

PORNOGRAPHY

13 Reasons Why Not

1 Objectification

I want to say this to you, my friend. I want to say that you and I can not imagine what it is to be a woman. To be looked at before you are listened to, if you are listened to at all. To be judged not by the energy you bring to the world, but by the extent to which you are willing to submit to its will. To be taught from your first breath that your role in life is to make others happy, to resist always the urge to assert your own needs, your own point of view. To be dissected by the glance of a stranger, to be reduced to a mere collection of body parts, to have to choose every day, in every moment, between being seen as a prude or a whore, so that no matter what your response to the sexual, the world's assessment of you will be made on exclusively sexual terms. And what you do, every time you visit this world of complete strangers reduced to flesh, arranged for your instant and fleeting pleasure, you say, I'm okay with this. I'm okay supporting this last enduring form of slavery, this casual dismissal of all that is good in my fellow human beings. I will not be the man who stands up for what is right, history will not count me amongst those who made a difference. Because right now, I'd rather just draw the blinds and play with myself, like some bad parody of primate at a zoo, dispirited, disconnected, disappearing ever inward. It says I'm okay looking past the human being because, for the shortest of moments it fills me with a sensation that is not unpleasant. And every time you seek to justify this habit of yours, you tell other people it's okay to do the same. Pornography is wrong because objectification is wrong, because it takes one half of the human race and strips them of their humanity.

2 Abuse

The problem with pornography is that it is leading to abuse. Maybe not for every user in every circumstance, but that's not an argument worth crediting. Because it increases the odds. Sex, in the end, is a private activity, and when two individuals engage with one another alone and out of the world's sight, the only thing that keeps them safe is the steadfast and determined goodness of the one they are with. They are kept safe by the respect the other shows them, by the shared understanding that neither is a means to their end but rather, however it is they choose to be with one another, it must raise them up and not diminish. And none of this is easy. People feel vulnerable, and confused and frightened, because our shared discussion of and depiction of sexuality is a complete and embarrassing disaster. And in those moments, they will cling to the thing they know, they will paddle blindly to any hint of a life raft, and I'm saying, in a world where the only open discussion of sexuality is had by pornographers, they're some pretty fucked life rafts. I'm saying, if you legitimise this shit, even if it has no impact upon your own behaviour, then you increase the danger for others, by increasing the opportunity and predilection for abuse, by increasing the odds that this will be their go-to reaction in moments of fear and awkwardness. By signposting most clearly the path away from restraint and respect, you are inviting us all along the road to abuse. And who gives you the right to do that?

3 The industry as evil

Pornography is not just a random collection of images created by our collective consciousness, it is the considered work of an industry interested only its own continued existence. There are no moral decisions made along the way, no considerations given to the harm of the user, nor the harm of those involved in its production. Indeed, it is the very act of harm that ensures its success, for it is by breaking the user, disconnecting him from the real world of connection and love and intimacy, sucking him into a mire of loneliness, shame and regret, that the industry creates the addict, coming back for more of the same, that they may feel worse about themselves, and more in need of temporary respite from their self loathing. Just as the fast food industry has no interest in providing us with nutrition, for it is precisely the sensation of being both over caloric and simultaneously malnourished that keeps us hungry for more, the pornography industry has no regard for the state of our emotional arteries. Look around you, it is not the healthy and the happy, the emotionally contented and self assured, that are this industry's target. They look for the weak, the young and the fragile, and they break them into pieces that they may be more easily consumed. And that's you, or if it isn't yet, it will be. So man up and walk away, while you still can.

4 Loss of intimacy

This isn't complicated. You get to choose how to express your sexuality. If you want to, you can aspire to the kind of connection that enriches your life, where your sexuality is an expression of your affection and appreciation and gob smacking gratitude for this bond you have formed with another human being. It can be about being honest and vulnerable and it's hard work is the truth of it, getting to that place, but the rewards are a celebration of your shared humanity, the rewards are a place to be in the world, a place of comfort, and of pride. The reward allows the body to flourish, and the spirit too. Or you can do the easy thing, and reduce your sexuality to a mere function of the mechanical, a set of urges to be satisfied, responses to be experienced, images to be accessed in the name of arousal. Urges to be satisfied by strangers, or two dimensional abstractions. And it is a choice. One doesn't get to turn a switch on and off, this moment intimacy, this moment pornography. The responses are not rationally chosen, rather they are conditioned over time. Continued mental physical association between the detached image and the aroused state in time becomes a block to experiencing proper intimacy. It becomes a block to flourishing in the company of others. It dehumanises it. The choice is ours.

5 Isolation, loss of connection

Loneliness isn't the state of being alone, it is the state of being disconnected. What you want as a human being, what we all want, is to draw close to the other. You want to listen and to be listened to. You want to laugh, to celebrate, to share your dreams and your fears. You want the warmth of another's embrace, and of their concern. That's the prize, and it takes an effort. It's hard work. It's the hard work of learning to trust, of taking risks and of making sacrifices. In the normal course of the world, some of our urge to move close to people is motivated by the sexual impulse. People feel desire for others, they are attracted to them, they fall in love with them, and in this state they are compelled to take risks, to draw close and to make sacrifices. The sexual is embodied in the intimate, and the reward is closeness. The reward is secrets shared, burdens unloaded, impossible dreams made possible through co-operation and love. The reward too is security, the ability to relax into the self, secure in the knowledge that you are loved, and capable of loving. Sever these ties, turn the sexual urge instead into something the market can attend to, and just as the food industry has subverted our base desire for nourishment in a way that makes us sick and unsatisfied, taste and convenience without nutrition, so the pornography industry subverts the sexual desire, cutting it loose from the desire to know and be known, and attending only to the most urgent but ultimately least nourishing of our needs. Pornography, and the casualisation of sexuality, harms us, by misdirecting us towards the wrong solution to a problem we no longer understand.

6 Normalisation, legitimising of the extreme

No one's arguing a slippery slope. It may well be true that all you're consuming is mild by most standards, perhaps you might say that there has always been within art a tradition of sexualised aesthetic appreciation, that you are doing nothing more than admiring the naked form, and perhaps you can even argue legitimately that in terms of how you see the world, and interact with women, it no more poisons your relationship than the fact of watching Grand Designs poisons your relationship with your own home. That in some sense you are perfectly capable of distinguishing between the fantasy and the reality, in the same way that a child watching a violent cartoon is quite capable of abstracting the image from the world they inhabit. And even if all of this is true, the fact is that the pornography industry exists along a continuum, and your patterns of consumption and your apologetics for the industry give it legitimacy. This indeed is the favourite cover of any industry that seeks to exploit, the hunting rifle becomes the cover for the military weaponry, as the middle class wine connoisseur is offered up as cover for the servicing of the needs of the violent alcoholic. Overpowered cars are sold as toys for the responsible user of track days but are marketed to over-testosteroned and inexperienced drivers. Every industry that makes its dollar from the exploitation of unhealthy over-consumption works very hard to ensure the existence of a visible population of moderate consumers, that the blame can be shifted from the product to the way it is consumed. And so the liberal instinct to support the moderate legitimises an industry which has no interest in moderation. That is the way industry works. The very fact that you do not consume extreme material makes you the perfect marketing tool for the extreme. You must take responsibility to the problem to which you are contributing, even if no immediate harm from your actions can be established.

7 Slow creep, death by a thousand cuts

It is an inescapable truth that part of the lure of pornography is the accessing of the forbidden. Part of the thrill of access, evidenced that this is indeed a largely private activity, is the fact that it is a departure from the publicly normal. One study of patterns of internet searches with regard to pornography shows a strong cultural pattern in terms of the types of material being sought, and these patterns reflect established taboos, or rather those things that sit just on the edge of taboos, that exploited within the culture for titillation. And here is the problem, the more a particular product is consumed, the more it becomes normalised, up until the point where it can eventually slip out of the hidden and into the mainstream. Yesterday's pornography is indeed today's mainstream television, and as such loses some of its power, having less of the power of the transgressive. In other words, why, having gone to the trouble of secretly accessing this material, often at considerable social risk, would you then seek out that which is already readily available publicly? There is therefore an internal progression to the development of pornographic material, and research suggests we are seeing this now with an increased tendency towards narratives of violence and coercion. The thrill of transgression becomes part of the addictive nature of the product and so in making the decision to consume, one steps not into a forbidden room, but rather onto a conveyor belt, moving always toward the more brutal and dehumanising. There is no such thing as soft pornography, for pornography is a shapeshifter by its nature.

8 Programming unhealthy responses

Perhaps you need to think about what it is you actually do when you look at pornography. This is not an anthropological study, nor is a simple escape into entertainment, in the manner of watching a comedy or listening to a piece of music might be. Men who watch pornography do it largely as a masturbational aid. This is using the images of strangers, engaged in acts presented in such a way as to specifically engage a physiological and sexual response. And it's worth questioning why this might be necessary at all. What exactly is it about these images that replaces the simple act of touch, for example? And the answer is surely this, one is exploiting a pre-existing tendency for response to the visual, and to the narrative of the forbidden, and exploiting that purely because it suits those who would benefit from your consuming of their service. The visual is the most efficient transmission mechanism of a detached service, provided by people who have absolutely no interest in your well-being. And in using it, you train the visual response. Sexual response is not a pre-wired condition. It is engaged by the mechanism of narrative. A hand brushing casually against your own is not in itself a sexual act, nor does it provoke of itself a sexual response. Jostling into another's body moving onto a crowded train, or backing accidentally into a stranger at the supermarket, these are not arousing. Yet, the lightest touch of another's finger against your own, when there exists between you the possibility of a connection, as yet unspoken, the breathlessly held future a tingle between you, is electric. Where does this difference come from then, for two events that are in terms of sensory information identical, yet in terms of sexual response, could not be more removed? The answer is narrative, and trained response. And pornography both provides and trains a narrative, that of arousal as the result of explicitly sexual visuals. Pornography no more presents sex than movie fighting represents violence. In both cases what is presented is an artfully conceived caricature, designed to maximally present the stimuli that will evoke the audience response. Sex moves from an activity of inherent closeness, where the biological details are by nature inaccessible to the camera, to something altogether more abstracted. The obsession with presentation of mechanics and body parts then creates a conditioned response not to sex, but to body parts, disembodied and disconnected, devoid of personality or narrative. And, through repeated exposure coupled with arousal and release, you create in an entire population not just an association with, but a reliance upon, the visual. In time, sexual stimulation becomes dependent upon this form of removal and disembodiment, and so sexual activity itself becomes insufficient for arousal, and the user visits upon their partner a vision of disconnection. The partner is subjected to a process by which they are reduced and dehumanised. And this by the person they have chosen to love. It is a devastating thing to visit upon those who in their goodness choose to trust us.

9 Pornography as educator

The problem of pornography is not just that it represents an important voice on the nature of sexuality, but rather that it often represents the only voice. Young people don't know what to expect of sex. It is a minefield of unwieldy physiological responses, psychological fragilities, social expectations and hidden rules, not to mention the mechanics themselves. All of this takes a lot of negotiating and getting used to, and in its formative stages is frequently awkward and frankly disappointing. It's hardly the only aspect of our lives that has this quality, but there is one stark difference, the activity being largely private, the information the young person can get hold of in the public realm is minimal. So closely aligned are attitudes to sexuality with other cultural touchstones like morality and religion, that even the best meaning adults find it difficult to freely offer advice and guidance. And there is a natural and universal coyness associated with sexuality which makes young people unreceptive to the intervention of adults in these matters. In this context, a world of freely available and unmitigated pornography is disastrous, because it shows none of the reticence of any other stakeholder. Pornography gives detailed, luridly so, depictions of sexual activity, and in doing so creates a picture of what is normal, and indeed what is expected. So not only does the industry create a set of sexual responses to unhealthy activities (here think coercion, violence, distancing, objectification) but it also creates an expectation that this is simply what sex is, and that expectation creates a burden on those young people attempting to negotiate an already impossibly complex landscape. People who have put themselves in a situation of such intimacy generally wish to please the person they are with. And this becomes a form of coercion even if nothing is directly asked of them. Where once western women were subjected to the brutal expectation that sex for them would be unpleasant, and was simply to be endured, they now face an even more demanding and demeaning narrative. Neither men nor women asked for this redefining of our sexuality, it was visited upon them by an industry devoid of moral purpose. And, for the young and uncertain, those least able to engage in careful and open communication, the possibility of sex as an act of warmth and connection is lost.

10 The shallows of instant gratification

If there is one truth we should wish to pass onto our children, it is surely this: every thing worth having takes work. Finding satisfaction in your job takes work. Creating a home where people love one another and feel safe and supported takes work. Establishing positive relationships with your work colleagues takes work. Being healthy takes work. Understanding the world we live in takes work. Relaxing, truly relaxing, satisfied in the knowledge that you are living a worthwhile life, takes work. So too lasting friendship, and so too intimacy. It is an important truth to own because with its knowledge comes a new kind of attitude to the world. The world is not benevolent, but nor does it mean you harm. The world just is, and we must move into that world with a willingness to do the work, to roll our sleeves up, uncomplaining, and get on with it. We must embrace the virtues of patience and service, we must resist the urge to feel put upon or disadvantaged. We must be prepared to play the long game, two steps forward and one step back, accepting the setbacks as an inevitable part of the journey. The alternative is to simply seek instant gratification wherever we can find it, consuming our fried chicken by the bucketful, finding entertainment through digital distraction, valuing our friendships by number not quality, and seeking sexual release not by way of hard won trust and intimacy, but by pre-packaged pixelation. Pornography is a crucial cog in a bigger machine of destruction. Pornography is embracing of the sort of laziness and lack of aspiration that breeds a lifetime of self-entitled disappointment. It encourages us to paddle forever in the shallow end of the pool, that we may never experience the sensation of floating free. It is the unambitious yielding to the animal instinct of the now, capitulation to the great lie of modernity, that you can have it all, right away. And in this child-like rush to satisfy only the needs of the moment, we lose sight not just of the other, but of the future self. The true act of kindness to the self is the valuing not of the life of the moment, but of the life yet to be. It is a determination to make tomorrow better through the sacrifices of today. It is the willingness to climb the mountain for the sake of the view, but also the self respect that comes from having taken the harder road. Real sex is fraught with difficulty and responsibility, is a scary, grown up act. Pornography offers reward without effort, and everywhere and always such reward is both fleeting and ultimately illusory.

11 The imprinting problem

You don't get to choose what arouses you. Or at least not exactly. Sexuality is largely an imprinted phenomenon. What we come to think of as desirable, what is most able to elicit sexual responses, is a function of the things we see, experience and think about during our adolescence, or so goes imprinting theory. We can see in comparative anthropological studies both universals (modesty, jealousy, long term bonding...) and tremendous variances. Culture has the ability to determine a great deal with respect to sexual mores. Who we find attractive, the social context within which sex occurs, the degree of responsibility towards one's partner, gender equality, all these things are modifiable via culture, and one of the strongest transmission mechanisms appears to be imprinting through adolescence. So, again, pornography doesn't depict actual sex, it is contorted for the purposes of the camera, and for the purposes of its consumers (who seek mostly short term arousal assistance). Yet, if this is what adolescents are being exposed to, the problem is not just in terms of warped and harmful expectations (for the activities presented are unlikely to satisfy) but also of programmed sexual responses. It is entirely possible that in time these become necessary components of the sexual response for the early consumer. Sexuality becomes then increasingly visual, and hence increasingly about objectifying of the partner, reducing them to the physical presentation of their bodies (as if body image isn't fucked up enough already). And, increasingly, we may also be programming into our youth a need for some form of aggression as a sexual trigger. Could this industry be any more damaging if we designed it to be so?

12 The infantilising of sexuality.

Children love routine. In it they find security. Returning to a familiar holiday spot, rushing into the arms of a loved grandparent, sitting down to their favourite meal. Their world is awash with the new and the confusing, and every day they are being asked to cope with novel and frightening situations. Their instinct is to shy away from these challenges when they can, to seek out the adult to guide them through the unknown. For a child with a limited skill set it is a sane and cautious approach. Then, as we mature and develop a wider range of skills, we gift ourselves with new levels of independence. We go out into the world, meet new people, take risks, try new things. We enrich our lives by trusting ourselves to adapt to the challenges of a shifting landscape. This openness to the world in so many ways defines adulthood. And yet there is an argument that, given the opportunity to regress to the behaviour of the child, we will turn to a sort of laziness and let these challenges that so reward us pass us by. Think of the cliché of the British tourist on holiday in Spain, eating fish and chips on a beach, bought with a warm beer from their favourite British style pub, holding loud sunburnt conversations with their British friends with whom they holiday every year, complaining about the locals. The franchise model of retail plays to this fear of the unknown, offering shoppers in every corner of the globe the comfort of knowing how to negotiate the menu, where to sit, even where the toilets will be. Capitalism appeals to our laziness, and so makes eternal children of us all. Even the challenge of conversation has been circumvented, witness any gathering of the young, each studiously attached to their phone's screen. And pornography is simply the apex of this dismal phenomenon. It allows us to experience our sexuality suspended in childhood, freed from the messy obligations of social interaction, of reading motivations, showing vulnerability, of losing control. The viewer of pornography is the epitome of control. He is removed, can start or stop any depiction with a single click, is hidden from view, will neither be seen nor interrogated. Everything is safe and familiar. Repetition becomes a watchword. And so this area of limitless riches, this experiencing of love and hope and letting go, is bypassed by the childish urge to be safe, protected and unchallenged. Like mass produced clothing, fast food and over-produced music, pornography sucks the colour from our lives by offering the excuse we need to never grow up.

13 Addiction

Pornography makes addicts of its users, and addiction hollows the life from the inside out, its true damage apparent only when collapse is imminent. Dopamine release is considered a key factor in the creation of addiction. This pleasure hormone, released as a reinforcer of behaviours, nevertheless contains within its receptors a desensitising mechanism. Awfully, with over-exposure, not only does the impact of a hit lessen each time, but the craving for the next hit intensifies. This double whammy underpins the pattern of addiction and explains why in time it will become so destructive. Be it gambling or gaming, pornography or ecstasy, the addict must in time seek more of it and more often, to satisfy the physiological need. So, while the early feeding of the habit may be socially manageable, in time the need for more money, more time, or more extreme stimulation can push the user outside society's bounds. The addict becomes a pariah, or more often lives in constant fear of being found out and cast as one. Shame is the constant companion, and with it, anger. The human beings surrounding the addict become a means to the greater end, or an obstacle to achieving it, and so in time those we know and love become strangers to us, dehumanised in the shadow of the greater god of satisfaction. The pornography addict (and while not all users are addicts, every user runs the risk, and viewed from the outside, it is a risk without an attendant reward, a dumb bet if ever there was one) finds themselves on a path to ever darker material, and ever darker demands. To hide their habit, they seek to appear sexually functional in the real world, but their view of sex is by now so distorted that any attempts to imitate intimacy run the risk of descending into abuse. It is an ugly place to end up, and because of the secretive nature of pornography consumption, the user can not turn to the normal social controls and constraints to mediate their behaviour. In any behaviour that is secretive the risk of escalation is magnified. And because, unlike many other addictions, there is not even a financial barrier to engagement, (or in the case of gaming, a temporal barrier) usage can spiral very quickly. The true addict is sexually and socially dysfunctional, and capable of bringing tremendous harm to those about him, for their mind ultimately is not their own. Pornography and its modern delivery mechanisms are designed to provide maximal risk of addiction. Why then are we not outraged by its glib acceptance?