

Personal self-defense against the hardcore empire is no longer enough. We need something else.

by Marina Terragni

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"I think porn is a disgrace. I used to watch a lot of it. I started when I was something like 11 years old. I think it destroyed my brain, I felt devastated. The first few times I had sex I wouldn't say no to things that wouldn't be good for me. I was doing them because I thought I should be attracted to them." The self-awareness of Billie Eilish, 21-year-old author of *What Was I Made For* on the soundtrack to *Barbie*, a pop star with 70 million monthly listens on Spotify, explains how with our instrumentalized boomer-words like "consent," "desire," "pleasure" will get us nowhere.

Stories such as in Palermo where a girl was dragged like a lamb by seven peers until the rigorously filmed final gang rape are not uncommon. There was the collective abuse of two 12-year-old girls last New Year's Eve in a villa in Fiorentino, filmed as well, and the violence on another New Year's Eve in a small villa in Primavalle with a pack of males onto of a 16-year-old girl who would later end up in a whirlpool of depression and self-harm. That's it. We won't understand anything about these stories if we don't become aware of how cyberporn has been cannibalizing for too long the free and joyful perverse-polymorphous imagination of girls and boys aged 10 and up in order to impose a sexuality made up of physical pain, humiliation and "consensual" submission.

"I used to think that if you didn't like hardcore, things like pulling out your hair or spanking, it was because you were boring in bed. So I pretended to like them," one girl told the *Guardian*. "When men on screen do a lot of violent things to the women they have sex with the effect is always the same: the women arch their backs and moan louder. Porn takes something that used to be considered niche and continues to show and re-show it in a mainstream context until it is normalized."

It's no party for young males either, grappling with images of punishment, snuffing (choking) and death clips ("fucked and killed") which are as far from love as they could possibly be. There are people who would empty their pockets to get a glimpse of Palermo's video. If you film it, only then is it real, the scene of the sex crime becomes a set; the flesh is virtual and needs evidence of reality. But there are also people who during the lockdown porn-binged and have never stopped. They're plagued with addiction, obsessive-compulsive consumption, depression, indifference to the tenderness of real bodies, and erectile dysfunction. "If I can't rip you apart or at least cause you cyanosis with a choke collar, I don't enjoy it." Studies show that the brains of regular porn-consumers have a smaller reward system from which follows the need for more and more extreme material to get aroused. Software and apps have even sprung up to self-block porn sites, such as *Remojo* by the young British entrepreneur Jack Jenkins, as well as those dedicated mental health services.

"I often think that if there had been a filter on the Internet when I was 13 I would be married with children now and I wouldn't have to have this conversation," confesses one patient to British psychotherapist Paula Hall, who specializes in sex and pornography addiction. Even Jenkins, the inventor of *Remojo* says, "we cannot hold children accountable for interacting with this content. It's shameful that we accept the situation as it is."

You feel like proposing emotional and sexual education in schools and calling out to those poor wretches of parents their responsibilities. But the grooming of the porn industry is too pervasive and powerful, personalized self-defense is not enough.

The weapon could be *Age Verification Laws*, laws that introduce mandatory age verification to access porn sites. In Virginia, access will be allowed only after showing one's digital ID; responsibility for enforcing the new rules will fall on the sites. In protest, *Pornhub* has blocked users in the state, and the *Free Speech Coalition* is considering legal action. Privacy and security concerns have also been raised. Arkansas has followed Utah and Mississippi in restricting children's use of social media, and a dozen other states, including California, are discussing age-control regulations.

In the UK, a law could be in place by 2024 with 78 percent of Britons in favor, according to a GB News poll. Voice and facial biometrics could be one of the control devices.

Similar regulations are also being studied in Germany, Spain, Belgium, and France, where one-third of minors aged 10-11 and older surf hardcore sites at least once a month. Overseas, the new rule could go into effect within the year, despite the tug-of-war with the hardcore giants. But, say the French, coordinated European action would be needed.

Is there any other way forward? At the moment, it is not in sight.

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