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# How Not to Watch Feminist Pornography

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## How Not to Watch Feminist Pornography

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### Abstract

This paper has three goals. The first is to defend Tristan Taormino and Erika Lust (or some of their films) from criticisms that Rebecca Whisnant and Hans Maes make of them. Toward that end, I will be arguing against the narrow conceptions that Whisnant and Maes seem to have of what “feminist” pornography must be like. More generally, I hope to show by example why it is important to take pornographic films seriously *as films* if we're to understand their potential to shape, or misshape, socio-sexual norms.

**Keywords:** pornography, feminist pornography, feminism, subordination, sexuality

One might reasonably have expected the philosophical literature on pornography to contain significant discussion of actual pornography. But while pornography the abstraction is discussed a great deal, specific films, stories, or pictorials are rarely mentioned, let alone subjected to extensive analysis. In a way, that is unsurprising, since so many of the contributors to this literature seem to regard pornography as unworthy of serious attention. But it was three decades ago that Linda Williams (1989) convincingly demonstrated that that is just a prejudice. Fifteen years later, Williams would edit a collection of essays, *Porn Studies* (Williams 2004), that marked the coming of age of that small but thriving field, and there is now quite a lot of serious academic work on actual pornography. But philosophers, by and large, continue to write as if there could be no point in discussing the details of any particular pornographic film.

Rebecca Whisnant and Hans Maes are recent exceptions:<sup>1</sup> philosophers who do at least discuss specific pornographic films in some detail. Both are concerned with putative examples of “feminist” pornography, and both argue that the films they consider do not really deserve that label. But neither of them asks the sorts of questions, about the films they discuss, that one might ask about any other sort of film, either concerning its narrative structure or its cinematic features. As a result,

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<sup>1</sup> There are others. The most notable is Edward D. Miller (2013), who discusses early gay male porn in depth.

their analyses are predetermined by their ideological preconceptions, or so I will be arguing. But my point is not just negative. My goal, rather, is to show, with specific reference to these two cases, what might be gained, both aesthetically and philosophically, if we were to analyze pornographic films more thoroughly.

### **1. Whisnant on Tristan Taormino**

I'll begin with Whisnant's paper "'But What About Feminist Porn?'" This is a question, Whisnant (2016a, 1) says, that she is often asked when she lectures about pornography. To her credit, Whisnant did not just dismiss the question but set out to address it, and not just by relying upon reports from others. She watched putative examples of feminist pornography herself, to see how it might differ from mainstream pornography. The films in question, *Chemistry* (Vivid Entertainment, 2006) and *Rough Sex 3* (Vivid, 2011), were both directed by Tristan Taormino.

It is easy to understand why Whisnant chose Taormino's films for analysis. As Whisnant (2016a, 1–2) notes, Taormino has long been an advocate of feminist pornography and is something of a feminist porn icon. Her film *House of Ass* (Adam and Eve, 2006) won a Feminist Porn Award in 2006, the first year those awards were given, and Taormino has won several FPAs since (seven, by my count). Taormino herself describes the FPAs as having "put the concept of feminist porn on the map" (Taormino, n.d.). By extension, the recognition that Taormino's films have received at the FPAs advertises them as among the best that feminist pornography has to offer. Taormino was also one of the editors of *The Feminist Porn Book* (Taormino et al. 2013), which helped to put feminist pornography on the academic map.

That said, if I were asked to recommend some feminist pornography to someone who was generally uncomfortable with pornography (as Whisnant seems to be), I certainly would not suggest Taormino's films. As Whisnant (2016a, 2–4) again notes, Taormino's primary focus as a filmmaker is on the ethics of *production*: Taormino aims to provide the people who perform in her films with good working conditions, to pay them fairly (Taormino 2013, 260–261), and to ensure that they fully and freely consent to what they are doing (Taormino, n.d.). Many (perhaps even most) other feminist pornographers have focused more on what sorts of sexual acts are performed in their films: on their sexual content. Thus, in the films of Candida Royalle (the first widely distributed feminist pornographer), the photography is much less explicit than in mainstream pornography of the same era, and the sex tends to be more gentle. Royalle consciously avoided external ejaculation and, especially, "facials"—men ejaculating on women's faces—though such scenes do sometimes occur in her films when their doing so makes narrative sense (see Royalle 2013).

One example is the third scene in *Eyes of Desire* (Femme Productions, 1998). Much of this film explores the pleasures (and dangers) of watching people have sex.

In the scene mentioned, Lisa uses a telescope to watch some neighbors.<sup>2</sup> In the end, the male partner withdraws and ejaculates on his partner's vulva. The emphasis here is very much on ejaculation as a visual spectacle, and on the way in which external ejaculation is a performance. The scene, that is to say, is "reflexive" (Beggan and Allison 2003): It invites consideration of the way that watching a pornographic film positions one as a voyeur, and it specifically raises questions about the place of the "cumshot" in contemporary pornography. But it is precisely because external ejaculation is the exception in Royalle's films that the scene invites such reflection.

Taormino, by contrast, is not much concerned with the kinds of sexual acts performed in her films. As Whisnant (2016a, 3) once again notes, Taormino's central goal, as far as sexual content is concerned, is to capture "authentic" expressions of human sexuality:<sup>3</sup>

I like to collaborate with performers on how their sexuality is represented, rather than giving them a script or a formula to follow. In order for the scenes to be performer-driven, women and men are given choices: they choose who they have sex with, the positions they get in, the sex toys, barriers, and lube they use—all based on what feels good to them, all based on their actual sexuality, not a fabricated script. (Taormino, n.d.; see also Taormino 2013, 258–259)

The idea is that the performers should have sex of a kind that is enjoyable to them, not what the director or the marketing people want them to do.<sup>4</sup> But, for fairly obvious reasons, many of the people who perform in pornography have fairly out-there sexual tastes. That is one reason that the sexual content of Taormino's films is often not very different from what one finds in mainstream pornography.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It seems likely, in the context of the film, that this couple expect to be watched. Lisa is staying at the house of a friend while trying to decide what to do about her boyfriend. The friend indicates to her that the telescope has some interesting uses. Lisa will later discover that she is not the only one with a telescope.

<sup>3</sup> Authenticity is important to many feminist pornographers, although Madison Young (2014) and Vex Ashley (2016) are both on record as questioning its significance. See note 36 for a bit more on this matter.

<sup>4</sup> As Whisnant (2016a, 3) remarks, in most mainstream pornography, the sex is largely preprogrammed: The performers are told, for example, to have sex in each of a number of positions, and to do so long enough for there to be enough usable footage of each position.

<sup>5</sup> Whisnant (2016a, 3) is surely right, as well, that it is a bit naïve to assume, as Taormino seems to suggest, that simply telling the performers to do as they wish

That is one of Whisnant's central criticisms:

Taormino's films . . . include many of the same acts common in (other) mainstream pornography, such as gagging, choking, slapping, and misogynist name-calling. When it comes to content, the similarities between her films and the rest of mainstream pornography are readily apparent. (Whisnant 2016a, 5)

Whisnant takes the occurrence of the mentioned acts to be incompatible with Taormino's claim to be making something that is significantly different from mainstream pornography.<sup>6</sup> In particular, Whisnant questions the contrast that Taormino (2013, 257) draws between scenes that involve rough sex—something that is, unsurprisingly, characteristic of the three films in the *Rough Sex* series—and scenes that are “downright hostile.” If someone gags a woman, chokes her, or calls her a bitch, then that just is misogynistic, or so Whisnant (2016a, 5) claims:

If celebratory eroticized depictions of female pain, abject submission, and even violence against women need not disqualify something as feminist pornography, what exactly is left [that would]?

It's a fair question, but one that has an answer.

To discover that answer, we need to look more closely at Taormino's films. I would agree that Taormino's films do not, generally speaking, challenge socio-sexual norms in the same way that the self-consciously queer pornography of, say, Shine Louise Houston or Vex Ashley does. That is one of the limitations of Taormino's films, and it is especially acute in the *Chemistry* series, where both the sex and the photography tend to be a bit too pornish for my tastes. But Whisnant is wrong to dismiss Taormino's films simply on the basis of the sorts of sexual acts they contain, or so I will now argue.

I'll focus here on the second scene from *Rough Sex 3*, titled “Cash.” (This is also the scene to which Whisnant gives the most attention.) Adrianna Nicole, who appears in all five scenes, plays a prostitute, and Ramon Nomar plays her client. The scene begins, as all the scenes in the *Rough Sex* films do, with interviews with the

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(rather than what they think they're expected to do) will result in “authentic” performances.

<sup>6</sup> Whisnant (2016a, 5) does recognize that “Taormino's films include marginally less robotic fucking and more emphasis on activities such as cunnilingus and vibrator use.” I would argue that she underestimates the significance of such differences (see Crutcher 2015) but will not pursue the matter here.

performers. Whisnant (2016a, 6) takes Nicole and Nomar to be discussing, in their interviews, “their perspective on the nature and/or appeal of prostitution.” That is a misunderstanding. What Nicole and Nomar are talking about, rather, is the *fantasy* that they are about to enact. Nicole describes the general outline of the fantasy, which she created and chose to enact with Nomar, and both of them talk about what appeals to them about this particular fantasy. Nicole mentions the uncertainty and danger that would be involved in meeting a new client, and Nomar mentions how this fantasy enables him to express dominance, something he enjoys doing, but only when his partner also enjoys his doing so.<sup>7</sup>

Summarizing the interviews, and related aspects of the scene itself, Whisnant remarks:

The scene conveys at least the following messages: that men demand sexual acts, and forms of sexual submission, from women in prostitution that they cannot get other women to perform to their satisfaction; and that the resulting sexual encounter is sexually exciting not only for the male buyer but for the prostituted woman herself. (Whisnant 2016a, 7)

Whisnant seems to be assuming that the way prostitution is presented in the film is supposed to reflect the reality of prostitution. But why? Nicole and Nomar are, as I have said, enacting a *sexual fantasy*. It is not obviously relevant whether the details are realistic, and there is nothing in the film to suggest that they are intended to be realistic.

This point is close in spirit to one made by Shen-yi Liao and Sara Protasi (see also Heck 2020, §4.3). They distinguish what they call “response-realistic” fiction from other fiction and argue that fetish and BDSM pornography is rarely response-realistic: We are not expected “to respond to [these] fictional characters and scenarios in the same way that [we would] respond to analogous persons and situations in reality” (Liao and Protasi 2013, 101). Nor are we expected to “export” our reactions to the

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<sup>7</sup> Nomar says, toward the end of the interview:

For me, basically, it is about what the woman’s feel is. So if a woman’s like, enjoys to be getting slapped, getting her rough sex, I enjoy it. If she doesn’t like it, I don’t do it. I have this, how you can say, “problem,” because for me it is always more about the pleasure of my partner than about my own. Her pleasure will give me my own.

(English is not Nomar’s first language.)

fictional scenario to analogous real-world situations (Liao and Protasi 2013, 110).<sup>8</sup> Similarly here, neither Nicole (the performer) nor Taormino (the director) wants us to respond to this enacted fantasy, emotionally or cognitively, in the way that we would respond if we were to encounter (or read about) an actual person who was actually abusing an actual prostitute. Nor are they suggesting that we should find actual abuse arousing.

Indeed, it is one of the central points of Nancy Friday's groundbreaking work on sexual fantasies that sexual fantasies are not, in general, response-realistic (Friday 1973, esp. ch. 1). Rape fantasies are the overused example, so let's try another. Suppose that Terri fantasizes about being a prostitute.<sup>9</sup> To ask Terri whether her fantasy-self worries about being arrested, abused, or killed would be fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of such a fantasy. Of course, danger might be part of the thrill. But if it isn't, then that needn't be because Terri fantasizes that prostitution is safe, nor because her fantasy-self is blind to obvious facts, nor because Terri herself is blind to obvious facts. And even if danger is part of the thrill, it need be so only to the extent that Terri herself decides that it is. When it stops being thrilling, she can cut it off, at whatever point she wants, and however arbitrary that cut-off point might seem to others. Sexual fantasies simply do not obey the same sort of logic that "realistic fictions" do (see Butler 1990): We are free to incorporate into our sexual fantasies some elements of their real-world analogues while blithely ignoring others, and if there is any justification for the distinction, it is only that certain things appeal to the author of the fantasy and others do not. The fantasy that Nicole and Nomar enact in "Cash" is no exception. It contains no "messages" about real-world prostitution. As Friday (1973, 117) puts it (discussing rape fantasies, specifically), "The message isn't in the plot—the old hackneyed rape story—but in the emotions that story releases."

As noted above, however, Whisnant's main worry about "Cash" concerns its sexual content—in particular, "the slapping, bossing, pushing, arm twisting, head yanking, gagging, and more" that occur in it (Whisnant 2016a, 7). And indeed, after a relatively playful first few minutes, the sex quickly becomes very rough. Whisnant is not unaware of the lengths to which Taormino goes to assure her viewers that

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<sup>8</sup> Liao and Protasi (2013, 111) go on to claim that mainstream pornography generally is response-realistic, but they offer no evidence for that claim.

<sup>9</sup> None of Friday's subjects in the original study reported such fantasies, much to her surprise (Friday 1973, ch. 3, "Room Number Sixteen"). But there were some in later studies (Friday 1991, 156).

everything is enthusiastically consensual<sup>10</sup> and, indeed, that Nicole enjoys and wants this kind of sex. The fantasy portrayed is hers, after all, and we learn in the first set of interviews that she enjoys being dominated. But Whisnant rejects the claim that consent can either license or excuse the slapping, gagging, and so forth:

A tenet basic to the ideology of pro-porn feminism [is] that it is fine to portray dominance, submission, pain, and hierarchy as sexually exciting, so long as women are shown consenting to them and even enjoying them.<sup>11</sup> . . . Depicting women in submissive and subordinated sexual roles is . . . liberatory and feminist—provided, of course, that it is all consensual and authentic. (Whisnant 2016a, 5)

Disagreement about the significance of consent is a recurring theme in feminist discussions of pornography and of sexuality more generally. What I want to do in the remainder of this section, then, is to explore why Whisnant regards consent as having such little moral significance. I am going to suggest that she misunderstands both what Nicole is consenting to in “Cash” and what her consent licenses. It will turn out to be crucial, once again, that what we are watching is the enactment of a sexual fantasy.

Whisnant writes as if Nicole has consented in “Cash” to the very same treatment that other women endure as abuse. She notes, for example, how often Nicole is choked in this scene and cites two studies that emphasize the ways in which “strangulation” is used as “a key method of misogynist torture and terror” (Whisnant 2016a, 7). Whisnant is clearly disturbed that Nicole is subjected to such treatment and supposes that her opponents would dismiss this concern on the ground that Nicole has consented: “It is terrible that some women get strangled when they don’t want to be strangled,” she has her opponent say, “but [Nicole] does want to be strangled because she finds it sexually exciting. . . . So what is the problem?” These remarks would make no sense unless Whisnant were supposing that what Nicole wants—to be strangled—is precisely what other women quite reasonably do not want. In the same vein, Whisnant (2016a, 7) speculates, on the basis of the retrospective interview done with Nicole two days later, that, after filming this “violent scene,” she

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<sup>10</sup> I have my doubts about whether enthusiastic consent is either necessary or sufficient for ethical sex, but I’ll set such concerns aside here and speak in this relatively familiar language.

<sup>11</sup> There is less agreement among “pro-porn feminists” than Whisnant claims. See, for example, the discussion of Petra Joy below. Still, it certainly is true that consent is sometimes treated as a magic bullet, and it should not be.



experienced the same sort of “traumatic dissociation” that a victim of sexual violence might.<sup>12</sup>

Whisnant appears to believe, that is to say, that, when Nicole consented to Nomar’s choking her, she was consenting to *harm*, specifically, to a sort of harm comparable to that *unwillingly* suffered by victims of sexual violence.<sup>13</sup> Whisnant seems to believe, to put it differently, that we should think of Nicole as having agreed to be *mistreated*. But any such agreement should be void: It can neither justify nor excuse the mistreatment itself. Now, to be sure, in some pornography, women really do “consent” to what really is mistreatment, and I would agree that consent cannot morally excuse such mistreatment. But “Cash” is not that sort of case.

Whisnant (2016a, 11n6) insists upon calling what Nomar does to Nicole “strangling” rather than “choking.” To be sure, words matter. But the Merriam-Webster dictionary tells us that to strangle is:

a: to choke to death by compressing the throat with something (such as a hand or rope) . . .

b: to obstruct seriously or fatally the normal breathing of.<sup>14</sup>

Not even (b) properly characterizes what we witness in “Cash.” As Whisnant (2016a, 7) herself notes, a “how-to” segment included as an extra on the DVD explains that, to “choke” one’s partner safely during sex, one has to be especially careful not to apply any pressure to the area around the trachea.<sup>15</sup> Rather, one should apply pressure (and not much is required) to the fleshy region under the jaw. If one watches carefully, one can easily see that Nomar uses precisely the technique described. And, when Nomar chokes Nicole, he rarely seems to restrict her breathing: Even while his

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<sup>12</sup> It is not uncommon for people who engage in BDSM to need some time to “come down” from an intense scene. That is part of why “aftercare” is so important in BDSM (see, e.g., Easton and Hardy 2003a, ch. 9; Taormino 2012, 29–31). I suspect therefore that Nicole was indeed expressing how deeply the scene had affected her, so that she did need such time, but not that the scene had in any way harmed her.

<sup>13</sup> Whisnant (2016b, 1) argues elsewhere that “humiliation in contemporary pornography . . . constitutes a severe form of harm to many female pornography performers” and that “the apparently consensual nature of much humiliating pornography exacerbates its harm to the humiliated performers.”

<sup>14</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “strangle (v. t.),” accessed November 23, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strangle>. Kate Manne (2018, 1–3) uses the term “strangulation” in this same sense in her discussion of “non-fatal strangulation.”

<sup>15</sup> Doing so can cause bruising that may lead to dangerous swelling, even days later (Manne 2018, 1–3).

hand is around her neck, she is usually able to breathe comfortably and to talk normally.

Even when Nomar does restrict Nicole's breathing, he does not do so with anything like the intentions that perpetrators of domestic violence have, and that fact is mutually understood between him and Nicole.<sup>16</sup> He is choking her as part of a roleplay—an enactment of a sexual fantasy—that we have been invited to observe. In the fantasy world the two of them are jointly creating, Nomar is firmly in charge, and Nicole is being verbally and physically subjugated, humiliated, and abused. But, as anyone familiar with the conventions of BDSM will appreciate,<sup>17</sup> Nicole, as the submissive partner, is the one who is ultimately in control, and to describe her as having “consented to harm” would badly misrepresent the situation.

BDSM is often described as a “consensual power exchange.” What this means is that, within the context of a BDSM “scene,” the submissive partner cedes a certain amount of control to their dominant partner. It is specifically negotiated in advance just what control they cede (i.e., what may and may not be done to them, without further discussion). Moreover, it is a crucial aspect of “safe, sane, and consensual” BDSM that, should the submissive partner at any point become uncomfortable with what is happening, they can bring the proceedings to an immediate halt by using a “safeword.” It is the submissive partner's absolute right to withdraw their consent, at any time, for any reason, or for no reason. Which is to say, once again, that the submissive partner is ultimately the one who is in charge.<sup>18</sup> One can see such interactions within “Cash” itself. For example, there is a moment (at about 47:50 on the DVD) when Nicole decides that she doesn't want Nomar to choke her anymore and moves his hand from her neck to her breast, which she is easily able to do. This may well have involved a prearranged signal: such a touch by the submissive partner is often used as a substitute for a safeword (since choking, gagging, etc., can make it

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<sup>16</sup> Any decent guide to BDSM will make the sorts of points outlined in the next couple paragraphs. See, for example, Califia (2001), Easton and Hardy (2003a, 2003b), or Taormino (2012). Note especially the editor of the last book referenced.

<sup>17</sup> Whisnant (2016a, 5) complains at one point that Taormino “does not explain the differences between porn being ‘hostile’ . . . and its ‘exploring dominance and submission, being rough, or pushing the envelope.’” The reason, I suggest, is that Taormino was supposing that her audience would not need such an explanation: that they would have some familiarity with (and appreciation of) BDSM.

<sup>18</sup> Or, at least, equally in charge. All partners have the right to suspend the scene, if they should become uncomfortable with it, though it is the submissive partner with whom we are concerned here. (There is a form of BDSM known as “consensual nonconsent” that is an exception, but it is controversial even within the BDSM community [Califia 2001, 198–200].)

difficult to speak). Nomar does not insist upon continuing to choke Nicole, as an actual abuser surely would, and it would have been a violation of consent for him to do so. That strongly suggests that Nicole was sufficiently “in charge” at that time to decide whether Nomar would choke her: She subtly said, “No more right now,” and he understood her signal and stopped.

It would be a mistake, then, to suppose that what we are witnessing in “Cash” is Nomar’s *actually* humiliating and abusing Nicole, where such behavior is supposed to be excused because she gets off on it. Nicole does not want actually to be humiliated or abused, and she is not actually humiliated or abused. Rather, Nicole finds the *fantasy* of being treated in such ways exciting, and “Cash” documents her exploration of that fantasy with Nomar.<sup>19</sup> That is not to say that Nicole does not experience fear or humiliation. She probably does, but in many ways that is precisely the point. One reason people engage in BDSM is to have a safe space in which to explore the erotic potential of acts and emotions that, outside that space, would be dangerous or harmful. Nor does Nicole’s consent make her a “willing victim” (see Bond and Mosher 1986). On the contrary, throughout the scene, Nicole is actively shaping the sexual interaction in which she is involved. Such active involvement on the part of all concerned is a crucial part of what makes for ethical sex, or so I would argue, though that is a topic for another time (but see Millar 2008; Cahill 2014).

There is, of course, a long history of feminist opposition to BDSM, dating at least to the publication of the collection *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (Linden et al. 1982).<sup>20</sup> Echoing some of the themes from that book, Whisnant (2016a, 7) writes that her “concern is with the ethics of representing a key method of misogynist torture and terror as a sex game.” But for many people, choking *is* a “sex game,” that is, an enjoyable part of sex.<sup>21</sup> Why should it be wrong to represent it as

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<sup>19</sup> It is true that Nomar’s *character* humiliates and abuses Nicole’s *character*. But what I have been arguing is that understanding what is happening *outside* the fantasy, between Nicole and Nomar themselves, is crucial to a proper appreciation of this film, which thus has a documentary aspect. This dual aspect of BDSM is part of what makes it difficult to understand (Hopkins 1994; Vadas 1995; Stear 2009), but it is also part of what makes it powerful for its practitioners (Weille 2002; Weiss 2011).

<sup>20</sup> For a review of this literature, see Wright (2006, 219–224). It’s arguable, too, that much of the concern expressed by early antipornography feminists about “violent” pornography was actually concern about BDSM pornography. Joshua Cohen (1996, 286) makes a version of this point, which is also central to many of Gayle Rubin’s (1984, 1993) discussions of antipornography feminism.

<sup>21</sup> A nationwide study of American sexual behavior done in 2015 found that 14% of men and 13% of women ranked “having rough sex” as “very appealing,” and 28.1% of

such? I agree that pornography that presents choking, slapping, and the like as *normative*—that is, as not requiring any “special” consent or negotiation, but simply as part of what heterosex typically involves—is potentially harmful (see Blue 2005). I have heard too many stories about undergraduate women whose male partners have choked or slapped them without seeking their consent, and I am pretty sure that mainstream pornography is partly to blame (relatedly, see Heck 2020, §6). But it is in *precisely* this respect that Taormino’s films are importantly different. The interviews that accompany the scenes are supposed to make it clear that what is happening is enthusiastically consensual and that everyone’s desires and limits are being respected. I take it that this is one of the reasons that Taormino includes these interviews in the films.

Perhaps, then, it is sexual choking itself to which Whisnant objects. Melinda Vadas (1995) has argued that sexual choking is wrong not just because it mimics strangulation but because its being arousing *depends upon* its doing so. In response, Nils-Hennes Stear (2009) argues that it is far from clear why that dependence should make sexual choking wrong, even if it is granted. But we need not resolve this issue here. If such concerns are the source of Whisnant’s objections to “Cash,” then those objections have little to do with pornography but emerge from independent views about what kinds of sexual acts are ethical and what kinds are not, even when they are enthusiastically consensual and carefully negotiated, as in the context of BDSM. Those are controversial views, even among feminists, and Taormino clearly rejects them, as do I.

We’ll return to this matter below.

## 2. Maes on Erika Lust

I turn now to Hans Maes’s paper “Falling in Lust.” Its main focus is on contemporary conceptions of what is sexy, how those conceptions can be oppressive (e.g., by desexualizing disabled bodies), and what role “egalitarian” pornography might play in reshaping those conceptions.<sup>22</sup> In that connection, Maes argues that “female-friendly” pornography—that is, porn that is reasonably sensitive to women’s sexual fantasies and proclivities—is not necessarily egalitarian. I do not doubt that claim. What I doubt is the counterexample that Maes offers: Erika Lust’s first pornographic film, *The Good Girl*, which was produced in 2004 and released onto the

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men and 27% of women ranked it as “somewhat appealing” (Herbenick et al. 2017, 15). The study did not ask specifically about choking.

<sup>22</sup> The distinction between “egalitarian” and “inegalitarian” pornography was introduced, using those words, by A. W. Eaton (2007), who suggests that egalitarian pornography could have positive effects, just as inegalitarian pornography has negative ones (see also Eaton 2016).

internet under a Creative Commons license.<sup>23</sup> Lust has since become one of the most celebrated feminist pornographers in the world, having won four (by my count) Feminist Porn Awards, including two for Movie of the Year (in 2011 and 2012). Maes (2017, 213) argues, however, that *The Good Girl*, though it “may be female-friendly pornography . . . is not egalitarian pornography,” because it reinforces problematic socio-sexual norms. Specifically, Maes claims, the film eroticizes female vulnerability, and he also objects to the fact that it includes a “facial.”

### 2.1 Eroticizing Female Vulnerability?

The first of these criticisms concerns the climactic moment of the non-sex part of the film, which contextualizes and leads into its sexually explicit portion. Maes writes:

When Alex drops her towel in an attempt to seduce the pizza delivery guy she appears shy, clumsy, and insecure. It is a very erotically charged moment, but that is precisely the problem: much like mainstream pornography, the film eroticizes the gender stereotype of a vulnerable woman versus a confident man. (Maes 2017, 213)

We need to fill in some background. The film begins with Alex (played by Claudia Claire) talking to her friend Julie (actress unnamed), a true believer in sexual liberation who is eager to tell Alex of her recent adventures with her yoga teacher. Alex has heard many such stories from Julie, and she seems somewhat bored with this one. But Alex envies Julie’s free spirit and has often fantasized about doing something similar herself: seducing the man delivering her pizza, perhaps. She never has, but this night is destined to be different. When dinner arrives, Alex is just getting out of the shower, and she answers the door wrapped in a towel, seemingly surprised. “Oh, my pizza,” she says. She invites Paulo (played by Lucas Foz) to step into her apartment while she looks for money to pay him. “He is not a normal pizza guy,” Alex tells us. “He is gorgeous.” Eventually, Alex works up the courage to drop her towel. That moment is, obviously, erotically charged, and Alex is, indeed, very anxious.

But it simply does not follow that “the film eroticizes the gender stereotype of a vulnerable woman versus a confident man” (Maes 2017, 213). For one thing, Paulo is not so confident. Ever since Alex invited him into her apartment, he has been

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<sup>23</sup> A re-edited, and longer, version of the film was included as part of Lust’s collection *Five Hot Stories for Her* (Lust Productions, 2007) under the title “Ser o No Ser una Buena Chica” (To Be or Not to Be a Good Girl). Maes does not say which version of the film he watched, but the differences between the two versions will not matter here, since the relevant sequences are unchanged.

puzzled by her behavior: the fact that she is wearing nothing but a towel; its briefly falling off to expose her breasts; the way she has been smiling at him; the unusually long time it has taken her to find some money. But he never does anything to move things forward. Ordinarily, of course, he would be expected to make the first move. But the situation—he’s delivering a pizza, not chatting to a woman at a bar—makes it inappropriate for him to do so. So he just leaves.

Alex closes the door behind him, leans back against it, and slowly sinks to the floor, shaking her head as she chides herself for failing, yet again, to do what she so desperately wants to do. But then the doorbell rings, and she bolts upright, quickly composes herself, and opens the door with a flourish. As Paulo leans into her apartment, she embraces him, thinking that he has returned for her. Moments later we hear him say, softly and sheepishly, “Sorry, I forgot my helmet.”

Alex backs away, her eyes falling as she offers an almost involuntary “Hmm.” It would have been completely understandable if she had turned away in embarrassment and allowed Paulo to leave once again. Or if she had simply decided that her attempt to interest him had failed. Somehow, though, she realizes that, if she wants this to happen, then she will have to be the one to make it happen, and without any assistance from Paulo. And so, as he picks up his helmet and turns to leave—slowly, looking down at the floor, seemingly disappointed and, perhaps, frustrated with his own impotence—Alex says, almost inaudibly, “Wait a moment, please.” He turns around and looks at her.

Up to this point, the story has been told almost entirely from Alex’s point of view. She has narrated it, and her experience has been the focus. But now the camera adopts Paulo’s point of view, and we see what he sees. And what is on display is not how sexy Alex is, nor even how desirous she is, but simply how *human* she is. She takes a moment to build up her courage. Only then does she slowly unwrap her towel, so hesitantly that it feels as if she might still change her mind. The camera shifts perspective briefly to show us, from right along the floor, the towel dropping to her feet, but then we are returned to Paulo’s position. Alex pulls her shoulders together, as if to cover her breasts, and draws her right hand to her face. It would be difficult to overstate how powerfully this simple act expresses what Alex is feeling in that moment: She has now exposed herself—not just physically but emotionally—and she can only wait, helplessly, for Paulo’s response.<sup>24</sup>

It’s important to remember that, though we may know what will happen, since we are watching pornography, Alex does not know. We know, because Alex tells us, how attractive she finds Paulo. But Alex has very little reason to think that Paulo finds

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, none of this works without the entirely convincing performances by Claudia Claire and Lucas Foz. So much, then, for the usual assumptions about bad acting in pornography.

her attractive, or even that he's single. Even if she's the sexiest woman he's ever seen, he might just as well have said, regretfully, "I have a girlfriend" or even "I have to get back to work."

Paulo's initial response is one of astonishment. He sets his helmet back on the table and walks slowly over to Alex, the look on his face less one of lust than of awe. He reaches first for her arms, touching her gently, even lovingly, before pulling her to him and kissing her passionately. But even then, he does not take charge. When, in the next segment, we find them moving toward her bed, it is she who enters the frame first, reaching back out of it to invite him, still fully dressed, to follow her.<sup>25</sup>

I can understand how, if one were to tear the crucial few seconds out of the context of the film, they might appear to eroticize Alex's vulnerability. But Alex is not presented as being vulnerable because she's a woman. She is just a human being who, at this particular moment, is feeling vulnerable, and for a very good reason. When she dropped her towel, Alex jumped off a cliff, one she had been standing in front of for a very long time. She had no idea what would happen next, but she jumped anyway. *Of course* she is vulnerable! It would be completely unrealistic to present her in any other way, given what we know about Alex by this point in the film.<sup>26</sup> And it is not her vulnerability that is eroticized but something far more complex involving, among other things, her boldness and her bravery: her willingness to risk rejection, even ridicule, for the chance to bring this man she just met two minutes ago, and whose name she doesn't even know, into her bed. This moment, then, placed within the context of the film, is one of tremendous honesty, exquisite beauty, and terrific filmmaking.<sup>27</sup> There is nothing "inegalitarian" about it.

To summarize, then, Maes (2017, 213) claims that *The Good Girl* "eroticizes the gender stereotype of a vulnerable woman versus a confident man." But Paulo is far from confident. And, although Alex is vulnerable, her vulnerability is not gendered but carefully contextualized. Nor is it what is being eroticized.

## 2.2 Celebrating Facials?

Maes's other criticism concerns the climactic moment of the sexually explicit part of the film:

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<sup>25</sup> This is a simple example of how filmmaking can matter: the way the scene is shot emphasizes that she is leading him. See also below.

<sup>26</sup> If there is anything that would constitute a pornish trope here, it would be for Alex to cup her breasts and adopt some model-like pose.

<sup>27</sup> This last because of how much is conveyed by how the scene is shot, especially the adoption, at the crucial moment, of Paulo's point of view.

At the end of their tenderly and beautifully filmed lovemaking, Alex asks the delivery guy to “cum on my face like they do in porn movies,”<sup>28</sup> which he then happily does. Thus, the film continues and even celebrates this most prevalent trope of inegalitarian pornography rather than subverting it. (Maes 2017, 213)

But *Lust* has worked very hard, in the rest of the film, to transform and subvert themes prevalent in mainstream pornography. It is implausible that, here at its finale, she should unthinkingly continue the tradition of ending heterosexual encounters with a facial, let alone celebrate that tradition.

Note, for example, the many ways in which *The Good Girl* plays with and transforms the pizza-boy script. In mainstream versions, the central theme is usually the familiar one of women’s sexual insatiability (see Williams 1989, 108–112; Segal 1998, 45–46). The woman who’s ordered the pizza seduces the delivery boy because porno-women always crave sex with any available man, and she’ll probably do it again tomorrow. Here, however, *Lust* has tried to reimagine the script more realistically: What not wholly implausible story could we tell about why a woman might decide to seduce the man who delivers her dinner? Insatiability is replaced with the frustration of a young professional woman who has always been a “good girl.” The story becomes one of how Alex breaks out of that mold and discovers her own sexual power and agency. Note also how Alex’s newfound confidence is explicitly contrasted with the almost compulsive sexual drive that governs Julie’s life. Alex, I suggest, is presented as embodying an alternative not only to the desexualized Madonna of respectable society but also to the archetype familiar from mainstream pornography: the ever-horny nymphomaniac.

So, again, it makes little sense that *Lust* should suddenly indulge one of pornography’s most infamous tropes at the end of her film. Why, then, does Maes read the facial scene that way? Unfortunately, he does not tell us. One possibility is that, like many critics of pornography, he regards facials as unavoidably misogynistic. Here, for example, is what Whisnant has to say about the inclusion of facials in Taormino’s films:

While it is true that [Taormino] cannot control how a facial cum shot is received or interpreted by viewers, she can and does predict quite accurately how it *will* be (mostly) received [namely, as degrading]. . . . She has decided to include these images in her films, knowing full well

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<sup>28</sup> This is a misquote. What Alex says is, “I want you to cum in my face like in porn movies.” (There are no typos there. Alex’s native language is not English.)



what they mean in a broader cultural context. (Whisnant 2016a, 6; emphasis in the original)

From this point of view, the inclusion of a facial in *The Good Girl* is inescapably problematic. Including a line in which Alex asks Paulo to ejaculate on her face not only fails to undermine the cultural meaning of the act but makes things worse: The film presents Alex as *wanting* to be degraded and humiliated.<sup>29</sup>

But Lust does not agree that facials must always be misogynistic. At the 2007 Berlin Porn Film Festival, there was a roundtable that featured several women directors. As Audacia Ray (2007) recounts, “The panel quickly devolved into an argument about blowjobs,” as several members of the audience questioned Lust about the frequent portrayal of that act in her films. A few days later, one of the other panelists, Petra Joy, posted a lengthy retrospective that included the following remarks:

Feminism is committed to equality of the sexes, so surely “feminist porn” should show women as equals to men rather than as subservient beings. . . . If you want to show cum on a woman’s face that’s fine but don’t call it feminist. (Joy 2007)

Lust (2007) responded with outrage, mocking “the Church of the Pure Feminist Porn Producers . . . declaring that certain sexual practices that me and other women across the world happen to like, are a sin” (see Wakeman 2009; McCombs 2012). Lust here echoes some famous remarks in Gayle Rubin’s paper “Thinking Sex”:

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. (Rubin 1984, 283)

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<sup>29</sup> In the case of the facial that ends the main scene in “Cash,” one might argue that Nomar is not *actually* humiliating Nicole but only doing so within the context of a consensual BDSM roleplay. But that reply is unavailable in this case. There is no BDSM here, and it would not be unreasonable to regard *The Good Girl* as intended to be “response-realistic.”

The tendency that Rubin here decries underlies a form of “sex negativity” (her term) that she calls “the hierarchical valuation of sex acts”: categorizing *types* of sexual acts so as to mark some of them as bad or disordered and some of them as good or natural (Rubin 1984, 278). Such hierarchies are thick on the ground. You find them in the Torah and in Freud, in some feminists and in many conservatives (Rubin 1984, esp. 298ff). By contrast, Rubin (1984, 283) insists that the only appropriate way to judge sexual acts is on a per-act basis, in terms of “the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures [that those acts] provide.”<sup>30</sup> That, I take it, is also what Lust (2007) means when she writes, in response to Joy, “I don’t believe that the word ‘feminist’ can be applied [to] sexual practices,” such as blowjobs and facials.

This negative point, of course, is one that a mainstream pornographer might equally well make. But Lust, in both her writings and her lectures, is relentlessly critical of mainstream pornography.<sup>31</sup> She is fully aware of how misogynistic facials can be and very often are. Nor do I think that Lust would be satisfied simply with the assurance that the facials in some particular film were consensual. So the question remains: How is the facial in *The Good Girl* supposed to be different from facials in mainstream pornography?

I take it that, just as Lust is asking us to imagine why a woman might plausibly decide to seduce the pizza guy, she is also asking us to imagine why Alex might want Paulo to ejaculate on her face. My answer, though I am sure there could be others, is that Alex’s request is a result of her newfound boldness, taken to an extreme in the heat of the moment. Alex’s line, “I want you to cum in my face like in porn movies,” is not just a joke; nor is it just an ironic commentary on the prevalence of facials in pornography. It is also a reminder of how pornography shapes real-life sexuality. Alex asks Paulo to ejaculate on her face, I suggest, precisely because it is something she has seen in pornography and has been curious about. The old Alex would never even have considered doing such a thing. But she’s just had sex with someone whose name she still does not know, so she’s going to end it all with a flourish.

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<sup>30</sup> Note that it does not follow that there cannot be types of sexual acts all of whose instances would be objectionable. But that would be because those instances must always fail the per-act test. (Of course, it is a nice question exactly what the per-act standard should be.)

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the first chapter of *Good Porn: A Woman’s Guide* (Lust 2010) and her TEDx talk “It’s Time for Porn to Change” (Lust 2014). The latter begins with a description of a stereotypical mainstream pornographic scene that ends, of course, with a facial.

What is especially notable is Alex's reaction when Paulo does, indeed, ejaculate on her face.<sup>32</sup> In mainstream pornography, the woman would be on her knees or back, her eyes and mouth wide open, looking expectantly up at her partner's penis while she awaits what, it would seem, is the nectar of the gods. She moans her delight and smiles broadly as the semen hits her face, that by itself apparently enough to bring her to orgasm (or close to it). Often, the woman will spread the semen around her face, or scoop it hungrily into her mouth. To say that her reaction is absurdly enthusiastic would be an understatement. By contrast, as Paulo straddles Alex's chest and masturbates, she tilts her head back away from him and seems more anxious than expectant. As he begins to ejaculate, she closes her eyes and mouth and, as he finishes, wipes his semen away from her lips and off her cheeks.<sup>33</sup> Her reaction, to put it in a word, is *neutral*. She does not appear to feel degraded or humiliated—she starts giggling shortly afterwards—but nor was it the earth-moving experience that mainstream pornography presents it as being. It was something Alex tried and . . . well, it's not clear whether she'll ever want to try it again.

It is also important how Lust shoots the scene. In mainstream pornography, the camera would be locked on the woman's face throughout, and the male performer would appear only as a disembodied penis (to borrow a phrase). Her facial expressions would feature prominently, as an indicator of her desire, but we would not see his face at all unless by accident. Now, quite generally, Lust shoots sex so as to highlight the fact that it is something that *people* do, so we tend to see more of both performers' bodies and, notably, the man's face (in heterosex). In this case, although the focus as Paulo masturbates over Alex's face is more on her experience than on his—the film is about her, after all—there are also shots, even as he orgasms, from a wider angle, so that his whole body and face are visible. The result is that his pleasure is represented not just through ejaculation but through his facial expressions and the contortions of his body. Most importantly, the entire episode is presented as a continuation of what they have been doing *together*, not as something that he is doing *to* her and to which she has simply “consented.”

I suggest, therefore, that Lust does intend this scene to subvert the hegemony of the facial—namely, by bringing facials down to earth. The message, as I read it, is that a facial is just a sexual act: one that some people enjoy and that others abhor and

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<sup>32</sup> Special thanks here to Ruth Foster, Christina Ge, and Margot Witte.

<sup>33</sup> According to the Internet Adult Film Database (see <https://www.iafd.com/person.rme/perfid=claudiaclair/gender=f/claudia-clair.htm>), Claire had previously performed in at least twenty pornographic films, and in about ten of those she had received a facial. So we can safely assume that she knew how it is done in mainstream pornography and is consciously doing it differently here, presumably at Lust's direction.

that yet others (maybe Alex) just don't feel very strongly about. There is nothing special about facials in that regard, and that once again is the point. Mainstream pornography, by contrast, presents facials as something that women either crave or don't yet know that they crave.<sup>34</sup> It is at least arguable that such pornography contributes to women's (sexual) subordination by encouraging men to feel entitled to have women perform this act for them. It is easy to find reports from women of being cajoled or shamed into letting men ejaculate on their faces (see, for example, Marcotte 2009). Indeed, it is not too difficult to see how some women could come to feel, without any personal pressure, but for broadly cultural reasons, that such an act is a "normal" part of heterosex, something that they ought to do because it is what women are supposed to do.<sup>35</sup> It is easy to understand how such pressure could result in a woman's feeling humiliated. But it is not having someone ejaculate on your face that is so degrading. It is being treated as a mere prop in someone else's fantasy. Alex, by contrast, is no one's prop.

Unfortunately, however, there is an aspect of the facial scene that undermines its subversive potential. Paulo and Alex have just been having intercourse in a "spoon" position, with her lying on her side and him behind her. After Alex has an intense and satisfying orgasm,<sup>36</sup> Paulo withdraws, rolls her onto her back, and straddles her chest. It is only then that Alex asks him to ejaculate on her face: when he is already in position to do so. It's a small lapse, but a significant one. The sex overall is convincingly realistic: the kind of thing that people like Alex and Paulo might actually do. But Paulo's rolling Alex onto her back and then straddling her chest seems, given what she goes on to say, prearranged, and it is not at all convincing. Had Alex delivered her line while they were still spooning, it would not have felt so contrived. But because facials in mainstream pornography are almost always contrived—the couple were just having intercourse, but suddenly she spins around, drops to her knees, and begs for ambrosia—this sequencing error breaks the illusion and makes this facial, too, feel

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<sup>34</sup> I am by no means the first to observe that, far from presenting facials as humiliating, mainstream pornography usually presents them as wonderful for all involved, especially the women (see, e.g., MacDonald 1983). I have my doubts, then, about Whisnant's claims about the "cultural meaning" of facials, quoted above (Whisnant 2016a, 6). That is not to deny that some pornography does present facials as degrading.

<sup>35</sup> Breanne Fahs and Jax Gonzalez (2014, 511) suggest that some women feel cultural pressure to have receptive anal sex and that pornography is at least partly to blame (see Heck 2020, §6).

<sup>36</sup> This is one place where debates about authenticity, mentioned earlier, take hold. Does it matter whether the real person, Claudia Claire, had an orgasm if she was able convincingly to portray Alex as having had one?

contrived. In order for it to work in the way I have suggested it was intended to work, it would have to seem like something that people like Alex and Paulo might really do. But it doesn't feel that way, at least not to me, though I can nonetheless appreciate what Lust was trying to accomplish.

To summarize, then, Maes (2017, 213) claims that *The Good Girl* "continues and even celebrates [the facial] rather than subverting it." In response, I have argued that Lust is indeed attempting to subvert the hegemony of the facial, not by ignoring its prevalence but instead by presenting this act in a more realistic way than is typical in mainstream pornography. Of course, those who regard facials as unavoidably misogynistic, as Whisnant does, will be unimpressed. But, once again, if this is the root of the disagreement, it has little to do with pornography but rests upon an independent claim that a certain sexual act is always unethical, even when it is enthusiastically consensual and wanted. As we have seen, Lust simply does not agree with that claim, and nor do I.

### 3. Closing Remarks

I have had several goals in this paper. The most narrow was to defend both Tristan Taormino and Erika Lust (or, at least, their films) from the criticisms that Rebecca Whisnant and Hans Maes make of them. Slightly more broadly, like Petra van Brabandt (2017), I have argued against the narrow conceptions that Whisnant and Maes have of what "feminist" pornography must be like. My broadest goal, though, following Linda Williams (1989) and elaborating a suggestion made by Nancy Bauer (2015, 78), has been to argue by example for the importance of taking pornographic films seriously as films if we're to understand their potential to shape, or misshape, socio-sexual norms.

A few specific conclusions stand out. The first is that a film's feminist credentials cannot be read off from a list of the sexual acts it contains: Consent (understood in a sufficiently robust sense) matters, and it matters whether and how that is conveyed to the viewer. Similarly, the narrative context matters: It matters why Alex is feeling vulnerable (not just because she is a woman in a sexual situation), and it matters why Paulo ejaculates on her face (because Alex is curious what it is like). Narrative details matter, too: It matters how Alex responds when Paulo starts to ejaculate, and it matters how tentative both of them are before she finally drops her towel. And, finally, and in a way most interestingly, filmmaking matters: The way Lust shoots the facial scene is a big part of what is different about it, and the way the camera adopts Paulo's point of view at the crucial moment is crucial to our appreciation of what is so powerful about what Alex has just done.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Anne Eaton for comments on a draft of this paper, as well as for her support of my work in this area. Thanks to Rachel Leadon, Willa Tracy, and Nancy

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