

**Book Review: Walter S. DeKeseredy and Marilyn Corsianos, *Violence Against Women in Pornography*. New York: Routledge, 2016. ISBN: 978-1455775422 (Paperback). 136 Pages. \$39.95.**

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Walter S. DeKeseredy and Marilyn Corsianos' *Violence Against Women in Pornography* is many things. It is a piece of sensationalistic anti-porn propaganda masked under the loose guise of a "sociological story" (107). It is a hegemonic, highly sexist articulation of what sexual expression "should" look like – both for the people creating porn, as well as for consumers interested in erotic media. It is presumptuous and dismissive, inaccurate, dated, and hysterical. And it is also a very important book.

At just over 100 pages, *Violence Against Women in Pornography* is a quick read, one that makes no attempt to veil or minimize its anti-porn agenda. The summary description on the back jacket suggests "the main objective of this book is to motivate readers to think critically about adult pornography." In the very same sentence, however, it encourages readers to "take progressive steps" to "curb the production and consumption of hurtful sexual media." The text is organized around this anti-pornography theme in five chapters. Each is remarkably reductive and biased.

In Chapter One, "The Extent and Distribution of Pornography Use and Production," the authors offer some discussion of technology development, which certainly has allowed consumers greater access to information and media of all types (not just porn), but the bulk of the

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chapter is spent constructing a bricolage of miscontextualized facts and outright fabrications related to adult entertainment. Figures describing various aspects of porn consumption are referenced as rigorous (none are); cyber-sex addiction is described as an ailment without controversy; and porn production, casting, and content forms are described inaccurately and without regard to era. For instance, gonzo form content, which was frequently produced approximately ten years ago, is inaccurately defined (see page 9, among numerous references throughout the text), as well as discussed as if its prevalence has not shifted.<sup>2</sup> In another example, the authors assert that “the desired jobs for porn performers are the ones that offer contract employment” (13), another pattern that began to shift dramatically approximately ten years ago and is no longer applicable in today’s post-piracy, social media-based branding environment. These are only a few of the “facts” used to paint an alarming picture of adult content’s prurient grip on contemporary society.

Chapter Two, “Adult Pornography Today,” continues along lines similar to Chapter 1. This section focuses on ideas related to images of women in mainstream pornography, which are described as “violent and degrading sexual images that dominate the mass market” (17). The most significant dimensions of this chapter revolve around conceptualizations of aggression and violence – specifically, sexual aggression and sexual violence. In addition to dismissing variable adult content forms, production standpoints, and themes, the authors assume that aggression and violence have universal meaning. As such, what constitutes “violence” to one person must also have the same meaning to every other individual, culture, and group. The authors also assume that no one can consent to behavior that they themselves or others may find aggressive or violent. Finally, the authors do not engage ideas related to performance or acting in media production. As such, it is assumed that pornography showcases exhibitions of emotions and sensations that are in no way manufactured, contrived, or acted. It is also assumed that consumers take in these exhibitions as such.

Not only do these assumptions and oversights nullify performers’ and producers’ workplace agency, they also nullify agency related to sexual expression – both in terms of enactment and in terms of consumption. As a consequence, this chapter stigmatizes and pathologizes sexual expression related to BDSM, rough sex, and any number of role-play

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<sup>2</sup> See Tibbals 2014 for a detailed discussion of gonzo form content and a more contemporary description of porn production trends.

fantasies. Further, putting ambiguities regarding variations in perception aside, at no point do the authors explain the sampling frame they use for assessing trends in “mass market” pornography, nor do they evaluate the sampling frames of their references. In Chapter Three, “Thinking Theoretically About Pornography,” the authors do work that most resembles sociology. They attempt to answer the questions “Why do men consume violent porn and what are the effects of their consumption?” via consideration of psychological, sociological, and feminist theoretical frames. First, they discuss the psychological standpoint in a very general way and largely reject psychological theories regarding porn consumption as too individualistic. Theories linking porn consumption to antisocial personality disorder and the *imitation model*, which asserts people imitate behaviors they see in the media, for instance, are dismissed as insufficiently nuanced.

The authors then move on to sociological explanations, dismissing theories that regard porn as functional in society as dated and uninformed, all without a trace of irony. Finally, the authors weigh feminist theoretical considerations of porn, emphasizing patriarchal societal organization and “male peer support” (49) as tools for legitimizing and encouraging abuse of women. The authors sum up this chapter with the declaration that “theoretical developments have not kept pace with the burgeoning empirical literature on pornography and its effects,” which reveals that, “like criminal conduct in general, pornography use and distribution is a ‘predominately social behavior’ among young men” (55).

In Chapter Four, “Pornography and Violence Against Women,” the authors’ stated purpose is to review empirical knowledge regarding the “hurtful pornography and men’s violent victimization of current and former female partners” (57). The works cited focus on consumer accounts of discordant sexual preferences between partners, as well as assigning behavior patterns and characteristics to women who work as porn performers (e.g. high likelihood of childhood sexual abuse, high incidence of poor mental health, etc.). Finally, the authors cover “pornographic cyber-bullying,” including sexting, “revenge pornography,” and other “dark sides” of the Internet and technology.

In their concluding Fifth Chapter – “Challenging Porn: Progressive Policy Proposals” – the authors assert that the mainstreaming of violence and degradation of women via porn strengthens contemporary misogyny. The nature of these images, according to the authors, makes it impossible for anyone to make sexual choices free of coercion, force, or conformity. As such, resistance and repudiation from society in general is needed.

The authors offer various tactics for challenging porn, which include pushing back against mainstream media's role in normalizing violence and sexist discourse, as well as using the mainstream media as a tool to disseminate counter-ideologies. The authors also suggest utilizing social media as a tool for anti-pornography activism, citing activism from faith-based organizations like Morality in the Media (MIM) as an exemplar. They suggest educational outreach, human rights outreach, and working with men and boys to shift and reframe cultural ideologies regarding masculinities.

*Violence Against Women in Pornography* was a challenging text to consider. It spouted highly sexist, paternalistic, and classist rhetoric, asserting and reasserting that individuals are incapable of making conscious choices within a system of inequalities that they are unable to comprehend. The authors share consumption patterns and spending figures, intending to shock (23). Graphic cherry-picked titles stir disgust (25). Porn production and consumption are repeatedly conflated and categorized with criminal activities including assault, bullying, revenge, and harassment (Chapter 5). These sorts of repeated proclamations work to draw class lines between virtuous and evil, genteel and raunchy, those in possession of cultural capital and those without – in essence, good people and people who in some way engage pornography. The text suggests that findings by scholars that conflict with their anti-porn agenda, though novel, are both exceptional and irrelevant. It asserts that porn is somehow an all-powerful monolith pumping messages into an uncritical world. These decrees come in addition to myriad inaccuracies and sensationalized proclamations presented as data or facts, all while knowing wider social discomforts with sex, commercial sex, and sex work have rendered pornography virtually unknowable to the general public – thus, falsehoods can be loosed with very little likelihood of being challenged.

In reviewing and summarizing this text, I found myself constantly fighting the urge to argue against it – to point out every inaccuracy and poorly articulated concept. To call out every moment where hegemony, sexism, and class privilege capitalized on fear, discomfort, or simply the unfamiliar in order to shape an analysis. To levy my own empirical research – work that explores the legal and technological history of US porn (Tibbals 2013), that explores porn performers' feelings of agency in the their workplaces (Tibbals 2012), and that considers the contents and depictions in pornographic media (Tibbals, 2014), among other studies – against the authors' assertions. Instead however, rather than offering a

point by point breakdown of where this book is wrong, I worked to stay focused on the significance of the book – and significant it is.

The authors DeKeseredy and Corsianos are intelligent, respected, and experienced scholars. This is not the first rodeo for either. And though to me, their understanding of erotic media, as well as producers' and consumers' navigation thereof, seems woefully pedestrian, the fact remains that they are far more informed about the state of contemporary porn than most people. This is because most people, scholars included, are deterred from thinking critically about sex work and adult entertainment via multiple layers of social stigma and shame. When thinking about it in this way, DeKeseredy and Corsianos are far more similar to me than they are different. And yet, given all this, they have still created a text like *Violence Against Women in Pornography* – one that couldn't possibly be more off mark in my view if it tried.

Herein lies the significance of the book. The current cultural and political climate in the US is nothing if not divided and tumultuous. We shout into virtual echo chambers and swaddle ourselves in like-minded cocoons, blocking those who do not reflect our beliefs. All this is facilitated by the very same technology and Internet access DeKeseredy and Corsianos decry.

Katrina Forrester recently wrote about the state of modern pornography in *The New Yorker*. In her piece, which cites many of the same off-mark figures included in *Violence Against Women in Pornography* while simultaneously questioning their veracity, Forrester describes echo chambers on both sides of the pornography fence: “[E]ach side commissions its own surveys, has its own journals, and cites selectively. There are studies for everything – to show that pornography consumption correlates with aggressive behavior, that performers are victims of sexual abuse, and that such findings are premised on ill-founded stereotypes and stigmas.... The pro-porn argument, which insists that pornography is changing but denies that it changes us, appears contradictory. It inverts the anti-porn mistake of seeing porn as the key engine of transformation, instead giving it no power whatsoever.”

Forrester's assessment articulates precisely my trouble with *Violence Against Women in Pornography*, which is, in turn, exactly why engaging the text is important. For every thing I “know” as a feminist, scholar, and activist, this text “knows” the exact opposite. And in today's world, it is ever more important for all of us to consider these types of exact opposite standpoints. We cannot continue to “block” or “defriend” those who disagree with us, nor can we continue to dismiss the tenets shaping their perspectives – especially when the exact opposite standpoint is, like

in this case, created by entities who are more similar to one's self than they are different. Ignoring or blasting standpoints that do not coincided with ours and saturating ourselves in intellectual, cultural, and epistemological sameness is how we reached this point in U.S. (and arguably, global) culture. Writing *Violence Against Women in Pornography* off as an amalgamation of pearl-clutching sex phobia and sexist sensationalized propaganda would further this divide.

As scholars and thinkers, we must take active steps to consider those standpoints that differ from ours. Because even within the relatively miniscule pool of researchers for who consider porn in a critical manner, there are monstrously huge divides. To dismiss work on the other side of these divides is to continue down the path we are currently on.

Rather than see porn, complex and variable, as part of a wider synergistic system of social relationships, this book asserts that Porn is Bad. It advocates for jettisoning sexual expression that does not manifest in the way the authors feel it should. This includes both the production and consumption of erotica. The counterpoint – Porn is Good – is equally problematic and lacking in nuance. It is ok to be critical of porn – but one must be informed about something in order for critical analyses to hold weight. In our current environment, all this book does is fan flames of hysteria about something the authors are looking at through a very narrow lens.

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