

0.1 Chapter 3: relationships: Sex

0.2 Sex

1 On Making Better Porn

The online world is flooded with every conceivable kind of sexual image. A substantial percentage of all internet searches (perhaps as high as 30%) are for pornographic material. Even its detractors have to concede that, by the standards of sheer volume at least, the porn industry seems to be hugely successful. It appears to have tapped into a core demand of humanity, however awkward it might at times feel to admit this.

But seen another way, porn is a major collective failure. Not because it exists at all. But for another reason, that initially sounds very strange: the porn industry fails us because it doesn't produce *good porn*. The idea of *good porn* can seem paradoxical. Many people worry that porn itself is bad it has surely ruined so many lives, it is an issue of grim conflict in millions of marriages; parents are terrified of their children's online exposure.

When people eat badly, we don't try to stop them eating at all. We hope to improve their diet. The aim isn't to abolish food, just because some food is terrible. We want good food to be more widely and easily available. The same move could apply to online sex sites. We can't abolish porn. So the goal is to get good pornography. Better porn isn't stuff that's even more thrilling or exciting. It is better in the sense of being better for us less at odds with the rest of our lives.

The idea that porn could, under the right circumstances, actually be beneficial, strikes many people as very strange. But it shouldn't. Looking at a lot of porn tends to leave us feeling disconnected and hollow. That's because it doesn't seem connected to anything else we value in the rest of our lives. It's merely about sex, rather than being also about other things we care about: like self-understanding, kindness, intelligence and good relationships.

The idea of harnessing sexual energy to the service of higher ideals has not always seemed strange. The Catholic Church, for instance, took very seriously the idea that they might, in their art, place some important ideas (about the meaning of life) next to some distinctly attractive people. Sex was invited to lend glamour and energy to philosophy.



Giovanni Bellini's pioneering exploration of good porn. Mary Magdalene: compassion & sexiness.



Caravaggios exploration of good porn: John the Baptist: sacrifice and sexiness

The wise ambition of the Catholic church is to get our erotic appetites to work in the same direction as our better nature, instead of in opposition which is so often and painfully the case.

We have to accept that theres always going to be a lot porn. The challenge is to start to make it better.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER PORN

One: Change the porn stars



The ancient Greeks were into statue porn. In this one they have taken a lot of trouble to get the forward thrust of the hip just right; the pose of the raised arm is very suggestive. They were hoping you'd be turned on. But he's also the god Apollo: the representative of wisdom and skill. He's going to be really dirty in bed, but he's got a lot of other things going on too. The statue of Apollo gives greater prestige to a very important ideal. It pictures someone very successful, very admirable and competent who is also highly sensuous. This ideal was meant to be in people's minds as they grew up, as they judged themselves and others. The Greeks were presenting Apollo as someone who could combine being sexual with being clever and accomplished. And they were saying to themselves and posterity: Maybe you should be a bit like this too.

We have unfortunately left porn largely in the hands of people who don't seem to be much interested in anything apart from sex. To put it more bluntly, the people portrayed in porn often inhibit identification. They don't look like your friends, or the people who work in the firm you're hoping to join, or those you'd find it interesting to meet.



Novels really took off in the 19th century when writers started to get interested in realism. The story might be about things youd never yourself actually do in real life; like walk from London to Brighton, as in Dickens *Oliver Twist* (1838) or manage a failing paper manufacturing company as in Balzacs *Lost Illusions* (1843). But it was possible to feel close to these characters, to share their ambitions and fears and to learn from their experience.



This wise development hasn't yet happened with pornography. The porn of the utopian society would allow us to identify properly with the people involved, and to care a little about them, even if we meet them for only three minutes or in one still image.

We might, for example, meet a master's student in finance who spends an afternoon with two men. In her mind, there's a battle between a sense of guilt and a craving for exploration (she is especially excited by being shouted at); she doesn't tell her boyfriend. Or, we might meet a polite chemical engineer who wants to dominate someone, but despairs of getting this to happen in his life. Eventually, he learns to cast off politeness and reconnect with his own ruthlessness.

As we've learned from advertising, the psychological context can be made palpable very quickly. It's not impossible; it just takes a lot of skill, a quality as yet deeply lacking in the manufacture of porn.



Two: Get a better frame

Almost every porn website in the world is in bad taste. The colours clash, the language is aggressive, the site is jumbled and chaotic. This isn't a minor point. The French publishing house Gallimard takes immense trouble with its book jackets, because it knows that the experience of a book doesn't begin with just the words themselves. The wrapping too is a communicative medium that should have to all the dignity of the content.



The same principle should hold true with a porn site. Its design should communicate soberness, goodwill,

intelligence and calm.

Three: Change the categories of what turns us on

Porn pays great attention to externals: high heels, canes, skin colour, the size of body parts. But the underlying cause of much of our excitement is really very different. It is overwhelmingly psychological. We are excited by ideas.

At present, porn sites tend to divide up their material according to some pretty basic categories: AMATEUR, LARGE BREASTS, LEATHER and so on. Utopian porn would cast these aside in order to arrange the material according to the psychological triggers of excitement. We identify at least five major ones, around which the porn of the future should be classified.

i) Loneliness

This category would feature lonely or isolated individuals who we see overcoming shyness, reserve, and alienation in order finally to express their sexuality, in a way that encourages us to feel more comfortable with our own desires. Scientific researchers, librarians, civil servants and modest quiet individuals (rarely seen in porn to date) would feature heavily in this category. We would witness them journeying from reserve and innocence to full displays of sexuality. The pleasure of watching them would stem from a welcome sense that our own libido, also often repressed and the subject of guilt, could in turn be liberated and accepted by others.



Sexual excitement might sometimes appear to be a merely physiological phenomenon, the result of hormones and stimulated nerve endings. But in truth it arises as much from an idea as from a sensation: and it is in large part about the idea of acceptance, and of the promise of an end to shame.



At the core of certain kinds of arousal is a form of emotional reassurance and relief, a sense of freedom that we have been allowed finally to reveal our arduously defended secret selves.

ii) Authority

Life generally demands extreme politeness and restraint. We have to keep our bossiness in check. But in private, we go through life often thinking that we know what's good for another person or feeling that someone deserves some rather harsh treatment. In our hearts, we might like to be very bossy, very demanding and insistent. We would like to enforce absolute obedience on all those who defy us. But of course, in the real world, this is made difficult by the fact that very few people trust us to exercise such power; we simply are not able to rise to the status which would allow us to exercise power as we would want.



So a major porn category is one which allows to fantasise about exercising authority. In sexual fantasy, someone puts themselves in our hands, as we always hoped might happen; and we can be as bossy as we like. This is an attempt to address the very delicate, and very real problem, of how and when to exercise decisive power over another person. And yet in the porn scenario, instead of this being a situation fraught with anxiety because one might be mistaken about another's wishes, because there might be resentment and one might hurt someone the commands are met only with delight by the person on whom they are exercised.

No one is left bereft by the violence. The other person accepts one's violent, extreme possibilities. They aren't shocked. Afterwards, there may be love and cosiness, until next time. It is the fantasy that violence is no longer bad for us and others; that anger and aggression can be expended safely, will not make

others unhappy, but in fact will be welcomed by them and that the fury of another will not wreck our lives but, in fact, bring us a kindly thrill.

iii) Passivity

We are taught from a young age that we must become independent and strong. We live in an individualistic culture that constantly vilifies dependence and pushes us towards an ideal of solitary maturity.

And yet it seems, in our sexual selves, many of us are deeply turned on by the idea of thorough passivity and submission, as a form of escape from the over-strenuous demands of grown-up life.

Being a slave means that someone else will know exactly what you should do, will take full responsibility, will take choice away from you. This can sound appalling because most slave owners we can imagine (or even just most bosses) are awful. They won't have our best interests at heart. They won't be kind. So we want to be independent in part because there doesn't seem to be anyone around nice enough to deserve our submission.

But the deep hope in the erotic scenario in utopian porn would be that at last we can be with someone who is worthy of our complete loyalty and devotion: we witness the best form of passivity at the hands of an ideally authoritarian person.



Now you can do anything to me. I mean it. Anything.

Kinkiness collects around things that trouble us. Erotic fantasies are imagined ideal solutions to real-world anxieties. Porn has the opportunity to target our problems and minister to them. Rightly used, porn isn't a distraction. It feeds good moves to the imagination. It has a role to play in our emotional education.

iv) Seriousness

It can be extremely exciting when a normally very serious, responsible person reveals a kinkier, more erotic side.

That's why glasses can, for example, be so sexy. Glasses are symbols of thoughtfulness and gravity.

They're worn by people who seem to have a lot on their plate and perhaps a lot of significant thoughts in their minds. The worry is whether these sort of people have any time for us. They may be too important to pay us and our desires much attention. But when glasses are invited into sex, a natural and important anxiety is being addressed and (temporarily) resolved: the worry that thoughtfulness and seriousness on the one hand, and bodily excitement on the other might be incompatible.

The imagined solution is that the person in glasses can turn out to be not only thoughtful but also extremely interested in sex and the body. Sex with glasses symbolises that the life of the mind is not separate from that of sensual pleasure, that sensitivity and seriousness can be properly reconciled with, and profoundly sympathetic to intimacy.



v) Responsibility

Good porn has a therapeutic role. It ideally helps us integrate sexual longing with the rest of life. Consider a very caring mother in her early 40s, who has slightly lost interest in her husband, who in any case is preoccupied with work and tends to drink a bit in the evenings and isn't often up to sex.

She might need porn to reconnect her to an important, but currently neglected part of herself: more adventurous, less emotionally involved. She doesn't need to get closer to people, she needs to feel that she doesn't have to be responsible for everyone. She can be selfish for a minute and the world won't fall apart. She'd say she's not interested in porn.



She might need some pretty rough and anonymous porn. She doesn't need to think of relationships. She needs to enjoy guilt-free orgasms and get back to her hectic, hugely important life a little more at ease with herself and the world.

Something similar will be needed by a shy, over-sensitive man who should get a bit more independent and sure of himself. He needs to become more assertive. In adolescence, he became acutely aware of his own sexuality, but didn't pick up very well on the sexual nature of other people: it seems to him that nice girls (the kind he'd otherwise like to be around) will be disgusted by the dirtier aspects of his own imagination. In conversation he'd of course say he understands perfectly well about women and sex. But in secret he doesn't have faith.

He needs porn that can reassure him that the sort of women he meets (who are not remotely like porn stars are today) have just as kinky thoughts as he does. He's got to really enter into their minds and porn should help him do so. He should see people who have completely normal existences; only they are very generously sharing with him the details of their erotic longings.

We shouldn't be negative about porn, just because of how most of it seems today. In 1800, many people offering medical services were quacks. They didn't know what they were doing. There was a hunger for remedies however misguided. So being a doctor was nothing like the respectable career choice it is today. What changed was the realisation that we needed really serious, thoughtful and honourable people to go into this field. Health was too important to be left to self-appointed peddlers of fanciful potions. Right now, pornography is distracting, distorting and unhelpful. It takes up too much time and it leaves most people feeling ashamed. None of that is necessary. The solution isn't to ban porn, but to make it better.

We're hugely aware of the terrible things that can go wrong around porn in the age of the internet. But the longing for sexual stimulation isn't going to go away. Given how vast the demand is, and how crucial the role of sexuality is in life, it is tragic that comparatively so little talent, wisdom, intelligence, maturity and aesthetic imagination has been directed to it. We've rightly come to fear bad porn, because it damages so many lives. Good porn could help us deal a little better with the complex, tricky fact of being at the same time highly sexual and highly reasonable beings.

Look at the School of Life's own porn site at: www.pornastherapy.com

