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Visceral pedagogies: Pornography, affect, and safety in the university classroom

Susanna Paasonen

Debates on the sexualization of culture, including the increased availability and volume of online pornography, the assumed social effects of porn, its public visibility and circulation, have been active throughout the last decade (Attwood 2009; Smith 2010). In tandem with the rise of porn studies as an interdisciplinary field of investigation (Williams 2004; Smith and Attwood 2014), pornography has begun to feature regularly in media studies, gender studies, sociology, and cultural studies curricula in several Western countries. At the same time, existing literature on pornography and higher education, most of it authored within the Anglophonic academia, points to it not simply being a topic or media genre among others. On the contrary, pornography poses a potential source of tension in the classroom, the university, the media, and public opinion alike in ways that require reflection and analysis (e.g., Jenkins 2004; Miller-Young 2010; Penley 2013; Noble 2014).

This article addresses the pedagogical choices and the visceral reverberations involved in teaching porn in the university classroom. In what follows, I first discuss different aims and goals for teaching pornography as well as the some of key pedagogical considerations and options involved in this, drawing on my own experiences of teaching porn in Finnish gender and media studies departments since 2005. Because of crucial contextual specificities, pornography in the classroom has different reverberations in a Nordic country than in North America. My premise is that although such regional contexts obviously both vary and matter, the key pedagogical issues and concerns related to teaching porn are less regionally specific as such. When teaching porn, pedagogical practice becomes a pivotal focus of reflection in outlining what to show, what to tell, how to do it, why, and what can be achieved by doing it.

As a media genre, pornography tries to evoke bodily responses of sexual arousal, surprise, and disgust through sound, image, text, and combinations thereof, and it is mostly consumed in private for both titillation and distraction. Examining porn in class shifts the focus and modes of watching it in crucial ways that disturb given boundaries between the private and the public, the viscerally intimate and the socially shared. Consequently, teaching porn involves a knowing affective attunement and maintenance of classroom

atmosphere on the part of the teacher, addressed below as forms of affective labor. The second part of article revolves around the notion of affect, understood as intensities of feeling that both precede and give shape to nameable emotions (cf. Ahmed 2004; Featherstone 2010). I do this from multiple interconnected angles: by addressing affect as intensifications of sensation that are elementary to how pornography functions as a genre; that surface in the classroom when discussing, watching, and listening to pornography; that are connected to reactions towards pornography as a scholarly focus; and that orient pedagogical practice. The central dynamics of the article revolve around the notion of safety as it connects to pornography, classroom, and pedagogical practice.

How to frame pornography?

The first decision when integrating pornography into a syllabus is that of motivation and framing—the key question as to why pornography is being taught and how. Decisions need to be made over whether the class investigates and analyzes pornography as a media genre or as a theme connected to sexual cultures and politics, debates on freedom of speech, or the risks and harms of online communication, to offer only some examples. In addition, one needs to decide whether the class tackles or makes use of porn as a cultural symbol or symptom (e.g., of late capitalism, hetero-masculinity in crisis, or the commodification of intimacy) or frames it as a historically contingent genre and category.

In Anglophone contexts, pornography has been a key symbol and focus of disagreement among feminist scholars and activists since the 1970s. The legacy of the so-called sex wars dividing antipornography scholars from anti-antipornography and prosex academics continues to orient contemporary argumentation and possibilities for dialogue, as well as the possibilities for addressing pornography in the university classroom (e.g., Miller-Young 2010; Noble 2014; Smith and Attwood 2014). At the same time, pornographic materials can be used to back up and illustrate virtually an endless array of views on the topic: The diversity of currently available content provides ample illustrations of the genre as demeaning and violent toward women but equally as a site of queer exploration of nonnormative sexualities and personal desires. As a point of reference, pornography is fragmented, slippery, and thorny in its diversity. Teaching porn basically means exploring the diversity of sexual desires, orientations, and cultures.

Although different in scope and structure, the porn classes I have taught have been united by the same goal of introducing media and gender studies students to academic porn debates to support their own thinking and argumentation concerning the genre, its cultural roles, and social resonances. The general aim of the classes has been to provide an overview on the

technological and aesthetic development of pornography in a historical context and to explore the methodological, ethical, political, and affective issues related to it. The course outlines have been thematic, with focus, examples, and readings shifting from one session to another: from the practices and arguments of feminist anti-porn activism to taste cultures; from audience research to the ethics of production; from debates on children and pornography to those on the pornification of culture; and from amateur practices and reception studies to the affective dynamics of extreme and fringe pornography. Such a thematic structure affords different perspectives on pornography without the aim of pinning down its meanings and social implications, or approaching it as an assumedly singular entity. Rather, my aim has been to pose different definitions of the pornographic as open questions to be explored in class through specific and markedly diverse sets of examples. The goal has been to create room for various responses and interpretations concerning porn while also providing the students with a firmly contextual and tangible sense of the materials addressed (also Waskul 2009, 656–657).

Students with little or no background in gender studies, for example, are rarely familiar with 1970s radical feminist analyses of body politics, sexual oppression, the patriarchal institutions that are seen to govern them, or of the alternative strategies that were developed in the visual arts to counter these. These are easily forgotten also in popular reminiscences covering the era and the histories of pornography.¹ Watching clips of the well-known antipornography documentary *Not a Love Story* (Klein et al. 1982) or introducing Judy Chicago's 'cunt art' when discussing the genesis of feminist anti-pornography movement therefore helps to map out some of the gynocentric agenda in its temporal context. This may also help students to be more open to reading and discussing anti-porn texts, which many of them are otherwise readily dismissive of. The question of how porn and analyses concerning it are framed and contextualized in the first place then becomes a focus of investigation.

This contextual pedagogical strategy necessitates a broad range of examples to be shown and contextualized in class, from the erotic and political engravings of the eighteenth century to the postcards and stag films of the following centuries, the so-called classics of 35 mm film pornography of the 1970s, European productions, couple's porn, and porn parodies distributed on video and DVD as well as the current massive online video sharing platforms; sex activist, amateur, and fetish sites; and transgender, feminist, and queer productions. Like Henry Jenkins (2004, 3), I find it ethical to systematically show examples of the materials discussed. Examples enable students to make their own interpretations and judgments while grounding the more abstract themes addressed in concrete images, sounds, texts, and aesthetics.

Students are informed when enrolling in my classes of the clips shown and they can decide for themselves whether to take the course or not: These classes

have not been, and should not be, compulsory, independent of the student's major subject. I discuss my pedagogical strategy of showing clips in the very first and last sessions of class (and occasionally in-between). The last session includes a general discussion on how the students have experienced the class, what they have gotten out of it and what not. In addition, the students give, and receive, written feedback. The students are left with the choice of deciding the topic and focus of their final essay: The format is chosen so that they can zoom in on the issues and materials of their interest. Although watching porn in the classroom is not optional, I do not insist for the essays to address hardcore materials. Consequently, they have drawn on a range of examples and approaches, including observational analysis in sex shops, the examination of pornographic features in romantic fiction, music videos, and advertising, as well as considerations of ethics of meat production and possibilities of porn parody in the cookbook, *Fifty Shades of Chicken*.

Before teaching a session on extremity, shock porn, and the affective dynamics of disgust in 2014, I told the students that many might consider the clips off-putting and they could replace their attendance by doing a written exercise based on the readings. One of them chose to. I asked the students to comment on these specific clips in their feedback, and many of them did. Although some identified the clips (fairly enough) as disgusting, many more also considered them informative and necessary for understanding the themes and contents addressed. And although experiences of watching porn in class were not something I especially inquired about, several students commented on the lack of embarrassment they had felt, and which they attributed to the overall relaxed atmosphere. I will discuss the aim and goal of creating such an atmosphere—as well as the difficulties of trying to articulate and analyze it—in the second part of the article in the framework of affective labor.

To show or not to show

In his pragmatic guidelines for teaching pornography in the U.S. academia, Jenkins (2004) makes several important remarks, such as insisting on historical and institutional precision and making use of concrete examples rather than resorting to abstraction when discussing porn. He also advises aspiring porn teachers not to “leave the room when (. . .) projecting sexually explicit materials to the class” and to know what these materials are: “Don't just run to the local video shop the night before class and grab an armload of tapes” (Jenkins 2004, 5–6). As Jenkins rightly points out, one would not do this with any media studies class—indeed, not knowing one's chosen examples, their historical context, makers, or generic specificities, let alone leaving the room when screening them, would strike most media studies scholars as profoundly unprofessional. The apparent need for such basic advice may speak of the

difficulty and unease associated with pornography in the North American classroom. This unease is fuelled and amplified by the fact that courses on pornography easily gain negative media attention and may result in tensions with the university administration. They may risk the futures of individual careers in terms of tenure, as well as the future of programs and possibly even that of departments. (See Attwood and Hunter 2009, 547–551.) Tangible discomfort is, then, already present in the political framing.

I have taught full porn classes as a postdoctoral researcher, assistant professor, and full professor in two different Finnish universities with the support of my colleagues (or at least without opposition from them). The student feedback for these classes has been among the most positive that I have ever received—and I have been a teacher for some two decades. The classes have gained no sensationalist media attention but have been met with some institutional interest: a departmental publication interviewed me on the 2006 class and students from my 2014 class wrote a somewhat enthusiastic article on porn studies for the student newspaper. This may point partly to the topic of porn being much less controversial in the classroom than it once was, and as having lost much of its power to shock (McNair 2009, 565–566). In addition, it may also speak of the specificities of Nordic contexts (in comparison to North American or British ones) that include positive public attitudes toward pornography, public sex education in schools, and relative sexual permissiveness (Kontula 2009). As a feminist media studies scholar, I interact with journalists on a weekly basis, commenting on pornography as well as popular culture, gender, and online phenomena without the purpose of my scholarly activities having been questioned to date. These experiences would be in stark contrast with those of many of my international colleagues.

The option of showing examples of pornography without contextualizing them—as addressed in Jenkins’ guidelines—is suggestive of pornography’s low cultural status as bulky material assumedly involving little inner distinction. If one example is as good as any other, then any clip has the power to stand for the genre as a whole. And if the teacher already knows what porn is, means, shows, and does, then there may not be need to watch it at all (see Smith 2009, 568). For some teachers, the act showing porn in class poses a problem as such. Anna Reading (2005) argues against showing pornography to students with the aim of keeping the classroom a safe environment for students and staff. For Reading (2005, 129), students should have the “choice to find and access web pornography somewhere else, such as home, where, should they wish to, they can find examples of extreme adult pornography.” If so decided, these examples can then be brought into class for general showing and discussion. This pedagogical strategy foregrounds student agency and aims to unravel the power relations within the classroom with the aim of “enabling media students to think critically about the contemporary impact

that pornography has now it is produced, mediated and consumed via the computer” (Reading 2005, 128).

The question nevertheless remains as to how screening pornography in the classroom connects to a feeling of safety and how it might distract from the pedagogical aim of addressing the cultural impact of porn and its ethical implications. If students are left with the responsibility of accessing pornographic materials and to pick examples to be shown in class, what does this process teach them about pornography and how? The result seems to be unavoidably that of random sampling: an anecdotal selection of materials that have caught the students’ attention and that are most likely decontextualized (unless the student in question has expert knowledge concerning the examples she has chosen).

It is also unclear as to how decontextualized examples of porn will help the students think critically about the impact of contemporary porn production, distribution, and consumption. Doing this necessitates an understanding of the contexts of production and their working practices that cannot be deciphered by simply watching porn images or videos. For example, a scene of submission and domination may be based on consensual agreements whereas an intimate amateur clip may be circulated online without the permission of the performer(s) as a means of vengeance. Porn distribution has changed both technologically and economically in drastic ways in the course of shifting to online platforms, as have its practices of production (see Paasonen 2011). All this necessitates contextual framing. Finally, understanding the impact of contemporary porn consumption would necessitate conducting research on the topic because not much empirical evidence exists (for notable exceptions, see McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008; Smith, Attwood, and Barker 2011).

Reading frames her decision of not showing porn in the classroom as ethical. This leads to further questions as to what can be known and assumed of pornography, and what kinds of critical knowledge the classroom can afford. Similar to Jones and Carlin (2004), Reading premises her pedagogical strategy on pornography as being offensive, potentially traumatizing, nasty, and unsafe (Reading 2005, 125; Smith 2009, 573). Pornography may be generic even for a popular genre, but it is also a genre cut through by endless inner distinctions, such as those separating straight porn from lesbian, gay, or transgender porn; mainstream commercial porn from independent, artistic, and amateur productions; fetishes, kinks, and other special preferences from one another; high production values from gritty gonzo; porn stars, high-profile directors, and production companies from one another; and porno produced in Finland from American, Swedish, or Russian products. These vary drastically in terms of their aesthetics, economies, and ethics of production. As I see it, random sampling based on student initiative alone leads to decontextualization that ultimately makes it impossible to address contemporary pornography in sufficient width or depth.

Discomfort

As a cinema and TV studies undergraduate in the mid-1990s, I attended a seminar on new directions in film theory. On a bright and cold winter day, we were given a brief introduction to Linda Williams' (1991) work on body genres and the analogy between hardcore porn and musicals in featuring solo performances, duets, and group choreographies, and as alternating between scripted and improvised performance. The dozen of us students then watched two vintage German porn loops—a teenage girl inserting a Coke bottle in her vagina and a family of four getting it on in a domestic setting. I vividly recall trying to focus on the formal aspects of porn choreography, to remain expressionless except for an occasional smile or smirk aiming to indicate properly detached amusement, and to distance myself from the affective force of the scenes while remaining notably self-conscious and uneasy. I have recalled that sunny afternoon more than once when planning and teaching my own classes on pornography: in fact, it remains one of the few seminar sessions that I can so vividly recall from my student years. These long-lingering sensations of discomfort have been instrumental in making me contemplate the visceral force of pornography and the power dynamics within the classroom (Boler 1999). Memories of not knowing what we were watching—or indeed why precisely we were watching them—have attuned me to the importance of contextualization and motivation when showing examples of porn. In retrospect, I learned a surprisingly great deal from that one seminar session, although not perhaps in ways intended by the lecturer.

Watching porn in a classroom is likely to be a self-conscious experience at most given moments. Displays of affect tend to be controlled with the exception of wrinkled brows and laughter: Nervous laughter is related to releasing tension, knowledgeable laughter may imply connoisseurship or ironic distance although bursts of startled and amused laughter may accompany some of the more surprising clips. Some students opt out from laughter and refuse to be amused (cf. Ahmed 2010), yet seldom are they indifferent to the examples shown and discussed.

Jones and Carlin (2004) characterize experiences of watching porn in class as galvanizing but also in terms of Brechtian discomfort and alienation. According to them, “Porn then reveals not just flesh, but also its formal conventions, its repetitive narratives, its tableaux of power, its cold ideologies, its descent into bathos” (Jones and Carlin 2004). Generic conventions are crucial in and for analytically watching and understanding pornography. I am nevertheless far less convinced that pornography involves cold ideologies or descends into bathos by default, or that revealing these machinations—which are premised as known from the start—should be a key focus when teaching porn.

The awkwardness often experienced when watching porn in class is intimately tied to both context and the management of affect. The act of watching pornographic imagery that one has not chosen and might not otherwise

choose to encounter together with fellow students and teachers in a university auditorium is probably as detached from the mundane experiences of porn use as the laboratory settings of scholarly experiments in measuring sexual arousal or gendered aggression vis-à-vis pornography (e.g., Chivers et al. 2010). Pornography is consumed for a range of reasons in addition to sexual arousal and titillation connected to masturbation, including curiosity, amusement, and boredom. The university classroom involves particular detachment that works against the very carnal grab of pornography (see Williams 1991). This shift in context can help to frame pornography in a range of productive ways without doing away with its power to touch, move, and affect its audiences, yet the reflexive detachment toward the sounds and images of porn wards off forms of intimate engagement. In the classroom, it is much easier to discuss the affective force of porn abstractly as a general potentiality and impersonal dynamics of experience than it is to frame as a matter of visceral engagement on a more personal level.

The class I attended as a student in the mid-1990s framed porn in predominantly formalist terms, as detached from its contexts of production and circulation, and as indicative of terrain considered risqué in terms of cinema studies. Other classes have framed porn as controversial media. Jones and Carlin's English class, which caught the attention of the British tabloids, was titled "Unpopular Texts" and included porn along with other materials deemed offensive, such as Enid Blyton's novel *The Three Golliwogs*, punk, and white supremacist texts. The general aim was to explore the boundaries of acceptability and the practices of policing them (Jones and Carlin 2004; also Reading 2005). There is little doubt as to pornography exhibiting and foregrounding visual and textual materials that explicitly and knowingly conflict with notions of normative good taste in their close-up depiction of bodily orifices, secretions, and motions—as well as and in the ubiquitous uses of the terminology of "filthy sluts" and "sick degenerate action" as promotion for hardcore action with no holds barred and sexual taboos left unexplored (see Paasonen 2011, 59, 207–208). The genre is no stranger to giving offense and has not been traditionally a popular academic object of inquiry. It can nevertheless hardly be considered unpopular in terms of its consumption, cultural visibility, or financial profitability: The dominant video sharing site Pornhub alone reported 21.2 billion visits in the year 2015. Whether commercial or noncommercial, produced by amateurs or well-established studios, distributed for free or for pay, pornography is a notably popular genre.

The frame of unpopularity and offensiveness helps to mark porn as a symbol for things extreme, politically problematic, and dangerous. Although affording engagement with particular aspects of pornography and the contingent boundaries of acceptability (Kendrick 1997), this frame closes down other potential analytical vistas, such as the exploration of the diversity of aesthetic, ethical, economical, technological, or political aspects, aspirations, and concerns

related to pornography in a historical context. The question is essentially one of pedagogical aim and focus, and the very motivations for addressing pornography in the classroom. If the class starts from firm presuppositions of what the genre stands for and signifies, it is difficult—if not impossible—to accommodate discussions on contradictory definitions, examples, and arguments. Such a pedagogical framing is therefore bound to be limited in the mutual learning and dialogue that it affords between teachers and students.

Spaces for critical, reflexive discussions on porn in everyday life are few and far in-between. At the same time, pornography has ubiquitous presence in the lives of students and teachers who may experience it as desired or undesired, fascinating or off-putting, encounter it randomly or actively produce and archive it themselves. I believe that for university classrooms to function as spaces for critical reflexive discussion concerning the shapes, forms, and boundaries of pornography, pedagogical practice needs to support the articulation of different views, stances, and arguments, rather than foreclose some of them.

Viscera

The fact that pornography arouses a range of affective responses is key to understanding its specificities as a genre, its attraction, as well as its cultural position as an object of controversy and debate. Pornography regularly attracts its consumers by crossing zones of comfort in its fleshy displays of excess, control, and submission. A sense of discomfort when watching porn in class may help in corporeally understanding how it works in and through bodies. Being uneasy and uncomfortable may not therefore only be a bad thing, provided that this is something that can be discussed and worked with (Kyrölä 2015). Doing this may nevertheless be easier said than done.

The gut reactions evoked by porn can be disturbingly complex and ambivalent, which causes obvious challenges to their uses as basis of knowledge. One can be simultaneously sexually aroused, amused, and disgusted by pornography, reactions may vary from one encounter to another, and what one person experiences as titillating may bore or dismay another. Individual feeling is contingent and cannot be generalized as a shared way of sensing and making sense of pornography. Such dynamics can be addressed in class through different theorizations of affective force—from Williams' (1991) discussion of body genres to Silvan Tomkins' (1995) considerations of shame and disgust, and Sara Ahmed's (2004) conceptualization of affective stickiness, proximity, and distance. Theories of affect help in thinking through how we are impressed by the images, texts, and sounds we encounter, what kinds of connections and disconnections these encounters give shape to, and how they reverberate in our bodies (also Seigworth and Gregg 2010).

I am in admiration of Susan Driver's (2004) take on teaching sexual popular media by making use of students' own experiences, pleasures, and preferences.

A similar pedagogical strategy in the context of hardcore pornography would however risk rendering the classroom a workshop on the intimate and the individual. Despite my thematic focus on affect, I consciously veer class discussion away from the confessional and singularly individual, the “me and the my.” I find it crucial not to limit considerations of affective force to the level of personal feeling and emotion when discussing pornography. This risks isolating the question on the level of individual psychology and may lead to confessionalism if students are expected to articulate their own embodied reactions, likes, and dislikes concerning the examples shown. The students’ sexual tastes and preferences are nobody else’s business but their own and certainly not something they need to share with their teacher for the sake of credits or grades. Some of my students have addressed their personal uses of porn, masturbation patterns, and incompatibilities of their sexual fantasies with those of partners’ in their essays, whereas others focus solely on the legal, conceptual, discursive, and representational aspects of pornography. The degree of intimacy or distance is theirs to choose. It should be up to the students what they wish to disclose of their personal experiences and sensations in the classroom—if they choose to disclose anything at all.

Some students identify themselves as anti-porn whereas others see themselves as aficionados and yet others remain markedly indifferent. There need be no consensus, nor is consensus even desirable in classroom discussions on porn, yet arguments need to be well-grounded and not based solely on individual feeling or opinion as the basis of ethical or political judgment. Because some of this may go against the tenets of feminist pedagogy emphasizing the inseparability of the personal and the political, some further words of explanation are likely to be necessary.

Public debates on pornography are all too often about how people feel about certain images, sexual acts, and scenarios, and what effects they imagine these images and scenarios to have on other people. This form of debate should be an object of analytical investigation in the university classroom, not the chosen or acceptable mode of interaction and exchange. Instead of considering the issue of safety in relation to teaching porn as one of watching or not watching porn together, or as one related to the safety of the teacher within the institution and the public eye, I would like to frame it as one of creating a safe space where affective imageries and debates can be analyzed and discussed without the necessity of personal confession. This links to the centrality, or at least the aim, of facilitating a sense of ease in class and the simultaneously material and immaterial work of teaching that it entails.

Affective labor

When teaching porn, I am exceptionally conscious of my agency as a teacher: how I act, dress, speak, gesture, smile, and connect with the class, and how I

both distance the discussion from the materials shown and create points of proximity with it. This self-awareness is due to me recognizing the power of porn to touch its viewers in more ways than one and wanting to facilitate a classroom environment accommodating of divergent opinions and arguments. It is also amplified by the fact that the students in porn classes have explicitly commented on my persona and teaching style over the years as something significant in terms of learning. In the feedback for the 2014 course, students mentioned aspects such as neutrality (i.e., my perspective not being limited to one ideological position over another), enthusiasm, lightness (i.e., the uses of humor), and matter-of-factness as both positive and central in terms of learning and the overall classroom atmosphere.

Creating a “nice feeling” in the classroom is a goal, and practice, exceedingly difficult to put into words. It has been discussed as emotional labor: of “Not just ‘acting out’ feelings superficially like pretending to be disappointed or surprised, but also consciously working oneself up into a state of actually experiencing the necessary feelings that are required to perform one’s job well—be these feelings of anger or enthusiasm, coolness or concern” (Hargreaves 1998, 840; also Hargreaves 2000; Zembylas 2005a; Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006). Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003, 7) has famously discussed emotional labor as the affective dimensions of service professions, namely “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display”. For Hochschild (2003), such labor “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” Emotional labor means handling and managing, even manipulating, the feelings of others as well as those of one’s own—it is characteristically affective and bodily activity. The management, shaping, and performing of emotions in teaching has been explored as both conformity with and resistance to social norms, hegemonies, and ideologies: as self-control and as the negotiation of emotional rules in the classroom (see Hargreaves 1998; Boler 1999; Callahan 2004; Zembylas 2005b).

The affective labor I am discussing occurs in the context of teaching syllabi rife with content that some of the students consider disturbing and unpleasant and that, in other academic contexts than a Finnish one, would be subject to compulsory trigger warnings (see Kyrölä 2015; Pozo 2015). Although course participation is voluntary and the students are aware of sexually explicit materials to be shown, these materials are not necessarily easy to palate, ranging as they do from historically dominant porn scenarios to the more experimental and marginal ones, and from the soft-core to the notably visceral.

When teaching these materials, my performances are variably ones of enthusiasm, interest, amusement, concern, coolness, and myriad combinations thereof. Although I am very much present in class, the overall aim is to create and maintain a sense of affective distance—not in the sense of aloofness but as detachment from the intimately personal. My avoidance of trigger warnings

does not result from disinterest or disregard towards the students' comfort or wellbeing. Not only are potential triggers in the examples shown too many times for warnings to lose effect, but it is impossible for a teacher to know what precisely may trigger what, in whom, and why. Empirical research on porn consumption provides little support for pornography as a perennial source of sexual trauma (e.g., McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008; Smith, Attwood, and Barker 2011; Paasonen et al. 2015). Even more centrally, framing the sexually explicit as that which requires trigger warnings builds on a problematic theoretical model of sexuality premised on trauma (see Barker 2014).

As Elspeth Probyn (2004, 29) argues in the context of teaching women's studies, affective responses are complex and result partly from "an embodied history to which and with which the body reacts, including how the classroom is conceived and practiced." She notes the importance of moments of reflection as flashes and affective bodily responses that help the students to connect the theoretical and the conceptual with the personally experienced and felt (Probyn 2004, 33). At the same time, pedagogical practice involves affective management, or even control: "While we offer material that potentially sets off lines of flight, we then have to continuously re-territorialize the very bodies that have been set in motion through our teaching," for example through theory as a means of dampening down "the potential affect, the potential frenzy" (Probyn 2004, 35). In other words, theory can be both a means of generating and diminishing affective intensity in the classroom. Given my strategy of steering the focus away from the confessional, I find theory crucial in terms of fine-tuning the level of discussion on the visceral aspects of porn through conceptualization and abstraction. As a means of generalization, theory helps to shift the level of discussion from the intimate and the singular to something more broadly recognizable. In this sense, theory may provide a sense of safety and relief for teachers and students alike while helping discussions to move beyond individual encounters towards conceptualizations of sexuality, gender, media, technology, affect, power, and desire—and, by doing so, to help understand the individual, the collective, and the social alike.

Probyn (2004, 30) continues to note that "careful consideration needs to be paid to providing safety structures for students for whom a triggered affective response may be deeply disturbing." Unfortunately Probyn provides no answer as to what such safety structures can or should entail, even if she goes on to discuss the importance of physical presence and connection with the students in class in ways that resonate with my own experiences of trying to generate an open and relaxed atmosphere. The attempts to manage affect as intensities that circulate and stick in unpredictable ways as we encounter and address images and sounds on the screen (Ahmed 2004; Brennan 2004) involves physical cues and techniques such as posture, facial expressions, eye contact, smile, as well as the tempo, rhythm, and pitch of speech. The question is not merely one of what

is being said—although this obviously remains highly crucial—but also one of how things are said (Waskul 2009).

This issue of corporeal teachings style applies to virtually all teaching practices and I am hardly the first one to point out the centrality of affect and emotion in teaching (e.g., Nias 1996; Hargreaves 1998; Sutton and Wheatley 2003). I nevertheless argue that questions of affective tuning and corporeal presence become particularly pivotal when teaching pornography. Such tuning is markedly ephemeral and largely nonlinguistic, yet something that students note in the feedback they give (also Probyn 2004, 37–38). In feedback from a 2006 class, a student noted that “The course would have been very different had it been taught by a nervous middle-aged man. This from the perspective of an approx. 20-year old female student. Why a young female teacher is ‘more safe’, I don’t know, but that’s how it is.” This excerpt associates safety with the teacher’s gender and age, suggesting that since pornography is strongly identified with male consumers, the motivations of a female teacher—especially one with a background in gender studies—are considered somehow less suspicious. This obviously begs the question as to whether the students would find a similar course taught by a male teacher equally acceptable, and how fair this might be towards male scholars working in the field.

On the one hand, this conflation of gender and age with safety can be seen as speaking of how emotional labor in the classroom connects to, and becomes articulated as gendered care, given that the well-being of students has long been identified as a concern of female teachers in particular (e.g., Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006; O’Connor 2008). On the other hand, it may also speak of a sense of sexual safety, as it implicitly evokes the image of risk as the opposite of safe: if the female and the relatively young embodies safety, then, by implication, the male and the relatively older (as encapsulated in the stereotypical figure of “the dirty old man”) is a marker of risk. Probyn (2004, 34) argues that bodily intensities in the classroom are altogether too often reduced to the sexual and, more specifically, to potential sexual engagements between students and teachers in ways that close down other considerations of the body in teaching (cf. Eastman 2006). The potential frictions involved in all this are obvious for classes dealing with embodiment and sexuality. When teaching porn, the teacher, as the curator of the clips watched, may become framed as suspicious in her or his motivation, and even as a risk to student safety.

Lastly, the othered figure of “a nervous middle-aged man” in the feedback raises the obvious yet crucial issue of ease. It is acutely necessary for the teacher not to be driven to unease by either the explicit materials shown in class or the students’ reactions to them. At the same time, there needs to be room available for discussing these reactions—be this on the general level of affective intensity or, should such an occasion arrive, on the personal level of the reactions that the students register. Nervous teachers make a restless classroom, defensive

teachers block discussion, and uneasy ones tend to be unconvincing in their delivery. Discomfort shows.

Resonances beyond the classroom

Classroom discussion on porn can be cumbersome to organize especially if the format is lecture-based rather than a seminar. Student comments on the clips shown are often analytical but also judgmental, ironic, and humorous, and their comments possibly aim at lightening the atmosphere. Some students make comments readily whereas others feel disinclined to say a word. Silence does not however mean that the students would be inattentive or not have anything to say: They may simply want more time to process what they have just seen and heard, and the classroom may not be the right time and space for them to do, or share that. Generally, porn classes are the ones where my students resort to their distracting smart devices the least, where questions are asked and comments made throughout the lectures, and where classes are regularly, even dutifully attended. There is specific intensity to a porn classroom.

For me as teacher, porn classes have been a key means to consider my pedagogical strategies, their advantages and disadvantages in performing, engaging, and interacting with students and trying to craft out spaces of learning that are safe while also possibly sometimes uncomfortable, and ethical while simultaneously dealing with contents deemed risky and controversial. For some students, these classes have oriented their MA work by opening up analytical vistas into sexuality and media in ways that are otherwise seldom explored in the curriculum. The discussions in my first 2005 class in particular were similarly instrumental in refocusing my interest in porn studies and inspiring me to push my theoretical investigations further.

Following Stuart Hall's (1996) call for "worldliness," I understand the practice of cultural studies—be it in a gender studies or a media studies classroom—as involving an engagement with the material world and the struggles that take place in it. Optimally, a porn class then facilitates contextual understanding that fuels, invites, and generates reflexive discussion and analytical insight both inside and outside the university classroom connected to the genre's historically and geographically contingent production cultures, economies of circulation, dynamics of consumption, and the political stakes attached to this all. My key argument concerning knowledge production on pornography is one of contextual specificity that necessitates moving beyond simplified notions of what porn is or does toward both regularities and differences that matter. Without empirical understanding concerning the genre, pedagogical practice is likely to repeat familiar generalizations that efface political nuances, ethical concerns, and aesthetic distinctions from view and make it virtually impossible to account for the particularities of specific materials, their

producers, technological underpinnings, or circuits of distribution—and, consequently, to find out much about the phenomena addressed. A critical porn class would therefore provide students with contextual understanding as well as conceptual, theoretical, and methodological tools for conducting their own investigations and analyses, and possibly also for reflecting on their own relationships with pornographic materials and the role it plays in their everyday lives.

It seems that some of this is also achievable. Students have, for example, commented on porn discussions continuing after class and hanging around discussing the things just seen over cups of coffee. Some have told of sharing the online clips or even the full lecture slides just shown in class with their roommates, virtually re-enacting the lectures for them—which I find extraordinary as such. One student even described her family dinners as having been dominated by the topic of porn for the duration of the class: although her father had remained silent, her mother and brother had been fully engrossed in the topic. In such instances, the affective intensities of interest and focus oscillate and grow out from the classroom, engender different kinds of encounters and discussions, and give way to reflections and exchanges that are unconfined by the aims or structures of the particular class in question.

For me, such instances—as rare and exceptional as they may be in a teacher’s career—are exemplary of successful pedagogical encounters: of attunement between the students, the teacher, and the materials discussed that energizes the classroom and resonates outside its confines in possibly surprising ways. Porn classes can help to carve out spaces of mundane exchange around a topic that facilitate dialogical forms of knowledge production. Such encounters, exchanges, and points of intensity make porn classes matter. Importantly, their worldliness need not be confined to negative critique of pornography’s generic conventions and their gendered, classed, or raced underpinnings, or focus on the commercialization of intimacy generally associated with sex work. Rather, the worldliness I am addressing here is a matter of contextual understanding that is both empirical and theoretical; both based on an understanding of the specificities of cultural production and consumption and moving beyond their singularities through the means of conceptualization; attached to the affective both as intensities felt in the body and as an issue of broader, impersonal dynamics and aesthetics. All this facilitates meaningful engagements with the ethics and politics of pornography that do not fix it into a cultural metaphor, symbol, or symptom. Rather, pornography emerges an internally diverse and contradictory field of cultural practice that involves heightened political passions, moral stakes, labor practices, production tools, sexual scenes, subcultures, identifications, individual sexual lives, as well as notable knowledge gaps. Counter to the debates on pornification framing pornography as an outsider force infiltrating and transforming culture, pornography is a field of culture with heterogeneous shapes, forms, meanings, and social resonances. As such,

porn builds on, taps into, and fuels both private and public fantasies, and facilitates both acts of resistance and the reproduction of hegemonic norms connected to sexuality. Pedagogical practice simplifies this complex, messy terrain at the expense of its own critical scope.

Note

1. Consider, for example, the widely screened documentary film *Inside Deep Throat* (Bailey and Barbato 2005), where feminist critiques of pornography are associated with moral conservatism, censorship, and prudishness.

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