

Case 8.

A growing number of universities have recently started offering courses in the study of pornography. A few such courses are “Cyberporn and Society,” at the State University of New York at Buffalo; “Cinema and the Sex Act,” at the University of California, Berkeley; “Pornography in Popular Culture,” at the University of Iowa; and “Sex and the Law,” at UCLA.

Academic discussion of pornography has been around for a long time, usually in the context of first-amendment issues, gender and society, or feminist studies. But some professors say that merely studying pornography without watching it is ineffective, and they advocate in-class screening or display of pornographic material. Time Magazine quotes a Northwestern University professor of communication studies as saying, “University students are often too cool, too hip to understand why other people get perturbed [at pornography]. Showing a film like this allows them to react and then take a step back and analyze their reaction with the critical reflective tools you give them.” The film she was referring to was “Salò, or 120 days of Sodom,” which, she says, disgusted and horrified students who had previously expressed staunchly liberal views about freedom of expression.

Promoting pornography is not the goal expressed by teachers of these courses. Those who teach pornography typically do so to warn of its psychological dangers, expose its corrosive impact on culture, and alert the audience to the harm it does to the understanding of what it is to be human. For instance, according to Anna Reading, a Reader in Arts and Media at London (UK) South Bank University, Andrea Dworkin, an outspoken opponent of pornography, toured England and America promoting her book, “Pornography: Men Possessing Women” (1989). On this tour she gave lectures in which she read passages that depicted women as sexual slaves. According to Reading, “Her lectures shocked, disgusted, and dismayed student audiences, generating a new wave of women and some men to become involved in questioning the ideology of pornography.”

However, many people think the college classroom is not an appropriate venue for such materials. Wendy Wright, director of Communications for Concerned Women for America, asserts that studying it in the classroom “lends legitimacy to pornography.” She says, “One thing that we can do is let it be known that this is happening, and to let parents know that the education they are helping to fund is being spent not on education, but rather promoting pornography.”

Even some professors who teach courses on pornography have reservations. According to Paul Abramsom, a professor of psychology at UCLA, pornography is “so pervasive in our culture, most students have already seen it,” so, actually showing it in class seems unnecessary.