

# Professor Todd Kendall on Pornography: RAPE VERSUS “FACIALS”\*

Laurence Thomas  
Syracuse University

THERE ARE FEMINISTS who have insisted that porn causes men to rape women. Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin are well-known feminists who advanced this line of argument.<sup>1</sup> The average man will tell you that this point of view is absolutely wrong. Most men who have watched porn with some regularity would not dream of raping a woman. But the recent research by Todd Kendall at Clemson University has turned this feminist line of thought upside-down entirely; for in his essay, “Pornography, Rape, and the Internet,”<sup>2</sup> he has argued that there is an inverse correlation between pornography. That is, Kendall has presented evidence in support of the view that pornography has actually contributes significantly to the decline of rape.

One indisputable and quite significant truth that follows from Kendall’s report is that this is a very substantial good that pornography does. For if anything is a good, surely minimizing the number of rapes that occur is.

But what exactly should we think about pornography, given that it serves to prevent rape? One line of thought might be that if porn minimizes the number of rapes that occur, then we should give it *carte blanche* (the case of child pornography aside). The more, the better: whatever form it might take.

Well, Kendall’s own words might be most instructive here. In the conclusion of his essay he writes the following:

---

\* The remarks in this essay are not so much a reaction to Kendall’s argument, but to what appears to be the way in which some are extending the argument—that is, the moral import that some seem to think that the argument has.

<sup>1</sup> Respectively, see for example, MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Harvard University Press, 1988).and Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women* (Penguin Group, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> The essay is available at: <http://people.clemson.edu/~tkendal/internetcrime.pdf>  
There are two versions of this essay. The Stanford University version delivered in 2006 hosted by Stanford; and the revised version from a website at Kendall’s Clemson University. Parenthetical page references are to the version hosted by Clemson version.

The results [from this study] suggest that potential [male] rapists [of women] perceive pornography as a substitute for rape (p. 29).

Upon reading the above words, I have asked myself time and time again: Who exactly counts as a potential rapist? Presumably, any man can rape a woman. But it is manifestly clear that Kendall does not for a moment hold that the typical male as such is a potential rapist. I cannot speak for all the male friends of mine, but I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that some among my male friends are, in the absence of a most fundamental change in character, constitutionally unable to commit rape.

Who is Kendall talking about? He is talking about men who most likely would have committed rape were it not for the fact that they had watched porn. While it is true that there clearly way too many men like that, it is also true that there are lots and lots and lots of men who are not at all like that. Thus, we should not lose sight of the fact that Kendall's findings *apply* to a comparatively small percentage of men. To be sure, we want the percentage of men who commit rape to be zero. However, this ever so laudable goal does not entitle anyone to disregard the fact that most men do not commit rape.

The question, then, is this: Given that (a) watching porn tends to prevent men who would otherwise commit rape from doing so, does it thereby follow that (b) in general watching porn has a salubrious impact upon men or, in any case, a non-deleterious impact men? If (b) followed from (a) that would be exceedingly significant. For if it did, then that would be a very strong reason to give porn *carte blanche* (child pornography aside). Not only that, there would be a reason to recommend porn. In fact, there might even be a reason to require it.

Let me point out, however, that one can consistently hold that it is true that

(1) Watching porn tends to prevent men who would otherwise commit rape from doing so

and that it is also true that

(2) There are forms of porn which if regularly watched might have deleterious impact upon men in terms of how they think of sexual relations with women.

In the case of (1), we already know that these men are lacking in respect for women. So it is not the case that watching porn undermines their respect for women, since that respect is not there in the first place.

Now, it is possible for a man to be lacking in the sensibilities that he ought to have for women, even though it is the case that he would never ever think to rape a woman. That is, it hardly follows from the fact that a man would not rape a woman that he is flawless in terms of his respect for women, any more than it follows from the fact that a person does not use racial epithet towards Asians or Arabs or whomever that he is flawless in his respect for members of these ethnic groups.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that Kendall's study takes the wind out of the sails of conservatives and certain feminists (who made for strange bedfellows in the first place) by substantially decoupling porn from rape. And this, in turn, makes the idea of constitutional support for porn considerably stronger. But we should *not* make any more of that decoupling than is actually licensed by the argument.

Kendall's argument does not for a moment show that porn in all of its glory is just wonderful. The more; the merrier. The argument does not show that "facials" in porn, for instance, are just fine. Nor, again, does his argument show that women are betrayed as the moral equals of men in porn.

There is nothing at all trivial about showing that, far from contributing to rape, porn tends to have the opposite effect instead. But this marvelous conclusion does not in any way whatsoever entail that porn is beyond serious moral criticism. Nor, in particular, does it entail that porn cannot have a deleterious impact upon men who watch it.

Many a desire has been occasioned by what someone has seen on the screen. Arguably, the very presupposition of

advertisement that people can be influenced to have desires that heretofore they did not have.

In the case of would-be-rapists, the desire to rape is extinguished because watching porn provides a means for release. But what about the possibility of unwholesome desires being inculcated by porn? Desires that have nothing at all to do with rape. Kendall's study does not preclude this possibility. I understand why porn scenes typically have men ejaculate, as this makes explicit the achievement of an orgasm on the male's part.<sup>3</sup> But how we get from *that* to the man ejaculating upon the woman's face, a so-called "facial", has always been a mystery to me; for that act can only be characterized as demeaning. The example of "facials" is a particularly telling one because we have an act that, on the one hand is obviously demeaning, but which, on the other hand, does not any form of physical harm. It is utterly implausible to think that anyone who has had a wonderful sexual experience might think to herself that have semen spewed upon her face would make complete the sexual experience or make it more satisfying in some way or the other. And no one who has ever watched this act has ever entertained the thought that *now* the "recipient" of the "facial" is absolutely beside herself with pleasure. Physically harmless though they may be, it is beyond dispute that "facials" are demeaning.

So, if porn should occasion the desire on the part of a male that his female sex partner should submit to a facial, then we have something that strikes me as rather unsatisfactory although there

---

<sup>3</sup> This, of course, speaks to the reality that so much of porn is male-centered. Now, it seems reasonable enough to suppose that upon occasion a person, female or male, is merely interested in sexual release; and it seems clear enough that pornography often facilitates that end for men. Pornography just for men might very well focus upon things that are constitutive of the male orgasm, whereas pornography just for females might very well focus upon things that are constitutive of the female orgasm. We have a problem, however, when porn only privileges those activities that are constitutive of the male orgasm. The prevalence of "facials" in porn make it manifestly clear that male sexuality is being privileged.

This point is particularly serious if we consider the plausible assumption that for many male adolescents their first exposure to sexuality is through porn. The idea is not that we should remove the smut. Rather, it is that male adolescents should see that there are many ways of engaging sex, and that some of those ways are far more affirming of women than others.

has been ne'er a thought on his part to commit rape. True, he does not force her, but he would just like to try it with her! Just once, of course.

I repeat: Many a desire has been occasioned by what someone has seen on the screen.

I do not mean to be arguing against porn. I am generally in agreement with Ronald Dworkin on this subject; and I think that porn should be protected as a form free speech.<sup>4</sup> But even protected free speech can be open to moral criticism. Clearly, the fact that porn contributes to a decrease in the number of rapes committed only strengthens the argument that porn should be protected as a form of free speech.

What I have argued, rather, is that we should not infer from the obviously wonderful truth that porn contributes a decline in rape, *among men already disposed to commit rape*, the conclusion that porn, in its present form, does not inculcate unsavory desires on the part of men with regard to women owing to the way in which women are typically portrayed in porn. For all we know, it may not. My only point is the truth that porn does not inculcate unsavory desires on the part of men does not follow from the truth established by Kendall's evidence that, *for men who are already disposed to commit rape*, watching porn makes it less likely that they will actually commit rape. This should come as no surprise, as there are a host of despicable attitudes that we can have towards another that do not in any way whatsoever involve our committing physical violence against that person.

Again, in Kendall's own words:

The results [from this study] suggest that potential [male] rapists [of women] perceive pornography as a substitute for rape

This truth no more entails that porn is good for men generally, then the truth that a form of medicine is good to take when one is

---

<sup>4</sup> See his "Women and Pornography," *The New York Review of Books* 40 (21 October 1993). As one might imagine, Ronald Dworkin's argument does not turn on the idea that pornography has redeeming social value. Of course, precisely what makes Kendall's thesis so very fascinating is that the truth of his thesis actually accords pornography—the smutty stuff, in fact—some redeeming social value, contrary to what many conservatives or feminists of the MacKinnon-Dworkin variety would ever have imagined.

violently ill entails that it is a good thing to take that medicine when one is not at all ill in that manner. Some, upon reading Kendall, seem to be more than a little too inclined to make the quite fallacious inference that there is nothing wrong with porn at all, since we can fight rape with porn.<sup>5</sup> Alas, Kendall's results are compatible with the truth that it would be a good thing if *would-be-rapists* watched one kind of porn and a good thing if men generally watched a different kind of porn.

So although the average man who watches porn from time to time can rightly feel vindicated by the Kendall study precisely because the average man finds the very idea of rape utterly repulsive and committing is not something that is even near--let alone on--his "to do" list, the average man is not at all entitled to conclude that porn in its present form is just fine, and so beyond moral criticism. Kendall's study does not show that at all.

This should stand to reason. After all, if in the matter of how he treats women, the only claim that a man can make on his behalf is that he is not a rapist, then surely it is the case that he stands in need of a very serious moral make-over!

---

<sup>5</sup> Commentators have seized upon the fact that porn can be used to fight rape as if that made any and all aspects of porn good or, in any case, rather immune to moral criticism. See, e.g.,

<http://www.tuccille.com/blog/2007/11/fighting-rape-with-porn.html>

and

<http://www.slate.com/id/2152487/?nav=tap3>