



# Problems with Playboy

A guest writer answers questions about porn in light of Playboy's UNC visit

By Matthew Ezzell

In November 1998, Playboy released its monthly magazine. The cover model was a blond woman dressed as a cheerleader with a low-cut top next to a description of the magazine as a "Hot, Hot, College Issue" on her right and the title of the spread "Girls of the ACC" on her left. All of this was under the title and subtitle, "Playboy: Entertainment for Men."

On March, The Daily Tar Heel ran an advertisement that started, "Attention female student body." It was an advertisement for Playboy's newest "Girls of the ACC" pictorial. On April 5 - 6, Playboy staff came to interview UNC female students as potential models. This is a problem.

What's the deal? First, let me say what the deal isn't - it isn't a call for censorship and it isn't a call to take away these women's right to audition. It isn't about being all in a tizzy because our sensibilities are offended or our feelings hurt. What it is, however, is a call to discuss how pornography is *harmful*.

What I'm about to say (in very few words) is a critique of mainstream *heterosexual* pornography. This critique is informed by a radical feminist perspective and the foundational work of feminists throughout the last three decades.

Pornography is harmful. What does that mean?

Consider this: Playboy is an enterprise that sells images of women's bodies as "Entertainment for Men." It's not rocket science: the magazine functions as a facilitator for men's masturbation and sexual pleasure.

When a man uses the images in these ways, the woman who is represented in the picture is rendered a mirror for his desire. This is sexual objectification. It dehumanizes the real women that are used in pornography's production, and it reinforces the dehumanization of all the other women who are walking around on this planet. Playboy's spokespersons are clear on this: "You never know if the girl sitting next to you in Biology 101 could be Playboy material." In Playboy's world, women everywhere are available for heterosexual men's pleasure.

When a group of people is seen as less than human, it is easier to commit acts of systemic violence against them. We see this in war, slavery and hate-crimes. We see this in heterosexual men's co-optation of woman-woman sex for their own

sexual gratification. We see this in men's violence against women.

"Does this mean pornography causes rape?" No. If pornography were abolished tomorrow, rapes would still happen. However, in a world in which our cultural landscape is saturated with images of women as sexual objects, as things, and as body parts, it is more likely that acts of violence will be perpetrated against them. Pornography doesn't *cause* rape, but it is *implicated* in rape.

"But isn't pornography really about sexual expression?" Not really. These images and videos are part of an industry that, not including revenues from the Internet, has earnings of an estimated \$56 billion a year. Playboy's online ventures alone are expected to top \$70 billion a year by 2006.

In that sense, these pictures and movies are an industrial product that are churned out over and over, reinforcing the same limited notion of what it means to be sexual. It's a patriarchal script that revolves around submission, domination and hierarchy. While it can feel rebellious because it's "dirty," it's not close to revolutionary in that it's a basic re-telling of the status quo.

"But if the models and actors like it, that's all that matters, right?" Not totally. We don't live in a vacuum. Individualism neglects that we are interconnected. It neglects that our actions affect others. Even if a woman who poses for Playboy feels great about her decision (although it's telling that the women interviewed in local press didn't want to give their last names, despite the fact that images of their bodies could be re-produced millions of times over for men to look at and masturbate), we have to ask the question: What are the consequences of this for women *as a group*?

"Does it hurt men, too?" Yes, but not in the same ways. Largely through our choice to consume it, I believe that mainstream heterosexual pornography limits our ability to connect with women and other men by conditioning us to see other humans as means to an end, instead of as ends in and of themselves.

In short: Patriarchal sex is about what is done *to*, not *with*, another body. We can all be more creative and expressive than that.  $\lambda$

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