

Caitlyn Speier

Phil 3322W (Michael Calasso)

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Misogynistic Porn

In her 1980 paper “Pornography, Oppression and Freedom,” Helen Longino presents her case as to why pornography, by definition, is morally wrong and would not be permitted by a government interested in protecting the rights of its citizens. In this paper, I will provide the definition of pornography utilized in Longino’s paper and reconstruct the main argument she provides as to how pornography is morally wrong. From there I will respond to these arguments, highlighting the questionable nature of the definition used and the pervasive implications of these arguments, regardless of the definition utilized. After this, I will present a counterargument that recognizes that though this criticism defends the production of pornography, it doesn’t necessarily protect the distribution of such material. Through these arguments, it is my hope that it can be determined that regardless of the definition you provide for pornography and the questionable effects of degrading sexual imagery, the argument for it being morally reprehensible in all cases is inaccurate and more counterproductive than progressive and to restrict the production would equate to attacks on autonomy and individual rights.

To begin I will reconstruct the key argument made by Longino in order to reach her conclusion that “the production and distribution of pornographic material is thus a social and moral wrong.” Longino provides a definition of pornography as “verbal or pictorial explicit representations of sexual behavior that have as a distinguished characteristic ‘the degrading and demeaning portrayal of the role and status of the human female... as a mere sexual object to be exploited and manipulated sexually.’” [229] An extremely important note to make about this

definition is that Longino includes that she considers this degradation regardless of whether or not the people involved have “chosen or consented to be harmed, abused, or subjected to coercion.” [230] From here Longino makes the argument that through the production and distribution of this material endorses and promotes the lie that women exist as sexual objects for the pleasure of men and the fulfillment of male fantasies. In doing this “pornography is implicated in the committing of crimes of violence against women,” [233] because it spreads a lie about the nature of women and “reinforces the oppression and exploitation of women.” [233] Before concluding she also addresses the response that regardless of these critiques Americans have the right to do this under the First Amendment stating that “the manufacture and distribution of material which defames and threatens all members of a class by its recommendation of abusive and degrading behavior toward some members of that class simply in virtue of their membership in it seems a clear candidate for inclusion on the list [of exceptions to the First Amendment]” [235]

Now that I have an understanding of Longino’s argument, I will provide my criticisms. For starters, Longino has begun her argument with a biased and uninformative definition of pornography, but regardless of this we can see that her argument is dismissive of female autonomy and sexual complexity and provide a reductive picture and understanding of a male consumer of pornography. So, let us consider this definition. In making the distinction between pornography and erotica, she is not acting in accordance with the common understanding of the label pornography. A perfect demonstration of this point is the work of Erika Lust. Erika is self-described as an ‘indie erotic film director,’ however she readily describes her work as pornographic. It seems the problem is not porn, but rather misogynistic porn. In this assessment it becomes clear how counterproductive Longino’s narrative is, because of the way it seeks to shame and prohibit the production of pornography rather than revive the industry. This is a

definition that is clearly biased in favor of Longino's conclusion and shouldn't be accepted as the definition of pornography, but let us consider that this is the true definition of pornography. Even if it were the case that the label pornography is only applicable to explicit material that degrades women as a sexual object to fulfill men's fantasies, this does not inherently make the production and distribution of porn morally wrong. First and foremost, it must be considered that there are women who have sexual fantasies rooted in degradation. An example of this can be found in Jon Ronson's *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, he recounts the story of Jodi Taylor working with Princess Donna for the porn site 'Public Disgrace.' Jodi Taylor is quoted in the book as saying "Obviously if something like public disgrace happened to me in real life, it's extremely intense, horrifying and awful. But that's the beauty of porn. You can actually do these crazy things without actually doing them. It's all make-believe. It's pure fantasy and a fantasy is never humiliating or scary." There are numerous examples of incredibly contentious and ethical porn productions and through stories like Taylor's we observe that degrading porn is not always incompatible with female fantasy. From here we must address the claim that these libelous claims endorse violence and oppression against women. We can move on from the claims of oppression, as the sexual liberation of women that we described before is not consistent with this claim. Now considering the notion that pornography endorses or incites violence against women, we can see the not only is this dismissive of the moral integrity of viewers of pornography, but it is also not consistent with the conclusions made by the Commission of Obscenity and Pornography, the source in which Longino got her initial definition of pornography from. Officially the Commission recommended a focus on restricting access to juveniles and further research on the effects of viewing pornography. The report concludes that there was no "evidence that exposure to explicit sexual materials adversely affects character or moral attitudes

regarding sex and sexual conduct." [Source 4] Overall, Longino's conclusions about pornography have completely and utterly missed the mark.

In response to this it can be said that though the production of this material may not be morally wrong as it doesn't violate the autonomy or rights of any individual involved, it can be argued that the distribution and popularity of the material (within Longino's definition) is not protected under the first amendment. As it seems, distribution of pornography is not distributed as the execution of one particular woman's fantasy, but rather as the position of all women, which is in line with the oppression women have faced historically, making any slander or liable content even more potent. Whenever discussing the First Amendment in conjunction with a historically marginalized group there is an increased level of sensitivity required, consider for example the additional penalty for an assault case being a hate crime. The current environment of commonplace misogyny in porn doesn't necessarily equate to a hate crime but does create reason for concern.

In conclusion, it seems that the definition of pornography provided by Longino is too narrow for practical application, however, the description of there being an issue and the roots of that issue are not entirely off base. Consenting adults, female or male, have the right to do as they please as the respect for individual autonomy is the foundation for personhood and everyone's rights. The public distribution of those private fantasies or opinions may be another question. While it might be offensive to some, I am not convinced that the distribution of porn that degrades women is the source of violence against women and neither is the restriction of its production the solution. It remains that the most effective way to respect the personhood of individuals is to respect their rights to freedom of speech and autonomy over their body, rather than attempting to promote a standard of purity.

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