Philosophy 2120L:  
Speech and Pornography*

Instructor: Richard Kimberly Heck  
Email: rikiheck@brown.edu  
Office: 216 Corliss Brackett  
Office hours: W 12–1pm, F 1–2pm  
Office phone: (401)863-3217  

Course Website: [http://frege.org/phil2120l/](http://frege.org/phil2120l/)

Course Description

Pornography as we know it today was born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and feminists have been concerned about its influence ever since. Indeed, in the late 1970s, pornography became the central concern of many feminists, so much so that, even today, the term ‘feminist pornography’ strikes some people as self-contradictory. The usual charge was that pornography causes sexual violence: “Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice”, as Robin Morgan famously put it. The causal connection was always hard to prove, however, and in the 1980s the argument shifted. Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon argued that pornography did not just cause women’s sexual and social subordination but somehow constituted it: In some robust sense, pornography was supposed to make it the case that sexual violence is legitimate.

But feminists have never been of one mind about this issue. Early opponents included the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) and ‘sex-positive’ feminists such as Gayle Rubin, Lynne Segal, and Ellen Willis. These critics articulated powerful (and sometimes angry) rebuttals of the claims of MacKinnon et al., even while emphasizing that they too regard (much) pornography as distasteful and, in some ways, socially harmful. Given the social and political context, however, their emphasis was, understandably, always on denying that pornography ‘caused rape’ or ‘licensed women’s subordination’—and so on denying that pornography was an appropriate target for (any form of) censorship. As a result, these feminists never clearly articulated their own account of pornography’s harmfulness. Something similar is true today. Only rarely do ‘anti-censorship’ feminists address the question what social harm pornography might do, and how, and what we might do in response.

That is my own present research goal: to develop an account of why (certain kinds of) pornography are not just distasteful or even offensive, but are produc-

*Thanks to Jessica Metzler of the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning for help with this syllabus and the override request form.
tive or supportive of socio-sexual norms that are contrary to women’s equality. I doubt that we will quite get to the point where I can articulate such a view, but I hope that we will get close enough to see what such a view might be like.

We’ll start by considering the attempt by Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton, in the early 1990s, to develop Dworkin and MacKinnon’s arguments by drawing upon work in the philosophy of language. We’ll consider some of the criticisms offered in response and (hopefully) learn some lessons we can apply later.

One of the great ironies about the philosophical literature on this topic is that, as much as it has to say about Pornography the Abstraction, it has very little to say about actual pornography. As a result, the literature tends to feature some very broad claims about the nature of pornography that have little basis in reality. On the rare occasions when specific claims are made about specific films or pictorials, they tend to be at best exaggerated and at worst pre-determined by an ideology that refuses to grant pornography any complexity at all. Outside philosophy, however, there has been a great deal of careful analysis of pornographic media. A major inflection point was Linda Williams’s groundbreaking study of pornography as film, *Hard Core*, which was first published in 1989. We’ll read that book and some later contributions from queer theory and sexuality studies, all by way of encouraging and practicing a more nuanced ‘reading’ of pornography.

All of this will help to motivate a somewhat different approach to the question what is objectionable about much ‘mainstream’ pornography. It’s a common refrain that sexually explicit media doesn’t have to be misogynistic. One way to address the question what exactly is wrong with much pornography would therefore be to ask what ‘better’ pornography might be like. In fact, however, such pornography actually exists—or, at least, there are people out there who are at least trying to create pornography that is ‘better’.

Such pornography dates to the early 1980s, when several women (most notably, Candida Royale) began creating pornography that, they hoped, would reflect something of women’s sexual experience and embody a more feminist perspective on sex and gender. Such pornography came to be known as *feminist pornography*. In the last few decades, the internet has solved the distribution problem that independent pornographers had previously faced, and there has been an explosion of such work recently. Philosophers have started to pay attention to it—though, as we’ll see, often with their ideological blinders still firmly in place. We’ll watch some of this work ourselves and then read some of the commentaries on it—both as a different way of exploring normative questions about pornography and also to practice reading pornography critically.

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1 Pornography can also be racist, homophobic, trans-misogynistic, ableist, and objectionable in any number of other ways. We may consider some of these issues, as well.

2 Queer pornography is born around the same time, with the founding of the lesbian erotic magazine *On Our Backs* in 1984 and the birth of an associated video production company, Fatale Video, in 1985. (Gay male porn is older, but, as we’ll see when we read Richard Dyer, it did not necessarily merit the label ‘queer’ until later.)

3 Royale remarks in many of her retrospectives that she found it difficult to find distributors who would handle her films—not because they found them objectionable, but because they thought they wouldn’t sell. Women, she was told, don’t watch pornography.
Course Structure

The main course meetings will be Mondays, 3-5:30pm, in Alumnae Hall 212. There will also be film screenings associated with the course, in the evenings, during the week (e.g., one might be on a Tuesday at 7pm). Very tentative dates and times for these are indicated below; we’ll discuss as a class what times work best for the most people. There will be three screenings, one of which will involve a visit from a prominent woman director (not Stormy Daniels). There will also be other films (or parts thereof) that students will be asked to watch on their own. And short clips of sexually explicit material may occasionally be shown in class, so that it can be discussed.

Students will have the option to view the publicly screened films privately or to ‘opt out’ of the public and private screenings altogether. However, such students will be required to do substitute work (of a similar scale), and they may find it difficult to follow some of the in-class discussions. More generally, such students will miss out on an important aspect of the course. Students who expect to be uncomfortable with this aspect of the course are encouraged to speak to the instructor before enrolling.

Prerequisites

This course is a graduate research seminar in philosophy, so the target audience is primarily graduate students in philosophy and advanced philosophy concentrators. Students from other disciplines who have significant prior experience with philosophy will also be welcome. Some students may have other relevant experience (e.g., in feminist theory or film studies) that can compensate for their lack of prior experience with philosophy. Such students should indicate their background on the relevant portion of the Override Request Form, which will be distributed in class on the first day.

Students wishing to enroll will also be asked, when submitting that form, to indicate, though their signature, that they understand (i) that the course involves the study of sexually explicit content, (ii) that participation in the course will require students to view and discuss such content, and (iii) that sexually explicit content may sometimes be displayed in class so that it can be discussed.

Some auditors will also be welcome, though how many will depend upon the number of students who enroll in the course. Auditors will be expected, however, also to sign the Override Request Form.

Readings

There is one required book for the course, Linda Williams’s *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*. It should be available at Brown Bookstore and is, of course, also available from other sources. List price is $31.95. We will also be reading a number of essays from *Beyond Speech: Pornography and Analytic Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Mari Mikkola. Students may wish also
to purchase a copy of it, and it should also be available at Brown Bookstore, but it is not required. List price is $36.95.

All other readings are accessible from the course website. For many of these, you will have digital access through the Brown library. For others, you will need a username and password that will be distributed in class.

Requirements and Grading Policies

So far as possible, the seminar will be run as a discussion. Notes and questions concerning the various readings will be posted to the course forum[^1] and all enrolled students will be expected to post thoughts about the readings to the forum by 10am the day of class. Students should plan to write at least a paragraph about each of the readings for that week. (There will usually be three to four readings.) The goal is not to summarize the readings, nor even necessarily to criticize them, but to raise some questions, exegetical or substantive, about what we have read for the week. I will use the comments on the forum both to determine what parts of the readings people understood and what parts need more clarification, and also to shape the discussion around the questions in which people showed most interest.

Students are also expected to engage with one another on the forum, i.e., to respond to each other’s comments. Doing so will count as a form of ‘course participation’ that may affect one’s grade.

There will similarly be notes and questions about the films students will be asked to watch on their own, and students will be expected to write about their reactions on the course forum, prior to our discussions of those films in class.

After the first couple sessions, teams of (probably two) students will present that week’s material to the group and lead the discussion. Each enrolled student will be required to do at least one presentation and then to write a short (3–5 page) paper based upon the presentation, due one week later.

The main written work for the course will be a term paper of about 12–16 pages. If enrollment allows, students will be given the option of doing a second presentation and then writing a shorter paper of about 8–10 pages. The topic is each student’s own choice, but it should be cleared with the instructor by no later than 6 May. The paper itself is due on 17 May (the day we would otherwise have the final exam).

The final grade will be based upon the following factors:

- Course participation (25%)
- Presentation (10%)
- Short paper (25%)
- Final paper (40%)

[^1] Course members will need a username and password in order to log onto the forum. This will keep our discussions private. The advantage of using the forum is that, unlike with Canvas, people who are not enrolled will also be able to participate. More information about this matter will be provided in class.
For students doing an additional presentation and the shorter final paper, those will count for 10% and 30% of the grade, respectively.

**Time Expectations**

You should expect to spend the following amounts of time on activities for this course.

- Course meetings (12): 3 hours each = 36 hours
- Reading for course meetings and forum responses (11): 8 hours each = 88 hours
- Reading *Hard Core* and writing responses: 12 hours
- Presentation preparation and related meetings (beyond the time usually spent reading, etc): 6 hours
- Public screenings (3): 3 hours each = 9 hours
- Private screenings and forum comments: 5 hours
- Short paper: 8 hours
- Long paper: 16 hours
  This includes time spent reading additional material, planning the paper, and actually writing it.

Your total time commitment should thus be approximately 180 hours.

**In Class Behavior**

Most people find it difficult to grasp that whatever they like to do sexually will be thoroughly repulsive to someone else, and that whatever repels them sexually will be the most treasured delight of someone, somewhere. One need not like or perform a particular sex act in order to recognize that someone else will, and that this difference does not indicate a lack of good taste, mental health, or intelligence in either party. (Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex”)

Much of the material we will be discussing is ‘academic’ and relatively ‘dry’ but some of it may be emotionally challenging, and any discussion about sexuality has the potential to feel threatening. It will therefore be essential that there be an atmosphere of trust and safety in the classroom. I will attempt to foster an environment in which each member of the course is able to speak freely, and to be heard respectfully, and I will demand that all members of the course show proper respect for one another’s views, attitudes, opinions, and feelings. Some of the material we discuss may evoke strong reactions. Please be patient and

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5 Some of what follows is adapted from syllabus language due to Lynn Hernandez that is cited by the Sheridan Center.
kind with one another, and do not jump to conclusions. Do not make sweeping
generalizations (anyone who finds that erotic must be sick) but use “I” language
(that makes me feel uncomfortable). Expect the best, not the worst, of others.
Still, as good as our intentions may be, there may be occasions when someone
says or does something that causes discomfort or offense, and that can adversely
affect other people’s educational experience. I will make it my responsibility to
address such issues forthrightly.

Any student who fails to meet these standards will be given one opportunity
to correct their behavior. Failure to do so will result in exclusion from the course.
Please remember, too, that Brown’s Title IX policy applies to all of us.

Should any issues of this sort arise, students will have four options open to
them:

1. Discuss the situation privately with me, and I will address the matter with
   others if need be. Such conversations will remain confidential.

2. Discuss the situation with the class. Other students may well have had
   a similar reaction, and discussing our reactions will allow everyone in
   the class to have a fuller understanding of the context and impact of the
   material we are studying.

3. Use the anonymous ‘course feedback’ form that will be made available
   after every course meeting.

4. If for any reason someone does not feel comfortable discussing the issue
directly with me, they are encouraged to speak to someone else, such as
an academic advisor, a trusted faculty member, or a friend, and have them
talk to me.

I should perhaps add that it is my firm hope and belief that, with proper attention
to our own emotional reactions, such problems can be avoided altogether.

**Electronic Devices**

Students may use laptops and the like to take notes in class or to access material
we are discussing in class, but *all other use of computers, tablets, and mobile
devices is prohibited during class*. This includes but is not limited to checking
email, texting, and surfing the web, even if said surfing is ostensibly related to
the course. (Actually, given what we’re studying, surfing related to the course
might be the worst thing to do!)

In a study entitled “Laptop multitasking hinders classroom learning for both
users and nearby peers” (PDF here), Faria Sana, Tina Weston, and Nichola
Cepeda showed exactly that. It is not just that students who “multi-task” during
class—check e-mail, text, or whatever—received significantly lower grades in
the study than students who did not. This is not surprising, since the human
brain simply cannot focus on very many things at one time. (If you’re skeptical
about this, then watch this video or perhaps some of these ones.) Rather, the
surprising conclusion was that students who were sitting near other students
who were multi-tasking also received significantly lower grades than students
were who not. In fact, they were almost as distracted as the students who were actually doing the multi-tasking!

There is thus evidence that multi-tasking does not only hurt the person doing it. It also harms the people around them. And that is the basis of my request that students not engage in such activities during class. If someone near you is doing so, you should feel free to ask them to stop.

Notice Regarding Academic Accommodations and Short-term Adjustments

Students seeking accommodations due to a disability or medical condition should contact the Office of Student and Employee Accessibility Services (SEAS). Students in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact one of the deans in the Dean of the College office. Students seeking psychological support services should contact Counseling and Psychological Services.
Course Schedule

28 January
Introductory Class

4 February

- Mitchell Green, *Stanford Encyclopedia* article on Speech Acts ([HTML](#)), sections 1–3
- Celia Kitzinger and Hannah Frith, “Just Say No? The Use of Conversation Analysis in Developing a Feminist Perspective on Sexual Refusal”, *Discourse & Society* 10 (1999), pp. 293–316

11 February


18 February

- **No Class: Presidents’ Day Holiday**

- Although we will not have class this week, you should use the time to begin reading Linda Williams’s book *Hard Core*. You have until 1 April to finish it, but it’d be a good idea to get started now. Much of the non-philosophical material we’ll read is deeply indebted to Williams.
25 February

Visit from Louise Antony


27 February, 7 pm (possibly)

First Screening: Introduction to Feminist and Queer Pornography

4 March


11 March


18 March
Visit from Anne Eaton


19 March, 7:30 pm (possibly)
Second screening: Film(s) TBA

25 March
• No Class: Spring Break

1 April


• Richard Kimberly Heck, “Does Pornography Presuppose Rape Myths?” (draft)


8 April


• Martin Barker, “The ‘Problem’ of Sexual Fantasies”, Porn Studies 1 (2014), pp. 143–60


15 April


• Nick J. Fox and Clare Bale, “Bodies, Pornography and the Circumscription of Sexuality: A New Materialist Study of Young People’s Sexual Practices”, forthcoming in Sexualities

17 April, 7 pm (possibly)

Third screening: Film(s) TBA

22 April


• Petra van Brabandt and Jesse Prinz, “Why Do Porn Films Suck?”, in Art and Pornography, pp. 161–90

29 April


- Hans Maes, “Falling In Lust: Sexiness, Feminism, and Pornography”, in Beyond Speech, pp. 199–220

- Petra van Brabandt, “In/Egalitarian Pornography: A Simplistic View of Pornography”, in Beyond Speech, pp. 221–42

- The Great Blowjob Debate (PDF)

- Willa Maxine Tracy, “Backwards and In High Heels”, A Priori 3 (2018), pp. 25–52

6 May

- TBA (or maybe no class this day)