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Sex in the Syllabus — Adventures in Academic Misconduct

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TIME magazine reports that increasing numbers of colleges and universities are offering academic courses in pornography — complete with pornographic films, materials, and paraphernalia.

Look at the introductory paragraphs by *TIME*'s Lisa Takeuchi Cullen:

With classwork like this, who needs to play? Undergraduates taking Cyberporn and Society at the State University of New York at Buffalo survey Internet porn sites. At New York University, assignments for Anthropology of the Unconscious include discussing X-rated Japanese comic books. And in Cinema and the Sex Act at the University of California, Berkeley, undergrads are required to view clips from Hollywood NC-17 releases like Showgirls and underground stag reels.

It's called the porn curriculum, and it's quietly taking root in the ivory tower. A small but growing number of scholars are probing the aesthetic, societal and philosophical properties of smut in academic departments ranging from literature to film, law to technology, anthropology to women's studies. Those specialists argue that graphic sexual imagery has become ubiquitous in society, so it's almost irresponsible not to teach young people how to deal with it. "I was amazed by how much the students knew about pornography but how little they knew how to think about it," says Jay Clarkson, a graduate student in communications who introduced the University of Iowa's Pornography in Popular Culture class last fall. But although Clarkson and his peers may agree that porn studies have a place in the curriculum, they are divided over how far professors should go in teaching them. Do students really need to watch a couple copulating onscreen to understand why pornography turns people on? Or does a stimulating essay on the nature of desire provide just as much if not more insight?

Linda Williams, a film professor at the University of California, Berkeley, told *TIME*, "I'm quite critical of pornography. . . . I'm not trying to teach people to accept the existence of it. As with any tradition of moving-image culture, we need to take it seriously. We need to try and come at it with some theoretical tools." We need to come at it with some theoretical tools? Who is kidding whom? Is the taxpaying public of California ready to subsidize this kind of public education? Evidently so.

More:

Parents who foot the bill for such epiphanies often start out eyeing those courses with varying degrees of skepticism. After Matthew Schwartz told his parents he was enrolling in the cyberporn class at Buffalo last year, his mother Fran joked that he had got the school to tailor a class around his interests. His father Marvin complained, "I'm paying for you to study what?" The class delved into what causes cultures to define pornography in different ways—lessons that Schwartz, 21 and a senior, says will make him more sensitive in his planned career as a translator in Arab countries. "It turned out to be about societal norms—not fluff at all," says his mother. How open-minded of her.

What about the school administrators? Surely they must be bracing for a backlash. Evidently not:

Administrators at schools that offer porn studies find themselves caught between their desire for cutting-edge

scholarship and their reluctance to stir up controversy. "I wish I had more faculty doing this kind of exciting work," says David Penniman, a dean at Buffalo who oversees Halavais' cyberporn course. Penniman acknowledges that the graphic images used in the class may upset some people, but, he adds, "it's tricky for a dean or university president to try to dictate what should or shouldn't be in the syllabus." It's especially tricky at state schools where legislators help determine school funding. After Clarkson's course appeared in the catalog at the University of Iowa, a state politician threatened to withdraw school funding. (He dropped his efforts only after he learned that lessons wouldn't involve explicit visuals.)

Dean Penniman wants more "faculty doing this kind of exciting work." You can count on this — he will get them.

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