

# Does Pornography Presuppose Rape Myths?

## Abstract

Rae Langton and Caroline West have argued that pornography silences women by presupposing misogynistic attitudes, such as that women enjoy being raped. More precisely, they claim that a somewhat infamous pictorial, “Dirty Pool”, makes such presuppositions. I argue for four claims. (1) Langton and West’s account of how pornography silences women is empirically dubious. (2) There is no evidence that very much pornography makes the sorts of presuppositions they require. (3) Even “Dirty Pool”, for all its other problems, does not make the presuppositions that Langton and West claim it does. (4) Langton and West misread “Dirty Pool” because they do not take proper account of the fact that pornography traffics in sexual fantasy.

Pornography, it is sometimes said, tells lies about women.<sup>1</sup> The anti-pornography ordinance proposed by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon (1988, p. 101) went so far as to *define* pornography as sexually explicit media that, among other things, encodes such ‘messages’ as that women “experience sexual pleasure in being raped”.<sup>2</sup> These messages are then supposed to be internalized by viewers of pornography, much to the detriment of women. As Rae Langton and Caroline West note, however, little if any pornography makes such pronounce-

---

<sup>1</sup> This now familiar phrasing is due to John Stoltenberg, whose essay “The Forbidden Language of Sex” concludes with the words: “Pornography tells lies about women. But pornography tells the truth about men” (Stoltenberg, 1989, p. 106).

<sup>2</sup> Dworkin and MacKinnon famously use the term “pornography” in a ‘thick’ sense, but I shall use it in a morally and politically neutral way: as applying, roughly, to sexually explicit media that, in some sense, and to some significant extent, is intended to facilitate sexual arousal in those who engage with it. That said, I’ll not be particularly careful in what follows about when I’m talking about pornography quite generally and when I’m talking just about what we might call “misogynistic pornography”. Context should make that clear enough.

ments explicitly (L&W, p. 306).<sup>3</sup> We need to be told, therefore, just how pornography encodes the lies it tells.

Answering this question is the central purpose of Langton and West's paper "Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game". L&W, as I shall henceforth call them, suggest that the mechanism is what philosophers and linguists call *presupposition*. Someone who asks "Does Jean regret voting for Smith?" does not explicitly say that Jean voted for Smith. But one can only regret what one actually did, so even raising the question whether Jean regrets voting for Smith presupposes that Jean did in fact vote for Smith. Similarly, L&W claim, the sorts of stories told by pornography presuppose such facts as that "... 'Gang rape is enjoyable for women' or 'Sexual violence is legitimate'..." (L&W, p. 312). Those stories would make no sense if one were to presume instead that women do not enjoy being raped. Moreover, ordinary "public and private sexual conversations" between men and women are alleged to incorporate "the presupposition, introduced and reinforced by pornography, that a woman's no sometimes means yes" (L&W, p. 314). As a result, some women's real-world attempts to refuse sex by saying "No" fail, with the result that these women are date-raped (Langton, 1993, pp. 320–1; L&W, p. 314).

It is essential to this argument that (a good deal of) pornography does presuppose, e.g., that a woman's "No" does not always mean *no*. What evidence do L&W offer for this claim? Perhaps surprisingly, they discuss only one actual example of pornography, a somewhat infamous pictorial, "Dirty Pool", that was published in *Hustler* in January 1983. The previously mentioned claims about gang rape and sexual violence are specifically made only about it. But L&W (p. 311, fn. 20) insist, in a footnote, that the story "Dirty Pool" tells is "in many ways typical"—typical, presumably, in the respects just mentioned. The question in which I'm interested here is whether any of these claims are true.

Here is the plan. We'll begin by recalling some basic points about presupposition. I'll then argue, in section 2, that Langton's account of how pornography silences women rests upon empirically dubious assumptions about acquaintance rape, though it will emerge that there may be a different way in which pornography silences women, assuming it presupposes what L&W say it does. As we'll see in section 3, however, it is doubtful that very much contemporary pornography does make such presuppositions. Even "Dirty Pool" doesn't, or so I'll argue in section 4.

---

<sup>3</sup> References to Langton and West (1999) are marked "L&W".

The overall point will turn out to be one that feminists have been making since the dawn of the anti-pornography movement: that the sort of flat-footed, literal reading of pornography that we find in L&W either overlooks or misunderstands the fact that pornography traffics in sexual fantasy (see e.g. Webster, 1981; Willis, 1983).

## 1 Presupposition

The notion of presupposition first appears in the work of Gottlob Frege (1984, pp. 168ff), but it was Sir Peter Strawson who brought it to prominence. As against Bertrand Russell (1905), who had argued that “The King of France is bald” logically implies that France has a king, Strawson (1950) argued that the sentence instead *presupposes* that France has a king—as does its negation, “The King of France is not bald”. Indeed, if France has no king, then utterances of “The King of France is bald” do not even express a proposition, or so Strawson claims. Thus, a sentence’s presuppositions might reasonably be regarded as ‘felicity conditions’ on its utterance: Generally speaking, one ought not to utter a sentence whose presuppositions are not satisfied, since one will, in such circumstances, not actually manage to say anything.

For Strawson, then, presupposition is a ‘logical’ relation between a sentence and a proposition. Robert Stalnaker (1974), by contrast, argued that the more fundamental notion is what *someone* presupposes. It would be better, on his account, to say that someone who utters “The King of France is bald” makes it manifest that *they* are presupposing that France has a king. And, in so far as utterances of that sentence have a ‘felicity condition’, it is not that France should have a king, but rather that it should be mutually presupposed, among the parties to whatever conversation is under way, that France has a king. These mutual presuppositions constitute what would later come to be called the ‘common ground’ of the conversation.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to appreciate that presuppositions, in Stalnaker’s sense, are not necessarily beliefs, although it is not uncommon for philosophers to operate with what Stalnaker (2002, p. 704) describes as a ‘simple model’ according to which the common ground does just consist of mutual beliefs. In general, however, presuppositions need not be believed. The

---

<sup>4</sup> Stalnaker (1974, p. 49) uses this phrase in his first paper on the topic, but only once, and not in any technical sense. I do not know how or when it became standard terminology.

most common counterexamples are explicit suppositions. “Suppose Alex is a spy”, I might say. Then, assuming you are willing to play along, we now mutually presuppose that Alex is a spy. Thus, you could now say, “Then Sam must be a spy, too”. The word “too” is a so-called presupposition trigger: Use of that word, in this case, is felicitous only if it is presupposed that some other conversationally relevant person is a spy. That this utterance is now felicitous thus shows that it really is being presupposed that Alex is a spy.

The terms usually used in this connection are “accept” and its cognates (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 715). So, in the conversation just described, we would be said to ‘accept’ that Alex is a spy. But our accepting it amounts to different things in different cases, and this technical notion of acceptance must be sharply distinguished from nearby notions. Acceptance, in this sense, is in no way a dilute form of belief. Supposition utterly lacks the ‘truth-directed’ character of belief, and what you accept in the context of a particular conversation can even contradict what you believe.<sup>5</sup>

This is critically important in the present context. L&W propose to explain how pornography inculcates its misogynistic presuppositions in its viewers in terms of what David Lewis (1979) called “accommodation”: If one is watching a pornographic film that presupposes that women enjoy being raped, then one has no choice but to accept that presupposition while watching the film, since otherwise the film would make no sense. It’s a short slide to the claim that one must *believe* that women enjoy being raped in order to engage with the film; it would then be quite clear how pornography could “alter beliefs rather directly”, all but forcing its viewers to believe what it presupposes (Langton, 2012, p. 84). But the only sense in which one must ‘accept’ such presuppositions is very weak: I might equally accept, ‘for the sake of argument’, that Alex is a spy; the presuppositions that I accept, as already said, can contradict what I believe. To borrow a formulation from Stalnaker (2002, p. 716), the presuppositions one accepts at a given time are what one is prepared to take for granted *for the purposes of the conversation in which one is engaged at that time*, and only for that. So it is not immediately clear why the presupposition that women enjoy being raped, even if one is

---

<sup>5</sup> Langton (2012, p. 84) later acknowledges this point, but she dismisses its significance, writing: “. . . [B]asically, on Stalnaker’s approach the shared common ground is identified with certain belief-like propositional attitudes of the speakers. . . .”. But, while acceptance is like belief in certain ways—ways in which it is unlike desire or intention—it is not like belief in the ways that matter here, which have to do with the way that beliefs affect behavior.

forced to ‘accept’ it while viewing a particular film, should propagate beyond the context of viewing. But it must do so if it is to affect real women who are not party to the pornographic ‘conversation’.

There is much more to be said about this issue, but I shall not pursue it further here. What matters for present purposes is just that, when I speak in what follows of viewers who ‘accept’ pornography’s misogynistic presuppositions, it is this technical notion of acceptance that I have in mind. I am neither claiming nor conceding, say, that someone who engages pornographically with “Dirty Pool” must *believe* that women enjoy being raped, if that is indeed what it presupposes.

## 2 Presupposition and Silencing

L&W (pp. 311-2) claim that “Dirty Pool” presupposes the rape myth that a woman’s “No” sometimes means *yes* and that it is typical in this respect. This claim is meant to underwrite the thesis, which Langton develops in more detail elsewhere, that pornography silences women. Langton writes:<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes a woman tries to use the “no” locution to refuse sex, and it does not work. It does not work for the twenty percent of undergraduate women who report that they have been date raped. It does not work for the twenty-five percent of final-year schoolgirls who report that they have been sexually forced. Saying “no” sometimes doesn’t work, but there are two ways in which it can fail to work. (Langton, 1993, p. 320)

The first way is that a man might recognize a woman’s intention to refuse sex but simply ignore it.<sup>7</sup> That, Langton says, is “simple rape”. The case to which she wants to draw attention is a different one, in which a woman says “No”, but her utterance does not even count as a refusal (Langton, 1993, p. 321). That, L&W (p. 314) suggest, is what happens in

---

<sup>6</sup> To be clear, I do not doubt the statistics Langton mentions. Nor am I any less outraged by them than she is. What is at issue here is what explains the prevalence of date rape and, relatedly, how we might best combat it. All of the researchers I shall be citing are motivated by such concerns. See e.g. Beres (2010, p. 12).

<sup>7</sup> I find the idea that women must ‘refuse’ sex disturbing, but that sort of language is so common that it is hard to blame anyone in particular for it. Nonetheless, I shall avoid it where possible. My use below of such terms as “invite” and “decline” was inspired by Rebecca Kukla (2018).

many cases of date rape,<sup>8</sup> and pornography is supposed to silence women by making it the case that, in some sexual contexts, a woman's saying "No" does not constitute her refusing sex.<sup>9</sup> This is what Langton calls 'illocutionary disablement'.

As Daniel Jacobson (1995, pp. 76ff) was perhaps the first to note, there is a serious worry that, if so, no rape has occurred in such cases: The woman has not actually refused her partner's request for sex. But that is too quick: That the woman has not refused does not imply that she has consented (Hornsby and Langton, 1998, p. 31). As Nellie Wieland (2007, pp. 451–5) argues, however, if a woman's saying "No" doesn't count as her refusing, then that would seem to diminish the responsibility of date rapists to some degree, which is still problematic. Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan (2010, p. 171) reply that, even if "pornography causes (some) viewers to make interpretive mistakes" (e.g., not to interpret "No" as a refusal), that does not by itself show that there is diminished responsibility: There may have been other indications, even clear indications, of the woman's non-consent. Surely the man ought to have been sensitive to those.

But it is far from clear that there need be any other indications of non-consent. What if the woman does just say "No" and does not resist in any other way, perhaps out of concern for her physical safety? Cases of this form are especially common when the woman initially gives her consent but later withdraws it. If intercourse becomes uncomfortable, physically or otherwise, and if all a woman does is say "No" or "Stop" (cf. Gattuso, 2015), then the man's 'finishing' is not rape if pornography has made it the case that she does not withdraw her consent by uttering such words. But it is rape.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> It's worth noting that date rape was something of a new idea when Langton was writing her first paper on these topics (Langton, 1993). A book that advertised itself as the first collection of scholarly work on date rape was published just two years before Langton's paper (Parrot and Bechhofer, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> It would be difficult to overstate the extent to which it has become a sort of 'common knowledge' among analytic philosophers that date rape is often a result of women's refusals not being recognized as such. Jennifer Hornsby (1995) and Mary Kate McGowan (2003) develop explanations of this 'fact' that are closely related to Langton's; Miranda Fricker (2007, pp. 137–42) and Rosa Vince (2018) offer explanations of the same 'fact' that are broadly epistemological. I have heard the claim made by many others, too, often in passing, as if it is just something we all know.

<sup>10</sup> Rape is a legal category, and I am not a lawyer. So the claim, to put it more carefully, is that such an act constitutes an extremely serious form of sexual misconduct for which the man is blameworthy. But that cannot be if the woman has not withdrawn her consent.

Langton also makes questionable empirical assumptions. As she sees it, (heterosexual) date rape is often the result of a failure of ‘uptake’: a failure by some man to recognize what illocutionary act (refusal) some woman is trying to perform (Hornsby and Langton, 1998, pp. 27–8). Langton thus accepts a form of the so-called *miscommunication hypothesis*, which was quite popular when she was writing her first papers on pornography.<sup>11</sup> But that hypothesis was quickly challenged by feminists who worried that it blames women for their own rapes (see e.g. McCaw and Senn, 1998, esp. pp. 610, 622–3), and the initial evidence that seemed to support it was soon contradicted. Now, after more than three decades of empirical work, I think it is safe to say that the miscommunication hypothesis has been thoroughly refuted, as much of a hold as it may still have on what passes for common wisdom.

Celia Kitlinger and Hannah Frith showed over two decades ago that women typically decline sexual invitations using the very same conversational strategies that they (and other people) use to decline other sorts of invitations. People just do not normally decline invitations by directly saying “No”:

... [Y]oung women find it difficult to say ‘no’ to sex at least partly because saying immediate clear and direct ‘no’s (to anything) is not a normal conversational activity. Young women who do not use the word ‘no’, but who refuse sex with delays, prefaces, palliatives and accounts are using conversational patterns which are normatively recognized as refusals in everyday life. (Kitlinger and Frith, 1999, p. 310)

One might think that women who refuse indirectly invite misunderstanding, but, in oft-quoted remarks, Kitlinger and Frith draw a very different conclusion:

If there is an organized and normative way of doing indirect refusal, ... then men who claim not to have understood an indirect refusal (as in, ‘she didn’t actually say no’) are claiming to be cultural dopes, and playing rather disingenuously

---

<sup>11</sup> The miscommunication hypothesis seems to have originated in such works as *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, by the sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1991). A related though earlier view is that date rape is sometimes due to men’s misperception of women’s level of sexual interest (see e.g. Abbey, 1991). These views can be combined, and often were. See Frith and Kitlinger (1997, pp. 517–22) and Gavey (2005, ch. 2) for the history.

on how refusals are usually done and understood to be done. They are claiming not to understand perfectly normal conversational interaction, and to be ignorant of ways of expressing refusal which they themselves routinely use in other areas of their lives. (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999, p. 310)

Kitzinger and Frith's position is almost opposite Langton's: Things other than "No" often do mean *no* and are readily understood as doing so. But Kitzinger and Frith do not quite contradict Langton. Her view is that, in a *sexual* context, men's ability to recognize ordinary refusals fails, because pornography has made it the case that, in those contexts, what would ordinarily count as a refusal does not there count as one.

But follow-up studies have shown that men are perfectly capable of understanding even subtle non-verbal ways in which women express a lack of interest in sex (O'Byrne et al., 2006, 2008). As Melanie Beres puts it in describing the results of one of her studies:

...[W]omen and men's demonstrated literacy in social refusals generally should also apply to accepting or refusing sexual invitations. Not only were men and women able to identify verbal forms of disinterest or refusal, but they also described subtle forms of non-verbal refusals. These non-verbal signals were considered to be *obvious and easy to interpret*. These men and women articulated these cues in the context of casual sex; they did not know their partners well enough to read their unique body language. (Beres, 2010, p. 11, emphasis added)

There is simply no evidence that the difference between sexual and non-sexual contexts has the significance that Langton needs it to have, even where non-verbal communication is concerned.

There is other research that bears upon this issue, as well. Work done in the 1980s seemed at first to show that women do frequently offer 'token resistance' to sex so as not to seem too 'easy' (e.g. Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh, 1988),<sup>12</sup> but later work essentially refuted this claim (e.g. Muehlenhard and Rodgers, 1998).<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, however, the

---

<sup>12</sup> Vince (2018, pp. 3–5) discusses some of this early work but seems unaware of what followed.

<sup>13</sup> Methodological issues with the earlier studies are discussed in detail in the paper just referenced and work cited therein, as well as the other papers to be mentioned below. Note that one of the authors of the later study just cited is the same as one of the authors of the earlier study: Muehlenhard refuted her own earlier work.



reason is not that women never say “No” when they actually do have some interest in sex. The reason is that what women mean by “No” is more nuanced than one might have imagined—though what they mean is, again, readily understood in practice.

In one study, for example, Melanie Beres, Charlene Y. Senn, and Jodee McCaw (2014, p. 768) asked subjects who had some experience with heterosexual relationships to imagine themselves having had a very pleasant date, including “a really enjoyable dinner”, after which they went back to the woman’s home to continue the “terrific” conversation.<sup>14</sup> They are “both feeling close”, and the man “makes a sexual advance”. The woman refuses—the study does use the word “refuse”—but they later engage in sex anyway, including intercourse. The question that Beres, Senn, and McCaw asked their subjects was: *What happened in between?* Subjects were asked to imagine what their own experience might have been and then to answer the question free-form, at whatever length they wished. (This methodology is known as ‘story completion’.)

Nearly 80% of the subjects—and about the same percentage of men and women—wrote stories that reflected an initial ambivalence on the woman’s part (as opposed to a definite aversion to sex with this new partner), an ambivalence later resolved in favor of sex with him (Beres et al., 2014, p. 769). Crucially for our purposes, *none* of these 80%, either men or women, thought that the woman’s initial “No” did not mean *no*. Rather, they recognized that a woman’s not wanting to have sex *now* does not preclude her wanting to have sex *later*:

In the ambivalence stories, the male characters recognized the possibility of ambivalence and either left it up to the female character to initiate any further sexual activity, or they addressed the source of the ambivalence by engaging in conversation with the female character.<sup>15</sup> (Beres et al., 2014, p. 773)

Stories that involved some sort of coercion were much less common, but, even then, the man recognized the woman’s refusal as such. He just chose to ignore it. Even in the stories in which the woman fully intended

---

<sup>14</sup> It’s her home in the version of the story given to women. It’s not said whose home it is in the men’s version. (See also McCaw and Senn (1998), which uses much the same story.)

<sup>15</sup> Note that this does *not* mean harrassing or haranguing the female character until she gives in. See note 17.

to engage in sex when she first declined, what her “No” usually meant was *not now* or *not yet*:

... [T]he refusal is directed toward the specific timing of the behavior refused. The refusal is very situational and reflects that the woman is changing things to fit her idea of how she would like the evening and the sex to progress. (Beres et al., 2014, p. 772)

Only 4 of the 252 stories collected—that is, 1.6% of them—featured a token “No” that clearly did not mean *no* (Beres et al., 2014, pp. 772–3). The authors conclude that “. . . there is little evidence to support the miscommunication hypothesis, despite its widespread acceptance” (Beres et al., 2014, p. 774).

But the really crucial point here is that what “No” means in such a context is typically “I do not *consent* to sex”. It does not necessarily mean “I do not *want* to have sex”.<sup>16</sup> One can want to have sex but not consent to it, and one can consent to sex one does not want to have. Having sex with someone who wants to do so but does not consent is rape, but having sex with someone who consents but does not want to have sex is more complicated, and its ethical status (as opposed to its legal status) would seem to depend upon the person’s reasons for consenting. In an established relationship, one might consent to sex as an act of generosity, even when one is not ‘in the mood’. For our purposes, what’s most important is that the participants in the study we have been discussing seem quite capable of tracking this difference: In the ambivalence stories, in particular, the male character clearly recognizes that the female character does not *consent* to sex while simultaneously recognizing that she might be ambivalent about *wanting* it.<sup>17</sup> The subtlety and complexity of this response is what is most strikingly inconsistent, it seems to me, with the miscommunication hypothesis.

Presumably, there must be *some* cases in which refusals aren’t recognized as such, but there is scant evidence that this is a significant factor in date rape. As Kitzinger and Frith (1999, p. 310) put it, “. . . the

---

<sup>16</sup> For a summary of early work on this distinction, see Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005), which suggests that a failure to distinguish consenting from wanting vitiates the early studies on token resistance.

<sup>17</sup> There are complex issues here about when it is permissible to try to interest someone in sex when they have already declined, and when doing so starts to become coercive. Such themes surface in some of the coercion stories that Beres *et al.* received. But that does not suggest, let alone imply, that men have difficulty recognizing refusals.

root of the problem is not that [some] men do not understand sexual refusals, but that they do not like them". That is, women are date-raped not because "[r]efusal. . . has become unspeakable" (Langton, 1993, p. 321) but because their refusals, though recognized as such, are ignored. Contrary to what Langton suggests, that is to say, date rape typically just is 'simple' rape.<sup>18</sup> If so, however, then pornography does not silence women in the way that Langton claims it does, simply because women aren't silenced in that way.

Pornography might silence women in a different way, however. The miscommunication hypothesis clearly has some cultural currency. So, even if it is uncommon for men actually to misunderstand women's refusals, date-rapists might still be able to exploit people's *false belief* that such misunderstandings are common to excuse their own behavior. Indeed, there is evidence that some men do just that (O'Byrne et al., 2008). There is even evidence that some women appeal to this same myth to avoid blaming men they know and like for hurting them (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997, p. 524). None of that is 'illocutionary disablement' in Langton's sense, so far as I can see. Still, if people's readiness to believe that 'consent is complicated' makes it difficult for women who are date-raped to convince other people (friends or jurors) that they were raped, then perhaps that would count as illocutionary disablement (cf. Langton, 1993, p. 326; Vince, 2018, pp. 5–6).

Arguably, then, the miscommunication hypothesis is a rape myth. So, if pornography helps to propagate it, then that is a problem.

### 3 Pornography and Rape Myths

The question remains, however, just how pornography might encourage the false belief that women do not clearly communicate their sexual consent or refusal. That, of course, is the main question that L&W mean to be answering, so the core of their analysis is untouched by what was argued in the last section. If pornography presupposes that women often say "No" when they do not (in any sense) mean *No*, then that might well

---

<sup>18</sup> There is additional, though controversial, evidence for this claim. Some research has suggested that most date rapes are committed by repeat offenders who know exactly what they are doing: men who target women that they identify as vulnerable, incapacitate them with alcohol (by far the most common date rape drug), and purposely isolate them before assaulting them (Lisak and Miller, 2002; Lisak, 2011). As said, however, that research is controversial, in part because one of the authors, David Lisak, is himself somewhat controversial.

lead people to believe that it is easy for men to be misled. The rape myth would still be encouraged by pornography, then, even if the effect of the myth's acceptance was somewhat different from what Langton suggests.

If pornography is to enforce this sort of myth, however, then pornography that makes such presuppositions needs to be relatively common. If only rarely viewed pornography made such presuppositions, then it would be hard to see how it could contribute very much to the cultural ubiquity of such myths. That, I take it, is why L&W (p. 311, fn. 20) insist, as was noted earlier, that the story that "Dirty Pool" tells is "in many ways typical". What they mean, presumably, is that "Dirty Pool" is typical in how it bears upon the issue of silencing and so in what it presupposes, namely, that a woman's saying "No" does not always indicate that she does not consent to sex. Indeed, the way that Langton talks about pornography elsewhere strongly suggests that, like many anti-pornography feminists, she believes that it often features non-consensual sex (see e.g. Langton, 1993, pp. 307–8). But does it?

There are some pornographic films that, at least arguably, fit this sort of description. One example is *Behind the Green Door*, which was directed by the Mitchell Brothers and released in 1972. Gloria (played by Marilyn Chambers) is taken against her will to a sort of sex club. A mime warms up the crowd while Gloria is prepared by six female attendants for what is to happen to her. As the women lead her onto the stage, an announcement is made:<sup>19</sup>

Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness the ravishment of a woman who has been abducted. A woman whose initial fear and anxiety has mellowed into curious expectation. Although at first her reactions may lead you to believe that she is being tortured, quite the contrary is true. For no harm will come to those being ravished. In the morning, she will be set free, unaware of anything except that she has been loved as never before. . . . So, with the knowledge that you are powerless to stop the performance, just relax and enjoy yourself to the fullest extent.

In fact, Gloria is still frightened and anxious when her 'ravishment' begins, but she is soon overcome by her own arousal and before long seems to be participating willingly, even enthusiastically.

---

<sup>19</sup> My attention was drawn to *Green Door* by Linda Williams's discussion of it, to be mentioned shortly. Williams does not get the announcement quite right. I had to listen to it several times, and I'm still not sure I've got it right.

It is not exactly shocking, then, that Linda Williams should conclude, in her ground-breaking study of pornography as film, that *Green Door* is “regressive and misogynist” (Williams, 1989, p. 157).<sup>20</sup> But Williams situates that observation in a complex analysis of *Green Door* and its place in the development of hardcore cinematic pornography. Williams (1989, p. 164) ultimately concludes that *Green Door*’s “celebration of ravishment” is a feature of its ‘separated utopianism’, which she regards as a particularly escapist aspect of some pornography of this era.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Williams emphasizes not just how diverse pornography already was in 1972—the very different films *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones* were released the same year, both directed by Gerard Damiano—but also how significantly pornography changed over the next decade or so.

Nothing illustrates those changes better than the (truly awful) sequel to *Green Door*, which was released in 1986 and which revisits many of the themes of the original, though those themes are significantly transformed. Williams (1989, p. 239) remarks that “. . . the revisions of the original film’s narrative quite explicitly aim at modifying its misogyny, at making it more acceptable to women and thus to viewing couples”. Williams is here alluding to an important consequence of the domestication of pornography in the intervening years. The emergence of technologies that allowed people to watch pornography at home helped to make possible the ‘couples market’, since women were far more reluctant than men to enter the seedy theaters and ‘arcades’ to which pornography was consigned after the early 1970s (Williams, 1989, pp. 171–2; see also Juffer, 1998).<sup>22</sup> This new market encouraged a significant softening of pornography through the 1980s. I know of no evidence that very many films from that era—i.e., from when Langton and her collaborators were writing—featured any sort of non-consensual sex.

Nor is there any convincing evidence that much contemporary pornography features non-consensual sex. In an effort to document the allegedly ‘violent’ character of mainstream pornography, Ana J. Bridges

---

<sup>20</sup> Darren Kerr (2012) has argued for a more progressive reading of *Green Door*. He may well have a point, but I’ll not interrogate Williams’s reading here.

<sup>21</sup> As Williams (1989, pp. 156–66) reads the film, the green door represents a portal to a wonderland beyond the dreary lives of the truckers whose memories the film recounts. It’s the way that sexual bliss is presented as the solution to the problems of ordinary life that marks the film as separated utopian. (Following Richard Dyer (1981), Williams compares the film at some length to certain forms of musical, especially ones from the Great Depression.)

<sup>22</sup> The original such technology was the the video cassette recorder, or VCR. These would later be replaced by DVD players and, later still, by the internet.

and her colleagues examined 304 scenes from the top-selling videos of 2005. Their oft-cited conclusion was that 88% of these scenes included some form of physical aggression (Bridges et al., 2010, p. 1079). Their definition of ‘aggression’ has proven controversial (see e.g. Weitzer, 2015), and other studies have reached quite different conclusions (e.g. Tibbals, 2010). For our purposes, however, what’s most important is that, despite their focus on sexual violence,<sup>23</sup> Bridges *et al.* (2010, p. 1080) explicitly note that they “did not observe depictions of rape or scenes that perpetuated the ‘rape myth’...”. Not even one.<sup>24</sup>

About a decade later, Marleen Klaassen and Jochen Peter studied the one hundred most-viewed videos from each of four popular internet sites and found that only 6% of them portrayed non-consensual sex in which women were the victims—the same percentage as portrayed non-consensual sex in which men were the victims (Klaassen and Peter, 2015, p. 728). Klaassen and Peter do not tell us whether any of these involved a woman’s saying “No” but not thereby refusing sex. But even if we assume that all of them did, such scenarios would still be exceptional. Klaassen and Peter (2015, p. 731) conclude that their results “contradict the notion that women who are forced into sex are a central component of [contemporary] pornography...”.

What the empirical literature suggests, then, is that not much popular pornography makes the sorts of presuppositions that L&W claim it does, and it hasn’t for a long time. There is surely some that does, but it seems unlikely that there is enough of it for pornography to make any especially significant contribution to the propagation of rape myths.

#### 4 What Does “Dirty Pool” Presuppose?

I turn now to “Dirty Pool” itself. I am going to argue that even it does not presuppose rape myths. Whether it does is not, in itself, a particularly interesting question. But the claims that L&W make about “Dirty Pool”,

---

<sup>23</sup> I emphasize this point because pornography researchers almost always seem to have an agenda. In so far as Bridges *et al.* have an agenda, it is certainly not that of ‘defenders’ of pornography.

<sup>24</sup> They additionally remark: “This finding mirrors findings in the literature on pornography effects: recent studies have *failed to uncover* a previously robust finding that aggressive pornography increases acceptance of rape and endorsement of the rape myth” (Bridges et al., 2010, p. 1080, my emphasis). (This ‘robust finding’ was always controversial and was at best correlational (Weitzer, 2015).)

and the grounds on which they do so, are worth considering, since the mistakes they make are common enough to be instructive.

Before we begin, let me emphasize that I will not be arguing that “Dirty Pool” isn’t misogynistic. There are plenty of ways in which it is. What I am claiming is just that “Dirty Pool” does not make the sorts of presuppositions that L&W claim it does: that women enjoy being gang-raped, etc. Let me also warn the reader that some of what follows may seem pedantic. But the claim we are considering is that certain sorts of misogynistic “presuppositions *are required in order to make sense of* what is explicitly said and illustrated. . .” in this particular pictorial (L&W, p. 311, my emphasis).<sup>25</sup> That is a very strong claim, and we will need to consider several weakenings of it.

The claims that L&W make about “Dirty Pool” are central to their argument: This pictorial is, as I’ve said, the only concrete example of pornography they mention; they regard it as typical and extrapolate from it. One might have expected, then, that they would have examined it carefully. It seems, however, that they might not have seen it. They describe the associated text as “captions to the series of sexually graphic pictures” (L&W, p. 311). But, while there are six double pages of pictures, there is only a single block of text on one page; it is certainly not something I’d describe as “captions to the series of. . . pictures”, or even ‘a caption’. Moreover, L&W misquote the text, omitting the final ten words of the last sentence (which, as we shall see, are actually quite important). L&W seem to be relying here upon a paper by Catherine Itzin that they cite in this connection: Itzin (1992, p. 30) also omits the last ten words (though she does at least replace them with ellipses). Moreover, some of L&W’s claims about what “Dirty Pool” presupposes—e.g., “that the female waitress says ‘no’ when she really means ‘yes’; . . . that raping a woman is sexy and erotic for man and woman alike” (L&W, p. 311)—seem to be borrowed from Itzin’s paper, which includes the words: “The message is that while [the woman] says ‘no’ at first, she really means ‘yes’ for once the men touch her, she immediately gives way to the ‘ecstasy’ of gang-rape”.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> L&W add a caveat: that these presuppositions may only be “required for one way, perhaps the most natural and obvious way of making sense of” the pictorial (L&W, pp. 311–2). But the readings I’ll be discussing will not be outlandish. One of them is even correct.

<sup>26</sup> I should emphasize that I am not accusing L&W of plagiarism. But their citations are sloppy: It is utterly unclear to me whether they regard their characterization of “Dirty Pool” as simply a repetition of Itzin’s or as their own. And Itzin’s own characterization,

Should we trust Itzin's characterization? Actually, it is not her own. She credits it to a slideshow presentation developed by a group then known as 'Organizing Against Pornography'.<sup>27</sup> According to the Minnesota Historical Society (2019), this organization, which was founded in 1984 as the Pornography Resource Center, "was actively involved in the passage by the Minneapolis City Council of an anti-pornography ordinance, which had been prepared by Catharine MacKinnon in 1983". This is the same organization that published Dworkin and MacKinnon's manifesto *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality* (1988). Organizing Against Pornography was thus not an academic collective, and its claims should not be cited as if it were.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps, then, it is worth our taking a look at "Dirty Pool" ourselves.<sup>29</sup> The pictorial comprises nine photographs over, as I have said, six double pages. It features one woman, a waitress in what appears to be a working-class bar, and four leather-clad men gathered around a pool table.<sup>30</sup> At the lower right on the fifth page are five sentences of text:

Watching the muscular men at play is too much for the excitable young waitress. Though she pretends to ignore them, these men know when they see an easy lay. She is thrown on the felt table, and one manly hand after another probes her most private areas. Completely vulnerable, she feels one after another enter her fiercely. As the three violators explode in a shower of climaxes, she comes in a shuddering orgasm of her own and quickly passes out from the ordeal.

---

as we are about to see, is itself borrowed, which threatens to make L&W's account third-hand.

<sup>27</sup> Eithne Johnson (1997) discusses the theatrics of these sorts of presentations.

<sup>28</sup> Many of the "detailed descriptions of the kinds of pornography widely available in the United States and the United Kingdom" that L&W (p. 311, fn. 20) find in Itzin's paper are extracted from this same presentation. L&W do note that Itzin "draw[s] on work done by Jeanne Barkey and J. Koplin", but they do not note that Itzin is, for the most part, just quoting the slideshow, and they do not note that Barkey and Koplin were *activists*, not researchers with even a token commitment to objectivity.

<sup>29</sup> As of this writing, the pictorial is readily available online for those interested in studying it. A relatively obvious web search should suffice.

<sup>30</sup> One of the four men is never shown undressed, although he seems in many ways like the ring-leader. All of the characters, it also seems worth noting, are so stylized as to be almost cartoonish.



Now what does this story presuppose? We can start by considering L&W's suggestion that it presupposes that gang rape is enjoyable for women.<sup>31</sup> All women? There does not seem to be anything about the pictorial that suggests that the waitress is meant to represent women in general.<sup>32</sup> Granted, not much is said about who this woman is, other than that she is a "young waitress" and an "easy lay". But it is just not true that one cannot "make sense of what is explicitly said and illustrated. . ." in the pictorial (L&W, p. 311) without accepting that, quite generally, women enjoy being raped. At most, the pictorial seems to presuppose that rape *can* be enjoyable for women, or that it is enjoyable for some women, such as the waitress (an 'easy lay'). But that would be bad enough.

What is meant here by enjoyment? A clue is provided by L&W's suggestion that "Dirty Pool" presupposes "that raping a woman is sexy and erotic for man and woman alike" (L&W, p. 311). What L&W seem to be claiming, to borrow language from Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988, p. 101), would thus seem to be that "Dirty Pool" presupposes that (some) women "experience sexual pleasure in being raped". And indeed, not only does the accompanying text describe the waitress as having a "shuddering orgasm", but some of the later photographs seem to portray her, through her facial expressions, as sexually aroused.<sup>33</sup> So, again, the suggestion might be that what the pictorial presupposes is that women sometimes experience sexual pleasure while being raped.

But, as uncomfortable as this fact might be, that is just true. A significant percentage of people who are subjected to non-consensual sexual stimulation *do* experience sexual arousal and even orgasm. In one study, for example, 21% of female victims reported having a "physical response" during a sexual assault, even though, in almost all of those cases, violence was used to coerce the victim (Levin and van Berlo, 2004, p. 86).<sup>34</sup> Even orgasm during rape is not uncommon, a fact that seems to

---

<sup>31</sup> There are also questions to be raised about the alleged presupposition that raping a woman is enjoyable for men, but I shall leave it to the reader to consider what questions those might be.

<sup>32</sup> I do not doubt that female nudes, e.g., *can* be representative of women in general (cf. Eaton, 2012). But we need to be told why that should be true in this case, if it is, and I do not see any reason to think that it is.

<sup>33</sup> As Cindy Patton (1989, p. 105) notes, this is the same stereotypical, and limited, visual language that is often used to represent women's sexual pleasure, whether in pornography or in advertising.

<sup>34</sup> The study in question was originally published in Dutch (and was conducted by different authors). I am therefore relying upon the report of its results in the paper cited (one of whose authors, van Berlo, was also an author of that paper).

be well-known to clinicians and rape crisis workers (see e.g. Atkinson, 2008, pp. 185–8). In response to an inquiry about this heart-breaking phenomenon, one therapist wrote:

Approximately 1 in 20 women who come to the clinic... for treatment because of sexual abuse report that they have had an orgasm from previous unsolicited sexual arousal. It is not detailed in the (professional) literature because the victims usually do not want to tell/talk about it because they feel guilty, as people will think that if it happened they must have enjoyed it. The victims often say, “My body let me down”. Some however, cannot summon the courage to say even that. (Levin and van Berlo, 2004, p. 85)

Presumably, however, *Hustler* is not primarily in the business of conveying such factual information as that women sometimes experience orgasm during rape. There is supposed to be something significant about the waitress’s orgasm, and the obvious proposal is that what’s being suggested in “Dirty Pool” is that the sexual pleasure experienced by the ‘young waitress’ *excuses* the violence perpetrated against her. What her orgasm is supposed to reveal, that is to say, is that what originally looked like violence was really just seduction.

Such a myth is sadly familiar (cf. Littleton and Axsom, 2003). Even victims are vulnerable to its effects, a fact that can make experiencing sexual arousal (let alone orgasm) during rape especially traumatic, since it can make victims wonder whether they ‘really wanted it’ and so whether it was rape at all (Levin and van Berlo, 2004, p. 85). But arousal does not imply consent (and none of the authors cited mean to suggest that it does). Perhaps, though, *Hustler* disagrees. Maybe that, then, is what L&W (p. 311) mean when they suggest that “Dirty Pool” presupposes that the waitress “wanted to be raped and dominated all along”: What the waitress really wanted was an orgasm (though she might not have realized it), and what might initially have seemed liked coercion and violence are excused by the sexual pleasure the waitress eventually experiences. To put it differently, the suggestion is that there is a slide from “She experienced sexual pleasure” to “She enjoyed it” to “She wanted it” to “She consented”. Every one of these steps is objectionable, but maybe *Hustler* disagrees.

If that were the right reading of “Dirty Pool”, then L&W’s remarks about it might well be defensible. But this reading is at odds with the text that accompanies the pictorial. The last sentence, recall, reads:<sup>35</sup>

As the three *violators* explode in a shower of climaxes, [the waitress] comes in a shuddering orgasm of her own and *quickly passes out* from the *ordeal*. (emphasis added)

That is not a description that invites the conclusion that it wasn’t really rape because the waitress enjoyed herself. Is the presupposition, then, that the waitress really did want to be *raped*?

There is a *de re–de dicto* ambiguity in L&W’s formulations of what “Dirty Pool” presupposes:<sup>36</sup> Is it, e.g., that women sometimes enjoy what *they themselves experience* as rape? Or is it that women sometimes enjoy what the pictorial does not present as rape (or as having been experienced as rape) but which really is rape (and would be so experienced)? Probably what L&W mean is the latter. One central function of rape myths, after all, is to excuse certain acts that actually are rape by making them seem as if they might have been ‘just sex’.<sup>37</sup> But even a cursory look at “Dirty Pool” makes it clear that it really is presenting the event in question as a rape, and as having been experienced as such by the waitress. All of the photographs imply some level of aggression, with the possible exception of the last.<sup>38</sup> Some of the photographs (especially the second) clearly convey the waitress’s fear. And yet, some of the very same photographs also present the waitress as sexually aroused. So does “Dirty Pool” actually presuppose that (some) women enjoy *what they themselves experience* as rape? Even while they are terrified?

---

<sup>35</sup> Note now the importance of the last ten words (beginning with “of”), but especially the last seven (beginning with “and”). Why were they omitted from the slideshow—or from Itzin’s report of it, if the slideshow included them? (Here again, it is not clear whose elipses elide the relevant words.)

<sup>36</sup> And, I should emphasize, in similar formulations of what pornography in general presupposes. So it is worth getting clear about this matter quite independently of any concern with L&W’s claims.

<sup>37</sup> Nicola Gavey (2005, ch. 6) raises some difficult questions about whether women who do not characterize their own experiences as rape might nonetheless have been raped. But I think we can set those questions aside here. It would only make things more difficult for L&W if we denied that there could be ‘unrecognized rapes’, as they are sometimes called.

<sup>38</sup> It turns out, then, to be important actually *to look at* the pictorial—unsurprisingly, since it is the *pictures* that make it pornographic, not the associated text, which is pretty sedate. (Compare women’s descriptions of their own rape fantasies, as reported by Nancy Friday (1973, pp. 116–22). They are far more graphic.)

One might well want to suggest at this point that trying to make coherent sense of the story told by “Dirty Pool” is hopeless. I submit instead, however, that we have been trying to make sense of it the wrong way. In particular, we have been taking the story far too literally (cf. Butler, 1990; Segal, 1998). To see what the alternative might be, note that, although there are no circumstances in which a woman might actually want to be raped,<sup>39</sup> there are circumstances in which some women want to be ‘raped’. What I have in mind is a form of consensual BDSM<sup>40</sup> that involves roleplaying situations in which one or another partner is raped. People sometimes go to great lengths to make these ‘scenes’ seem as real as possible from within, because the sense of danger (or fear) is for them a powerful erotogen (as is the trust required to engage in such an activity with someone).<sup>41</sup> But no one is really raped on such occasions any more than people are really arrested when children play cops and robbers. Not only is the entire episode both consensual and wanted, but such ‘scenes’ are co-operative undertakings that require “a sense of intense identification and attunement with [one’s] partner’s experience during play” (Weille, 2002, p. 139). Moreover, the ‘victim’ is the one who is ultimately in control: They can bring the entire episode to a halt at any time by using their ‘safeword’ (or some similar mechanism).<sup>42</sup>

What, then, if we thought of “Dirty Pool” as documenting a consensual BDSM ‘scene’? The pictorial itself would not have to change in any way. But the way we read it would. Its primary perspective would be from within the ‘scene’, and the pictorial would invite us into a world in which a ‘waitress’ was being ‘raped’ by three ‘violators’. But, at the same time, we would know that, back in the real world, what was happening was

---

<sup>39</sup> Barring very weird philosophical thought experiments, perhaps.

<sup>40</sup> The acronym is a melange of “Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism, Masochism”. BDSM is a form of consensual power exchange, typically but not always in a sexual context (Cross and Matheson, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> For a fictional account of such an experience, see Brooks (2006). The theme of ‘non-consent’ is extremely common in erotic fiction, including that written by women. See Paasonen (2007) for discussion of such stories on the popular website Literotica.

<sup>42</sup> There is an ‘advanced’ form of BDSM, known as ‘consensual non-consent’, that is an exception. Kukla (2018, §VI) seems to misunderstand this term, construing it as applicable to any roleplay in which the typical meaning of “No” and similar locutions are suspended within certain limits. To the contrary, in consensual non-consent, consent is only granted initially, with the understanding that it is non-revocable for the duration of the scene. But that is not typical. It is, in fact, controversial even within the BDSM community (Califa, 2001, pp. 198–200), and it is very risky. (For a vivid account of such an experience—a consensual non-consensual rape—see @iSlut\_ (2010). Be forewarned that this recollection will be disturbing to many people.)

both consensual and wanted. More importantly, for our purposes, the pictorial so read would have none of the presuppositions that L&W claim to find in it. In particular, there would be no suggestion that women who were *really* raped might enjoy the experience. The pictorial might still presuppose (or even say explicitly) that consensual roleplay in which someone is ‘raped’ can be satisfying for both the ‘rapist’ and the ‘victim’. But that’s just true. It’s why people do it.

There is, of course, a long history of feminist opposition to BDSM, dating at least to the publication of the collection *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (Linden et al., 1982).<sup>43</sup> Various objections have been offered. One is that it is wrong to make one’s pleasure contingent upon the existence of injustice (Vadas, 1995). Another is that it is wrong to take pleasure in a fantasy of something that is morally wrong (cf. Corvino, 2002). Neither claim seems terribly compelling (see Card, 2002; Stear, 2009), but the debate continues (see Smuts, 2016). Fortunately, though, we can set these issues aside here. Our question is whether “Dirty Pool” *presupposes* that women sometimes enjoy being raped, and no-one, so far as I am aware, has wanted to argue that roleplayed rape scenes presuppose that *actual* women might enjoy *actually* being raped. Within the scene, the woman does not want to be raped; outside it, she only wants to be ‘raped’; nowhere does she want to be raped. The way in which participating in BDSM involves simultaneously occupying both of these points of view makes it difficult to understand, no doubt, but it is also part of what makes it powerful for its practitioners (Weille, 2002; Weiss, 2011).

All that said, I do not actually want to suggest that we should read “Dirty Pool” as presenting a BDSM scene. What I want to suggest, rather, is that we should think of “Dirty Pool” as a textual-cum-photographic presentation of a *sexual fantasy*. One might think that L&W make this point themselves, writing: “Pornography usually purports to be fantasy, or *fiction*” (L&W, p. 314, emphasis original). But that is just a conflation. Fantasy is usually fictional, but it is not *just* fictional. Fantasy, as the term is typically used in discussions of sexuality, plays by different

---

<sup>43</sup> Susan Wright (2006) reviews this literature. It’s arguable, too, that much of the concern expressed by early anti-pornography feminists about ‘violent’ pornography was actually concern about BDSM pornography. (It may well be that much of the pornography that allegedly portrays non-consensual sex is also BDMS porn.) Joshua Cohen (1996, p. 286) makes a version of this point. It’s also central to many of Gayle Rubin’s discussions of anti-pornography feminism (see e.g. Rubin, 1984, 1993).

rules than ordinary fiction does.<sup>44</sup> A fictional story in which a man had intercourse with a woman while simultaneously performing oral sex on her could only be regarded as absurd. But physical impossibility is nothing to fantasy, part of whose charm is how it allows us to overcome such limitations, even if only in imagination (cf. Segal, 1998, pp. 57–8).

Consider a very simple (and very common) sort of fantasy. You see someone on the street one day with their partner and children, someone that you find disarmingly attractive, and later that evening you masturbate while imagining having sex with them.<sup>45</sup> There are a number of interesting questions that we might ask about your fantasy. Why do you imagine doing what you do with them? Is there something about the fantasy that reveals the nature of your attraction to this person? There are a number of other questions, however, that it would be utterly inappropriate to ask, such as: What was it that led this person to want to cheat?<sup>46</sup> Did they feel guilty the next day? Did they tell their partner? And what about you, you home-wrecker?

The point is not just that the story may not have filled in enough details for these questions to have answers. That sort of thing happens all the time with fiction. But, when one reads fiction, one still imagines that such questions *have* answers. Even if the story ends with the clandestine lovers parting, and even if we do not know (and maybe even cannot know) what happened the next day, something did, and the whole point of the story may be to invite the question what that was.<sup>47</sup> That is: The story we are being told does at least happen within a larger world. Fantasies, by contrast, are their own worlds. Even if the cheating is part of the thrill, there need be no reason for it, and there need be no next day (cf. Laplanche and Pontalis, 1968).

---

<sup>44</sup> Sexual fantasy, as I'm understanding it, need not be fantasy in the psychoanalytic sense of that term, either, though it certainly can be construed that way, at least in some cases (Butler, 1990).

<sup>45</sup> I assume here that there is nothing wrong with enjoying sexual fantasies, a privilege that seems once to have been denied to women (Friday, 1973, esp. ch. 1). That said, Julia Penelope (1980, p. 103) once went so far as to speculate that fantasizing during masturbation may be "a phallogentric 'need' from which we [women] are not yet free. . .". Rubin (1984, pp. 300–9) discusses this trend at some length.

<sup>46</sup> Assuming that is what they would be doing, i.e., that they are not in an open or polyamorous relationship.

<sup>47</sup> Sofia Coppola's movie *Lost in Translation* does precisely that, to great effect. As the not-quite-lovers say goodbye, Bob (played by Bill Murray) whispers something to Charlotte (played by Scarlett Johansson), but we do not hear it. There has been much discussion (to say the least) about what it might have been.

Something similar is true of sexual roleplay—unsurprisingly, since such roleplaying is often described as ‘acting out a fantasy’. Thus, if two people roleplay a rape, then the question how the ‘victim’ dealt with the subsequent trauma “simply doesn’t arise”, to borrow a suggestive phrase from Strawson (1950, p. 330).<sup>48</sup> The same goes for sexual fantasies and so, in particular, for the fantasy presented in “Dirty Pool”. That fantasy does not presuppose, any more than the corresponding BDSM scene would, that real women really do enjoy really being raped.

## 5 Concluding Caveats

Let me be clear about what I have and have not been arguing.

I am not arguing here that there is nothing wrong with rape fantasies, let alone that there is nothing wrong with portraying them in a public form: textually, photographically, or cinematically. That is a question for another day. Our question here is whether pornography that dramatizes such fantasies *presupposes* that women actually enjoy being raped. What I have argued is that it need not and, moreover, that a close reading of “Dirty Pool” shows that even it does not.

Nor am I claiming that “Dirty Pool” is not sexist. What I am claiming is that the fact that “Dirty Pool” presents a rape fantasy does not *by itself* make it sexist. But there is more to “Dirty Pool” than that. Though L&W hardly mention the photographs that comprise it, “Dirty Pool” is a *pictorial*.<sup>49</sup> I would argue that what is sexist about “Dirty Pool” lies very much in the photography, in how the pictorial *visually* presents the fantasy it does. Something similar is true, or so I would argue, of much visual pornography: What is sexist about it lies, very often, and to a significant extent, in how it is shot. If so, however, then understanding what is sexist about (far too much) visual pornography—indeed, understanding it at all—will require us to analyze it *as photography* or *as film* (Bauer, 2015, pp. 85–6). There is plenty of excellent work along these lines, beginning with Linda Williams’s now classic book *Hardcore* (Williams, 1989). But almost none of this work seems to be known to analytic philosophers who write about pornography.

---

<sup>48</sup> Strawson claims that the question whether the King of France is bald does not arise, since France has no king, i.e., the presupposition of the question is not satisfied.

<sup>49</sup> Oddly enough, then, L&W’s account of what makes “Dirty Pool” objectionable seems to have almost nothing to do with the fact that it is sexually explicit, i.e., that it is pornography.

Nor do I mean to deny that some people might read “Dirty Pool” not as fantasy but as ‘realistic fiction’ (cf. Liao and Protasi, 2013). Some such people might even ‘get the message’ that L&W think the pictorial is trying to send. And even though I think that reading “Dirty Pool” as realistic fiction (rather than as fantasy) would be a *misreading*, I would agree that there is something irresponsible about presenting such a fantasy without making it clear that that is what it is supposed to be: a sexual *fantasy*. It is not enough for pornographers simply to insist that their work is fantasy and to blame their audience for not appreciating that obvious fact. Whether its producers want it to be or not, pornography has become sex education, if only by default, and pornographers should accept the responsibility that the freedom they so vigorously defend brings with it.

Over on the other side of the debate, however, it is disturbing what a poor opinion many authors seem to have of the critical capacities of ‘users’ of pornography—a dismissive term I have purposely avoided. MacKinnon (1993, pp. 16, 17) once remarked, for example, that pornography is “masturbation material” that “does not engage the conscious mind” and “is antithetical to thinking”. A more nuanced view, and one that is far more widespread, is that, as Cindy Patton (1991, p. 378) puts it, “. . . porn has no narrative or aesthetic pleasure beyond merely ‘getting off’ . . .”.<sup>50</sup> Patton goes on to argue that this (elitist) assumption is what ultimately lies behind the prejudice that “viewers and readers interpret ‘pornographic’ material as real stories or actual, filmed sex” rather than as fantasy. In general, however, they do not (see e.g. Loftus, 2002; Ryberg, 2015). So, if we really want to understand what they do instead, then we need to take seriously the fact that wanting to ‘get off’—not that there’s anything wrong with that—is only one of the reasons people have for engaging with pornography, which does indeed have other pleasures to offer, some of which may be just as significant, alongside (not just instead of) getting off (see e.g. Atwood, 2005; Smith et al., 2015).

Implicit in the foregoing, then, is a significant re-orientation: away from questions about pornography as it is in itself—e.g., what “Dirty Pool” presupposes—and towards questions about how people engage with it. This is now an active research area, though also a relatively new one,

---

<sup>50</sup> A sociologist best known for her writings on the AIDS epidemic, Patton was a founding editor of one of the first erotic magazines for lesbians: *Bad Attitude*, which was first published in Boston in 1984.



and not much is yet known.<sup>51</sup> But the research that has been done so far is more encouraging than one might have feared. For example, a 2010 study of Swedish adolescents concluded:

Our findings suggest that most of our participants had acquired the necessary skills of how to navigate in the pornographic landscape in a sensible and reflective manner. The way they reasoned about the exposure and impact of pornography indicated that most of them had the ability to distinguish between pornographic fantasies and narratives, on the one hand, and real sexual interaction and relationships, on the other. (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010, p. 577)

The authors do not downplay the risk that pornography poses to those who lack such skills—nor the risk these ‘at risk’ individuals might pose to others. But it should be no surprise that there are healthy and unhealthy, responsible and irresponsible, ways to engage with pornography, as with everything else. We should find ways to encourage healthy and responsible engagement.

Finally, I am not arguing that all pornography should be read as fantasy. One might well suppose, for example, that amateur pornography in the ‘home movie’ style is an exception (cf. Hardy, 2009). A more important case, because it is so often emphasized by opponents of pornography, is so-called ‘gonzo’ porn, a central feature of which is its documentary style. It is an open question how viewers engage with gonzo, as well as how it should be understood and analyzed. I have no opinion about how these questions should be answered, but there is now an active literature devoted to them, too.<sup>52</sup> Suffice it to say, for now, that it simply does not follow that, if viewers do not interpret gonzo as fantasy, then they must interpret it as ‘real’, in the sense that they regard it as indicative of how real-life sex is or should be. Whatever else gonzo may be about, it is about sexual excess and the limits of the body: John Stagliano, who is widely regarded as the creator of the style, once remarked that gonzo treats sex as an extreme sport (Maina and Zecca, 2016, p. 426). Perhaps so. But if so, then it would be as foolish for viewers to try *that* at home as it would be for them to try to mimic the stunts performed at the X Games.

---

<sup>51</sup> Besides the papers mentioned in the text, see Stock (2012); Todd (2012); Barker (2014).

<sup>52</sup> Enrico Biasin and Federico Zecca (2016) survey some of this literature in their introduction to an issue of *Porn Studies* devoted to the topic.

## References

- Abbey, A. (1991). 'Misperception as an antecedent of acquaintance rape: A consequence of ambiguity in communication between men and women', in Parrot and Bechhofer 1991, 96–111.
- Atkinson, M. (2008). *Resurrection After Rape: A Guide to Transforming from Victim to Survivor*. Oklahoma City OK, R.A.R. Publishing.
- Atwood, F. (2005). 'What do people do with porn? Qualitative research into the consumption, use, and experience of pornography and other sexually explicit media', *Sexuality & Culture* 9: 65–86.
- Barker, M. (2014). 'The "problem" of sexual fantasies', *Porn Studies* 1: 143–60.
- Bauer, N. (2015). 'How to do things with pornography', in *How To Do Things With Pornography*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 52–86.
- Beres, M. A. (2010). 'Sexual miscommunication? Untangling assumptions about sexual communication between casual sex partners', *Culture, Health, & Sexuality* 12: 1–14.
- Beres, M. A., Senn, C. Y., and McCaw, J. (2014). 'Navigating ambivalence: How heterosexual young adults make sense of desire differences', *Journal of Sex Research* 51: 765–76.
- Biasin, E. and Zecca, F. (2016). 'Introduction: Inside gonzo porn', *Porn Studies* 3: 332–6.
- Bridges, A. J., Wosnitzer, R., Scharrer, E., Sun, C., and Liberman, R. (2010). 'Aggression and sexual behavior in best-selling pornography videos: A content analysis update', *Violence Against Women* 16: 1065–85.
- Brooks, A. (2006). 'Callie's kidnapping', in V. Blue (ed.), *Lips Like Sugar: Women's Erotic Fantasies*. San Francisco CA, Cleis Press, 109–14.
- Butler, J. (1990). 'The force of fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and discursive excess', *differences* 2: 105–25.
- Califa, P. (2001). *Sensuous Magic: A Guide to S/M For Adventurous Couples*, 2d edition. San Francisco, Cle.

- Card, R. (2002). 'Intentions, the nature of fantasizing and naughty fantasies', *Southwest Philosophy Review* 18: 159–161.
- Cohen, J. (1996). 'Freedom, equality, pornography', in A. Serfat and T. R. Kearns (eds.), *Justice and Injustice in Law and Legal Theory*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 99–137.
- Comella, L. and Tarrant, S., eds. (2015). *New Views On Pornography: Sexuality, Politics, and the Law*. Santa Barbara CA, Praeger.
- Corvino, J. (2002). 'Naughty fantasies', *Southwest Philosophy Review* 18: 213–220.
- Cross, P. A. and Matheson, K. (2006). 'Understanding sadomasochism: An empirical examination of four perspectives', *Journal of Homosexuality* 50(2/3): 133–66.
- Dworkin, A. and MacKinnon, C. A. (1988). *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day For Women's Equality*. Minneapolis MN, Organizing Against Pornography.
- Dyer, R. (1981). 'Entertainment and utopia', in R. Altman (ed.), *Genre: The Musical, A Reader*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 175–89.
- Eaton, A. W. (2012). 'What's wrong with the (female) nude? A feminist perspective on art and pornography', in Maes and Levinson 2012, 277–308.
- Frege, G. (1984). 'On sense and meaning', tr. by M. Black, in B. McGuinness (ed.), *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 157–77. Also in Frege 1997, 151–71.
- (1997). *The Frege Reader*, Beaney, M., ed. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Friday, N. (1973). *My Secret Garden*. New York, Pocket Books.
- Frith, H. and Kitinger, C. (1997). 'Talk about sexual miscommunication', *Women's Studies International Forum* 20: 517–28.
- Gattuso, R. (2015). 'Rape culture is a contract we never actually signed', *Feminisiting*. <https://tinyurl.com/GattusoRape>.

- Gavey, N. (2005). *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. New York, Routledge.
- Gibson, P. C., ed. (2004). *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*. London, British Film Institute.
- Hardy, S. (2009). 'The new pornographies: Representation or reality?', in F. Attwood (ed.), *Mainstreaming Sex*. New York, I. B. Tauris, 3–18.
- Hornsby, J. (1995). 'Disempowered speech', *Philosophical Topics* 23: 127–147.
- Hornsby, J. and Langton, R. (1998). 'Free speech and illocution', *Legal Theory* 4: 21–37. An abbreviated version appears in Langton, 2009, ch. 3.
- @iSlut\_ (2010). 'Consensual nonconsent', *A Slut's Memoir*. <https://tinyurl.com/ConNonCon>.
- Itzin, C. (1992). "Entertainment for men": What it is and what it means', in C. Itzin (ed.), *Pornography: Women, Violence, and Civil Liberties*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 27–53.
- Jacobson, D. (1995). 'Freedom of speech acts? A response to Langton', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24: 64–78.
- Johnson, E. (1997). 'Appearing live on your campus! Porn-education roadshows', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 41: 27–35.
- Juffer, J. (1998). *At Home With Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life*. New York, NYU Press.
- Kerr, D. (2012). 'Lost in damnation: The progressive potential of *Behind the Green Door*', in C. Hines and D. Kerr (eds.), *Hard To Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen*. New York, Wallflower Press, 101–12.
- Kitzinger, C. and Frith, H. (1999). 'Just say no? The use of conversation analysis in developing a feminist perspective on sexual refusal', *Discourse and Society* 10: 293–316.
- Klaassen, M. J. E. and Peter, J. (2015). 'Gender (in)equality in internet pornography: A content analysis of popular pornographic internet videos', *Journal of Sex Research* 52: 721–35.

- Kukla, R. (2018). 'That's what she said: The language of sexual negotiation', *Ethics* 129: 70–97.
- Langton, R. (1993). 'Speech acts and unspeakable acts', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22: 293–330. Reprinted in Langton, 2009, Ch. 1.
- (2009). *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- (2012). 'Beyond belief: Pragmatics in hate speech and pornography', in M. K. McGowan and I. Maitra (eds.), *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 72–93.
- Langton, R. and West, C. (1999). 'Scorekeeping in a pornographic language game', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 77: 303–19. Reprinted in Langton, 2009, Ch. 8.
- Laplanche, J. and Pontalis, J.-B. (1968). 'Fantasy and the origin of sexuality', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49: 1–18.
- Levin, R. J. and van Berlo, W. (2004). 'Sexual arousal and orgasm in subjects who experience forced or non-consensual sexual stimulation—a review', *Journal of Clinical Forensic Medicine* 11: 82–8.
- Lewis, D. (1979). 'Scorekeeping in a language game', *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 339–59. Reprinted in Lewis, 1985, Ch. 13.
- (1985). *Philosophical Papers Volume 1*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Liao, S. and Protasi, S. (2013). 'The fictional character of pornography', in H. Maes (ed.), *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*. Palgrave-Macmillan, 100–18.
- Linden, R. R., Pagano, D. R., Russell, D. E., and Star, S. L., eds. (1982). *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*. San Francisco, Frog In the Well.
- Lisak, D. (2011). 'Understanding the predatory nature of sexual violence', *Sexual Assault Report* 14: 49–50, 55–7.
- Lisak, D. and Miller, P. M. (2002). 'Repeat rape and multiple offending among undetected rapists', *Violence and Victims* 17: 73–84.

- Littleton, H. L. and Axsom, D. (2003). 'Rape and seduction scripts of university students: Implications for rape attributions and unacknowledged rape', *Sex Roles* 49: 465–75.
- Löfgren-Mårtenson, L. and Månsson, S.-A. (2010). 'Lust, love, and life: A qualitative study of Swedish adolescents' perceptions and experiences with pornography', *Journal of Sex Research* 47: 568–79.
- Loftus, D. (2002). *Watching Sex: How Men Really Respond to Pornography*. New York, Thunder's Mouth Press.
- MacKinnon, C. (1993). *Only Words*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- Maes, H. and Levinson, J., eds. (2012). *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Maina, G. and Zecca, F. (2016). 'John Stagliano interviewed by Giovanna Maina and Federico Zecca', *Porn Studies* 3: 420–6.
- Maitra, I. and McGowan, M. K. (2010). 'On silencing, rape, and responsibility', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88: 167–72.
- McCaw, J. M. and Senn, C. Y. (1998). 'Perception of cues in conflictual dating situations: A test of the miscommunication hypothesis', *Violence Against Women* 4: 609–24.
- McGowan, M. K. (2003). 'Conversational exercitives and the force of pornography', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31: 155–89.
- Minnesota Historical Society (2019). 'Organizing Against Pornography: An inventory of its organizational records at the Minnesota Historical Society'. <https://tinyurl.com/MHSONOAP>. Accessed 20 February 2019.
- Muehlenhard, C. L. and Hollabaugh, L. C. (1988). 'Do women sometimes say no when they mean yes? The prevalence and correlates of women's token resistance to sex', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54: 872–9.
- Muehlenhard, C. L. and Peterson, Z. D. (2005). 'Wanting and not wanting sex: The missing discourse of ambivalence', *Feminism & Psychology* 15: 15–20.

- Muehlenhard, C. L. and Rodgers, C. S. (1998). 'Token resistance to sex: New perspectives on an old stereotype', *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 22: 443–63.
- O'Byrne, R., Hansen, S., and Rapley, M. (2008). "If a girl doesn't say 'no'...": Young men, rape and claims of "insufficient knowledge", *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 18: 168–93.
- O'Byrne, R., Rapley, M., and Hansen, S. (2006). "You couldn't say "no", could you?": Young men's understandings of sexual refusal', *Feminism & Psychology* 16: 133–54.
- Paasonen, S. (2007). 'Strange bedfellows: Pornography, affect and feminist reading', *Feminist Theory* 8: 43–57.
- Parrot, A. and Bechhofer, L., eds. (1991). *Acquaintance Rape: The Hidden Crime*. Wiley.
- Patton, C. (1989). 'Hegemony and orgasm—or the instability of heterosexual pornography', *Screen* 30(1–2): 100–13.
- (1991). 'Visualizing safe sex: When pedagogy and pornography collide', in D. Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. New York, Routledge, 373–86.
- Penelope, J. (1980). "And now for the hard questions...", *Sinister Wisdom* 15: 99–104.
- Rubin, G. (1984). 'Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality', in C. S. Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 267–319. Reprinted as Rubin, 2011, Ch. 5.
- (1993). 'Misguided, dangerous and wrong: An analysis of anti-pornography politics', in A. Assiter and A. Carol (eds.), *Bad Girls & Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to Reclaim Feminism*. Boulder CO, Pluto Press, 18–40. Reprinted as Rubin, 2011, Ch. 11.
- (2011). *Deviations*. Durham NC, Duke University Press.
- Russell, B. (1905). 'On denoting', *Mind* 14: 479–93.
- Ryberg, I. (2015). 'Carnal fantasizing: Embodied spectatorship of queer, feminist and lesbian pornography', *Porn Studies* 2: 161–73.

- Segal, L. (1998). 'Only the literal: The contradictions of anti-pornography feminism', *Sexualities* 1: 42–62. Reprinted in Gibson, 2004, pp. 59–70.
- Smith, C., Barker, M., and Atwood, F. (2015). 'Why do people watch porn? Results from pornresearch.org', in Comella and Tarrant 2015, 277–96.
- Smuts, A. (2016). 'The ethics of imagination and fantasy', in A. Kind (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Imagination*. Routledge, 380–91.
- Stalnaker, R. (1974). 'Pragmatic presuppositions', in M. Munitz and P. Unger (eds.), *Semantics and Philosophy*. New York, New York University Press, 197–214. Reprinted in Stalnaker, 1999, Ch. 2.
- (1999). *Context and Content: Essays on Intentionality in Speech and Thought*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- (2002). 'Common ground', *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25: 701–21.
- Stear, N.-H. (2009). 'Sadomasochism as make-believe', *Hypatia* 24: 21–38.
- Stock, K. (2012). 'Pornography and imagining about oneself', in Maes and Levinson 2012, 116–36.
- Stoltenberg, J. (1989). *Refusing To Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice*. London, UCL Press.
- Strawson, P. F. (1950). 'On referring', *Mind* 59: 320–44. Reprinted in Strawson, 1971, Ch. 1.
- (1971). *Logico-Linguistic Papers*. London, Methuen.
- Tannen, D. (1991). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Ballantine Books.
- Tibbals, C. (2010). 'From *The Devil in Miss Jones* to *DMJ6*—Power, inequality, and consistency in the content of US adult films', *Sexualities* 13: 625–44.
- Todd, C. (2012). 'Imagination, fantasy, and sexual desire', in Maes and Levinson 2012, 95–115.
- Vadas, M. (1995). 'Reply to Patrick Hopkins', *Hypatia* 10: 159–161.



- Vince, R. (2018). 'Testimonial smothering and pornography: Silencing refusing sex and reporting assault', *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2018.3.5784>.
- Webster, P. (1981). 'Pornography and pleasure', *Heresies* 12: 48–51.
- Weille, K.-L. H. (2002). 'The psychodynamics of consensual sadomasochistic and dominant-submissive sexual games', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 3: 131–60.
- Weiss, M. (2011). *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Durham NC, Duke University Press.
- Weitzer, R. (2015). 'Interpreting the data: Assessing competing claims in pornography research', in Comella and Tarrant 2015, 257–76.
- Wieland, N. (2007). 'Linguistic authority and convention in a speech act analysis of pornography', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85: 435–56.
- Williams, L. (1989). *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*. Berkeley CA, University of California Press.
- Willis, E. (1983). 'Feminism, moralism, and pornography', in A. Snitow, *et al.* (eds.), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. New York, Monthly Review Press, 460–7.
- Wright, S. (2006). 'Discrimination of SM-identified individuals', *Journal of Homosexuality* 50: 217–31.