The Postmodern Don Juan Scoring on the Internet
Representation of Gender and Culture of Late Capitalism in the Film Don Jon (2013)

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay explores how the film Don Jon (2013) is an astute criticism on modern society, showing how gender inequality is embedded in media narratives and ultimately institutionalized in pornography. Reading the film through literary theories of the postmodern, such as Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler, the essay demonstrates how the setting and gender relations represented in the film exemplify the culture of late capitalism, with its fragmented sense of history and loss of meaning. The protagonist of the film, Jon, is a porn addict who is only concerned with the appearance of himself and the women in his life. Presenting a male protagonist who is unable to relate to anyone on an intimate level yet constantly tries to connect with women, the film plays with stereotypical representations of women and sex. The film further explores female roles and stereotypes with the juxtaposition of the two main female characters in the movie, Barbara and Esther. The themes are explored through the narrow point of view of the male protagonist, offering a satirical vehicle for the examination of the male attempt at navigating the fragmented postmodern surface. The constraints of traditional male social roles are also explored and the impact of homosocial bonding as a means for maintaining the status quo. The political implication of the pornography industry as a misogynic narrative, as it is demonstrated in the film, is explored, as is the porn addiction which the protagonist experiences, partly as a consequence of postmodern capitalism in Frederic Jameson’s terms. The misogyny found in pornography is shown to be a continuation of an essentialist narrative, institutionalizing inequality based on biology which then again will explain any material inequality between men and women. The development of the protagonist throughout the film is a political cry for a change by demonstrating how all agents, male or female, are suffering in the culture of late capitalism.
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"Condoms are terrible, they just are but you got to wear one because unlike porn, real pussy can kill you" (Don Jon, 2013)

Introduction

The film Don Jon (2013) is the directorial debut of the actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who also plays the leading role. The film follows Jon Marcello, a young man living in New Jersey, and his interactions with his friends and women against the backdrop of an overwhelming porn addiction. Jon's character development goes from a womanizing bartender in New Jersey whose goals in life is to score the most attractive woman, keeping a 'streak' going, sleeping with new women every weekend without fail. Jon claims that he likes his pornography better than sexual intercourse with real women, and the premise of the film is about his pornography addiction. He meets Barbara, a beautiful woman whom he considers to be a perfect ten and thus the ideal woman. However, throughout his relationship with her he realizes that what he considered to be ideal is not satisfying him. After he meets Esther he is finally able to connect to another human being on an intimate level and loses his objectifying outlook on life and thus the film concludes.

In an interview with Detail Magazine, Gordon-Levitt states that the movie is a comedy and an homage to his mother, who was very active in the US feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. As a result of his mother’s feminist perspective, Gordon-Levitt says he grew up keenly aware of the ways in which women were objectified in the media, and that he chooses to live his life in a way that represents that understanding.

With this pretext, one would expect an overtly-feminist film, which will be demonstrated later in the essay. However, after studying the film more deeply, I believe the film also reflects a deep, underlying sadness and emptiness, centered on the current state of Western culture. Specifically, the movie represents a disturbing but honest commentary on the consequences of unfettered capitalism. As I will demonstrate, this situation leaves women often as collateral damage when it comes to positive representation, but interestingly enough, as women are gaining more agency in both the public and private sectors, pornography and mainstream media advertisements have
evolved into a safe and accepting home for blatant misogyny. As Don Jon so aptly communicates, however, it is not only the women who suffer under these conditions, but the men too.

In this essay, I utilize post-modern theories as a frame, specifically the works by Frederic Jameson (Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism) and Jean Baudrillard (Simulacra and Simulation). Further, I interpret the movie from the perspective of feminist theories, specifically those articulated by Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, along with more contemporary feminist theories emphasizing the idea that a socially-constructed gender is seen as integral to any discussion on gender representation by the media. I will also draw from academic research on addiction to examine some of the more overt themes of the movie. The questions I pose here are the following: Does the film Don Jon demonstrate Jameson’s idea of the postmodern society of late Capitalism? The essence of Jameson’s theories are that this stage of capitalism portrays lack of connections to reality and pastiche has replaced parody and time and history is replaced by space and fragmented connections and/or juxtapositions. Is the movie an example of how Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra and simulation has invaded the historically-private sphere of human intimacy, where pornography has in some cases superseded real sexual relationships, and thus the hyperreal has taken over? How does the film Don Jon present the relationships of the characters and the role of gender, and are there any substantial counterpoints to those portrayals?

In this essay I will show that the answer to the first two questions is yes. However, the question remains whether the narrative as portrayed by Don Jon as Gordon-Levitt is realistic, or if there are plausible counterpoints.
1. The Culture of late Capitalism and the loss of meaning

Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is considered one of the most influential books in postmodernist theory. His book was published in 1991, his reading on modern society still rings true today, and is perhaps more timely in its call for an alternative narrative for our times. Some of the themes he examines e.g., the blurred lines between high and low culture, are so prominent today that they are almost prescient. The current coming-of-age generation—often termed “millennials”—has grown up in a world where there is no serious class-based distinction between films, TV series, art exhibitions, classical music, jazz, pop or any other kind of art and entertainment. If there is a distinction, it is more of a personal preference rather than a superimposed idea of a correct canon of works one should see as “true” art or, alternatively, sleazy entertainment. The flipside of this cultural phenomena is the ever increasing “commodification over all spheres of life [which] marks postmodernity’s reliance on the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’” (Felluga, Modules on Jameson).

In the movie *Don Jon* the commodification of sex is at the core of the narrative. The main character prefers masturbation to having real sexual intercourse, and is addicted to pornography. Although he claims that “all guys watch porn”, the extent of his consumption is extreme, and self-consciously hidden from even his male friends. As Jameson points out, the commodification starts to signify “a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary ‘theory’ and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum” (Jameson, p. 6). Instead of having real intimacy with another person, Jon craves his pornographic fix. A series of pornographic clips stream through his computer, but the sexual acts they are depicting are completely void of emotions, realness or any kind of intimacy. Similar to the dynamic of other addictions, Jon’s use of pornography is continually escalating, and he often spends hours in the search of the perfect clip that will finally make him “lose himself”. His addiction is so extreme that he experiences sexual arousal simply by the sound of his computer’s startup sequence. Modern technology has created a world in which pornography is accessed with the click of a button, often anonymously and at no financial cost. It is precisely this technology, Jameson noted, that is “the figure for a whole new economic world system” (Jameson, p. 6). The dystopic state in which a machine effectively substitutes for another human in
sexual interactions is in itself both unique to our times and foreboding for our society’s future. The ideas of Jean Baudrillard describe it well:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself – such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences. (Baudrillard, pp. 2-3)

Jameson also speaks to “the waning of affect” (p. 10), which fits the addiction Jon is experiencing perfectly. His is a slave to his addiction, and his temper is fierce, as can be seen in his road rage episodes throughout the film. According to Jameson, this culture of addiction is caused by a loss of any sense of historicity: reality is no longer real, and our only access to it is through series of fragments. In effect, we are more inhabiting spaces than experiencing a sense of time and connectivity.

With the loss of historicity, the present is experienced by the schizophrenic subject "with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect", which can be "described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity. (Jameson, 28-9) (italics are mine)

Gordon-Levitt’s character, Jon, displays all of these notions. He is driven, but connects to his surroundings superficially and does not seem to have any real direction, apart from feeding his addiction and maintaining his playboy status within his group. The only appearance of a more stable traditionalist order in his life is observed when he attends church with his family, ultimately confessing his sins. Even there, however, things are not what they seem. In what appears to be a highly-conscious attempt to direct the interpretation of viewers, Jon’s presence in church is accompanied by a cinematographic focus on the cross which, along with his confessions, would suggest a
cycle of sin-and-repent that is often cited in derisive critiques of the Catholic Church as a place to transact your sins away. The answer to whether Jon is actually receiving some kind of a substance—a spiritual redemption—from his church visits and confessions is more nuanced. On the one hand, there is some form of communication in the church; Jon is not just talking to a machine. The first church visits we see goes well, and Jon appears to get a load off his chest feeling his repentance is just and proper. However, in subsequent visits, patterns emerge and with them similarities between his church visits and his pornography-watching activities. Jon does not see the priest he confesses to, he is hidden within a box, and hands out, almost robotically, the Hail Marys for the sins. The robotic feel of the confessional box parallels with his computer interactions, and the distrusting reader might argue the priest could easily be replaced with an efficient machine that would detect the intensity of the “sins”—and dole out the Hail Marys accordingly.

The two main, and real, women in Jon’s life are Barbara, played by Scarlett Johansen and Esther, played by Julianne Moore, and it is through the relationship with these two that we follow the protagonist’s battle, with losses and finally a glimpse of transformation towards a more mature integrated individual.

It is only after Jon has met Esther and is seriously trying to change his life that he starts seeing a problem with his behaviour. He previously was directed to recite ten Lord’s prayers and ten Hail Marys, a task completed while working out. After his relationship with Barbara begins, he felt he was just in reciting only five Lord’s prayers and ten Hail Marys, as he has stopped watching pornography but was still engaging in sex out of wedlock since they were not married. He also feels he is justly punished when he gets a double dose after punching through a man’s window in a particularly violent road rage episode. After all his effort in freeing himself from the shackles of pornography, however, the priest does not change anything. Jon loses himself in Esther, believing he is on the “right path”. Proud of his accomplishments, he once-again attends confession with the priest. He confesses that he lied about previously ceasing his pornography habit, but now he has truly stopped. He tries to ask the Father if he is always the same man, or if there are a few different ones, but receives no answer, indicating how he is starting to question his surroundings. When he gets his usual ten Lord’s prayers and ten Hail Marys, he asks how those numbers are calculated, how sin is measured, since he gets the same amount as usual. Perhaps thinking Jon deserves less
considering his accomplishment, the priest absolves him of his sins, extolling him to have faith. In a notable departure from his normal routine, Jon does not do the usual kissing his cross and thank the father.

As Baudrillard maintains when discussing Western faith participating in the wager on representation, the institution of Church is not exempt from loss of meaning.

… what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. (Baudrillard, pp. 5-6)

As opposed to representation, where there is a sense of reality behind the sign, simulation “stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference” (Baudrillard, p.6). This dichotomy between the sign and the signified happens in four stages, according to Baudrillard. First, it is a reflection of a profound reality. In the second stage, it masks and denatures a profound reality. In the third stage, the sign masks the absence of a profound reality, and, finally, the sign has no relation to any reality whatsoever and is its own simulacrum (Baudrillard, p. 6). Based on these stages, it is tempting to locate the church in stage three, a tendency the deeply religious might wince at. Still, the notion of the church not functioning as a real alternative to the quest for meaning is certainly posed in the movie, and this notion is a valid critique, regardless of a reader’s personal religious beliefs.
2. Representation of women

If we apply Laura Mulvey’s theory to the film, as presented in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” we see Gordon-Levitt, as director, playing with the stereotypical representations of women as often depicted in cinema. He employs both Mulvey’s idea of the male gaze, in which women are viewed voyeuristically as whores and fetishized, but also diametrically (and to a lesser degree) as the unattainable pure angels. The audience is afforded a view of women through Jon’s eyes, which sell the alluring images in a manner and with an effectiveness similar to good advertisements. It goes without saying that the women in the pornography clips are fetishized to such an extent that they are no longer human, but just body parts where the “reality” of the human being behind the “sign” is completely amputated from the perspective of the consumer. The person (that would equal Baudrillard’s “profound reality”) is not a part of the capitalistic currency of this model, just the body parts, ergo the sign is not only masking the absence of a profound reality, but has already reached stage four as its own pure simulacrum.

The scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object), and, in contradiction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms, which this cinema has played on. The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of a man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form – illusionistic narrative film. (Mulvey, p. 351)

The simulacrum has created a gap between the actresses in the pornography and their perceived lack of meaning as consumer products. Still, the main character in the film, Jon, is being “educated” on women via his porn-use. Before we look at the major female characters in the movie, it is proper to see the women in the clubs as some sort of a continuation of the fetishized whore we find in the pornography. Jon and his friends commoditize women and their bodies, judging them with numerical ratings and comments about body parts that are based on the standards observed in pornography. If the “package” of body parts looks good, they get a high score.

Laura Mulvey employed Lacan’s model of psychological reading and her
conclusion was that films made by men within the hegemonic discourse would always exploit women through sexual objectification. The negation of women’s agency in films and the signified and sexualized void were in fact the very key to male dominance; only through the female negation did patriarchy thrive. Without the comparison via the voyeur, patriarchy would crumble and lose its power. In *Don Jon* we can see how Jon's objectification of the women around him and his Don Juan-esque perpetual hunting of new conquests is basically the very fabric of his identity as a male.

When Jon meets Barbara at the club he immediately sees her as a “perfect ten”. She is both pretty and she fits his ideal image of women as developed through his extensive pornography viewing. The name Barbara is derived from Greek βαρβάρος (barbaros) meaning "foreign". Interestingly enough, according to legend, Saint Barbara was a young woman killed by her father Dioscorus, who was then killed by a bolt of lightning (http://www.behindthename.com/name/barbara). It is tempting to read the use of the name as a woman metaphorically killed by patriarchy. Furthermore, when a more recent explanation from the Urban Dictionary is checked, the name Barbara is explained as “the sexiest female on the face of the earth.” She is, in that sense, a trophy girlfriend, whose value is commoditized as property rather than as a potential partner in a relationship or a contributing member of society. Furthermore, her last name, Sugarman, evokes the idea of a sugar-daddy, a man who supports someone in exchange for sexual favours, implying that Barbara is an implicit force in maintaining, rather than challenging patriarchal values.

Barbara is a girl with a plan. She is not going to be anybody’s one night stand, but is in the business of getting a good husband—or at least someone she can train to become a good husband. In that sense, she incorporates two chauvinistic female ideals: she fits with the patriarchal characterization of “wife material” but also is objectified as a coveted sex symbol.

Jon, however, clearly sees her much more as the latter, even though she comes in far second to his favorite porn actresses. It is interesting that both Jon and his father always refer to Barbara as a “thing”. Jon first describes Barbara as a “dime” (slang for a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10), then moves on to describing her as “The most beautiful **thing** he's ever seen”, he repeats that four times throughout the film. Jon's dad does not seem too interested to greet Barbara until he sees how attractive she is, exclaiming he
was not expecting such a lovely young lady. After Barbara exits to help Jon's mother in the kitchen Jon's dad shares his true thoughts: “You didn't tell me you were bringing home a piece of ass like that”, before proceeding to ask if her breasts are real. As much as Barbara is seen as a good wife material, she is still no more than the sum of her body parts to the leading character and his primary male role model.

Barbara never develops a voice in the film because she is always portrayed through Jon’s point of view. What the audience does observe is a character willing to embrace a stereotypical pink princess role, commonly reserved for girls’ birthday parties. She dresses predominantly in attention-grabbing pink or red colors, the preconceived colour palette for girls. We also observe Barbara’s personal agenda: train Jon to become good husband material and dote on her every wish, because she is a 'princess', and thus a man should be satisfied in his existence with the sole goal of making her life comfortable. This ideology is rooted in the pre-feminist media, in verbal and visual consumer advertisements prior to the 1960s. The ideas seem to echo some sort of a 1950s wonderland, where women stay at home in their white picket-fenced houses while husbands go to work and support the family financially. This is where Barbara's perspective on gender roles seems to originate from, with the nostalgic if increasingly diminishing, post war ideals of proper interactions between men and women. Jon later sees her constant consumption of romantic comedies (“chick ficks”) as parallel to his porn consumption, though the degrading aspect of pornography is completely left out in that equation.

It is also clear in the narrative that Jon learns some of his objectifying attitudes towards women from his father, just as well as Barbara learns hers from her female role models. When Jon's dad is telling Barbara the story of how he met Jon's mother, he says that when he saw her he said "that's mine", combining both objectification and entitlement with male ownership.

Jon’s father is constantly watching TV in the dining room and, as much as he belongs to an older generation who is less likely to have mastered sophisticated technology of computers, he is just as glued to the screen when it offers sexualized images of women. Apart from that, he appears to be constantly watching sports, presumably at the expense of healthy family interaction and conversation.

Jon’s sister is not a major character, though she appears to be the only person
who understands him. She is portrayed at all times glued to her phone, watching the screen to the point of being absurd. Even in church, her phone is not given a rest, but we are never shown what she is actually doing. When she finally speaks, the audience is almost shocked that she can actually talk, yet she exhibits a critical insight into how Barbara was trying to shape her brother into her own idea of the perfect future husband.

Finally, we have Esther, Jon’s classmate in the evening class Barbara gets him to attend. According to the Word Library, the name Esther means 'star' and is a derivation of the root name of the goddess Ishtar. The name was, according to various theologians and anthropologists, changed through the ascent of Christianity. Anthropologist Krystal D’ Costa states on her website:

Easter was originally the celebration of Ishtar, the Assyrian and Babylonian goddess of fertility and sex. Her symbols (like the egg and bunny) were and still are fertility and sex symbols (or did you actually think eggs and bunnies had anything to do with the resurrection?) After Constantine decided to Christianize the Empire, Easter was changed to represent Jesus. But at its roots, Easter (which is how you pronounce Ishtar) is all about celebrating fertility and sex. (D’Costa, Beyond Ishtar: The Tradition of Eggs at Easter)

True to the name she is given, Esther is portrayed as a woman in her 40s and she is the only woman in the film who is not adhering to stereotypical gender roles, although she is a bit of the motherly type, exhibiting more than any other character Jon’s mother’s attributes. She has different values, is more caring, and not in a competition with anyone, thus displaying integrity and a sense of autonomy, which is something foreign to Jon. At first, Jon is not interested in her at all; she does not look the part and, furthermore, he is in a relationship with Barbara. However, his world is slowly caving in on him and he is finding it increasingly difficult to hide his porn addiction from Barbara. In trying to cover his tracks, Jon feeds his addiction by changing his viewing habits, watching pornography on his phone in class, in the car, or mostly anyplace where Barbara cannot catch him in the act. This is precisely how Esther comes into his life. She notices him watching porn in class and confronts him, albeit nicely, about it. We see Esther in distress and crying profusely in the parking lot, and later learn that she has lost both her husband and her child in a horrible accident. Her vulnerability makes her a more rounded character than the other women in the film.
In fact, she is the whole counterpoint to the capitalist model illustrated so well in the movie and the main catalyst to Jon’s change and development as a character. The very fact that she is somewhat “hippie-like” is also important, as it locates her in a specific timeframe, as the original hippies of the Sixties aimed to challenge the established order, to reject conventional values and seek a more spiritual and meaningful relationship to self and others. She is genuinely interested in Jon and is caring as opposed to playing the “currency” exchange game like Barbara does. It is via Esther that the narrative of the film provides a counterpoint to the ideas of the prevalent and insidious culture of late capitalism, ripe with empty signs and loss of meaning. Esther’s character is further representing the values of the 1960s and 70s, a historical period of the rise of the Civil Rights Movements and Feminism. Surrounding Esther are ideas stemming from this period that later manifested themselves in theories like feminist theory, colonial theory and, later, queer theory, where normative ideas about gender and the world in general are questioned and challenged. She is not playing into any preconceived notions of how she should appear to others or how she perceives others, including Jon. She is the only one who is authentic in this world where the hyperreal has taken over. When Jon explains to Esther why he and Barbara broke up he recites the same speech he told his friend Bobby previously.

Esther had previously caught him watching pornography in class and thus sees through him and more or less 'forces' him to face the problem. "You say you want to lose yourself, in order to do that you have to lose yourself in another person, and she has to lose herself in you - it's a two way thing" (Esther in Don Jon, 2013). She sees the porn addiction for what it is, a solitary masturbatory experience without any human connection or emotional depth. In the final scene of the movie Jon acknowledges that there is something special about Esther. He previously hated it when women looked him in the eye, but he does not mind when Esther does it. He returns the gaze and that is enough to turn him on. He is no longer interacting with the computer or having sex without really being present, because now for the first time, he is really connecting with another person on an intimate level.
3. Homosocial bonding

Jon has two best friends in the film, Bobby and Danny. They give him the name Don because he is the best in bedding girls, and is more or less their role model when it comes to interacting with women. He is a regular “Don Juan” which also matters in this context because this old trope would probably be a porn surfing character much like Jon in this time and age. The bonding between the friends seems to be based primarily on excursions to the clubs and hunting for females, joking around and marking their territory. Any talk of careers or serious issues are somehow blurred away from the main focus, which is conquering women. Perhaps the explanation of why this group of friends is less driven in climbing social or professional ladders is related to a lack of dominance in their respective employments. In “…an epoch when the dominance of men is more and more questioned … The [male] homosocial group increasingly takes on the function of a refuge” (Meuser, 2004; p. 397). The way the men talk about women is also their way of maintaining the patriarchal hierarchy, something that has been diminished in many professional settings in the West in recent years, but is alive and well in the media and city nightlife. This group also does not discuss emotions or relationships in any depth, much less show any sign of emotional or psychological vulnerability.

The male predicament can be expressed in terms of a polarity. One pole is deeply rooted in traditional “social representations” … that orient males toward issues of aggression and competition with other males. To succeed in this realm, psychological vulnerabilities of all kinds must be mastered and controlled, including feelings associated with early developmental anxiety states: separation anxiety, dependent yearnings, and fears of injury and danger. The lessons of male socialization teach that these self-experiences must be concealed from other males to inhibit scapegoating and aggression and to maintain status in the group. Ultimately, the best way to conceal vulnerability is to conceal it from oneself. (Levant, p.94)

After Jon and Barbara break up and Jon meets his friends at the club, one friend calls “dibs” on a girl, meaning that she is “his” and therefore off limits to friends, but Jon ends up going after her (successfully), demonstrating his alpha status within the group. Bobby, the friend bested by Jon, comes to his house to confront him about his
behaviour, having heard of his road rage incident. When Bobby asks him what happened between him and Barbara, Jon tries to dismiss the whole conversation, but still ends up telling him a greatly edited version of how they broke up, and that she had caught him watching a little porn. Bobby does not know of his addiction or how pornography has taken over his life, and thus agrees with Jon that he is better off without her. Still, he encourages Jon to continue with the class even if it was Barbara who persuaded him to take it originally. This is the first time in the film that the viewer can see Jon engaging in any sort of 'real' conversation with his friends, despite the fact that he is still incapable of being totally honest and vulnerable with Bobby. Still, it is clear that he does not feel good about lying to himself and Bobby, but he does not seem to have the ability to break out of his preconceived notion of masculinity.

The audience is never given real access to either of Jon’s friends. As with the other characters in the movie, everything is seen from Jon’s perspective, thus we have limited knowledge. As far as representation goes, the men are portrayed in a stereotypical manner, communicating primarily via jokes, discussion of sports, or talking about women as things. Bobby is the only black man in the movie, making it a film which is quite surprisingly void of characters who are different from the hegemonic heterosexual Caucasian cast. However, we still see through Jon the ways in which he and his friends have been conditioned by modern society and the media.

Gender role attitudes may be particularly relevant for understanding sexual behavior because individuals’ endorsement of traditional gender role attitudes may reflect internalization of social norms that put men and women in risky sexual situations. Men who internalize such social norms may feel pressure to embody the stereotypical masculine ideal of sexual adventurer, and women who internalize such norms may leave important sexual decisions up to their partners. (Shearer, Sex roles, p.313)

This is essentially the portrait of gender stereotypes which the film Don Jon is presenting and what I feel Levitt is using as a critique of the cultural situation today. The backlash against women is now taking place in different arenas, and both men and women suffer if gender issues are not put at the forefront of discussions related to current cultural dilemmas. At the end of the movie, however, there is a glimpse of hope when Jon, who always used to go and work out alone while reciting his penance for his
addiction, decides to go and play basketball in a group setting with the men, indicating he may be emotionally ready to connect with others on a more real and mature level than before.
4. Pornography and female agency

In feminist media studies, the term “pornography” and its impacts are hotly debated, and definitions of what constitutes pornography vary. The most vocal anti-porn advocates claim that that “pornography reduces ‘woman’ to an ‘object’ and that objectification is in essence a form of violence against women. This point is made particularly explicit in the well-known claim that ‘The word pornography … means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores … Whores exist only within a framework of male sexual domination’” (Dworkin [1979] 1999, p. 200) and that, where “pornography is the theory, and rape the practice” (Robin Morgan 1980, p. 139)” (Attwood, p.8).

A clear causal link between violence in films translating into violence in real life has not been established. It has been established, however, that television does influence viewer's perception of violence and desensitizes them. While this effect might be limited, it does exist. More exposure has been seen as being directly correlated with heightened occupational expectations (Comstock and Paik, 1991, p.140).

It seems obvious that growing consumption of the more violent strands of pornography can have unforeseen consequences. Constant consumption will likely have an effect on ideas related to gender and power, even if it does not lead to direct violence.

Chris Hedges, a famous American journalist, wrote an article on the subject of pornography and has a very distinctive opinion on the matter. The article is called “Pornography is what the end of the world looks like”, and in it he says:

Women in porn are packaged commodities. They are pleasure dolls and sexual puppets. They are stripped of true emotions. Porn is not about sex, if one defines sex as a mutual act between two partners, but about masturbation, a solitary auto-arousal devoid of intimacy and love. The cult of the self—that is the essence of porn—lies at the core of corporate culture. Porn, like global capitalism, is where human beings are sent to die. (Hedges, p.1)

According to Hedges, capitalism and pornography are intertwined into a vicious dehumanizing cycle, where people are transformed into commodities. This is one of the main bases of inequality in our society between men and women, and the consumer culture is an evil that feeds our attention. Jon and his friends talk disrespectfully about women, they bond by doing so, and it is the very core of how they communicate and
how their relationship functions. This alpha male hunting game they play every weekend is detrimental to equality between the sexes, and with this mentality they diminish the chances of being able to have a respectful relationship with women. They will go into relationships that have a clear exchange of “currency”, whether it be looks or money.

The wheels are turning in the capitalist machine in the postmodern culture. Even the aesthetic style of the film underpins the idea of selling a story with sound bites and captivating, fast-moving images. The movie starts with the glossy images of women in pornography and women portrayed in mainstream media, and the whole film is mainly shot in a very stylized manner, in the line of expensive commercials to fit the theme and subtext of the story. Everybody looks glossy and in great shape, just like characters in advertisements are turned into commodities in order to sell consumers their product. The value put on bodily form is no coincidence: the gym is an altar to the body, thereby glorifying and emphasizing the surface and not the intrinsic value of the person. In this culture, as Mike Featherstone says, “…those who become fat, or let their appearance go, or look old before their time, [are seen] as not only slothful but as having a flawed self” (Featherstone, p. 195). Both males and females need to fit into a preconceived mold in order to survive in this world of surfaces and little substance. Identification is conceived via brands, a process by which all intrinsic meaning is forsaken. Even the hunting game at the club is becoming sad, like a never-ending loop. Women are reduced to fragmented, sexual toys, lacking any personal agency. In this culture, women will not stand a chance in the quest for equality.

The portrayal in the movie of the state of the post-modern culture is bleak, and there does not seem to be many benefitting from it, with the exception of the perpetually revolving consumerist capitalist machine; the providers of the pornography, the clothing brands, the gyms, et cetera. The importance of addressing the problem of misogynistic representation of women in porn is something the author Gail Daines talks with Chris Hedges about:

“When you fight porn you fight global capitalism,” she said. “The venture capitalists, the banks, the credit card companies are all in this feeding chain. This is why you never see anti-porn stories. The media is implicated. It is financially in bed with these companies. Porn is part of this. Porn tells us we have nothing
left as human beings—boundaries, integrity, desire, creativity and authenticity. Women are reduced to three orifices and two hands. Porn is woven into the corporate destruction of intimacy and connectedness, and this includes connectedness to the earth. If we were a society where we were whole, connected human beings in real communities, then we would not be able to look at porn. We would not be able to watch another human being tortured.” (Hedges, p. 1)

In the context of feminism and its political impact, it is important to address what has changed since the days of Laura Mulvey. The level of essentialism has been abandoned because, with hindsight, the theories of the first and second wave feminists had a very limited point of view, as they mainly addressed and focused on the situation of white heterosexual women. Their discourse was based in binary opposites, where males vs. female, good vs. bad, black vs. white were inherent and uncontested terms. Thus, groups of women which failed to fit into that category, found themselves without a narrative base when it came to feminism. Judith Butler is one of the better known scholars in feminism and queer studies and she states:

By grounding the metanarratives in a myth of the origin, the psychoanalytic description of gender identity confers a false sense of legitimacy and universality to a culturally specific and, in some other contexts, culturally oppressive version of gender identity. By claiming that some identifications are more primary than others, the complexity of the latter set of identifications is effectively assimilated into the primary one, and the “unity” of the identifications is preserved. (Butler, p. 330)

Other scholars in gender studies, such as Calvin Thomas, talk of the problematic stance of the voyeur in Mulvey’s theory because it “only … [applies] to straight males, maybe even straight white males. Obviously … straight men do gaze at other men … but only under certain conditions of exhibition – generally, those that guarantee competitive violence or actively work to dispel erotic contemplation and deflect the gaze (or at least make a pretense of so working), such as contact sports, extreme fighting, and cinematic or videographic warfare…” (Thomas, p. 7). Furthermore, the case of the gay male viewer is not incorporated, although later feminists added to their theory the idea of the bisexual gaze in case “the spectator did not identify in a
monolithic, rigid manner with his or her gender counterpart, but actually alternated between masculine-active and feminine-passive positions” (Creed, p.12).

As much as these concerns are valid and important, both for political and humanitarian reasons, the postmodern idea of a fragmented truth has, in my opinion, stifled to a point the raw power of the pioneer feminists and second-wave feminism. It seems that, instead of building a coalition of underrepresented voices of women and men of different racial background and diverse sexual orientation, each fragment became a private cell of like-minded activists. Perhaps I am speaking from a site of privilege, as a white, heterosexual woman, but the female power is not as obviously a force to be reckoned with today as it was in the 70s.

Ironically, given the fact that director Levitt’s mother is a white, second-wave feminist, these underrepresented fragments are not shown at all in his movie. The token black friend is the only representative of non-whites, and nobody appears to be gay in the movie. The solution provided in the character of Esther is also going back to the ideology of the 70s with flower power, pot, love and happiness. Today the ideology of the 70s has advanced into the form of ecological activism rather than, in my opinion, exploring alternative drug-induced worlds.
5. The affliction of addiction as a side product of post-modern society

Jameson saw the postmodern culture of late Capitalism as a site of severe addictions, where people with no real connections to any historical sense of narrative become hedonistic in search of the next fix in order to feel a sense of purpose (Jameson, p. 28-9). Jon is a portrait of that very lack of purpose, devoid of any connection to an intricate and profound reality. When people think of addicts, they usually picture alcoholics or drug addicts, but as psychological evidence gathered over the preceding half a century indicates, addiction can come in many forms. It is the method of abusing something in order to escape reality. In Jon's case, he uses pornography.

Research in the United States has shown that 66% of men and 41% of women consume pornography on a monthly basis. An estimated 50% of all Internet traffic is related to sex. These percentages illustrate that pornography is no longer an issue of minority populations but a mass phenomenon that influences our society. (Kuhn, Gallinat, p.2)

This problem is very real and pressing. Just as Jon said; “Every guy watches porn”, but to what extent and, ultimately, what cost? If people are taking a few minutes per day, perhaps this activity is harmless. However, spending endless hours indulging in the reward seeking behavior suggests that they are not only wasting their lives, but, as research indicates, risking reconstructing their brain activity, which may ultimately lead to dissatisfaction in actual sexual activities. “In partnerships, a decrease in sexual satisfaction and a tendency to adopt pornographic scripts have been associated with frequent Internet pornography consumption” (Kuhn, Gallinat, p. 2). This goes hand in hand with Jon's problem in the film. There is a general belief, stated by Jon in the film when Barbara catches him watching pornography, that only men who are not able to get “the real thing” indulge in pornography, and thus Jon should have no need for it. However, as the film depicts in great detail, even Jon’s success in dating this gorgeous woman, whom he had been pursuing and fantasizing about sleeping with for at least a month prior, did not upend his preference for pornography over real interaction. In Kuhn and Gallinat's research, they conclude that, while there is still room for more intensive research in the field of pornography and how it affects your brain, there exists
evidence of a negative association with pornography consumption during cue reactivity, which could reflect change in neural plasticity as a consequence of intense stimulation of the reward system. Alternatively, it could be a precondition that makes pornography consumption more rewarding (Kuhn, Gallinat, p.3). In other words, there is usually an underlying reason for addiction. However, the brain reorganizes itself when there are changes in situation and in the environment and thus compensates to adjust, for instance:

Similar to theories taken from addiction research, it has been speculated in popular science literature that pornography constitutes a prewired, naturally rewarding stimulus and that high levels of exposure result in a downregulation or habituation of the neural response in the reward network. This is assumed to elicit adaptive processes in which the brain is hijacked, becoming less responsive to pornography. (Kuhn, Gallinat, p.2)

This is why Jon spends hours watching pornography, all the while claiming he does not have the time to do so. As with drug addicts, Jon needs a larger quantity to satisfy his need as his addiction evolves. In the beginning of the film, Jon is narrating while he is having a sexual encounter with a woman he took home from the club. He complains that sex with real women is boring, for he cannot reenact what the people do in the pornography he watches. The dichotomy between reality and the pressing need to get his pornographic fix from the capitalist sex industry producing the material has rendered him virtually impotent. The political impact of this situation is tremendous because of the misogynistic representation of women in mainstream porn.

“A representative Swedish study on adolescent boys has shown that boys with daily consumption showed more interest in deviant and illegal types of pornography and more frequently reported the wish to actualize what was seen in real life.” (Kuhn, Gallinat, p.2). Jon never indicates he wants to do something deviant or illegal, but he does compare his sex life with what he sees in pornography, and feels reality doesn’t live up to his porn-infused expectations.

Jon's delusion when it comes to his addiction is made apparent in the beginning of the film, he does not view his addiction as a problem, but rather as his way of losing himself or, in other words, escaping reality. In his mind he justifies his craving for pornography by deeming it just a recreational activity in. His capacity to understand or
even face his addiction problems is not something he is prepared to do. The very idea that he is addicted, or that his dissatisfaction in his life is forcing him to be stuck in a rut, is something that he seems to be unable to even conceptualize until he meets Esther, and his constant denial is a typical trait for an addict.

In 2012 a study was conducted by a research team at Harvard which resulted in the following conclusion.:

When asked, or when she asks herself, why she broke her resolution to refrain from smoking, getting drunk or whatever it is that she vowed to refrain from, she cannot tell us (or herself); she cannot provide a satisfactory account of her behaviour. To paraphrase both St. Paul and Davidson, the addict does not understand her own behaviour and it is in this sense that it is out of her control. This, we suggest, is at least a part of what she means when she tells us she is addicted – she keeps doing something without knowing why it is that she keeps on and cannot refrain from doing it. This may also be the reason why addicts willingly seek help or formal treatment for their problem; since they cannot understand their own. (Heather, Segal, p. 6)

When it comes to finding solutions to the problem of addiction, trying to minimize the addiction is perhaps more harmful than anything else. However, the quotation above is about a woman who knows she is an addict and knows that she has a problem, yet is unable to control herself. Jon has not acknowledged his addiction yet. He is in denial, partly because he lacks the vernacular to express himself on the topic since pornography addiction is not as commonly talked about both in the media and among people as drug addiction or alcoholism, although sex addiction is a confirmed addiction with available support groups.

Furthermore, the culture of late Capitalism—with its empty pastiche instead of a sense of connectedness to both history and people—is slowly but surely eradicating all ideas that do not fit into the currency model, where the ultimate goal is to obtain as many consumers as possible, and the idea of sharing products is counterproductive to the money making goal: “The result is the threatened victory of capitalist thinking over all other forms of thought” (Felluga, Modules on Jameson).
Conclusion

*Don Jon* (2013) is a feminist film in the sense that it consciously plays with stereotypical gender representations and by exaggerating them it shows them to be misguided social constructs. The ominous prediction of both Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard regarding the loss of meaning and substance in the postmodern society provides the setting and political implication of the film. Nothing seems to have any real or intrinsic meaning, and even religion seems like a hollow echo of what it once was. We are invited into a world void of any real substance until the flawed but emotionally-vulnerable female character Esther brings hope to the situation. Just as Gordon-Levitt stated about having made this movie as homage to his mother, Esther’s character incorporates a need to reclaim lost values. As such she is a representative of the second-wave feminism, which locates her mentality in the hippie era, where our perhaps “failed” attempts of serious societal deconstruction lie, as well as genuine opposition to capitalism as a meta-narrative. With her character representing the light at the end of the tunnel, the message of the film for society seems to be a call to change course and revive the ideology of the pre-Reagan era, when politics of the people, as opposed to politics of corporations, was at the center of political power. In that sense, I am reading a political message in the film, both on gender as well as on current modern society.

The relentlessly booming industry of pornography can and should be regarded today as the singular most disturbing threat to gender equality, and to the sexual health and wellbeing of young men and women in the West. The perceived notion of gender equality that many young women and men feel has been established today, might be a premature assumption in many ways, because gender inequality is running rampant at the core of many media narratives. The film *Don Jon* is demonstrating a very dangerous side of a blatant misogyny, which is “educating” the users of porn both the power structure between the sexes by objectifying women to the point that they are no more than postmodernist fragments – body parts - void of real meaning. Therefore, the biggest feminist issue addressed in this film relates to porn and how it has become a serious threat to both gender and class equality. Gail Dines sums it up when she connects pornography with the faults of capitalism in her interview with Chris Hedges:

“If you are going to give a tiny percent of the world the vast majority of the goodies, you better make sure you have a good ideological system in place that
legitimizes why everyone else is suffering economically,” she said. “This is what porn does. Porn tells you that material inequality between women and men is not the result of an economic system. It is biologically based. And women, being whores and bitches and only good for sex, don’t deserve full equality. Porn is the ideological mouthpiece that legitimizes our material system of inequality. Porn is to patriarchy what the media is to capitalism.” (Chris Hedges, 'Pornography is What the End of the World Looks Like', p. 2)
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