

The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality and Relationships

Directed and Produced by Miguel Picker and Chyng Sun

Co-Writer and Associate Producer: Robert Wosnitzer

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[synopsis]

Synopsis (short)

Pornography has become mainstream and ubiquitous, but its content has also become more and more violent and degrading. This film examines this troubling trend and how it affects our sexuality and relationships.

Synopsis (medium length):

Once relegated to the margins of society, pornography has become one of the most visible and profitable sectors of the cultural industries in the United States. It is estimated that the pornography industry's annual revenue has reached \$13 billion. At the same time, the content of pornography has become more aggressive, more overtly sexist and racist. Going beyond the debate of liberal versus conservative, the film features the voices of consumers, critics, and pornography producers and performers. It paints a nuanced portrait of how pleasure and pain, commerce and power, and liberty and responsibility are intertwined in the most intimate parts of our sexual identities and relationships.

Synopsis (full length):

Once relegated to the margins of society, pornography has become one of the most visible and profitable sectors of the cultural industries in the United States. It is estimated that the pornography industry's annual revenue has reached \$13 billion. At the same time, the content of pornography has become more aggressive, more overtly sexist and racist.

The film features the voices of consumers, critics, and pornography producers and performers. It is particularly revealing when male pornographers openly discuss their views about women and how men should relate to them, and when male and female porn users candidly discuss the role pornography has played in shaping their sexual imaginations and relationships. Honest and nonjudgmental, the film paints both a nuanced and complex portrait of how pleasure and pain, commerce and power, and liberty and responsibility are intertwined in the most intimate aspects of human relations.

At the same time, the film examines the unprecedented role that commercial pornography now occupies in U.S. popular culture. Going beyond the debate of liberal versus conservative so common in the culture, *The Price of Pleasure* provides a holistic understanding of pornography as it debunks common myths about the genre.

The film features interviews with scholars of mass media (Gail Dines and Robert Jensen), economics (Richard Wolff), and psychology (Dr. Ana Bridges); writers on pornography and popular culture (Ariel Levy and Pamela Paul); producers and performers from the pornography industry (John Stagliano, Joanna Angel and Ernest Greene); and a former stripper/porn performer-turned-author (Sarah Katherine Lewis).

About the filmmakers

Producer, Director & Editor:

Miguel Picker worked at WGBH-TV in Boston for over 15 years as an editor. His editing credits include *La Plaza*, *Greater Boston Arts*, and a 52-part national series titled *Destinos*. He also has produced and directed programs for WGBH, including *Como Hacemos*, *Dúo* and *The Early Music Workshop*. He has produced and directed numerous independent projects as well, such as *Francisco Mendéz - The Portrayal of a Cuban Painter* and *A Day in Martha's Vineyard*. Picker is also a musician and composer, and has worked with a wide range of art institutions and public foundations, including PBS, the Boston Ballet and the New England Conservatory. Picker moved to New York City in the summer of 2004, and his recent projects include editing and music composition/production for the award-winning documentary *The Borinqueneers* (2007), and co-directing and editing *Ulises' Odyssey* (2009), a documentary on Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile in 1970's and its aftermath. ([HYPERLINK "mailto:mpicker@mac.com"](mailto:mpicker@mac.com) mpicker@mac.com, www.miguelpicker.com)

Filmography (Director):

Beyond Good and Evil

2003

Recorder Power

2002

Mickey Mouse Monopoly

2001

Francisco Mendéz - The Portrayal of a Cuban Painter

1998

Como Hacemos

1997

A Day in Martha's Vineyard

1997

Producer, Director & Writer:

Dr. Chyng Sun is a filmmaker and a Master Teacher of Media Studies at McGhee Liberal Arts, School of Continuing and Professional Studies at New York University. Her research interests include media literacy; race, gender and sexuality in media; and audience research/media effects. With Miguel Picker, Sun produced the documentaries *Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood and Corporate Power* and *Beyond Good and Evil: Media, Children and Violent Times* (both distributed by the Media Education Foundation). She has been researching the topic of pornography since the summer of 2004. Together Robert Wosnitzer and two other scholars, Sun designed a large-scale research project on the content of the most-rented pornographic movies of 2005. Her forthcoming book *Fantasies Matter* (working title) will be published by the Peter Lang Publishing Company in 2010. (chyng.sun@nyu.edu)

Filmography (Producer)

Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood and Corporate Power

2001

Beyond Good and Evil: Media, Children and Violent Times

2003

Co-writer and Associate Producer

Robert Wosnitzer is a doctoral student at New York University's Department of Media, Culture and Communication, and an adjunct instructor at NYU's Stern School of Business. He teaches courses in media, business, politics, and globalization. Prior to his academic career, Robert worked in the field of investment banking capital markets, coordinating the trading and placement of debt-related securities for over a decade. In his current research, Robert draws on critical theory to engage the dynamics of cultural and economic globalization. He is doing research on the cultural implications and patterns in relation to microfinance as a circuit of global capital, and its structuring of identity formations. Robert's research and writing also includes a large-scale content analysis study investigating aggression, authorship, and ideology within popular pornographic videos, co-authored with Drs. Chyng Sun, Erica Scharrer and Ana Bridges; critical analysis of race in the Academy-Award winning film, *Crash*, co-authored with Dr. Robert Jensen; constructions of race and gender in film texts; and critical media pedagogy. (HYPERLINK "mailto:Robert.wosnitzer246@nyu.edu" Robert.wosnitzer246@nyu.edu)

Directors' Statements

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 type 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 too 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 generate 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 because the issues were not black and white.

Before I entered this project, I had been familiar with the radical feminists' anti-pornography perspectives through reading the articles and books by Gail Dines and Robert Jensen, and through my numerous and intense conversations with them. My first task of working on this film

was actually to go study the opposite side. I thought it was very important to understand the strongest pro-porn arguments in order to come up with the most convincing criticism of pornography. In fact, I agreed with such arguments from the porn defenders as: (1) there is indeed hypocrisy in this culture as witnessed by the Federal Communications Commission making such a big deal when Janet Jackson exposed her nipple; (2) this culture seems to be more tolerant toward violence than toward sex, and (3) some slasher films and advertising may have much more troubling messages than the image of two people having hardcore but consensual sex. Furthermore, there is a stigma in this society toward women who perform in pornography that greatly narrows their future career choices and brings shame to their family as well as ostracism by the larger society. But what if the problem lies with our *society* which is closed to portraying and talking about sexuality and intolerant toward people's differences? And what exactly is the harm in working in the pornography industry? Didn't I see interviews of porn stars saying that they loved to have sex on camera and didn't I see Nina Hartley claiming that she is a feminist and had the choice to make a living as a registered nurse? For young women who do not have family resources, higher education or special skills, working in porn compared to in minimum wage jobs, may well earn them more money and flexibility along with fewer work hours. Isn't this all about individual choice? Above all, pornographic and sexist images are everywhere – don't they all have negative effects? Do I then claim that pornography has the worst effects? Why then do I pick on pornography to criticize? Thus, all these questions that emanated from pro pornography arguments have been very important in pushing me to broaden the scope of my investigation as well to think in a deeper and more nuanced way that is closer to most people's reality. Robert Jensen and particularly Robert Wosnitzer were immensely helpful in the process.

Another question that defenders of pornography often complain about is: given that the definition of pornography is so broad, unclear and subjective, is it almost impossible to study and to criticize it? They further protest that the critics of pornography often purposefully pick the worst kinds of porn to analyze and to use as scapegoats. I took this criticism to heart, and with Robert Wosnitzer, Dr. Ana Bridges and Dr. Erica Scharrer, designed and conducted a large scale study on the content of the most rented pornographic videos in 2005, identified by the porn industry's "Bible," *Adult Video News*. I resolved the issue on the definition of pornography by referring to both the industry's classification as well as to the audience's choices and by examining the popular/mainstream pornography.

Being a producer for a documentary that is normally budgeted as \$200,000 to \$300,000, I miserably failed one of the most important tasks: raising funds. Thanks for NYU's Research Challenge Fund of \$10,000, my parents' unconditional support, and a friend's generosity, I relied for the rest on loans and most importantly, the volunteer labor by Miguel Picker (Co-director and co-producer, director of photography, editor, motion graphic artist, music composer/producer, and all other post-production work), Robert Wosnitzer (Co-writer, Associate Producer, thorough researcher and consultant on all matters), Sandra Koponen (photographer), Michelle Chang (assistant editor), and Denise Gillman (script consultant), and interns. I also had plenty of other weakness so that the project took a long time and has become so costly. Yet I did one thing right: I was a good listener. My genuine curiosity, nonjudgmental attitude and my respect for the interviewees probably came through and helped me to gain insights that none of the readings I had done could ever have taught me.

A 20 years old male college student said to me, "...because sexuality is so personal. You've got to be real careful how you approach people about that. 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 radical 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, I think for the majority of men and women the effects of pornography were less overt and dramatic but still no less profound on their sexual imaginations and relationships. That is why the focus of the film is on sexuality and relationships. But when I explored deeper and deeper into the issues, what concerned me the most was beyond how pornography affects, but what it revealed 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. Condemning the producers as being particularly misogynistic does not go far; instead the important questions that we should ask are: why would a system reward private enterprise to make a movie like this and 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, and "Pornography delivers patriarchal messages to men's brain by the penis," by Gail Dines. If problems are rooted in the systems, and if the systems are not going to change overnight, how would the film not leave the audience in a state of paralysis?

Anyone who expects a dramatic ending, a neat solution, or some clear strategies at the end of the film are bound to be disappointed. There is none of these. My target audiences are the typical porn users who regularly use pornography for sexual stimulation, are not critical about what they watch, and mostly receive the messages from the mass media that pornography is harmless fun and that the only problem is that there are some deviant addicts who just can't control themselves. Talking about solutions may be a few steps ahead of them; they are not yet convinced that pornography is a problem. And to be honest, we don't know what a quick or even not so quick solution may be. The defenders of pornography like to say that it is a symptom of sexism or that it is an expression of a male-dominated culture. We don't disagree with that statement but we have trouble with how it is used to justify that pornography is then "innocent." We view pornography as not a mere "reflection" of male supremacy, but rather a construction of

masculinity in such a way that male dominance becomes natural 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.." Furthermore, we should not be surprised that the commercialization of our sexuality and humanity is so widespread in a capitalist society in which nearly everything is for sale and profit is legitimized as the major, if not only, incentive that drives production and distribution. Pornography indeed perpetuates, reinforces and normalizes male domination, but burning all porn will not end male dominance and sexual exploitation; the producers of porn simply will find another form, another channel. Furthermore, since pornography has already permeated all forms of popular culture and media, how do we find solutions for all? To us, pornography is a way for us to examine the roots of the problem – 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. The defenders of pornography often explain that the "guilt" associated with watching porn comes only from sexual repression, and porn could conveniently liberate that. It was only part of the story. What the interviewees revealed is that the guilt also may arise from them knowing full well that the women from whom they gain pleasure may not want to be there, and the treatment of these women is not right. Because the viewers often shut down their critical minds when they are watching pornography or they willfully ignore what is really showing in the porn film, they don't actually think about what they see. 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."

Systemic change comes from individuals; change from individuals is seldom sudden, dramatic and smooth. The process is full of struggles and pain, advances and set backs – all these make us human. So no one expects that Greg would quit watching porn right then and there. What is important, is not to ignore the discomfort, not to turn down the volume, not to fast-forward the bothering scenes, not to use "She chooses to do it" or "This is free porn, I didn't buy it" or "This is free speech" to justify our consumption. Just simply and honestly see what is constructed, made, sold and what exactly turns us on.