

The Myth of Objectivity: a Reply to Weitzer
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For *Violence Against Women*

In the epilogue to my edited collection *Everyday Pornography* (Boyle, 2010: 208), I note that much of the contemporary debate on pornography progresses with one “side” assuming they know what the other is arguing. Ronald Weitzer’s (2011) review of *Everyday Pornography* and Gail Dines’ *Pornland* (2010) in this journal falls into that trap. In this essay, I want to address some of Weitzer’s assumptions as well as clarify the content and approach of *Everyday Pornography*.

Firstly, it is important to clarify the kind of pornography the book (and hence this essay) is concerned with. *Everyday Pornography* is about pornography’s mainstream, defined as “sexually explicit material for the heterosexual male consumer, widely recognized as pornography” (2010: 4). Inherent in this definition is a recognition that pornography is a product, with an intended audience, and that it exists as a discursive category. As such, in addition to essays focusing on pornographic texts, the collection is interested in what pornography is made to *mean* in different spaces (e.g. the virtual world of Second Life; local newspapers in the UK; debates about public policy; porn users’ discussion forums). Dines’ *Pornland* has a similar focus. Pornographies intended for different audiences do, of course, exist. But to criticise these books for not saying anything about these “other” pornographies, when these are not their focus, is somewhat disingenuous.

In the introduction to *Everyday Pornography*, I further clarify that the focus is primarily on pornographies in English. Although the collection emphasises pornography produced in the US, individual chapters are interested in *specific* debates about its meaning and status outside those borders, particularly in the UK. It is an *inter-disciplinary* collection and one which, although edited by someone who defines *herself* as an anti-porn feminist, is not written exclusively by those who would embrace that label (indeed, some actively resist it). It is ironic, then, that in order to criticise *Everyday Pornography* for its “sweeping generalisations”, Weitzer must ignore (or dismiss as “uninteresting”) the ways in which individual essays are specific about the kinds of pornography they discuss and the scope of claims that can therefore be made about “pornography” *per se*.

One of Weitzer’s chief criticisms appears to be that the book lacks “even the appearance of objectivity” (2011: 666). I am unapologetic in stating my own anti-pornography politics upfront and in both the introduction and epilogue I discuss in some detail what it means – politically, intellectually – to define oneself in this way at this point in time. Feminist researchers have long argued that “the appearance of objectivity” in academic research is precisely that: an appearance. And so the editorial framing of *Everyday Pornography* – with its autobiographical elements – is intended to locate the collection quite precisely, whilst acknowledging that this will not be a position all of its readers share. Weitzer seizes on my statement that these politics “drive what I think are the significant questions to be asked about/of pornography” (Boyle, 2010: 12), something I am sure will strike many readers of this journal as commonsensical. As feminists, many of us have long argued that violence against women (particularly men’s violence against women) is an important research area and have declared our intent to use our research to try to benefit the lives of women

experiencing and surviving violence. It is difficult to imagine how one could be “objective” about this: to declare oneself “neutral” on this issue is a politicised position in itself.

But for many – Weitzer included - there is difficulty in accepting feminist arguments which position pornography as violence against women. The problem here seems to be the clash between a systematic analysis of pornography *as an industry* within, and serving the interests of, a patriarchal society, and an analysis which focuses on how particular pornographies are subversive in content, enthusiastically performed, or pleasurable consumed. To argue that pornography is a form of violence against women is *not* to argue that all pornographic content is explicitly exploitative or violent. Rather, it is to argue that pornography is a *system* of gender inequality in which access to the bodies of one group of people (particularly, but not exclusively, women) are sold to another group of people (particularly, but not exclusively, heterosexual men) for the purposes of the sexual gratification of the consumer, irrespective of the experiences of those whose bodies are packaged for sale. It dehumanises those sold: they become the product (Jameson with Strauss, 2004: 333). Defenders of porn may counter that this does not mean that all individuals performing in pornography are victimised, and/or that those consuming porn are savvy to the dehumanisation but not complicit with it. Both of these things are certainly true for some performers and consumers. However, there is a distinction to be made between the experiences of the *individual*, and an analysis of pornography as an *industry*. As an *industry*, porn depends upon the dehumanisation and literal commodification of the human body. If you want to defend pornography then don’t dress it up: defend it on those grounds.

One of Weitzer’s other charges is that I dismiss the experiences of performers, arguing that to include them is to “let men off the hook” (Boyle, 2010: 205). The comment about “letting men off the hook” is made in the context of a discussion about how the voices of women in pornography were used in academic work in the 1980s and early 1990s. Academic anthologies focused on pornography in that period nearly always included testimonials from women in the industry – whether “for” or “against” pornography. These testimonials were often incredibly powerful but their effect was to hinge the debate on the reliability and representativeness of women: personal accounts drowned out structural analysis and the debate became about *women’s* choices and experiences. Hence, men were “let off the hook”. This does not mean that I *dismiss* the experiences of performers but rather that I question the discursive weight they were (and are) made to bear in academia and the implications of focusing on women in this way.

One of those implications is that research dealing with the consumers of pornography has been relatively thin on the ground. The exception to this is the massive literature – primarily within psychology and communication studies – which has sought to identify and measure the “effects” of pornography. I have been challenging the effects paradigm in my own writing for more than a decade (Boyle, 2000) and remain critical of effects-based work and sceptical about its value. In addition to concerns about the methodologies of much of the work in the field, my major concern about the effects-paradigm is that it asks a question – namely, does a representation *cause* a particular effect in the real world – that is unanswerable for many reasons, not least that it is impossible to isolate one media message from all others (a justification, in itself, for

focusing on the discursive construction of pornography across a range of sites, as many essays in *Everyday Pornography* seek to do). In this Weitzer and I are in agreement. It is therefore puzzling that Weitzer devotes so much of his review to a discussion of the *findings* of effects research and his claim that the weight of the evidence suggests that porn does *not* have negative effects rings hollow given his prior critique of the paradigm.

In his essay in *Everyday Pornography*, Michael Flood approaches this literature with more caution in the context of reviewing the available research on young men's consumption of pornography. It is true that we are only beginning to understand the varied ways in which men and women consume porn, and empirical work in this field is limited. Any means of accessing those consumers is inevitably loaded: *The Porn Report* in Australia (McKee, Albury & Lumby, 2008) and an ongoing project on consumers in the UK (Smith, Attwood & Barker, 2011), for instance, specifically targeted people who identified as *enjoying* pornography, in the Australian case advertising for participants through connections with the porn industry (Pringle, 2011). This does not render the research invalid, and learning more about what those who enjoy pornography think about it is important. But this research does presuppose something about porn consumption: namely that it is purposeful and pleasurable. For many – most perhaps – this may be true (though there is little research which has investigated this question), but the design of these projects does not *encourage* those whose experiences may be more ambivalent to participate.

The emphasis on *consumers* – and on current, active, enthusiastic consumers – can, of course, only tell us part of the story. In other areas of media studies, the emphasis which audience researchers initially placed on “fans” of popular texts is increasingly becoming complicated by work which considers those with differing levels of engagement (e.g. Gray, 2003; Andrejevic, 2008). In this, the figure of the “anti-fan” – the person who dislikes a text and in communicating that dislike contributes to its discursive construction – and the “non-fan” (who exhibits no engagement) are also recognised as important. At the very least, this work might alert us to the danger of fetishising the porn-enthusiast. More productively, it suggests the importance of studying those who refuse to engage with pornography – alongside those who do – to better understand what pornography means in contemporary culture and the conditions in which *choices* are made about its consumption.

Whilst I echo Weitzer’s call for further research on porn consumers (and add to it a call for systematic investigations of refusers), audience research is only one approach to investigating what porn means in contemporary culture. From his sociological standpoint, Weitzer is dismissive of textual analysis, focusing on those chapters of *Everyday Pornography* which offer more quantitative data. However, his discussion of Ana Bridges’ chapter is misleading. Bridges’ chapter is not centrally concerned with presenting the findings of her own content analysis of violence in pornographic videos but, rather, with re-examining that data in light of other research using different sampling techniques, definitions and methods. This allows her to discuss the difficulties in quantifying pornographic violence. By extracting the numbers from the discussion of their construction, Weitzer side-steps questions about methodology and the sampling of popular culture which are Bridges’ central concern. In his discussion of Meagan Tyler and Susanna Paasonen’s work, Weitzer is similarly fixated on the quantitative measurements, although both Tyler and Paasonen deploy content analysis

far more loosely than Bridges and within different disciplinary traditions. For these authors, the quantitative data serves as a jumping off point for detailed textual work exploring how the porn industry seeks to position its consumers, via the trade paper *Adult Video News* and spam emails advertising porn respectively.

Analysing how texts *position* their readers/viewers is an approach adopted in a number of the chapters in *Everyday Pornography*. Weitzer implies that this is not “solid evidence” but it is important here to consider what we are looking for “evidence” of. In the context of *Everyday Pornography*, textual analysis is particularly valued in terms of what it tells us about the imagined consumers of pornography. This is *not* to argue that the text pre-determines the ways in which it is to be read, but, rather, that certain interpretations are privileged. Whether or not those positions are taken up by individual readers, this can tell us something about how the porn industry *wants* to be seen.

Finally, I turn to Weitzer’s brief comments about the sex educative function of pornography. Michael Flood’s chapter in *Everyday Pornography* recognises that pornography can be a source of sex education for young men. However, whilst Weitzer interprets this as evidence of porn’s pro-social effect, Flood sees this as the beginning of a conversation about what young men are actually learning and whether this is – personally, socially – desirable. Leaving aside the question of the kinds of sex acts enacted and portrayed in pornography, there is a fundamental problem in thinking about a genre of *representation* premised on the principle of maximum *visibility* as a tool for teaching about sex. Something analysts of all political persuasions typically agree on is that audio-visual porn’s *raison d’être* is to provide the best vantage point from which to *see* unfaked bodily interactions. In contrast, it is surely uncontroversial to state that sex education should be focused on how sex *feels*, both physically and emotionally, and on how to make it feel *better* for all parties (safely, consensually, responsibly). But sex acts in porn (at least in its audio-visual forms) are performed to give the best view: how those acts *feel* to those performing are not the primary concern. Thus even if porn *is* giving viewers a wider repertoire of sex acts, that these acts are performed according to a logic of *representation* and not *sensation* must be a cause for concern. Thus Gail Dines, both in *Pornland* (2010) and in the roundtable discussion which opens *Everyday Pornography*, refers to pornography as “industrial sex”. It is a commercial product, a system of representation: it is *not* a spontaneous, unmediated and “authentic” expression of desire or pleasure.

That Weitzer also takes issue with Dines’ definition of porn sex as “body punishing” suggests that he fails to grasp the argument that porn sex is *both* a reality *and* a system of representation. Just because an act does not *appear* to hurt or physically damage a performer does not mean that it does not. (The reverse of this is also true: a representation that appears to hurt may not do.) In pornography, *any* sex act *can* become damaging as the production process typically demands that it is performed repeatedly, over long periods of time, in positions designed for visibility, not comfort or sensation. You don’t need to take my word for this. This is something that is repeatedly, and apparently uncontroversially, acknowledged by industry insiders (Boyle, 2011). If the industry has no problem in acknowledging that porn sex is “body punishing” then it is incumbent on academics defending porn to explain why this does not form part of their analysis of the industry.

This is why framing feminist debate about pornography as a question of “effects” – as Weitzer’s review does – so fundamentally distorts our concerns. The question of whether or not watching porn *results in* consumers engaging in “body punishing” sex ignores that it is the industrial context of performance which renders these acts “body punishing”. A consumer’s pleasure – or, indeed, their distress – at viewing the end product does not change that reality. Counter to Weitzer, then, feminist research on pornography should not be driven by the question of “effects” and it is misleading to suggest that this is in any way the central concern of *Everyday Pornography*.

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