

# Are 'Facials' Misogynistic?

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## **Abstract**

So-called 'facial' cumshots, when a man ejaculates onto a woman's face, are very common in pornography. While they are frequently said to be degrading and misogynistic, the fact that women are usually shown as enjoying this act should make us think again. Facials are instead rooted in male insecurity: of a fear that an aspect of how men orgasm—semen—is disgusting to women. By contrast, the fantasy, which pornography makes vivid, is that women might not just tolerate but celebrate and eroticize both ejaculation and its product. The way mainstream pornography presents facials may often be misogynistic, but it does not have to be, and it is not always.

## Are ‘Facials’ Misogynistic?

There are those who believe that the come shot, or, as some refer to it, “the money shot”, is the most important element in the movie and that everything else (if necessary) should be sacrificed at its expense. Of course, this depends on the outlook of the producer, but one thing is for sure: if you don’t have the come shots, you don’t have a porno picture. (Ziplow, 1977, p. 34)

It is a convention of pornography that the sperm is on her, not in her. It marks the spot, what he owns and how he owns it. The ejaculation on her is a way of saying (through showing) that she is contaminated with his dirt; that she is dirty. (Dworkin, 1995, pp. 182–3)

The ‘cumshot’, as it tends to be known nowadays, may be the most familiar of pornography’s many tropes. Cumshots are deemed so important, in fact, that, in the rare case when a male performer is unable to ‘produce’, the cumshot is sometimes faked, typically with Piña Colada mix, Cetaphil (a facial cleanser), or coconut oil.<sup>1</sup> Never mind that such fakes are frequently unconvincing. What’s interesting is just that they are deemed to be necessary.

It is so common in mainstream heterosexual pornography for ejaculation to occur outside the female performer’s body that there is an entire sub-genre that is devoted to ejaculation in the vagina. Such an act is known, in the peculiar vernacular of pornography, as a “creampie”,<sup>2</sup> but titles like *Come Inside Me* (Hard Candy Films, 2013, and Sweet Sinner, 2016) will also be instantly recognizable to fans of this particular act. This is not quite the same as simply not showing external ejaculation, as some feminist pornographers prefer to do. A film that advertises a ‘creampie’ will typically show the man’s semen flowing out of the woman’s vagina, so that one does still get a kind of ‘cumshot’, after the fact. And, insofar as the cinematic purpose of the cumshot is to offer proof of male orgasm, or at least of the culmination of ‘the sex act’, dripping semen still suffices, in a way that other audio-visual presentations of male orgasm would not.

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<sup>1</sup> The scene with August Ames and Danny Mountain from *Rekindling the Flame* (New Sensations Tales from the Heart, 2014) would appear to be an example. Chauntelle Tibbals (2015, Ch. 14) recounts one such episode that she witnessed. I have also read about cases in which ‘stunt cocks’ were called in to deliver the goods.

<sup>2</sup> There are also ‘anal creampies’, ‘oral creampies’, and the like.

As the above quotation from Andrea Dworkin shows, ejaculation onto women’s bodies has long raised the ire of anti-pornography feminists. Gail Dines regards it as “one of the most degrading acts in porn” and echoes Dworkin when she writes that it “marks the woman as used goods” (Dines, 2010, pp. xxv, xxvi). When the landing site is the female performer’s face—what’s known as a ‘facial’ cumshot, or just a ‘facial’—even feminists who do not regard themselves as ‘anti-pornography’ can be found making similar remarks. In response to a blog post by Jessica Wakeman (2009) confessing her own enjoyment of facials, Amanda Marcotte (2009) insists, with no supporting argument, that “the facial is a visual representation of spitting in someone’s face”. She then claims, against Wakeman’s own testimony, that the only reason someone could possibly enjoy such an act is because they “get off[] on being degraded and shamed”.<sup>3</sup> Even Betty Dodson, the ‘mother of masturbation’, and perhaps the most sex-positive of all sex-positive feminists, once responded to a question from a man confessing “a thing for facials” by encouraging him to “let a guy friend come on your face so you can understand why women in porn get paid to put up with this form of humiliation” (Dodson, 2013).

Some feminist pornographers have also expressed strong views about ‘facials’. At the 2007 Berlin Porn Film Festival, there was a roundtable that featured several female directors. As Audacia Ray recounts, “. . . the panel quickly devolved into an argument about blowjobs”, as several members of the audience began to question Erika Lust about the frequent portrayal of that act in her films. Lust responded “that she personally likes giving blowjobs, which is why they are in her films so much, and she personally is a feminist, so do the math” (Ray, 2007).<sup>4</sup> A few days later, however, another participant, Petra Joy, posted a lengthy retrospective that included the following remarks:<sup>5</sup>

Feminism is committed to equality of the sexes, so surely “feminist porn” should show women as equals to men rather than

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<sup>3</sup> Marcotte does not seem clearly to distinguish getting off on being *genuinely* degraded and shamed from getting off on experiencing such emotions in the context of BDSM. But this distinction, while important, will not be critical for our discussion here.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, many of these blog posts have disappeared from the web, and Ray’s is not even available at the Wayback Machine. They are collected at <https://rikiheck.blogspot.com/2021/02/the-great-blowjob-debate.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Joy does not go so far as to claim that blowjobs themselves are anti-feminist, though that kind of claim has also been made (and seems, from Ray’s report, to have been on the minds of some in the audience).

as subservient beings. A woman receiving head, a woman fucking a guy with a strap-on, a guy tasting his own cum and also to feature female ejaculation—those techniques that show a woman in control might be “feminist porn”. If you want to show cum on a woman’s face that’s fine but don’t call it feminist. (Joy, 2007)

This time, Lust responded with outrage, mocking “the Church of the Pure Feminist Porn Producers. . . declaring that certain sexual practices that me and other women across the world happen to like, are a sin. . .” (Lust, 2007). But what’s most striking, for our purposes, is Joy’s apparent insistence that facials *can’t but* be anti-feminist. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Marcotte, Dodson, and Joy all think that facials are unavoidably, maybe even inherently, degrading.

It is easy, however, in the age of the Internet, to find women who insist otherwise (see e.g. McCombs, 2012). Several of Dodson’s female readers, for example, responded that they enjoy receiving their partners’ ejaculate on their faces and don’t find it at all humiliating. It would be non-sensical to insist that such acts are humiliating even though neither these women nor their partners experience them that way. Nor is there any reason to suppose that these women’s partners take secret pleasure in humiliating them behind their backs, as it were. And it would be patronizing to insist that such women ought to feel otherwise: that, as Ray sarcastically puts it, “if only we. . . were radicalized to better understand our oppression, we would know that cocksucking and money shots are Bad For Women”.

Both Marcotte and Amanda Hess (2009) insist that such women’s enjoyment of facials must somehow be rooted in patriarchy. Even if that is true, however, it does not imply that facials are inherently degrading or humiliating. Many things have their roots in the patriarchy, such as marriage, as Hess points out.<sup>6</sup> That does not make it impossible for some heterosexual couples to have reasonably equitable marriages. The origins of an institution or practice do not determine its meaning for all time, and in all contexts.

None of this is to deny that facials *can* be degrading, both within and without porn. Any act that is imposed on someone, in disregard of what that person wants or enjoys, is degrading. Any such imposition clearly does convey a lack of respect. And, of course, sexual acts have special meaning—as does the face, as Marcotte rightly emphasizes. So, if one

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, feminism has its roots in the patriarchy (see Stear, 2009, pp. 30–1).

were trying to degrade or humiliate someone, ejaculating on their face might be a good way to do it. But none of that shows that facials can *only* be experienced (or intended) as degrading their recipients. Why, then, do so many people seem to think they must?

In her groundbreaking paper “Thinking Sex”,<sup>7</sup> Gayle Rubin writes:

Most people find it difficult to grasp that whatever they like to do sexually will be thoroughly repulsive to someone else, and that whatever repels them sexually will be the most treasured delight of someone, somewhere. One need not like or perform a particular sex act in order to recognize that someone else will, and that this difference does not indicate a lack of good taste, mental health, or intelligence in either party. (Rubin, 1984, p. 283)

And many women, it seems clear, do have a visceral reaction to the very idea of someone’s ejaculating on their face: disgust, or something close to it. Given the strength of this response, it would be unsurprising if at least some women were to project that response, reflexively, onto everyone else: both onto other women, whom they assume must share their disgust, and also onto men, whom they assume can only find facials sexy if they find humiliating women sexy. Marcotte, Dodson, and Joy, I suggest, all make precisely that mistake, and Dines and Dworkin probably do, too.

But it is not just projection of which these authors are guilty. It is a form of sex-negativity that Rubin (1984, p. 278) calls “the hierarchical valuation of sex acts”: categorizing *types* of sexual acts so as to mark some of them as bad or disordered and some of them as good or natural. Such hierarchies are thick on the ground. You find them in the Torah, in Freud, in Dworkin and other feminists of the period, in their conservative allies, and in many other places (including legal statutes, e.g., ones that criminalize oral and anal sex). But, as Rubin (1984, p. 283) insists, the only appropriate way to judge sexual acts is on an per-act basis, in terms of “the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the

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<sup>7</sup> This paper is frequently regarded as having birthed what we would now call Sexuality Studies, though Rubin herself emphasizes, in a retrospective, that there was much prior work out of which it grew (Rubin, 2011a, p. 196). One of the central claims of the paper is that feminism, while by no means irrelevant to the study of sexuality, lacks the necessary critical tools to be “the privileged site of a theory of sexuality” (Rubin, 1984, p. 307). Rubin’s argument for that claim is developed in the pages that follow its statement.

pleasures [that those acts] provide”.<sup>8</sup> That is also what Lust means when she writes: “I don’t believe that the word ‘feminist’ can be applied on [*sic*] sexual practices”, such as blowjobs and facials (Lust, 2007).

In the end, however, the crucial question here is not whether it is possible for a woman to enjoy her partner’s ejaculating on her face without ‘getting off on being degraded’. The crucial question is how male consumers view the presentation of such acts in pornography. The question I want to address in what follows is whether cumshots in pornography, of which facials are the most striking variant, are as problematic as many anti-pornography feminists believe. The worry, in effect, is that cumshots convey a certain sort of message to the men who view them: that it is perfectly all right to degrade and humiliate women in this way; that women deserve such mistreatment, and maybe even expect and want it.

So the questions we need to ask are these: Why is ejaculation onto women’s bodies such a dominant trope in pornography? Is it because men think that women do (or should) find someone’s ejaculating on them degrading? Do men enjoy viewing such acts in pornography because they eroticize women’s degradation? That it is possible for a woman genuinely to enjoy receiving her partners’ semen on her body, and even on her face, gives us some reason to think that these questions should be answered negatively. But it hardly settles the issue. Nor does it settle the issue to quote a handful of men who anonymously post their own reactions to message boards, as Dines (2010, pp., xxvi–xxvii) does.<sup>9</sup> No one doubts that there are men who hate women, and I am happy to concede that such men can and probably will interpret facials as degrading. The question is whether the facials in pornography generally are received that way, or whether that is how they are meant to be received.

I certainly have no interest in denying that some pornography does portray facials, in particular, as degrading. But not all pornography does so; perhaps not even most of it does. As is often pointed out, pornography typically portrays women as relishing and even craving their partners’ ejaculate (see e.g. Moore, 2007, p. 84). If one assumes, as Dworkin does, that semen is “dirt”, then of course one will interpret such scenes as ones in which women take pleasure in their own contamination. But why

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<sup>8</sup> It does not follow that there cannot be types of sexual acts all of whose instances would be objectionable. But that would be because those instances must always fail the per-act test. (Of course, it is a nice question exactly what the per-act standard should be.)

<sup>9</sup> Nor to allude to the Marquis de Sade, as Dworkin (1995, p. 183) does.

should we make that assumption? Why not take such scenes, so to speak, at face value? They portray the women who appear in them as positively enjoying it when their partners ejaculate on them.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, that is primarily a fantasy men have—and here I mean not just *doing* it, but having one’s partner *enjoy* it. I take it, then, that one of the things that explains why cumshots are so common in mainstream pornography is that something about this fantasy appeals to a good number of men. But then the interesting question is what *meaning* that fantasy has for men: having their partner *enjoy* receiving their ejaculate on their bodies, and even on their faces.

One possibility is that women’s enjoyment of this act signifies their acceptance of the subordination that is represented by a man’s ejaculating on them. But for that reading to seem at all plausible, one already has to be assuming that men regard ejaculating on someone as a way of degrading them, or that they expect women so to interpret it. But that is part of what is at issue: what meaning such an act has for men and why they might hope that their partners could enjoy this act along with them. Moreover, and as is again often pointed out, cumshots and facials are at least as common in gay male pornography as they are in mainstream straight pornography.<sup>11</sup> There does not seem to be any general reason to interpret gay facials as degrading to men. Indeed, semen is much eroticized in the gay male community (see e.g. Terrell, 2016).

Before we discuss the meaning of facials, however, we first need to acknowledge that what one often finds in porn are not women who enjoy their partners’ ejaculating on them but women who are *trying very hard to appear* as if they enjoy it when they clearly do not. One might think that this amounts to portraying women as doing something they find humiliating while trying to appear as if they enjoy it.<sup>12</sup> But I do not think that is quite right. It conflates what is happening *diagetically* (that

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<sup>10</sup> Note the way this is stated. I did not say that such scenes portray *women* as positively enjoying something. That formulation would be ambiguous: It might be read to say that women *as a group* enjoy such acts. But it would need additional argument that individual scenes or films typically have anything to say about women as a group (or that male viewers interpret them that way).

<sup>11</sup> Which is not to say that there is nothing problematic about facials in gay male pornography. Dyer (1985), for example, remarks that the focus on ejaculation reinforces a narrative that “is never organized around the desire to be fucked, but only around the desire to ejaculate”. See also Young (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Note that this is quite different from what happens in the context of consensual BDSM. There, the crucial distinction is not unlike the one being made in the text: between what happens within a ‘scene’ (an agreed, consensual sort of role play) and what

is, in the world of the film) with what is happening *extra*-diagetically (that is, on set, in the real world).

In the sort of scene I have in mind, it is clear that the female performer knows that her character<sup>13</sup> is supposed to enjoy having her partner ejaculate on her face. That, so to speak, is what the script says.<sup>14</sup> But what if that is not something the woman playing this character actually enjoys? Then acting the part could be very difficult, or so I would suppose, and now it is easy to imagine how this woman's real-world *displeasure* might surface in the world of the film.<sup>15</sup> The diagetic and extra-diagetic worlds collapse, and the viewer is confronted with apprehension where there should be anticipation, a forced smile where there should be an excited grin, and so forth. What we now have before us, then, is precisely a woman who is pretending to enjoy a sexual act that she does not actually enjoy. Whether she is doing so for her partner, for pay, or for the audience does not much matter. What does matter is that this woman's actual distaste for the act she is performing has surfaced in the world of the film, and, in that world, it clearly does not matter very much whether she enjoys what she is doing.<sup>16</sup> The act is thus naturally interpreted as degrading, even if it was not supposed to be so in the 'script'.

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the participants actual attitudes towards one another, outside the scene. For further discussion of this contrast, see Heck (2023).

<sup>13</sup> Even in the case of very realistic porn, it is important to distinguish the performers themselves from the characters they are playing. A better word here might be "persona".

<sup>14</sup> Examples include the second scene in Michael Ninn's *Innocence: Baby Doll* (Ninn Worx, 2002), with Taylor Anne and Barrett Blade; the third scene, with Cassidy Blue and Candy Manson, from *Big Fucking Titties 6* (Acid Rain, 2009); and the first scene in Eddie Powell and Paul Woodcrest's *My Sister Has a Tight Pussy 4* (Digital Sin, 2015), with Karter Foxx and Ramon Nomar.

<sup>15</sup> I do not mean thereby to judge the woman in question, either as a woman or as a performer. For one thing, I cannot myself imagine how difficult it is to have sex on camera, in a room full of people holding microphones, cameras, lights, and the like. For another, there are all kinds of questions we might raise here about the way in which pornography is made, the unreasonable expectations often made of the performers, and so forth. Many feminist pornographers are, in fact, much more focused on workplace issues than they are on what happens on screen (see e.g. Ray, 2007; Taormino, 2013). But such questions, though important, are not central to our discussion here, which concerns precisely what is happening on screen and how it is interpreted by viewers.

<sup>16</sup> Note that the problem we are discussing is *not* that the performer does not genuinely enjoy the act. The problem would not have arisen had she successfully acted her part, and, as an adult woman, she is capable of consenting to perform acts on screen, as a professional, that she does not enjoy in real life (see Mir-Ausziehen, 2017). Nonetheless, there are all sorts of questions to be raised here about the conditions under which women (and men) work in pornography, some of which have already been mentioned in footnote 15. We are also now in the vicinity here of difficult questions about 'authenticity' in



Such scenes, then, are failures of film-making.<sup>17</sup> They may not be intended to present women as enjoying being humiliated, but they end up doing something in the same vicinity. It's easy to understand, then, why women especially might react negatively to such scenes.<sup>18</sup> One might also reasonably wonder how these scenes affect the men who view them. In the context of the present discussion, however, what matters is just that a great deal of pornography does at least *attempt* (even if it sometimes fails) to portray women as enjoying their partners' ejaculating on their bodies, and even on their faces. The interesting question, as I said above, is why this particular fantasy should be as appealing to men as it apparently is.

Toward answering that question, it is worth reflecting on the origin of the cumshot in pornography. Although such displays can occasionally be found earlier, in so-called stag films, cumshots attain something like their present hegemony only with the emergence of feature-length pornography in the early 1970s (Williams, 1989, p. 73). This is in large part because such films sought, as earlier films did not, to portray complete sexual encounters, from kissing and undressing to 'foreplay' and intercourse, culminating in male orgasm, which is treated as the 'climax' of the entire episode. Indeed, male orgasm is typically treated not just as an essential part of scenes that involve men, but it functions as their narrative closure (Dyer, 1985; Patton, 1989, p. 104; Williams, 1989, p. 73).

In so far as mainstream pornography incorporates and thereby propagates a conception of sex that treats male orgasm as the be-all and end-all of heterosexual relations, it is anti-feminist. But that ideology is hardly one that was invented by pornographers. It suffuses popular culture, being no less common in romance novels than in mainstream pornography (Cabrera and Ménard, 2013). As Catharine MacKinnon (1989, p. 321) observes, "We had sex three times' typically means the man entered the woman three times and orgasmed three times". For many viewers, then, especially men, sexual episodes in pornography

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pornography (Young, 2014; Crutcher, 2015; Ashley, 2016). Fortunately, we do not need to enter that morass here.

<sup>17</sup> Ideally, one might think, such sequences should be re-shot. But there are practical (e.g., physiological) obstacles to such a course of action, and the sad truth is that the makers of much pornography do not seem to care very much about the quality of what they produce, at least judging by the product.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, recent empirical studies, to be mentioned below, suggest that both men and women prefer it when the recipient seems to enjoy the act.

that did not include male orgasm would likely seem incomplete, possibly inspiring sympathetic feelings of sexual frustration.<sup>19</sup> But even if we set this androcentric ideology aside, it hardly seems surprising that the attempt to present ‘complete heterosexual encounters’ should typically include male orgasm.

Still, none of that yet explains why male orgasm came to be portrayed in the way it is: through the visual evidence of male ejaculation. But part of the answer is surely obvious: Film is a visual medium (Williams, 1989, ch. 4). And orgasm does, after all, have to be *portrayed*: The male performer’s orgasm—the overwhelming, time-stopping, brain-scrambling pleasure of it—*that* is the sort of thing that might be fit to be the ‘be-all and end-all of sexual relations’, but of course film cannot offer the viewer *that*. One might simply let vocalizations and other bodily signs of male orgasm do the work. Many feminist pornographers, such as Candida Royalle and Petra Joy, do precisely that.<sup>20</sup> But it is difficult to think of any audible or visible phenomenon more appropriate to represent male orgasm than ejaculation.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, although both orgasm without ejaculation and ejaculation without orgasm are possible for males, the two are often conflated (Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny, 1985, p. 71). The dual meanings of the slang term ‘cum’ illustrate the point: The verbal form, ‘to cum’, means to orgasm; the nominal, ‘cum’, means semen.<sup>22</sup>

But one does not have to conflate ejaculation with male orgasm to recognize that the former is much more than a *symbol* of the latter. For most males, orgasm is always, or almost always, accompanied by ejaculation. So ejaculation is more an aspect of male orgasm than a symbol of it. If so, then, at least under the right sorts of circumstances, witnessing a male’s ejaculating can be expected to call powerfully to mind one’s own experience of orgasm—especially for males, but perhaps not

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<sup>19</sup> It’s a striking feature of Paul Deeb’s film *Marriage 2.0* (Adam and Eve Pictures, 2015) that the first and last sex scene end without male orgasm, due to interruption by a nosy neighbor. (The scenes both feature India Summer, first with Ryan Driller and then with Mickey Mod; the neighbor is played by Carol Queen, an icon of the sex-positive community in San Francisco.)

<sup>20</sup> This is also true of versions of mainstream pornographic films as edited for cable television. Cumshots are removed and are typically replaced by vocalizations, etc.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Slade (2001, p. 656) goes even further: “Not exploiting the dramatic possibilities of ejaculation in a sex film would be tantamount to not exploiting the kinetic possibilities of car chases in adventure films”. But that goes too far. Royalle and Joy do show how it is possible to do without external ejaculation.

<sup>22</sup> The nominal ‘cum’ is also sometimes applied to female ejaculate and other products of female sexual arousal.

only for them. And now one might wonder whether what I said earlier is entirely true: that pornography cannot offer its viewers the performer's orgasm itself. Might there be an element of sympathetic response to (sufficiently convincing evidence of) another person's orgasm, a mild form of orgasmic synaesthesia? Might that be part of what explains the pleasure some viewers of pornography derive from cumshots?

Pornography has a more difficult time portraying female orgasm or, for that matter, any sort of female sexual pleasure. It is not that (much) pornography does not try to do so. Linda Williams (1989, ch. 1) suggests, in fact, that the quest to 'make sex speak'—to make female sexuality, in particular, reveal its secrets—is central to what cinematic pornography is as a genre. But it is far less obvious how to portray female sexual pleasure through the medium of film—or, at least, to do so at all convincingly. As Cindy Patton (1989, p. 105) notes, pornography frequently uses the same visual vocabulary used in mainstream culture, namely, "the transcendent glazed-over eyes, lips glistening and slightly parted, head thrown back". More familiarly, it uses sound (Corbett and Kapsalis, 1996)—or, at least, tries to do so, since the gasps and moans that punctuate so much pornography are, to borrow again from Patton, not so much acted as faked or, at least, augmented. It is a nice question how female sexual pleasure might better be represented. For our purposes here, though, the point is just that the question how to portray male orgasm has an obvious, if unimaginative, answer.

It is not so obvious how to portray male sexual pleasure more generally. Most mainstream pornography has not concerned itself with this issue, since men tend to appear only as 'disembodied penises' (to borrow a phrase). Some feminist pornographers have tried to portray non-orgasmic male sexual pleasure, however, and some have tried to extend this to a more encompassing representation of male orgasm. Often, they use the same sorts of techniques they employ in portraying female sexual pleasure, including facial expressions, clenched hands, tensed muscles, and realistic vocalizations, whether in addition to or in place of ejaculation.<sup>23</sup> What often matters most is how these visual cues are shot and how the finished product is edited. To put it briefly: Film-making matters.

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<sup>23</sup> For an example of 'in place of', see Erika Lust's short film "Mad Men Porn" (XConfessions, 2015); for an example of 'in addition to', see her first film "The Good Girl" (Lust Productions, 2004). I have discussed the facial that ends the latter elsewhere (Heck, 2021, §2.2).

The idea that ejaculation is the visual vocabulary of male orgasm was expressed already by Beatrice Faust, at the very beginning of the ‘sex wars’:

One could indicate male orgasm by accelerated thrusts and breathing and then sharp deceleration, but cynics would interpret this as faking. . . . For most people, male orgasm is identified with ejaculation and, since ejaculating into blank spaces is not much fun, ejaculating over a person who responds with enjoyment sustains a lighthearted mood as well as a degree of realism. . . . The ejaculation motif lends itself to elaborate theories, . . . but the simpler explanation is more likely to be the correct one. (Faust, 1980, p. 18)

Faust’s own explanation is a bit too simple, however. I suggested earlier that what we really need to understand is why the woman’s “respond[ing] with enjoyment” should be as important as it apparently is, and Faust does not address this question. Then again, we have not really addressed it yet.

There is actually a purely practical reason for a male to ejaculate outside their female partner’s body, a reason that would have been all the more important at the dawn of hardcore pornography. Before 1965, when the United States Supreme Court issued its decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, it was still illegal in two states even for married couples to obtain contraception. (Massachusetts was the other one.) It was not until 1972 that state laws prohibiting unmarried people from purchasing contraception (and anyone but a doctor or pharmacist from distributing it) were struck down in *Eisenstadt v. Baird*. And the law was hardly the only obstacle. As a result, many couples both before and after 1972 would have used the so-called withdrawal method: The male partner withdraws their penis from their female partner’s body just prior to ejaculation. And the withdrawal method remains popular. A 2002 study reported that, among American women aged 15–44 (who had had sexual intercourse), 56.1% of them had used the withdrawal method at least once (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005, p. 92).<sup>24</sup> There is

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<sup>24</sup> This makes somewhat puzzling an earlier study which reported that, in 1965, only about 15% of married women aged 18–39 had ever used withdrawal (Westoff and Ryder, 1967, p. 2). Perhaps the restriction to married women distorted the data. Another part of the story may be that many people seem not to regard withdrawal as a method of contraception at all, a fact that may lead “some studies [to] underestimate the use of withdrawal” (Jones et al., 2009, p. 409).

some indication that the method may have increased in popularity since then.<sup>25</sup> A 2014 study of sexually active females aged 18–39 reported that a third of them had used the withdrawal method in the previous *month*, often in conjunction with other methods (Jones, Lindberg, and Higgins, 2014). And one might reasonably suppose that, much of the time, when a couple uses this method, the male ejaculates onto their female partner’s body. Not because the male intends thereby to degrade the female, but simply because it is what least breaks the flow, for both partners. Maybe, for some people, it is even a way of maintaining connection in the wake of the literal and figurative ‘disconnect’ that occurs when the male partner ‘pulls out’. It would be nice to have some real data here. But one would suppose that even people who have not used the withdrawal method at least know of it.

There is actually nothing at all shocking, then, or even unusual, about a male’s ejaculating onto their female partner’s body. It is, rather, something many people have themselves experienced as part of sex, though not necessarily because the act itself is regarded as erotic.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, there is some reason to believe that the cumshot was, at least in part, originally a form of contraception. Female performers at that time often preferred that their male partners not ejaculate inside them because, though they used other forms of contraception, they did not fully trust them (Slade, 2001, pp. 653–4).<sup>27</sup> Some female performers have probably also had other reasons not to want their partners to ejaculate inside them. “Cum on me not in me” was a popular mantra of safer-sex advocates early in the AIDS era (Patton, 1991, pp. 376, 386 fn. 2). And is it really supposed to be less intimate to have someone’s semen *in* you rather than *on* you? No doubt pornography has reshaped our conception of this sort of act, precisely by exploring its erotic potential. But there is nothing surprising about that, either. Why shouldn’t such an act be eroticized? Not just in porn, but by couples who use the withdrawal method and even by those who don’t? Maybe some people find semen as disgusting as Dworkin apparently did. But, given its close association

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<sup>25</sup> This has been much discussed in the popular press (see e.g. Friedman, 2013; Pearson, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> When we were discussing this issue in my course on pornography, one of the students remarked that she very much enjoys seeing her partners (male or female) ejaculate, and she did not seem to be alone in this view.

<sup>27</sup> As noted above, withdrawal is often used today in conjunction with other methods. Indeed, it is sometimes recommended as an additional form of birth control (Higgins, 2015).

with male orgasm, that hardly seems inevitable. Mostly, it just seems depressing.

And it is here that we arrive, I think, at the most important reason that many men find the fantasy of a woman's relishing and even craving their semen so powerful: Many men have a deeply conflictual relationship with semen. On the one hand, as we've already discussed, semen is powerfully associated with orgasm. On the other hand, it is messy, inconvenient, and dangerous—potentially even deadly.

From the very first time a male ejaculates semen,<sup>28</sup> the question arises what to do with the stuff. It's sticky, not the kind of thing you want to get on your clothes, or bed, or what have you. And it has an easily recognizable odor even when dried, which makes it a tell-tale sign of an activity that one typically wishes to remain secret. Scott MacDonald's report of his first experience of ejaculation has all these features:

I remember the shock and fear that followed my first orgasm. Without knowing it, I had been masturbating in the attic of my aunt's house where I had discovered a pile of girlie magazines. The unexpected orgasm was astonishing and thrilling, but at the end of it, I discovered, to my shock, that my shirt and the magazine were covered with a substance I hadn't known existed. I cleaned myself up (even at that early point I was clear that for my relatives—especially for my mother and my aunt—the mysterious substance would be seen as a form of dirtiness),<sup>29</sup> and I spent the remainder of the day walking around with my arms and hands in odd configurations in front of my shirt in the hope of avoiding detection. From that time on, I was alert to the fact that every indulgence of my desire for sex would produce evidence the discovery of which, I was sure, could be humiliating. (MacDonald, 1983, p. 15)

My own experience was different in detail but in relevant respects similar, and I suspect that something like it is fairly common.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Many boys begin masturbating, and have their first orgasm, before they first ejaculate, something that usually happens early in puberty (Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny, 1985, p. 71).

<sup>29</sup> Note the reappearance of "dirt" both here and in the quotation from Hugo Schwyzer below.

<sup>30</sup> We might also discuss here the intense desire some men seem to have, as they approach orgasm, to consume their own semen, only to have that desire be replaced by disgust once they achieve orgasm. This is what gives rise to so-called CEI (cum-eating instruction) videos. See McKinnis (2012) and Jedeikin (2020).

When a male begins to have partnered sex, there are yet more problems. Semen now has to be carefully contained, even quarantined: Not only can semen cause pregnancy, but it can communicate disease, a fact that becomes all the more significant with the emergence of AIDS. It should therefore be no surprise that many males are anxious about how their female partners respond to their semen. Males are, as Lisa Jane Moore (2007, p. 90) puts it, “socialized to believe that their semen is undesirable and even disgusting to women, and possibly perceived as a health hazard. . .”. There is an obvious temptation to interpret such fears in psychoanalytic terms, with reference to toilet training (see e.g. Friday, 1980, p. 121).<sup>31</sup> But there is a crucial difference: Urination is not a routine concomitant of male orgasm; urine has nothing like the same symbolic significance that semen does. So the question that makes many males anxious, even if only at a sub-conscious level, is not just: Do my partners accept this fluid that my body just happens to produce? but: Is this aspect of my sexuality, of the way I orgasm, disgusting to my partners? The best-case scenario might well seem to be neutrality: As MacDonald (1983, p. 15) puts it, “For the most part, even between people who love each other, the presence of semen is at best a necessary evil”.

Earlier, I raised the question why we should suppose, with Dworkin (1995, p. 183), that males think that their own semen is disgusting, so that they would interpret ejaculating on a woman as contaminating and humiliating her. But we can now see that Dworkin is onto something: That may not be what males *think*, but it is what they *fear*. More precisely, what they fear is that *their female partners find their semen disgusting*—and, ironically, Dworkin threatens to prove them right. Like any deep-seated fear, this one will sometimes manifest as aggression: The source of the fear is projected onto women, who are then blamed for the bad feelings. So, when cumshots and facials are used in pornography to humiliate, we might understand them as saying: “I’ll show *you* just how dirty semen is!” That does not excuse such material, but it does help to explain it.

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<sup>31</sup> A better comparison, also mentioned by Friday (1980, p. 122), would be to menstrual fluids. MacDonald (1983, p. 15) develops this comparison and arrives at the same point I am about to make: “I feel a similar concern about semen [as women feel about menstrual fluids], and must face a very special irony: the fact that [semen] surfaces precisely at the moment of my most complete sexual abandon”. The best comparison, surely, would be to female ejaculation, about which females can experience a great deal of shame (Gilliland, 2009), but female ejaculation is a complex and somewhat contested topic.

It is this same fear, I suggest, that explains the appeal, for many men, of the fantasy of women who relish their partners' ejaculating on them—and the special appeal of a woman who enjoys having her partner to ejaculate on her face. Marcotte (2009) is right about that much: “The face and doing things to it is [sic] loaded. . .”. But Marcotte is wrong to compare a facial to “spitting in someone’s face”. That assumes that semen is to be compared to spit; that ejaculation is akin to spitting; and that the hoped-for response is humiliation grounded in disgust. None of that need be true, and I very much doubt that it is true in most cases. Here again, the *fear* is that women will respond to semen precisely as Marcotte suggests they might, and the fantasy is that they will respond otherwise.

It turns out that this sort of interpretation of cumshots and facials is quite common and has been repeatedly rediscovered (including by me). Nancy Friday comes to much the same conclusion in her classic study of men's sexual fantasies, which devotes an entire chapter to fantasies involving semen (Friday, 1980, ch. 5). And the complete quote from Moore, the end of which was elided above, reads:

[S]ince men are socialized to believe that their semen is undesirable and even disgusting to women, and possibly perceived as a health hazard, it is a relief to see representations [in pornography] of their semen as cherished. The raw material of male desire, seminal fluid, is produced directly from the source, and it is wanted and desperately desired in its purest form. (Moore, 2007, p. 90)

But perhaps the most striking expression of this idea appears in an essay by Hugo Schwyzer that appeared on the feminist website *Jezebel*:<sup>32</sup>

A few years ago, in a humanities course on the body, my class was discussing one of the most famous selections from the now-iconic *Vagina Monologues*, “Because He Liked to Look at It”. The monologue tells the story of a woman who thought her vagina was “incredibly ugly” until she meets a man named Bob, who loves to stare at—and taste—her vulva with delight and wonder. Bob's embrace of her body is the key to her self-acceptance. During our discussion of the monologue, a male student noted bravely that he thought many men felt

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<sup>32</sup> Schwyzer's own personal history does not undermine the insights expressed in this quotation.



the same way about their penises. Perhaps, he suggested, the intense appeal of facials in porn (and real life) was about men's desire for that same experience of being validated as desirable, as good, as "not dirty".

... A female student turned and asked him, "So you're saying that when a man comes on a woman's face, it's not about making her dirty—it's about making him feel clean?" The young man blushed, the class tittered. "Yes," he said, "that's it. And that's what makes it so hot." (Schwyzer, 2012)

That is not a full explication of the meaning of facials—I doubt there is any such thing—but my purposes here do not require one. Indeed, in many ways, I am only trying to make it clear how complex this terrain is, both emotionally and analytically. To think that facials, let alone other sorts of cumshots, are always about degradation is simplistic and naïve. We understand the appeal of facials better if we think of them as responsive to men's wish that their semen will not just be accepted by their partners—merely tolerated—but enjoyed and even celebrated.<sup>33</sup>

That is not, of course, to say that women should do anything in particular to cater to this male fantasy. Enough is expected of women already. The issue here concerns the 'meaning' that facials have for male viewers of pornography. What I have been arguing is just that what explains the popularity of facials in heterosexual pornography is not that male viewers enjoy watching women be degraded. That may be true for some men, but there is no reason to think that men in general regard facials as degrading. Claims about the 'cultural meaning' of facials therefore need to be treated with great care (e.g. Whisnant, 2016, p. 6).

Recent empirical work supports this analysis. Unsurprisingly, people vary in how they respond to images of 'facials'. People with higher levels of sexual disgust tend to respond more negatively, as do people who are more germ-phobic; people who feel more positively about casual sex tend to respond more positively, as do those who regard themselves as having high 'mate value' (Salmon, Hehman, and Figueredo, 2023). Overall, men do tend to respond to facials more positively than women do, but only a little bit more. And both men and women prefer images in which the recipient displays 'positive affect', i.e., seems to enjoy the act (Salmon

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<sup>33</sup> I will not discuss here 'bukake' and 'blowbangs', which typically involve large numbers of men ejaculating on a woman's body, and usually on her face. These raise somewhat different issues.

and Hehman, 2022, p. 1276).<sup>34</sup> That is the opposite of what one would expect if men regarded facials as degrading their recipients.

One might nonetheless worry about just how common facials are in mainstream pornography. If, as I have suggested, they are largely a manifestation of male insecurity, then they represent one of many ways in which mainstream pornography centers men's needs and fantasies and largely ignores women's. And there is much to criticize about the way facials are typically presented in mainstream heterosexual pornography. One problem, mentioned earlier, is that the women often do not appear to enjoy the act but only to be trying to appear as if they do. And even when performers do respond positively to facials, they often react in a way that is so over the top that it is simply not believable.<sup>35</sup> This is particularly true when the facial itself occurs in a way that is artificial and obviously scripted: The couple are having intercourse when, all of a sudden, she hops onto her knees and looks up at him expectantly while he masturbates to orgasm.<sup>36</sup> In all these cases, it is hard to avoid a sense that these women are receiving facials not because they want to do so but because someone has told them to do so. Their desires, in that respect, are visibly being subordinated to someone else's.

Indeed, well-done facials in professional pornography are rare. But one example of a convincing facial is in Stormy Daniels's film *Wanted* (Wicked Pictures, 2015). While Samuel (Eric Masterson) lies on his back, Sally (Jodi Taylor) fellates him, resting her head on his stomach. When he ejaculates, she directs it onto her cheek, smiling the whole time. Two things—besides the fact that facials are far from the norm in Daniels's films—make it work: (i) Sally is clearly enjoying herself, and (ii) the positioning makes the act feel natural and 'in the flow'. By contrast, the facial in the last scene (with Chanel Preston and Brad Armstrong) is a

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<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the affect of the recipient explains about the same amount of variance as the sex of the viewer.

<sup>35</sup> Examples include the scene with Sofi Ryan and Ryan Ryder in Paul Woodcrests's *A Hotwife Blindfolded 3* (New Sensations Tales from the Edge, 2017) and the scene with Haley Paige and Mick Blue in Halle Vanderhyden's *Innocence: Baby Blue* (Ninn Worx, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> This is so common that examples could come from almost anywhere. (If one includes similar sequences, but with him ejaculating on her breasts, then it is even more common.) But see, e.g., the final sex scene in B Skow's film *Color Blind* (Skow Digital, 2016), with Adriana Chechik and Jovan Jordan, and the first scene in Manuel Ferrara's *Screwing Wall Street* (Evil Angel, 2015), with him and Veronica Vain. By contrast, there is something reasonably believable about how this is done in Nica Noelle's film *Office Affairs* (Hard Candy Films, 2012), in the scene with Francesca Le and Wolf Hudson.

'hop onto the knees' case, and it very much does not work. Another good example is the scene with Jessica Rox and Will C from Dawn's *Bedtime Stories* (Daring Pure, 2013). This time, she is lying on her back and masturbating him as he kneels next to her. He eventually takes over and ejaculates on her face. The position is perhaps less natural, but her obvious desire, even glee, is what makes it different.<sup>37</sup> Of course, even well-done facials will not appeal to everyone—but nothing does.

Feminist pornographers—and more creative pornographers, generally—tend to avoid facials, if only because they are so cliché (see e.g. Ms Naughty, 2007). But there is a facial in Erika Lust's "Skype Sex", from *XConfessions 4* (2015), with Lady Mai and Juan Lucho, and it works as part of a fantasy the distant lovers are sharing. On the 'female-friendly' website FrolicMe, there is a video "Cum Together" (2015), with Sabrina Jay and Antonio Black, that is somewhat similar to the one from *Bedtime Stories*.<sup>38</sup> It helps that Black kisses Jay repeatedly afterwards. Convincing facials are somewhat easier to find in amateur pornography. For example, the woman who is part of YourDreamCouple, on Only Fans, clearly relishes having her partner ejaculate on her body, including her face.

I conclude, then, that facials do not have to be, and are not always, misogynistic. But it also seems fair to say that the great majority of facials one sees in contemporary pornography are misogynistic, in one way or another. So that's yet another reason to want porn to change (Lust, 2014).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The website X-Art.com has several videos with reasonably well-done facials. See, for example, "After Hours" (2011), with Kitty Jane and Johny Mimmo, "My Naughty Girl" (2013), with Caprice and Marcello Bravo, and "At Home With Tiffany" (2014), with Tiffany Thompson and Brandon.

<sup>38</sup> In FrolicMe's video "Fuck Hotel" (2020), with Baby Nicols and Andy Stone, *she* ejaculates on *his* face.

<sup>39</sup> Thanks to the members of my 2022 and 2024 courses on pornography, taught at Brown University, for helping me think through these issues. Special thanks to Phil Bold for first getting me to think seriously about it.

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