TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Sunday, Mar. 26, 2006

# Sex in the Syllabus

## Colleges are getting serious about porn studies, but should professors show or just tell?

By LISA TAKEUCHI CULLEN

With classwork like this, who needs to play? Undergraduates taking Cyberporn and Society at the State University of New York at Buffalo survey Internet porn sites. At New York University, assignments for Anthropology of the Unconscious include discussing X-rated Japanese comic books. And in Cinema and the Sex Act at the University of California, Berkeley, undergrads are required to view clips from Hollywood NC-17 releases like Showgirls and underground stag reels.

It's called the porn curriculum, and it's quietly taking root in the ivory tower. A small but growing number of scholars are probing the aesthetic, societal and philosophical properties of smut in academic departments ranging from literature to film, law to technology, anthropology to women's studies. Those specialists argue that graphic sexual imagery has become ubiquitous in society, so it's almost irresponsible not to teach young people how to deal with it. "I was amazed by how much the students knew about pornography but how little they knew how to think about it," says Jay Clarkson, a graduate student in communications who introduced the University of Iowa's Pornography in Popular Culture class last fall. But although Clarkson and his peers may agree that porn studies have a place in the curriculum, they are divided over how far professors should go in teaching them. Do students really need to watch a couple copulating onscreen to understand why pornography turns people on? Or does a stimulating essay on the nature of desire provide just as much if not more insight?

Linda Williams, a film professor at Berkeley, lines up on the side of showing rather than simply telling. While researching feminist reactions to porn in the early '90s, she grew fascinated by the choreography of dirty movies and began teaching a trailblazing course about porno films. "I'm quite critical of pornography," she says. "I'm not trying to teach people to accept the existence of it. As with any tradition of moving-image culture, we need to take it seriously. We need to try and come at it with some theoretical tools." Like many porn scholars, Williams includes readings from Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault, the French philosopher who

wrote about sexual identity, to explore how porno movies interpret desire and what that says about the human psyche. Similarly, Alex Halavais, an assistant professor of communication at SUNY Buffalo, tracks pornography's pivotal role in the development of communications systems from the telephone to the Internet, with a reading list that ranges from student blogs to the Congressional Record. And in her graduate-level class on obscenity, media-studies professor Laura Kipnis of Northwestern University examines how publications like Hustler can define class stratification in the U.S.--by discussing the work of the 16th century satirist FranÃ§ois Rabelais as well as skin magazines.

But some scholars disagree about the need to present porn in class. In Sex and the Law, a senior seminar given by Paul Abramson, a psychology professor at UCLA, the screening of Inside Deep Throat, a documentary about the making of the notorious '70s porno film, is optional. Porn is "so pervasive in our culture, most students have already seen it," Abramson explains. Showing it "seems unnecessary." Likewise, Catherine Sherwood-Puzello, who covers pornography in her human-sexuality class at the University of Indiana at Bloomington, the home of sex pioneer Alfred Kinsey's institute, displays Michelangelo's David and Playboy covers in her class but "no X-rated movies," she says. "Those are not a good way to explain porn," which she believes is best taught with the same dispassion with which one would teach a course on statistics.

Advocates of bringing porn into the classroom insist that studying porn without watching it misses the point. Kipnis screens SalÃ³ or 120 Days of Sodom, by the Italian avant-garde filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, in her obscenity class. The film, updated from the novel by the Marquis de Sade, is set in fascist Italy and depicts a tribunal of powerful men and their sexual torture of teenagers. She says students who had previously espoused staunchly liberal views about freedom of expression often find themselves disgusted and horrified by what they see. "University students are often too cool, too hip to understand why other people get perturbed," Kipnis says. "Showing a film like this allows them to react and then to take a step back and analyze their reaction with the critical tools you give them."

Students agree that watching skin flicks in a classroom--as opposed to, say, a dorm room--can offer new perspectives. Lindsey Reich, 21, a senior majoring in anthropology at N.Y.U., thought herself fairly progressive when she signed up for Professor Don Kulick's sexuality-and-gender course last year. Then he screened a film featuring the porn star Annie Sprinkle having sex with a transgendered man and another showing female ejaculation. To her surprise, Reich was shocked. "I realized I do have my biases about what is a man and what is a woman--I mean, I grew up in the Midwest--and it made me want to explore these stereotypes and get past them," she says. "Those films did that better than any academic book."

Parents who foot the bill for such epiphanies often start out eyeing those courses with varying degrees of skepticism. After Matthew Schwartz told his parents he was enrolling in the cyberporn class at Buffalo last year, his mother Fran joked that he had got the school to tailor a class around his

interests. His father Marvin complained, "I'm paying for you to study what?" The class delved into what causes cultures to define pornography in different ways--lessons that Schwartz, 21 and a senior, says will make him more sensitive in his planned career as a translator in Arab countries. "It turned out to be about societal norms--not fluff at all," says his mother.

Administrators at schools that offer porn studies find themselves caught between their desire for cutting-edge scholarship and their reluctance to stir up controversy. "I wish I had more faculty doing this kind of exciting work," says David Penniman, a dean at Buffalo who oversees Halavais' cyberporn course. Penniman acknowledges that the graphic images used in the class may upset some people, but, he adds, "it's tricky for a dean or university president to try to dictate what should or shouldn't be in the syllabus." It's especially tricky at state schools where legislators help determine school funding. After Clarkson's course appeared in the catalog at the University of Iowa, a state politician threatened to withdraw school funding. (He dropped his efforts only after he learned that lessons wouldn't involve explicit visuals.)

Schools are seeking ways to sidestep such concerns. Iowa and Buffalo bar students under 18 from porn classes. At the University of California at Santa Barbara, Constance Penley, a film professor and porn-studies pioneer, says she tells her students that "I don't want to squelch their financial possibilities or creativity, but as a favor to me, could they not make a porn film until after they graduate?" Teaching them about porn is one thing. Training them for a career in the adult arts is another.

With reporting by Jeffrey Ressner/ Los Angeles, With reporting by Stefanie Friedhoff/ Ann Arbor