

The background of the book cover features a close-up photograph of crumpled fabric. The top half is a vibrant pink, while the bottom half is a light, silvery-white. The fabric is gathered and knotted, creating deep shadows and bright highlights that emphasize its texture.

BOUND AND GAGGED

Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America

LAURA KIPNIS

“A wonderfully insightful book about the elitism that lurks behind antiporn sentiment. By bringing class into the picture, *Bound and Gagged* moves beyond the predictable, repetitive argument among feminists.”—Leora Tanenbaum, *The Nation*

“*Bound and Gagged* is a remarkably rational book about a subject that usually sparks remarkably irrational responses.”—Joy Press, *Boston Globe*

“Few readers . . . will come away from *Bound and Gagged* with their perceptions about porn intact. . . . This original and spirited paean to the secret power of pornography makes a stimulating bedside primer—albeit one that’s more likely to lead to sedition than seduction.”—Autumn Stephens, *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*

“A wonderfully provocative examination of pornographic fantasies and their broader cultural meanings. . . . *Bound and Gagged* pokes and prods at a number of America’s most tender spots—examining everything from transvestite personal ads and ‘fat fetishism’ to the class-ridden politics of disgust.”—David Futrelle, *Los Angeles Reader*

“*Bound and Gagged* will prove intellectually productive for generations of scholars and thinkers. As always, Kipnis’s insistence on articulating concerns of class and gender makes her work virtually unique within U.S. cultural studies—and she is doubtless among the most engaging writers in the academy today.”—Lauren Berlant, author of *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*

“Kipnis argues forcefully and wittily . . . [that] *Playboy* and, even more so, hard-core pornography are defined essentially by their downward class appeal and class marketing.”—Kenneth Anderson, *Times Literary Supplement*

BOUND AND GAGGED

Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America

LAURA KIPNIS

Duke University Press Durham 1999

Copyright © 1996 by Laura Kipnis

3rd printing, 2007

First paperback printing by Duke University Press, 1999

Originally published by Grove Press, 1996

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Kipnis, Laura.

Bound and gagged: pornography and the politics of fantasy in America /

by Laura Kipnis

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8223-2343-5 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Pornography—United States. 2. Pornography—Social aspects—
United States. I. Title.

HQ472.U6K56 1996

363.4'7'0973—dc20

95-39193

Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>One:</i>	Fantasy in America: <i>The United States v. Daniel Thomas DePew</i>	3
<i>Two:</i>	Clothes Make the Man	64
<i>Three:</i>	Life in the Fat Lane	93
<i>Four:</i>	Disgust and Desire: <i>Hustler</i> Magazine	122
<i>Five:</i>	How to Look at Pornography	161
	<i>Notes</i>	207
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	225

Preface

We're lately in the midst of a massive wave of social hysteria focused on pornography, which spills over into art and other cultural spheres. Through a strange-bedfellows alliance of the religious right, the feminist right, and cultural conservatives, pornography has become an all-purpose whipping person. From the Spenglerian scoldings about cultural decline to holy-roller excoriations about the pornographer-terrorist-homosexual lobby, you'd think that pornography has single-handedly brought down Western culture. At the same time, for certain feminists, pornography has become a convenient way to symbolize the omnipresence of rape and violence to women.

The panicked tenor of this new moral bloc has filtered down through the social structure, and the frenzy doesn't stop with pornography proper. Museum curators are put on trial. Parents are arrested for taking naked pictures of their kids. Sex and AIDS education are under assault. The National Endowment for the Arts is defunded by Congress after charges that it

Bound and Gagged

supports “pornographic art.” Legislation is under way to police the Internet for dirty pictures. At the same time, mainstream culture like movies and TV, advertising, pop music, not to mention high art, are borrowing pornographic explicitness, making the distinctions between the pornographic and the nonpornographic harder and harder to maintain, if they were ever tenable at all.

This book means to offer a different footing for debates about pornography. Its position is that the differences between pornography and other forms of culture are less meaningful than their similarities. Pornography is a form of cultural expression, and though it’s transgressive, disruptive, and hits below the belt—in more ways than one—it’s an essential form of contemporary national culture. It’s also a genre devoted to fantasy, and its fantasies traverse a range of motifs beyond the strictly sexual. Sex is pornography’s vehicle, and also its mode of distraction, but coursing through pornography’s dimly lit corridors are far larger issues. Abandon your prejudices about what kind of language is appropriate to serious philosophical inquiry, and you can see that within the staged, mythic world of pornography a number of philosophical questions are posed, though couched in a low idiom: questions concerning the social compact and the price of repression, questions about what men are (and aren’t), what women are (and aren’t), questions about how sexuality and gender roles are performed, about class, aesthetics, utopia, rebellion, power, desire, and commodification.

Reading between the bodies, you can also see the way that pornography lends itself as a form, in fairly mobile ways, to local necessities for expression of what’s routinely muzzled from other public forums. Like pornography of the past, from Boccaccio to Rabelais to Sade, it gets appropriated as a form of speech and deployed around subjects and issues that are the most “unspeakable,” the most buried, but also the most politically and cultur-

ally significant.¹ Or this is what you'll see if you give up insisting on the importance of high-minded language and grim-faced humorlessness to the task of philosophical or political engagement. And if you step back, just momentarily, from whatever dismay pornography may cause you. But if we've learned anything from the artistic avant-garde—besides the imperative to question the automatic reverence accorded high seriousness—it's that administering shocks to the bourgeois sensibility looks, in historical retrospect at least, like an important cultural project. Savor those shocks.

What follows is not an exhaustive survey of all existing pornography, but a strategic and selective one. Pornography is immensely popular: its annual multi-billion-dollar sales rival the gross revenues of the three major TV networks combined. While magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse* have high visibility and even a certain degree of respectability, the focus here is on less frequently discussed pornographic subgenres that I expect will fluster all the conventional platitudes about porn (it's all about violence, it's all about debasing women). We'll cover the gamut, from S&M to transvestite personal ads, to fat pornography, to *Hustler* magazine, to geriatric porn, infantilism, and tickling. Peripheral as they may seem at first glance, these pornographic subgenres distill many of our most pivotal cultural preoccupations.

Center stage within all pornography is the question of fantasy and its social meanings. But let's be quite clear: this isn't some abstract, theoretical concern. Without any public discussion of the issue whatsoever, the state has now taken the position that fantasizing about something illegal *is* illegal, and pursues prosecutions of the citizenry on that basis. As the opening chapter details, two Virginia men were sent to prison for over thirty years for having the wrong fantasies, and for being incau-

Bound and Gagged

tious enough to verbalize them in the wrong place. The notion that you can be imprisoned for thought crimes strikes most of us as something out of Orwell or a sci-fi dystopia, but this turns out to be the world we now inhabit. If public policy and policing procedures are enacted on the basis of the most simplistic assumptions about the role of fantasy in the human psyche (that fantasy is synonymous with intent, for instance), this imperils a basic form of freedom, as well as the available modes of political expression.

This book is not a rehash of the debates between antipornography feminists and anticensorship liberals: it endeavors to make an argument about pornography whose terms aren't dictated in advance by its opponents. This has proven difficult for the majority of "anti-antipornography" writers, because the positions of antiporn feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin have so dominated the debates and so influenced public policy discussions. Call me a feminist apostate, but I say there's more to pornography than a celebration of gender oppression, and limiting the discussion to that issue alone closes the door before things get interesting. If pornography offends women (or some women) more than it offends men (most men?) the question, What does it mean to be offended? needs to be put in front of us. But this is also not simply a "pro-sex" argument: I don't see in pornography the key that will unleash our reserves of unrepressed animal sexuality. Certainly everyone's entitled to better orgasms—wherever and whenever they can be had—but once you've accomplished that, there's still the issue of what pornography means as a form of culture, and why it's so meaningful *to* our culture, especially now.²

Whether pornography should or shouldn't exist is pretty much beside the point. It does exist, and it's not going to go away. Why it exists, what it has to say, and who pornography thinks it's talking to, are more interesting questions than all these

doomed, dreary attempts to debate it, regulate it, or protest it. Just what is pornography's grip on the cultural imagination?

Debates over pornography have generally seesawed back and forth over the same now-familiar issues. The First Amendment and freedom of the press versus putting a leash on obscenity. Women's right to be protected from offensive images versus sexual freedom and expressiveness. These arguments have become tedious because they evade what's really at stake in pornography with a barrage of smoke screens and circumlocutions, routinely reaching the heights of hypocrisy and the depths of logic, often simultaneously. Suddenly cultural conservatives start sounding like ardent feminists ("Pornography exploits women!"), feminists start sounding like autocratic patriarchs ("Women in the sex industry are incompetent to make informed career choices"), and staunch Republican free-marketeers become anti-big business ("They're just out to make a buck at the expense of our children").

Who's to say whether performing sexual labor is a worse or more dehumanizing job than manual labor or service-industry labor or working on an assembly line or waitressing, other than the person doing it? And let's not get too romantic about how much choice the labor market allows anyone, or how great working conditions are across the board. It's not as if we have all the vocational choices in the world: "Should I be a porn queen or . . . president of IBM?" If you get teary-eyed about exploited pornography workers and haven't thought much about international garment workers, or poultry workers—to name just two of the countless and quotidian examples of those with less than wonderful working conditions—then maybe your analysis needs some work. And some consistency. Contrary to some feminists, I think we have to operate on the basis that women *are* capable of making informed decisions about how to conduct their lives, and recognize at the same time that labor under capitalism, is, by its

Bound and Gagged

nature, exploited. The changes that are happening in sex industry work are being made from within, through organization.³ It always seems a little disingenuous when those who could care less about the violence of global capitalism, and think labor unions need to be taught who's boss, become raving socialists when it comes to pornography. (Incidentally, no one seems too worried about men being exploited by the porn industry, which says something about just how beset by stereotypes these discussions are.) None of this is a justification for the pornography industry; it simply points out that it's not exceptional. If you want to cap corporate profit, institute worker self-management, end alienated labor, or even dismantle capitalism altogether, I'm right behind you. But not if your revolutionary zeal is confined to this one particular industry.

Pornography is a business—as is all our popular entertainment—which has attained popularity because it finds ways of articulating things its audiences care about. When it doesn't, we turn it off. If you start out from the supposition that no complexity could possibly reside in “lower” forms of culture, in commercial culture, you will, of course, miss the complexity that does reside there. Pornography may indeed be the sexuality of a consumer society. It may have a certain emptiness, a lack of interior, a disconnectedness—as does so much of our popular culture. And our high culture. (As does much of what passes for political discourse these days, too.) But that doesn't mean that pornography isn't, at the same time, an expressive form. It speaks to its audience because it's thoroughly astute about who we are underneath the social veneer, astute about the costs of cultural conformity and the discontent at the core of routinized lives and normative sexuality. Its audience is drawn to it because it provides opportunities—perhaps in coded, sexualized forms, but opportunities nonetheless—for a range of effects, pleasures, and desires; for the experience of transgression, utopian aspira-

tions, sadness, optimism, loss; and even the most primary longings for love and plenitude.⁴

It's *this* nakedness that may have something do with the contempt—and perhaps the embarrassment—with which pornography is so routinely regarded. And the ambivalence. However, I'm suggesting that we regard pornography more creatively—and more discerningly—which, as the following chapters describe, is how it regards us.⁵

Bound and Gagged

One

Fantasy in America: *The United States v. Daniel Thomas DePew*

What kind of society sends its citizens to prison for their fantasies?

When an undercover San Jose police officer calling himself “Bobby” phoned Daniel DePew in Alexandria, Virginia, to suggest that they had “mutual interests” and invited him to his hotel for dinner, DePew, ever the optimist—and thinking that he’d been beckoned to a blind date with an out-of-town prospect—showered, put on a pair of tight jeans, and drove himself to the Dulles Airport Marriott. Twenty-eight at the time, DePew was a systems control engineer at a high-tech electronics company; he was also, in his off-hours, a well-known habitué of the gay sadomasochistic subculture of the Washington, D.C., area. Subcultures have their own private languages, along with shared sets of rules and codes of behavior that members employ: to DePew, when Bobby said “mutual interests” it meant S&M sex. It wasn’t unusual for him to meet people over the phone and get together to explore fantasies, maybe have some kind of

Bound and Gagged

scene—which often included verbalizing elaborate and violent fictional scenarios. Fantasy was a major component of DePew’s sexual universe. What DePew didn’t know was that what Bobby had in mind was that Dan play the role of executioner in a snuff film that Bobby was scripting, that Bobby was inviting Dan to his hotel room to discuss kidnapping and murdering a child, and that Bobby was working for the government. Our government.

What follows is a case study about odd, disturbing, and violent sexual fantasies, but just whose fantasies were they? Daniel DePew was sentenced to thirty-three years in prison for sitting around a hotel room and trading detailed kinky fantasies with two undercover cops who’d invited him there in the first place, and who spurred him on by sharing their own equally kinky fantasies, while a team of FBI agents listened eagerly in the next room. The cops and FBI agents are still roaming the streets; DePew is serving out his sentence in a federal prison. The fantasies never progressed beyond the realm of fantasy. This is a story about a crime that never happened. There was no victim. It’s also a story that wouldn’t have taken place without a couple of zealous law enforcement agents prodding a couple of tragically over-susceptible men to scratch open their psychic scars and plumb their darkest fantasies while the tape recorders rolled—like Kafkaesque state-sponsored psychotherapy—with every free association captured as evidence for a future trial.¹

United States v. DePew was the first prosecution nationwide involving sex-related computer bulletin boards, which is where a Richmond, Virginia, real estate agent named Dean Lambey inadvertently picked up a San Jose undercover cop and proceeded to lead Daniel DePew, whom he’d met only once, into the setup. These bulletin boards, and their successors on the Internet, were, briefly, an unregulated space for all manner of nonconstrained expression, whether political, sexual, creative, or just weird. These days any small-town cop with a modem and

a nose for sin can log on to the Internet and set about electronically policing the sexual proclivities of the nation. And following the case of a California couple sentenced to prison after an undercover Memphis postal inspector received their pornographic images over the Internet, Net hounds around the country are faced with the task of ensuring that their fantasy lives conform to the community standards of the Bible Belt, or risk prosecution. At the same time, these prosecutions are conducted haphazardly and rulings are contradictory: despite massive publicity about the 1995 arrest of a University of Michigan student after he published a violent fantasy about another student on a computer bulletin board and discussed similar fantasies through E-mail, the case was dismissed by a federal judge (after the student had spent a month in jail) who decided that the story and the E-mails were merely tasteless fiction. Federal legislation is now pending to criminalize sexually explicit speech and images on the Internet—ironically, as an amendment to a bill otherwise deregulating the telecommunications industry.

It's inevitable that the Internet will increasingly be used for entrapment purposes, as was the case with DePew and Lambey. The rationale for this expansion of law enforcement into the fantasies of the citizenry comes cloaked as the all-too-necessary responsibility of protecting children from perverts. The subject of child sexual abuse is so emotionally charged these days that little rational discussion of the topic is possible. Pedophilia is the new evil empire of the domestic imagination: now that communism has been defanged, it seems to occupy a similar metaphysical status as the evil of all evils, with similar anxiety about security from infiltration, the similar under-the-bed fear that "they" walk among us undetected—fears that are not entirely groundless, but not entirely rational either. (And predictably, the FBI once again plays a key role in ferreting out wrongdoing.)