



Hard-core reality of porn

PORNOGRAPHY/SOCIETY

THE EROTIC ENGINE: How Pornography has Powered Mass Communication from Gutenberg to Google. By Patchen Barss. UQP. 320pp. \$34.95.

PORNLAND: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality. By Gail Dines. Spinifex. 204pp. \$34.95.

Reviewer: JUDITH IRELAND

Unless you have girly magazines stashed under your bed or a predilection for those "boutique" movies from Fyshwick, you probably think your existence has nothing to do with pornography. Two recent books encourage us to think again. Between them, *The Erotic Engine* and *Pornland* argue that porn has a powerful influence on our lives, even if we don't know it.

In *The Erotic Engine*, Toronto journalist Patchen Barss contends that, "For forty millennia, pornography and sexual depiction have been a powerful source of creativity and innovation that has spurred the development of many new media." That is, sex not only sells, it provides an incentive to innovate and buys time for everyone else to catch on. In the second half of the 19th century, it cost more to buy an erotic photograph than it did to visit a prostitute. But the photos still sold (thanks to their more permanent attractions) and helped keep a fledging technology alive.

Look around your lounge room or office and you'll see the undeniable imprint of pornography. Your DVDs are the direct descendants of the video cassette, which may not have survived without porn users, overjoyed at the opportunity to watch porn in the privacy of their own homes. Your multi-media smart phone developed better and faster thanks to pressure from those who wanted to be able to access dirty content anywhere at any time. And your iTunes music collection has its origins in porn file-sharing during the early days of the internet.

Indeed, of all the communication forms, it is the internet that should really be thanking pornography. The development of the online world is intimately connected to the porn machine, which leapt at the chance to get involved with a medium that ensured both privacy and connectivity. For example, the prehistoric internet of the late '80s and early '90s (where, among other things, a lot of cybersex went on) created an incentive for people to work out fiddly modems and a demand for easier connections. People's willingness to pay for erotic content online not only told the mainstream there was money to be made with this internet thing, but encouraged others to develop secure and confidential payment systems to deal with it.

While Barss is not the first person to make the connection between porn and technology (among others, fellow Canadian Peter Nowak makes a similar

case in the recent *Sex, Bombs and Burgers*), the book is bolstered by interviews with players and experts of all persuasions. This includes academics at the forefront of the debate on whether cave paintings of erect penises are Palaeolithic porn, pioneering porn stars, super-rich porn barons, inventors of "teledildonics" and sexually voracious virtual-reality entrepreneurs.

At the outset of *The Erotic Engine*, Barss contends that there was "never a time when sexuality was not a driving force in communication". However, this becomes an over-ambitious claim. While he does examine things like cave paintings and Chinese sex relics, the connections here are less clear and not as plentiful as for the more recent material (and seem out of place when even the subtitle kicks in at Gutenberg). He himself also admits that porn doesn't always play a starring role in more modern innovations, given it had very little to do with the introduction of the printing press or film.

Nevertheless, Barss clearly portrays the dynamism of the porn industry and the hypocrisy of the mainstream – more than happy to capitalise on developments while decrying the evils of their origins. Indeed, while Barss is no apologist for porn, you almost find yourself cheering along those plucky pornographers who have done so much for our ability to communicate.

Gail Dines, however, won't be barracking for the porn industry any time soon. In *Pornland*, the Boston professor of sociology and women's studies argues that pornography has hijacked our sexuality, "we are in the middle of a massive social experiment". You may never access porn, but it's practically impossible to escape its reach. From pornstar Jenna Jameson's best-selling autobiography, to the Britney Spears clips made by a porn director and magazine articles about Brazilian waxing, porn culture has "seeped" into our lives.

It's big business too. In 2006, global revenues for the porn industry were an estimated \$96 billion, while it enjoys close financial ties with mainstream distributors such as Time Warner Cable and Comcast (the largest cable TV provider in the United States). It is also a major, though undisclosed, source of revenue for hotel chains such as Hilton, Hyatt and Sheraton.

Less immediately visible – though even more disquieting – is porn's impact on our conceptions of male-female relations, body image and sexuality. Dines argues that pornography has changed markedly with the advent of the internet. Fifteen years ago, mainstream porn was largely soft-core – often consumed via stolen magazines from dads or older



brothers. Today, a large proportion of the porn that heterosexual males use is "gonzo". *Pornland* describes this as, "hard-core, body-punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased" and routinely involves acts like multiple penetrations, gagging, crying and vomiting. Dines has been studying porn for over two decades, but even she is shocked by how quickly gonzo has come to dominate the internet.

There are multiple victims here. Apart from the female performers in these films (some of whom report physical injuries and symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder) there are the women whose sexual partners expect rough intercourse from hairless fembots who will do whatever the man wants. There is also a growing cohort of young men, who Dines encounters in her work, concerned about what is turning them on. Worryingly, the average age for first viewing porn today is 11 years old, "unlike before, porn is actually being encoded into a boy's sexual identity so that an authentic sexuality . . . is replaced by a generic porn sexuality".

In an even more sinister sense, *Pornland* reports that as viewers become more accustomed to graphic material, they seek to push the boundaries even further, which leads some to child pornography, or material that is extremely similar. To top things off, the industry is breathtakingly racist, from the way it portrays people of various ethnic groups, to the amount it

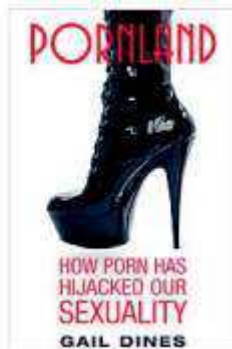
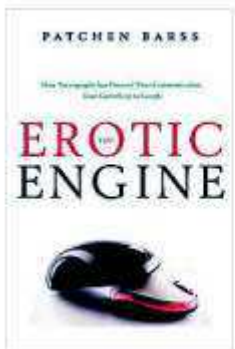
pays (or doesn't pay) ethnic performers.

There's no doubting that *Pornland* is a seriously confronting book. You reach the end feeling punch drunk. Yet while the descriptions are graphic, they are not gratuitous. Dines made a conscious decision to use the language of the industry when describing things like gonzo to tell readers exactly what's going on.

Somewhat frustratingly, after all this, she does not spend much time concluding her case and looking ahead. While at pains to point out there is no "magic bullet", she puts her money on resistance at the individual level and education campaigns, via parents, schools and universities. But more oomph is required. Some readers may also balk at the book's implied general anti-porn stance. While not immediately apparent, Dines makes no room for porn which does not degrade those who perform or watch it.

The modern porn industry emerges from *The Erotic Engine* and *Pornland* as a crazy, contradictory beast, at once mass and niche, erotic and exploitative, daringly creative and frighteningly destructive. The overriding message from both is that even if we can't immediately see it, pornography isn't some weird little subculture; it's a big chunk of the culture, full stop.

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