Pornography continues to be a hotly contested issue, not only in the community at large, but also among feminists. Discussing pornography engages our understandings of sex, gender and desire -- and also of selfhood and of power. This course will discuss various feminist discourses concerning pornography.

The recent Supreme Court decision in R. v. Butler exemplified the most familiar discourse, from liberal political theory and jurisprudence. This discourse tests whether sexually explicit material is "obscene," and what harm it might thereby do to persons, and therefore whether it enjoys Charter guarantees to freedom of speech and expression. The decision in Butler has its significance in its enlarged understandings of harm to women, and therein lies its usefulness -- or its danger.

A strongly argued position from Radical Feminism presents a second discourse. Exemplified by the work of Catharine MacKinnon, this position sees pornography as the eroticizing of dominance and subordination, the construction of gender as a hierarchy, and the sexualizing of this hierarchy. Totalizing to the point of essentialism, this discourse presses its point starkly about the fusion of sex and power. It advances innovative remedies through the use of legislative and legal processes which put initiative in women's hands, not the State's.

A third discourse can be located in Postmodernism's theory and politics of representation, examining the articulation/construction/proliferation of subjectivities and desires through diverse discourses and practices, of which pornography is one. The solution to pornography as an embodiment of the male gaze, representing male subjectivity, is more pornography, embodying the female gaze, and representing women's subjectivities.

This course would like to test the hypothesis that some insights from Postmodernism can break a stalemate in the "feminist porn wars" and open up new angles of vision, provide new strategies of response. To this end, we will conclude with discussions and examples of sexual representations, from various perspectives: porn for the female spectator (lesbian and heterosexual), gay "safe sex" porn, and Black films which explore the confluence of race and sex.

Tutorials will explore "the pornographic" in popular culture, with a goal of testing out various approaches, evaluating their definitions and solutions.

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Required Reading

R. v. Butler, Decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada, February 1992; and LEAF's argument in this case (available in xerox)

Other readings will be available on reserve

Recommended Reading


Requirements

Tutorial 25%
Short Paper 25% 6-8 pages: to review and comment critically on one of the discourses on pornography
Research Paper 50% 15-20 pages

Prerequisites - 60 credit hours or W.S. 100