

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT CHYNG SUN

Having grown up in Taiwan, I did not see my first porn film until I was thirty years old, when I came to the U.S. as a graduate student in Boston in 1990.

Contrary to many women being pushed to watch porn by their boyfriends, I had a shy partner who never had the courage to rent a porn video. The few times that I reached for the top shelf at the Video Smith in Brookline to grab a porn video, I had to endure the torturous journey – ignoring other men peering at me out of the corner of their eyes while I was cruising through this off limits section, holding the extra large video box with vivid pictures for everyone to see while I stood in a long check-out line, and then waiting for the clerk to slowly take the video out of its box and put it in a black box which everyone knew was for porn anyway. Although this journey made me descend from a respectable to a fallen woman, there was something thrilling and daring because I was against the constraints set by both Chinese and American patriarchy that disapproved of women's consumption of porn. I figured, if not being allowed to watch porn was part of the sexual repression, then rebelling against it must be liberating and even feminist.

However, I was conflicted when I was watching those on-screen porn women who were often coy, infantilized, indiscriminating of who had sex with them, and they enjoyed whatever was done to them including being overpowered. I asked myself: if these types of images appear in a beer ad, would I immediately call them sexist? So how could I feel liberated by watching sexism? On the other hand, I wondered if I was overanalyzing a medium that was made for sexual stimulation; perhaps this should be the zone that was free of critical examination because sexuality was not rational. Above all, it was so cool to be a girlfriend who was perceived as taboo-breaking and adventurous. Did I really want to ruin the fun? I felt unsettled and didn't really have the knowledge and conceptual tools to think it all through.

It was 15 years later when I decided to make *The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality and Relationships*. The Video Smith where I rented the videos was closed down and the internet had revolutionized the production and consumption of pornography, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Based on my own embarrassing experiences in renting porn videos, I can understand how enticing it is to select among endless pornography privately and anonymously, and how that rush can boost the amount one consumes. Growing up in a conservative family, coming from a culture that is sexually repressive for women, and having no stable relationships in most of the years in my twenties, I also understood the attraction of pornography. My personal experiences and my uncompromised feminist politics created tensions and generated questions about pornography that few people from either anti or pro porn sides have engaged. But I think my ambivalence, concerns, and struggles resonated much more with the majority of people.

I had studied the feminist critique of pornography, so my first task of working on this film was actually to go analyze the opposite side in order to understand their perspectives. In long and short interviews, I talked with 120 people overall, including porn performers, producers, critics and the users. If I were to point to my greatest strength in directing this film, I would say that I was a good listener. My genuine curiosity, nonjudgmental attitude and my respect for the interviewees hopefully came through and I have gained insights that none of the readings I had

done could ever have taught me. A 20 year old male college student said to me, "Sexuality is so personal. You've got to be real careful how you approach people about porn. If you try to be a firebrand about it, you're gonna alienate people." When I made editorial decisions, I always thought of what this young man said, and his words set a tone for the overall film: it is an exploration and analysis that avoids being didactic or dogmatic.

## WHAT THE FILM IS REALLY ABOUT

Chyng Sun & Miguel Picker

During the "porn war" in the 1980s and early 1990s, the feminists focused on the harm that pornography has perpetuated on women through its producers and consumers. Although some of the interviewees did experience or witness such horrendous sexual violence done to women that was connected to pornography, we think for the majority of men and women the effects of pornography were less overt and dramatic but still no less profound. That is why the focus of the film is on sexuality and relationships. But when we explored deeper and deeper into the issues, what concerned us the most was beyond how pornography affects, but what it reveals about the world we live in and the mechanisms that shape and maintain it.

J.M. Productions' *Gag Factor* is indeed hard to watch when the female performers choke and cry because the male performers' penises are inserted in their throat so deeply. The crucial issues are not whether a woman freely "chooses" to work in the film, but why an economic system would pay the women who are willing to be gagged 50 times more money than her McDonald's job and whether this is the best way to organize our labor system. Also, condemning the producers as being particularly misogynistic does not go far; instead, we should question: why would a system reward private enterprise to make a movie like this; why there are so many consumers who would watch it and gain sexual pleasure? Pornography is where patriarchy and capitalism meet. Theme-wise, this whole film can be summed up by two short statements: "Nothing shows any better than pornography what you get from capitalism," by Rich Wolff (Professor of Economics) and "Pornography delivers patriarchal messages to men's brain by the penis," by Gail Dines (Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies).

The defenders of pornography like to say that pornography is just a symptom or a reflection of a male-dominated culture. But pornography does more than passively "reflect;" it represents masculinity in such a way that male dominance and aggression becomes natural, normal and even beneficial. As pornographer Ernest Greene puts it, "There is a natural component of power as an erotic stimulant in all sexuality." Or in the same vein, pornographer Joe Gallent states, "Every woman I have ever met has had a rape fantasy at some point. Men have violence fantasies about domination, and that's just how it is." Pornography indeed perpetuates, reinforces and normalizes sexism, but burning all porn will not end male violence and sexual exploitation. To us, pornography presents an opportunity to examine the roots of the problems we are facing – patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy – in their most blatant, naked and rawest forms. When this exploitation can stir and stimulate our most irrational and uncensored sexual core, we know how deep we have internalized and naturalized such inequality.

So we go to the roots. The ambition of the filmmakers may seem very modest but actually no

less profound: we want people to really see what they have been watching all along. It is fascinating that almost without exception, the porn users who were interviewed admitted that they felt uncomfortable or guilty when they watched certain scenes because they knew the women on screen were not treated right, and they did not want to be there. Greg, a 20-year-old college student, said at the end of the film, "The second I have an orgasm and that passion kind of sinks out of my body and you're still watching the movie, you start to really see what's going on and it's kind of just foul... and you just kind of wonder like, this is not sexy, this is not sex, this is not how I want to experience sex."

We wish that viewers of our film do not ignore the discomfort – not turn down the volume, not fast-forward the bothering scenes, and not use "This is free speech," "She chooses to do it" or "This is free porn, I didn't buy it" to justify their consumption. Let's just simply and honestly see what exactly turns us on.