The Image is (Not) the Event: Negotiating the Pedagogy of Controversial Images

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Negotiating the Pedagogy of Controversial Images

In recent years, there have been a number of high-profile cases of professors using controversial images and displays in their classrooms. In this essay, we ask not why but how professors go about presenting potentially controversial images in the context of their course. To what extent do they frame these images for their students? What are their selection criteria? Are students required to view the images? Are they even presented with a choice? Through these larger framing questions, we then analyze the why outside the constraints of debates around free choice and gratuitousness, seeking to understand the stakes for the use of these images as essential components of learning, debate, provocation, and knowledge acquisition in the university context.

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Professor Patricia Adler meant to cause trouble of a very specific kind—she wanted, quite deliberately, to problematize her students' understanding of "prostitute" as an identity category. She wanted to show them exactly how broad it is and how much class stratification comes to bear in an arena many think of as straightforward (Jaschik, 2013). To do so, she had students perform as various categories of prostitute, an exercise she had done several times over the last year. This time, however, the performances caused a new kind of trouble, and Adler was asked to stop offering this very popular lecture . . . or to stop teaching at all.

Adler was stunned: She had been teaching this course for years with no institutional pushback. She did not expect any. Her students, in turn, were outraged; Adler's intervention, they felt, was thoughtfully framed, carefully communicated, and highlighted important and germane issues. It was not gratuitous.

The Adler case highlights a number of intersecting issues around pedagogy and controversial images. At stake, beyond questions of freedom of speech in the classroom, is a balance between content and method. Adler could have taught this topic in a different way, of course, one that might have been less controversial. Would that have made it less effective? Do we need to trouble students with

images in order to trouble their preconceptions? How do the pedagogues themselves approach these questions?

Adler is hardly alone in these debates, which get to the heart of issues of experiential learning, the nature of the classroom experience, and the role of the pedagogue and her decisions. In recent years, there have been a number of high-profile cases of professors teaching with controversial images and displays. These cases have caused a stir for their supposed salaciousness, prompting *TIME* magazine to ask, "With classwork like this, who needs to play?" (Cullen 2006). From explicit instructional films screened in the sex education classroom to pornographic materials shown in sociology courses (McGuiness, 2012; Smith, 2012), pornography has, perhaps unsurprisingly, dominated these more recent scandals. However, the recent outcry over U.K. schools allegedly omitting the Holocaust from history lessons altogether for fear of offense (BBC News, 2007) shows that concerns about the teaching of controversial materials extend beyond the realm of the sexually explicit.

Some of these notable cases fell outside of a strict classroom setting, including debates around extracurricular film screenings, invited lecturers, public performances, and art instillations, the most notorious of these arguably being the live sex demonstration staged as part of a human sexuality course on Northwestern's campus in

2011 (Helliker, 2011). Protests in response to the teaching of such materials have been continuous but varied in their dimension, involving the students themselves as well as parents, politicians, community members, and the media outlets that covered the events. The debates these cases bring to light are dominated by concerns with freedom of speech, pedagogical value, and community standards, and generate significant questions regarding both ideology and pedagogy. Yet in all instances, the underlying concerns are rooted in the continuing question of societal and educational boundaries and in unyielding anxieties about determining exactly "how much is too much."

However, the attempt to set such boundaries, as university officials, parents, and students have all feverishly sought to do, misses a fundamental part of the story. This article seeks to go beyond the question of standards to engage directly with professors invested in teaching through images that might be deemed "controversial," investigating their approaches to using such visual materials in the classroom. Rather than considering the potential risks involved in their pedagogical practice, or whether such risk should be regulated, we first ask not *why* but *how* professors go about presenting potentially controversial images in the context of their courses. To what extent do they frame these images for their students? What are their selection criteria? Are students required to view the images, or are they presented with a choice? Through these larger framing questions, we are then able to analyze the *why* outside of the constraints of debates around free choice and gratuitousness, seeking to understand the stakes for the use of these images as essential components of learning, debate, provocation, and knowledge acquisition in the university context.

We focused on two subject-area categories: pornography and atrocity photos. These two broad categories most frequently use controversial images and are, therefore, the most extensively discussed in the literature. We wished to include a third category, ethnographic films, but this yielded almost no interview data. Scholars using pornography and atrocity images were willing to discuss their choices, due in part to the rich literature in these arenas. Thinking through the similarities and differences between sex and violence as image categories was highly productive, as it helped us explore what kinds of images would best engender productive discussions on difficult topics.

Through semistructured telephone and personal interviews, each lasting between half an hour and an hour, with 14 university pedagogues across a variety of humanities and social science fields, we sought to understand why scholars show controversial images, how the concern around such images frames their own pedagogical approach, and to what extent there are similarities between the kinds of issues each category presents. We learned about a variety of pedagogical approaches scholars apply when deploying potentially controversial images in the classroom, showing that despite considerable differences in subject matter, course type, and institutional context, important similarities emerged. Based on our data, we identified three key trends, all of which show that the trouble caused by using controversial images was not about the images at all but rather about the troubling of ideas—or, to put it another way, about learning. Each trend speaks to the careful decisions made by the professors in question and to the centrality of images to a broader pedagogical imperative which, in all cases, eclipsed the image itself. An important backdrop to these findings was the uniform lack of resistance that our respondents experienced from their institutions; none of the professors expressed professional concern over their pedagogical choices. Given the nature of the study, however, our sample was likely somewhat self-selecting on this topic. We deduced that professors who had experienced reprisals, privately or otherwise, would have been less likely to speak with us about these key issues.

1. *The image was not the event.* Professors deployed images strategically in order to demystify them, often finding that the discussions about the images were far more provocative than the images themselves.

2. *Framing: Images were carefully selected, and students were thoughtfully prepared for the experience.* The images used were never random, and the professors always had specific pedagogical goals in mind related to the particular images they chose. While professors had various approaches to framing the viewing experience, none of them tried to explicitly shock or surprise the students by showing them images without an introduction.

3. *The images were not used to cause crisis.* The courses themselves were often unsettling and caused students to reconsider their ideas, which was in consonance with most professors' approach to pedagogy. These reconsiderations thus did not stem from the images, which were always used to support larger course trajectories.

Through chronicling these practical and ideological approaches, the fundamental set of questions at the heart of this investigation emerges more clearly: What work does the image do in the classroom? Moreover, how do images that are challenging, by a range of standards, shape how the classroom experience takes form? Are the images causing trouble, or is the trouble (for worse and for better) in the way they are presented? By asking about the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of showing these images despite (or perhaps because of) their controversial nature, we seek to open up new questions about what can be learned from a deconstruction of shock itself.

Literature Review

Many scholars have researched the pedagogy of teaching sex and teaching violence, though rather fewer have thought these through together. We combine them here to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between troubling images and troubling preconceptions. Both of these are broad categories, and both are moving targets: Porn and atrocity, and the boundaries around them, have changed over time. And they are taught in a variety of ways, many of which do not include visual material. But it is the images themselves that seem to be causing the trouble, inciting questions of what is necessary, what is useful, how those considerations come together in the classroom. Some of the literature is engaged with justifying the use of images through philosophical and pedagogical rationale; other work emphasizes best practices and guidelines. Many scholars discuss their own challenges and resolution around these questions. Broadly, the literature is clear in its support of the use of controversial images in the classroom, not just in light of freedom of expression, but also given the value added by the material itself.

Many scholars have paid careful and detailed attention to the professional and pedagogical issues surrounding pornography in the classroom. Linda Williams (1994, 1999), and Peter Lehman (2006), among others, has outlined the responsibilities of professors to thoughtfully frame their materials and have debated in depth the use of consent forms and the ways in which they elevate the expectation of offense. Lehman has noted that, as a male professor, he must be particularly careful of charges of sexual harassment, and thus does issue consent forms, despite the risk of framing the class in terms of potential controversy (Lehman, 2006). Brian McNair has also pointed out the particular challenges facing male professors and has

outlined some of his strategies for defraying these concerns (McNair, 2012). While these considerations engage with the relationship between the pedagogues and their students, asking questions about captive audience and differentiating between required and elective courses, they are highly specific to the issues of pornography and porn studies in particular. We sought to broaden the question to one of pedagogical practice more generally and found particular resonance in the use of pornography outside a strict porn studies context.

Atrocity scholars have been equally thoughtful in their considerations of the use of images and documentation in the public sphere, particularly around image fatigue, iconicity, and aestheticization of horror. Susan Sontag perhaps introduced the terms of the discussion in her literal reading of the "camera as gun" (Sontag, 1977). David Campbell (Campbell, Levinson, & Hess, 2012), Barbie Zelizer (2000, 2010), Marianne Hirsch (2005), Griselda Pollock (1999), Geoffrey Batchen (2002; Batchen, Gidley, Miller, & Prosser, 2012), Mick Gidley (1993), and Jay Prosser (2005), among others, have engaged deeply in these questions in both their written work and in various conferences on the topic. Most of this research and theoretical analysis has focused on atrocity images in the journalistic and public sphere rather than in the scholarly and classroom context; in the nuanced debate around the use of atrocity photos writ large, considerably less research has been devoted to teaching with atrocity photos. There is careful attention paid to the risks of turning atrocity photos into aesthetic objects, as well as concern with viewers getting used to seeing horror and ceasing to let it affect them. The "cereal test" asks if an image is appropriate viewing for breakfast; there is no classroom analogue.

Rebecca A. Adelman's work is a notable exception; she is specifically interested in teaching atrocity through images and argues that the images are inseparable from the events themselves. She suggests we reframe our approach entirely, challenging the idea of transparency and working toward reflexivity in viewing practices (Adelman, 2014). Her arguments are highly consonant with our findings in that professors overwhelmingly argued that they used images to challenge students to think about their own relationship to viewing practices as reflective of the issues they represent. While our initial assumption was that most scholars assumed the pedagogical mandate overwhelmed the related concerns, our interview data show that professors are highly concerned about the use of atrocity photos in their classrooms and

deploy them thoughtfully, carefully, and, often, sparingly. While many scholars did express their sense that these images enhanced their teaching in necessary ways, they were highly selective in their choices, operating in consonance with larger concerns about atrocity images as well as paying attention to the specifics of the classroom context.

Methodology

We interviewed 14 professors whose teaching practices include the use of pornographic and Holocaust images in the classroom. These two areas of interest are, to some degree, loose groupings of particular subject matters but were chosen to reflect categories that not only had resonance with the high-profile cases that have recently brought a renewed media attention to the issue of controversial materials in education, but also to encompass within them a range of disciplines, from history to communication, albeit in disparate ways: engaged with questions of the ethics of teaching with visually challenging content. These subjects were identified through an Internet search of syllabi, as well as through a search for existing writing and research on the subject of controversial materials, to inform us of conscious practitioners as a starting point. We did not explicitly seek professors who had encountered controversy or pushbacks to their use of such images but instead sought out individuals who would actively use challenging images in the classroom and whom we thus felt likely had thought through and put into practice the pedagogical questions and approaches we wanted to know more about. Our definition of "images" was purposefully broad, encompassing film, photography, and art, and even, in some cases, performance or other visual displays. To that end, the point was not to interrogate the content itself, or set too rigid a boundary on the medium, beyond that it be visual and not text based. Our goal was rather to connect to educators deploying a range of challenging visual content in the classroom and assess continuities in how these materials were dealt with across mediums and disciplines.

These preliminary searches produced a list of potential subjects whom we contacted via a standard e-mail form that informed them that we were doing a study about images of pornography and atrocity in the classroom. Our response rate was strong (with certain disciplinary caveats to be addressed later), though, due to various conflicts, there were a few subjects we were unable to interview, leaving us with 14 subjects willing to be interviewed. Using a semistructured interview process with the same script of questions for each

subject, most interviews were conducted over the phone; two were conducted in person. All interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Our semistructured script contained both demographic and descriptive questions, though most of the interviews developed organically. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and qualitatively assessed by both us and two other graduate students. While we did not formally code the interview data, we all worked collaboratively to seek out major themes in the responses collected. We took a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyzing the interview data and were careful to approach it without preconceived expectations of how professors would respond; in other words, it was important to us to let the data speak for themselves.

Professors identified their disciplinary commitments, the classes in which they introduced potent visual material, students and administrative reactions to such material, their framing techniques, their response to objections, whether classes were required or optional, small or large, upper or lower level, as well as information about their institutions and student body. We found very little meaningful differences based on institutions, class sizes, and other demographic information, though admittedly the strictly structural components of pedagogy were not the primary focus of our interviews. For the purposes of this study, we used informants' categories to define pornography: If scholars identified their material as pornographic, so did we. This approach excludes, for example, sex education, biology, and ethnographic images. We left it to our informants and the literature to delineate the distinctions made between various kinds of pornography.

While we anticipated some rejections in the response rate, the spread across fields and topic areas was itself quite instructive. We noticed certain trends among the reasons some scholars chose not to participate that seemed to reflect specific disciplinary practices and concerns. In particular, the response rate was highest for scholars using atrocity images. Scholars teaching with pornography were slightly less responsive, with a higher response rate from those whose courses were not about pornography as such but who used images to illustrate particular points about free speech, feminism, media industries, and the like.

Some rejections were due to scheduling difficulties or lack of interest in the topic, but it was the other, less straightforward (and less clearly articulated) responses that piqued our

interest. We noticed that among the pornography studies scholars, many felt that their scholarly writing had addressed the topic already. Holocaust scholars were, on the whole, willing and interested to talk with us. We hypothesized that scholars who teach with pornography had, by the very nature of their topic, to deal with the issues in our study, leading to at least some secondary material on the ways to use porn in the classroom. In the case of porn studies, the images themselves are often analyzed formally, making them a necessary and thus nonnegotiable part of teaching. Yet our interests lay less in extracting disciplinary-specific approaches to image usage, and more in deciphering broader concerns, approaches, and considerations within the decision to use such images. In certain kinds of classes, the decision was made by the topic itself; because of this, some of our most fruitful conversations were with Communication Studies scholars who used pornography to illustrate specific aspects of the course rather than as the subject of the course overall. Our own background in Communication Studies and personal connection with many of our respondents likely affected our relationship to this data. Those porn scholars who did speak with us were often well rehearsed in their responses, having already had to consider carefully the question of controversy both in their research and their teaching practice. However, although the why question was perhaps less pressing in these cases, we felt it important to include these respondents in our sample because of the centrality of the how, as well as the interesting ways in which their practice overlapped with other, less clear-cut cases.

Professors teaching with atrocity images offered the richest source of subjects. We found that scholars were very willing to think about their own classroom practice and how they approached the use (and nonuse) of photos. While professors differed in their understanding of why they chose to show pictures and the pedagogical goals they achieve therein, we found remarkable agreement around how they approached the use of images in their classrooms.

The Image Is (Not) the Event

Despite the intense attention paid by both students and scholars to the use of images in the classroom, we found that in most cases, *the image was not the event*. While tremendously important as a teaching tool, both to reflect particular events and considerations, and as a way to frame the discussion of these events, the images were often deployed to highlight the very extent to which they were not the point. Even in cases where they

were used for formal analysis (such as pornographic films in porn studies classes), professors repeatedly emphasized that the images served to relieve, rather than heighten, students' anxiety and concern about the controversial nature of what they were seeing. The point repeatedly emphasized by professors was that the pictures were, in the end, simply not as shocking as their students imagined them to be.

Two professors of Communication Studies, coming from seemingly opposite perspectives, expressed similar sentiments about the ways in which students imagine pornography to be more offensive than the images are in reality. A tenured professor at a private research university uses a page from a soft-core porn magazine in an undergraduate class on freedom of expression to "demystify both images and language, which are, after all, only representations." This professor strives to upset "the default interpretation of pornography for these students . . . that pornography is degrading of women and disempowers them." She strives to "make this picture more complicated before we decide," emphasizing that while not showing an image "doesn't look like the easy way, but it can be" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). She feels that showing the image causes students to reconsider their assumptions, and even those who were most concerned about viewing pornography, who "were anticipating something very gross . . . were relieved that it was not so serious." In fact, this professor expressed concern that her own framing of the particular class in which the images were to be viewed contributed to the buildup of the image, triggering "their imagination of what they're going to see, [which is] a little too creative" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011).

For this professor, the idea of the images was more powerful than the image itself proved to be. This power worked against the students' ability to participate in a discussion of freedom of expression around pornographic images, creating a pedagogical imperative to show an example of the image to deflate expectations. The images were significantly less offensive than the students imagined them to be, and by showing an example, the professor enabled a more productive and interesting discussion. Rather than creating controversy and offense, the use of the image in this context enabled a dialogue that would otherwise have been impeded by the fantasy of the image. The lack of controversy over the image, the lack of *event* around the image, served to remove a pedagogical barrier. The use of the image showed definitively that the rhetoric around the visuals was far more interesting than

the visuals themselves; students were not shocked by the actual image and were far more interested in the discussion than the picture.

Another professor of Communication Studies also engaged with the question of potentially disturbing images of both pornography and war. However, he differed dramatically in approach from the previously mentioned professor, choosing "not to show any images which are disturbing in terms of either violence or sex," and seeking instead to deal with "pornography without pictures." While these two approaches seem to be utterly opposed, the underlying assumptions are quite similar, as this professor feels that "the language is just as provocative and even more interesting to deal with." He feels that "what's really scary is words and sounds." He claims that "a word is worth a thousand pictures," and that pictures themselves inhibited discussion. To that end "by avoiding images you're able to do intellectual work that you couldn't do otherwise."

This professor argues that the images themselves are significantly less interesting than the discussions they generate, despite students' expectations to the contrary. Even though "they want pictures and they want films, the thing that's most memorable, I find for students, is people talking passionately" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). For this Communications professor, the discourse around the images was much more pedagogically rewarding than the display of the images, which he felt to be unnecessary. This professor expressed concern for "student sensibilities," including "people in minority or religious positions," that might lead to "not wanting to look at certain kinds of things" more so than did most of our other respondents. He also noted that professors could avoid "institutional troubles by avoiding pictures." Like many other respondents, when he did show what he called "gruesome" war photographs in an undergraduate class, he prefaced their display with a warning and the statement that he would be "totally fine if anyone feels like closing their eyes" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). However, he used such images sparingly, feeling that they often presented a barrier to the kind of enlivening and engaging discussion that he tries to foster.

Though he approaches the use of images in the classroom for an entirely different perspective than the aforementioned Communications professor, both overlap in the strong belief that the actual images are far less provocative than their imaginary in the minds of students. Where these two professors differ is in the way that they

believe provocation is best harnessed in the classroom setting. Both agree, however, that the images themselves are significantly less interesting than the discussion around them, a realization that seems dissonant with the range of recent news generated from supposed "controversies" of controversial images in educational settings. These media narratives emphasize the offense generated by *what* exactly is presented in the classroom. Yet to educators, it is resoundingly the question of *how* to generate a fruitful and educational discussion, and the importance of showing the image to highlight that gap is the matter of debate. What is not a matter of debate is the understanding that the image itself is not the event—the conversation around it is.

Pedagogical Framing

It comes as no surprise that professors very carefully framed both the images and the viewing experience for their students. Some courses were explicitly devoted to image analysis, in which case much of the framing was done by the syllabus itself, whereas others used images for selected class sessions that were not always telegraphed explicitly in course material. The latter courses (like the Freedom of Speech class that uses a porn image in one session) present specific concerns around captive audiences who may not have known in advance what their assignments entailed. In this context, professors differed in the extent and nature of their preparation to students for the introduction of images, depending on their own pedagogical philosophies and their goals in using the images themselves. Some spent a great deal of time framing the images in advance through historical context, institutional frameworks, and technical information, all of which served to demystify the image and allow students to see it as part of a larger whole related to the classroom material. For others, such an approach undermined the goals of the use of visual material.

In the latter case, most professors felt that students knew what the course entailed at the outset and proceeded accordingly in terms of their concerns about classroom controversy. This approach did not, however, lessen the extent to which they felt a pedagogical responsibility to frame the images themselves during the classroom analysis; they were simply less concerned with the possibility that students would be offended due to surprise. They still taught the image when showing it; they just did rather less work preparing students for what they were about to see. As one professor of Art and Art History noted about her classes on memory

and atrocity, "Right from the title, students know what they're signing up for it. It's a self-selected group." This self-selection is fostered by the professor at the outset because even though "People don't walk into a class on Holocaust film expecting it to be really breeze. . . . I do, right at the beginning, from the very first class meeting, talk about just how emotional and difficult the course is going to be," so that "if you're not up for it, then this isn't the right class for you, essentially." She expects, and in fact invites, them to be, in her words "destabilized," as

> I think that one of the virtues and disturbing aspects of difficult images that produce difficult knowledge is that they do stabilize a sense of certainty that students have in terms of what they know about the world. I try and prepare them for that sense of destabilization.

These somewhat contradictory comments highlight yet again the gap between sex and violence in our society; even though students may know from the title of the course what the content is going to be, the professor does not expect them to understand the emotional impact of viewing a Holocaust film. She feels a responsibility to emphasize the material above and beyond the syllabus in order to create the type of classroom environment most conducive to the kind of class she wishes to run. For her, the ability to view this material requires sophistication, such that in "the lower level undergrad classes, I tend not to show controversial images" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). Students expect that they know what it is to view a Holocaust film, but they may be wrong. It is, according to this professor, harder than they think. Her framing therefore has to do with underscoring in advance the very serious emotional difficulty of the class.

Despite the clear presence of the visual material on the syllabus, professors often strategically give students the option to avoid viewing the images in question, precisely in order to mitigate against their doing so. As one professor noted about atrocity films,

> I always say if anybody feels uncomfortable or needs to leave, please feel free to do so—no effect on your grade, blah, blah, blah. It all ends up being sort of gratuitous discourse. Because it's never happened that anybody has stood up and walked out weeping or something.

The professor noted that "The key in all this is framing it. To show it, you have to set it up and all that stuff" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). By allowing students the option to leave, the professor defused the situation and created an environment in which students were comfortable staying.

Part of creating this environment is careful selection of the material. A tenured professor of Politics and African Genocide at an elite private university screens atrocity films in his class but doesn't "show the bloodiest pictures." While there are plenty of extreme images, the professor has chosen to have "sanitized it to an extent. I won't show sort of gruesome horror shocking pictures." Such pictures are, to his mind, unnecessary to his "motivations in teaching the class," which "is to keep it in at least a generation of students' public consciousness." More sanitized images, including "still images of bloody corpses on the ground or short news clips" can still do this effectively by offering "visual reminders that something really awful happened." Given the "almost iconic" nature of the images this professor uses, and because "there's sort of an understanding if you take the class on the Rwanda genocides, you may be exposed to some pretty awful things certainly and images can be part of those things," he does not offer an elaborate preparation for the viewing experience itself. Rather, "I've said this sometimes and sometimes I haven't—said something like, 'You may find some of the scenes visually disturbing.' And I leave it at that." He is careful to note, however, that the entire class is a discussion of the images and their content, so "it's not just sort of glossed over; we'll reference it directly, but not in that sort of meta-level of why was it there" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). For this professor, the students had enough knowledge of the prospective content to allow him to avoid managing expectations, even though the images themselves still served to underscore the gruesomeness of the events in a way that could not otherwise be done.

Other professors use their framing techniques as an explicit part of the pedagogical moment. One visiting assistant professor of Jewish Studies at a public university introduces Holocaust films by "initiating a conversation on whether or not I should be showing those films, and whether or not the library should even own those films, because they're horrible." She introduces the question of using film in the classroom in active discussion, having the students "talk over ethical historiographic and other issues that are going to arise." She wants students to consider not just the content of these films but also their context, using the classroom as an opportunity to teach

"students how to read the frame as well as how to read the image." This professor is careful to have "discussed the historical context for the images before [showing] them" in service of "preparing students for what they are going to see." This approach, she notes, lays the groundwork for the viewing experience, but can never replace it. This professor frames the experience in order to avoid having the students' discomfort impede their ability to actually take in the context of the images because "no matter how much your read or talk about an event, it is never commensurate with seeing it visually" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011).

For these professors of atrocity, the production and framing of the images are as much a part of the classroom focus as their content. They feel that their subject and its power and import cannot fully be understood without images. Part of their pedagogical goal was to emphasize the very serious nature of their topic, a goal that could only be achieved by using images themselves. However, the strong and consistent emphasis on the framing and production of the images removes some of the attention from the images themselves, again underscoring the extent to which the content of the image is only a small part of the viewing event.

While some of these approaches and concerns may seem unique to issues of atrocity photos and films, we found a number of overlaps in the comments of those dealing with pornography. Professors studying pornography expressed similar sentiments around framing and careful image selection. One tenured film professor who researches cyberporn explicitly decided to limit the kinds of sex he screens in class, as he "made the decision that there was no good reason to showing penetrating sex." The value of such images is negligible, while the reaction to it could overshadow the conversation and pedagogical focus. In his experience, showing penetration "didn't really add anything, so given that there was no reason to do that and that there was potential of again, harm, I kind of tried to edit that out." Like some of the professors dealing with atrocity images, this scholar felt that images are vital to the class topic, but that highly graphic material of a certain kind actually detracted from the discussion and understanding of the course content. He felt that porn was not a special case, however, and noted his introduction to be the same for "any video I show whether or not it's pornography" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). While "it was framed pretty specifically," he, like many of the subjects, felt that framing was fundamental to any visual experience. In other words, the exceptionality of

the content lay in its visuality rather than its pornography, as "there's a very different kind of set of perceptual equipment, a perceptual frame when it comes to visual and auditory and textual material."

Another senior scholar in porn studies argued that viewing pornography is a vital component to its analysis because "I don't think that we can talk about these things without them actually seeing some of these materials." This point is particularly true about pornography, as "when it comes to pornography, for sure I think that's really important that they look at some of the stuff that has been talked about. . . . You have to look at it. You have to see it." She, like others, uses the viewing process as itself a topic of discussion, as she "would talk through why I think it's interesting that we look at this material" and "why I want to show that material." She also carefully selects her content, clearly "measure[ing] what kind of images I'm going to use," because "it's a purpose to what I'm going to show. I might use a scene, something that's a very hardcore scene, but I cut it at the point where they move into really explicit [acts]."

All of the academics we spoke to drew lines about what they would show, or more accurately, what they felt they needed to show. This decision was seemingly based on the acknowledgment of a line between what is gratuitously provocative and what is interestingly pedagogical. For those working with pornography, not showing penetration is a consistent theme. A film scholar who shows porn "ended up editing out the most lascivious pieces of it" and would "cut off right before sex" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). A senior Communications professor agreed: "I'm not interested in embarrassing [students], so my tendency in later years has been to stay away from erect penises and stuff like that." The point here is that there is a very specific point, which is fulfilled by "a very specific image" designed to destabilize the "default interpretation of pornography [that it] is degrading of women and disempowers them." As this professor is not teaching an entire course on pornography but rather using it in a specific module, students do not necessarily know that they will be seeing pictures as part of the porn discussion. As part of her project to demystify porn, the professor carefully but casually frames the viewing experiences by saying it "as simply as, 'I'm going to show some pictures—we're going to talk about porn, of course, next time, I'm going to show some pictures. If you think you're going to be uncomfortable, send me a note.'" Like some of our other subjects, she emphasized that the

analysis of porn was conducted "like we have a discussion about ordinary texts in the class . . . there's no treating it as different from anything else" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011).

While one professor noted that he recognizes "everyone's basis for not wanting to look at certain kinds of things as something more than just lack or courage or lack of education or something," (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011), that acknowledgment manifested in a warning about upcoming images rather than the decision not to show them. This move raises another set of key issues posed to our interviewees—if, after the careful framing and thoughtful introductions and full disclosure of upcoming material, students still voiced objections or concerns, would professors force them to look? If not, how would such student objections be handled?

For many of our subjects, students' refusal to see the images indicates that the professors themselves have failed—to frame the images correctly, to inspire students to push themselves, and to ask students to put their own assumptions into consideration. With this in mind, professors have a variety of approaches to facilitate students navigating their own discomfort with certain material. One professor tells students that "I'm totally fine if anyone feels like closing their eyes" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). Another noted that even though "you were really expected to see this stuff . . . if something is making you feel uncomfortable you can leave and you can talk to us about it" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). One gave students the opportunity to opt out well in advance, telling them the week before showing pornography that "if this makes you uncomfortable in any way, let me know, and we will work something out." This particular professor frames the situation in terms of problem solving. While viewing the material and participating in the discussion is an important part of the course, there may be ways to achieve the latter while comprising on the former; and indeed,

> Both times I've had a young woman contact me in the class and say they were concerned about it, and I offered them the option of sitting in a way that when I showed the magazine cover to the class or the pictures, they could not see it, or they had the option of coming to class late, or they had the option of looking down. And in both cases, they were anticipating something very gross, or who knows what

they were anticipating, but they were relieved that it was not so serious. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011)

Had the students avoided the class entirely, not only would they have missed the valuable discussion, but also they would never have come up against the limits of their own assumptions.

Not Wanting to Shock…but Hoping to Unsettle

While both porn and atrocity images are thus carefully framed, the intensity of porn viewing is less emphasized than that of atrocity viewing. Students may not have seen porn, but if anything, they over- (rather than under-) estimate the impact of the experience. Many professors work hard to calm expectations through a casual approach to the material, expressing the importance of "a sense of humor" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). Creating a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom is not just a way to foster discussion and alleviate potential embarrassment, though for many this is an important component to framing the images they show. One professor noted that she waits to show the images "mainly because I want the class to be comfortable with each other, to know each other, and to be comfortable with me." The emphasis is therefore on fostering trust and cultivating a certain comfort level not only between the students and the professor but also among the students themselves. This professor goes on to explain that she "certainly would never, at the beginning of the semester, say,

> 'Hey, we're going to look at some porn eventually'—because I'd never say that we're going to look at some porn eventually, that's too embarrassing and crazy for them then when they don't know each other and don't know me.

Consistent with her and others' goals of calming expectations and demystifying the images, this professor (of a nonporncentric class) introduces pornographic images in a matter-of-fact fashion, framing it as yet another image among many in the course, and only when the students have already reached familiarity with one another. The point is not to destabilize the students' relationship with each other but rather their expectations of the texts. As another professor put it, "it's not about wanting to shock the life out of them" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). Such an approach would be both gratuitous and pedagogically harmful, perhaps "disturbing students to the point where they can't think somehow, like they're short-circuited"

(Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). Rather, it is about putting the discourse of controversy itself in question.

Professors who teach with pornographic materials don't use it to deliberately shock their students by its graphic nature, at least not those professors in our sample. But what about images of atrocity and genocide? As we've already seen, many professors feel strongly that such images have to be seen to be understood and have to be understood in order to activate the students' consciousness of suffering. While professors frame these images and prepare the students to see them, do they also hope on some level to shock and surprise the students in order to achieve their goals?

Not according to our findings. While professors certainly underscored the importance of viewing atrocity images, they were consistent in their commitment to opening rather than shutting down discussion. One professor of genocide notes that while it is "part of the professor's duty to the students to present the material in what they believe to be the most effective way, even if that presentation makes student feel uncomfortable," there are "some films I haven't shown because I thought it was just sort of too much shock value" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). He firmly believes that "the students' learning has higher priority than the students' comfort level," but, in turn, that too much discomfort can actually impede learning.

It is, therefore, a fine balance. Professors using porn images seem to have negotiated their navigation smoothly, due in part to an awareness of what to expect based on course syllabi and topics and in part because professors control for the shocking nature of the images. It seems to be trickier for scholars using atrocity images, in part because the images themselves are fundamentally shocking—they are supposed to be. That is part of why they are used. Professors are faced with the challenge of framing the shock of the photos in such a way as to open, rather than close, a discussion that touches not just on the content, but its wider context. While, as we found, discomfort can be a valuable tool, if not carefully managed, it can take over the experience and limit the viewer's ability to learn, contribute, and understand. One professor argued that thinking through discomfort itself is an important component to the pedagogical experience: "I think education in general, regardless of Holocaust or whatever, should be about getting people to reflect on what it is that offends in the first place" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011).

And here we come to what is, in many ways, the heart of the matter: In the case of potentially unsettling material, who gets to decide on its educational centrality? Can the right balance be struck between discomfort and dialogue? And, most poignantly, is being unsettled a pedagogical value in and of itself? Overwhelmingly, our subjects said yes: yes that they, the professors, get to make the thoughtful decision about what students should see. Yes, with careful and thoughtful framing and discussion, the balance between potentially gratuitous material and highly productive discussion is not only possible, but probable and useful. And yes—in many ways, the fundamental point of education is to think critically about one's own assumptions and inclinations, even and perhaps especially to the point of possible discomfort. To put it another way: Students do not have the right not to be offended. In the words of one professor:

> I think students have the right to be offended—you can't require student to not be offended by something. On the other hand, I do think that as an instructor . . . if I have not introduced them to something that challenges their core beliefs I'm probably not doing a great job in teaching. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011).

Professors remain sensitive to student concerns but must balance those concerns with the fundamental educational imperative—to learn. "But I do think that part of the professor's duty to the students is to present the material in what they believe to be the most effective way, even if that presentation makes students feel uncomfortable. As noted one professor, "students' learning has higher priority than the students' comfort level. That doesn't mean that we can throw concerns for the students' comfort out of the window, but one has to think carefully about these issues" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011). That reflection came up time and again in our interviews, emphasizing that reflection borne of discomfort can be highly productive. As one professor noted:

> I think the whole purpose of education— or certainly a key purpose of education—is reflecting on and historicizing wherever it is you're coming from, your ideological background. And to think of it as, well, people have solid opinions. And then, if those are offended, so be it. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011)

Students wishing to engage only in material that reinforces their ideas are thus, according to our subjects, missing the point.

> You know, it's not about being in your comfort zone. Education means being challenged, and asking questions that you ordinarily do not even ask, and sometimes, yeah, realizing that question that might seem not even a question because the answer would be so self-evident actually is a really important question. I always have a dimension of the class that's about learning in general, the philosophy of inquiry as part of the process of questioning. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011)

Learning is therefore fundamentally about reconsidering. The process may be more obvious in classes with culturally loaded images but ought to be present in every interaction. With such a framework in place, every class could be said to contain potentially offensive material—it is just a question of how effectively it is presented.

Conclusion

This research, at its heart, is an exploration of the nature of pedagogy and the relationship between professors, classroom materials, and student attitudes, a relationship that is heightened in the case of controversial images. Yet we also envision it as a starting point for investigating related case studies that could tell us even more about how to navigate the complexities of teaching with controversial content.

Our study focused exclusively on visual images, which have generally been the most controversial media through which classroom pornography and atrocity has been delivered. We would be interested to know more about how professors have used written versions and descriptions of these topics and whether they frame these materials in a similar fashion. While the techniques used to analyze material differ with respect to their media, we would like to know what role the medium plays in both the perceived and actual controversy generated by these materials. Such an examination would be instructive regarding the relationship between text and image, as well as the role that medium itself plays in the experience of the content. We would like to know to what extent the medium was part of the decision of what to show. To that end, a finer-grained set of questions around media, expanded to include film, television, newspapers, books, magazines, images, and text, would be highly instructive.

This study provides the framework for a comparative analysis between various professionals and their use of controversial images. How do the considerations of the university instructor differ from, say, those of journalists, or advertisers, or lawyers, or medical practitioners? Who are the stakeholders in each professional category, and to what extent do they influence decisions made by practitioners? How much do financial and social considerations play into the decisions about what to show for each community?

Our research focused on two broad categories of images: pornography and atrocity. These subject-area categories could be broken down into subsections for more finely tuned analysis of how different sorts of controversial content shapes the classroom experience. One of our respondents did note that same-sex images produced far greater discomfort than heterosexual couplings, and several of our subjects commented on the boundaries they observed when choosing what images to show. Another study could examine these boundaries in depth, drawing conclusions about what kinds of images provoke more heated responses or greater discomfort. In addition, the categories themselves, though relatively broad for this study, could be expanded even further to explore other kinds of potentially controversial material, such as images of religious blasphemy.

We would also like to hear more from the students in these courses, such as whether they expressed their reactions in discussion or through their written work. Speaking to students would also be useful to uncover whether visual exposure to controversial material actually unsettled them or caused a change in opinion, understanding, or outlook. Finally, engaging directly with students would offer another perspective on whether these images were *actually* controversial or only imagined to be by careful pedagogues. Images do, and should, cause trouble. What we have found is that the trouble they cause is, largely, in the work they do to generate conversations around preexisting assumptions and ideas. They cause the kind of trouble that all classroom material ought to: They help students learn, and do so largely given the careful efforts of pedagogues to demystify and decentralize the images through a focus on their wider context, institutional position, social framing, and technical detail. They may shock, but, ideally, they do so as part of a wider conversation wherein the image is the least shocking part.

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