

Claudia Gold

American Urban History

Final Paper

November 1, 2004

The History of Pornography at MIT

Over 25 people protested pornography at MIT Saturday afternoon. Pro-femina, a women's group on campus, sponsored the demonstration. The protest coincided with the Lecture Series Committee's (LSC) showing of *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, a sexually explicit film.

Members of several MIT and non-MIT groups gathered in front of the Julius A. Stratton '23 Student Center and walked to 26-100, the site of the screening. The protestors entered the lobby of Building 16, where tickets for the movie were being sold.

Approximately 20 of the demonstrators bought tickets for the first showing, according to Gordon E. Strong '85, an LSC representative. The protestors walked around the room before the showing began. "When the movie started, a few of them jumped up onto the table on the stage," Strong said. "When they would not take their seats, we turned on the lights and had the Campus Police escort them out."

LSC refunded the protestors' money, he added. The protestors proceeded to the house of President Paul E. Gray '54, where they remained until the next showing. There were no further incidents at any of the later screenings.¹

The tradition of showing pornographic films on Registration Day at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) "goes back as long as anyone at the LSC can remember"², drawing crowds of hundreds, and lasted until 1985, when heated controversy led to its demise. The intensity of the pornography debates is evident in this scene, the most visual manifestation of the conflict, which was nearing its peak. The conflict arose as more and more students raised concerns about the effects of

¹*The Tech*, Volume 105, Number 8

²Volume 101, Number 1

pornography on the community. After several discussions, many letters to the editor of *The Tech* (MIT's student newspaper), and angry demonstrations by groups and individuals on all sides of the debate, MIT administrators formed the Ad Hoc Pornography Screening Committee, which tried to create guidelines for what constitutes appropriate pornography and screened all movies with questionable content that were to be shown in public. This did not fully satisfy either the anti-porn feminists and those on the religious right who wanted a ban on all pornographic movies, or some others, who claimed that the administration was acting as a censor and overstepping its boundaries.

The LSC eventually agreed to a voluntarily moratorium on pornography, and around 1990, the debate disappeared suddenly. Today, the presence of pornography on campus appears to be limited mainly to dormitories and other living groups.

What led to such enormous contention at MIT surrounding a topic unrelated to science or technology? How was the issue eventually resolved? And what is the status of pornography on the MIT campus today? Insight into these questions can be gained by exploring the ways in which pornography was depicted on campus in the 1970s and 1980s, the issues raised by students and activist groups, the administration's response, and how this contributed to the current pornography policies, attitudes, and traditions.

According to *The Tech*, Registration Day Porn became popular as a "last pleasure before the beginning of term."³ MIT, an unusually intense institution with a historically male-dominated student body, was in some ways the perfect environment for pornography to be a part of social life. "It makes sense. The stereotype of the MIT student is a male nerd with glasses who can't get girls, so he masturbates to porn."⁴

³Various articles in *The Tech*

⁴A Harvard student

However, MIT is, of course, not isolated from a larger social context, and the attitudes towards pornography reflected social norms at that time of society at large. It is likely that the Registration Day tradition began around the time pornography became more popularized in the United States. Until the 1970s, only a small segment of the population watched pornography; consequently, it was viewed as outside of the mainstream, and condescendingly ignored by most of society. “There wasn’t actually such a thing [as pornographic films], strictly speaking, in North America until the late-1960s. Sexual speech can generally be considered to have been criminalized until then.”⁵ It wasn’t until 1970, soon after The Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography “issued a 646 page report concluding that all sexually explicit films, books and magazines aimed at adults should be legalized” that pornography began to gain acceptance in the United States. (However, it was certainly not supported by the majority of Americans at this time.)⁶

In 1972, the movie *Deep Throat* brought national attention to the topic and caused deep controversy. The premise of *Deep Throat* is a woman who does not experience pleasure during sex because, as it turns out, her clitoris is hidden in the back of her throat. A “huge success,” it “was then shown in many mainstream theatres all over the US, starting a brief period of ‘porn chic’ when it was considered cool in some circles to go see porn movies, even in company.”⁷

The cultural significance of the film in arenas beyond the movie industry is evidenced by the branding of the title as a nickname for the elusive source of the infamous Watergate scandal. *Deep Throat* remained popular for many years, at MIT and elsewhere.

⁵<http://www.tranquileye.com/historyofporn>

⁶<http://www.rotten.com/library/culture/pornography/>

⁷[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_Throat_\(movie\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_Throat_(movie))

“If for no other reason than parroting the sexual zeitgeist, *Deep Throat* turned movie conventions on end and made casual sex a topic of conversation and a comical big screen entertainment. Importantly, although often set aside in the historical memory, it also helped establish an interest in trying to explore women’s sexual appetites and needs, even if those appetites and needs were entirely self-serving from the standpoint of the men who produced such movies and who would receive deep throat.”

Public showings in Boston were still being advertised frequently in 1974 in *Thursday*, an underground MIT student newspaper.

Through the early '70s, pornography had hardly any opposition on campus, either from faculty or students. Many viewed it a harmless, stress-relieving activity. In 1970, only five percent of undergraduates at MIT were female; understandably, the few women on campus generally tried to remain quiet and unnoticed, “avoiding any kind of disturbance,” according to Holly Sweet, Director of the Experimental Study Group at MIT and a licensed psychologist specializing in marriage counseling and gender relations.⁸ While there were scattered objections, usually from faculty rather than students⁹, the attitude towards pornography on the MIT campus was generally positive. The following excerpt from an article by Professor William Thompson which appeared in *Thursday* in April of 1969, illustrates the support pornography had even amongst some faculty during this time:

Because sex is so pervasive in our environment, one cannot claim anything more than that our training is one of the rivulets that fill the mainstream. Nevertheless, there does seem to me to be a peculiar sexual mythology that envelops our technology. The industrial quality of sexuality is, of course, clearly in evidence in *Playboy*, the best selling magazine in the Tech Coop.

In a penthouse apartment that is a technological paradise of stereos, tape recorders, cameras, blenders, automatic bars, and electric beds, the sleek

⁸Interview with Holly Sweet, April 20th, 2004

⁹Interview with Mary Rowe, an ombudsperson at MIT since 1973. April, 2004

airbrushed nude that offers enjoyment without involvement is the ideal appliance of any young engineer's dream.¹⁰

With these attitudes widespread, it was not until more than a decade later that opposition to pornography on campus created serious controversy. As usual, in February of 1981, the LSC showed a pornographic movie on registration day. Prior to the showing, posters depicting line drawings of a nude man and women in a sexually explicit position advertised the event, inviting students to "Grow up and come to LSC's Registration Day Movie," *Sex World*.¹¹

The following day, *The Tech* published an article reporting that the LSC received numerous complaints about the posters. In addition, some posters "were mutilated when an unknown person or group cut out the pictures." According to LSC chairperson Lucinda Linde, the LSC had received complaints in prior years, but it was not until 1981 that the response appeared to come from a significant and diverse segment of the student population. Some may have felt that the advertisement's wording ("grow up") was unfairly coercive for incoming students, who might feel pressured to attend the movie to prove their maturity. Mary Rowe recalls several complaints from students who felt this way about Registration Day movies.¹²

¹⁰ *Thursday*, April 17, 1969

¹¹ *The Tech*, Volume 101, Number 1

¹² According to Rowe, it has been rumored that some students did not know, on occasion, that the Registration Day movie would be pornographic until it began.

This also seems to be the first time that large numbers of offensive LSC pornography advertisements were destroyed. These tactics, criticised by some as “censorship,” were increasingly popular during this era of radical feminism. Radical feminism is a sect of feminism characterized in part by the ideology that society in its current form is fundamentally patriarchal and oppressive of women; many believe that pornography perpetuates those conditions. This view is outlined by radical feminist and Law Professor Catherine MacKinnon: “Pornography is the violation of the civil rights of women [. . .] What pornography does goes beyond its content: it eroticizes hierarchy (and) sexualizes inequality.”¹³

In addition to the growth of MIT’s radical feminist movement, many other factors led to the mounting criticism of pornography. One was the percentage of female undergraduates at MIT was growing steadily during the 1970s. The changing male-to-female ratio at MIT certainly affected the atmosphere.

One of the central causes of the opposition to pornography at MIT was the number of women on campus: “From a sociological perspective, when [the number of

¹³<http://www.trincoll.edu/~dbernste/newpage14.htm>.

women on campus] gets over about 20%, it starts to get noticed.” This threshold was first reached in 1979, only a few years before the climax of the pornography controversy.

After receiving several complaints from offended students and faculty, Prof. Mildred Dresselhaus, Chairperson of the Advisory Group on Women Students’ Interests (AGWSI) determined that “the issue deserves some considered discussion, due to the strong feelings women students have about it” and vowed to address the issue at the next AGWSI meeting.¹⁴ According to Dresselhaus, the distribution of Registration Day pornography posters was already limited to the campus living groups “to avoid areas where visitors frequent” but the AGWSI soon indicated that it would be taking further action to discourage pornography at MIT. Several weeks later, the AGWSI released an official statement: “MIT cannot endorse porn”.¹⁵

This short statement points to some of the important points of contention which would become central to the debate about pornography at MIT and other college campuses. The “endorsement” of pornography is not something that any university would like to have ascribed to it, due to both potentially negative effects on the community and concerns about the appearance to outsiders. Growing concerns about the effects of pornography and an emphasis at MIT on creating a positive environment for women as well as the fear of appearing to welcome, or even worse, embrace, material of an explicit (and perhaps, harmful) nature led to the administration’s attempts to ban it. However, it is unclear to what extent the university can legally and morally justify curbing behavior of its students beyond the enforcement of legal norms. In this view, debates about pornography on college campuses are a manifestation of the more fundamental question, What is the role of authority in the university system?

¹⁴ *The Tech*, Volume 101, Number 1

¹⁵ *The Tech*, Volume 101, Number 3

As with many other controversies at MIT, the pornography debate was part of several much larger debates taking place in the United States. The early 1980s marked the beginning of the Culture Wars¹⁶ a era of contention between conservatives and progressives concerning topics as abortion, public schools, and homosexuality. Interestingly, pornography does not as clearly fit into the right-left line, but it still certainly played a role in the struggle to “define the moral character of the nation.”¹⁷

During this time, feminism became more mainstream, and pornography as a women’s rights issue was discussed widely. Several well-publicized studies, such as the Meese Commission, attempted to show that pornography increases violence towards women and children and negatively impacts the way women view themselves. Other “pro-sex” and “anti-censorship” feminists responded that the studies were flawed and inconclusive, and that what is degrading towards women is subjective. Many of these views fall under the category of “liberal feminism,” a branch of feminism which “called for equality with men, who were not inherent oppressors so much as recalcitrant partners to be enlightened.”¹⁸

Also, the public was becoming increasingly intolerant of racism. Pornographic films are viewed by some as a visual representation of racial stereotypes and inequities. In a widely-read article, Andrea Dworkin writes:

Pornography uses racism and anti-Semitism to promote sexual arousal; pornography promotes racial hatred by promoting racial degradation as “sexy”, pornography romanticizes the concentration camp and the plantation, the Nazi and the slaveholder; pornography exploits demeaning racial stereotypes to promote sexual arousal; pornography celebrates racist sexual obsessions.¹⁹

¹⁶The term “culture wars” was coined by James Davison Hunter in his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. <http://sepwww.stanford.edu/sep/josman/culture/>

¹⁷<http://home.earthlink.net/generationwatch/popup-culture.html>

¹⁸*A Feminist Defense of Pornography*, Wendy McElroy, 1998. http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/mcelroy_17_4.html

¹⁹“*Why Pornography Matters to Women*”, 1981. <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/WarZoneChaptIVB.ht>

Some LSC films depicted white men raping black women.²⁰

The 1980s were characterized by conservative, sometimes reactionary attitudes towards sex, largely in response to the "free-love" era of the '60s and '70s: "This country was being consumed by [sex-related] hysteria, around day care centers, satanic cults, snuff films," fears which seem misguided to some in retrospect.²¹ This, along with growing awareness of women's issues, set the stage for heated debates related to pornography. Without this nation-wide debate as a backdrop, pornography may never have become such a controversial issue at MIT, even with the increasing numbers of women on campus.

Beginning in December of 1983 and continuing over the next several years, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin argued for anti-pornography legislation in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Such an ordinance would consider pornography a violation of civil rights, and would have brought an end to LSC-sponsored pornography. However, without laws specifically banning pornography, the correct role of the university in determining the place for porn on campus was unclear. Because of its unusual position in society, not public enough for its members to be protected by all rights granted to citizens in public but not private enough to have full reign of its regulations, the university's role remains a contentious question today.²²

By 1984, evidence of an intensifying controversy at MIT was abundant: many issues of *The Tech* included letters to the editor arguing both sides of the debate, feminist students petitioned against pornography in Lobby 10 (an area near the center of the main thoroughfare of campus), and a student group called Radicals at

²⁰Interview with Mary Rowe

²¹Interview with Holly Sweet.

²²See, for example, the 2002 New York Times Magazine article about Elizabeth Shin, an MIT student who committed suicide in her dormitory room several years ago, which questions the "in loco parentis" function of the university.

MIT called for “letting democracy decide.”²³ Many faculty and staff spoke out as well. One well-known MIT professor and radical feminist, Ann Russo, had a noteworthy impact on many students through her class “Violence Against Women in the Continental United States.” This class, taught throughout the ’80s and early ’90s, focused on pornography as a form of violence towards women. Sasha Wood, one of Russo’s students, feels certain even today that Russo’s class had a large impact on feminism at MIT. Many women came out of that class radicalized and mobilized to eradicate pornography on MIT’s campus through methods such as taking down offensive signs. Probably somewhat indicative of the difference between the tactics used by feminists in 1989 and 2004, in retrospect Wood questions whether these actions were appropriate.²⁴ Lee Perlman, a lecturer of philosophy at MIT, recalls Russo’s “large following,” which he feels was often “intolerant” of other viewpoints and “really characterized the problems” with the feminism of the 1980s.²⁵ Many of Russo’s students were founding members of Profemina, a group which was associated with removing the offensive LSC posters.

It was becoming increasingly clear that the issue would be difficult to resolve without outside intervention.

In late August, the Office of the Dean for Student Affairs (ODSA) announced a new pornography policy, effective beginning the 1984-1985 academic year. The new policy would require Dean for Student Affairs Shirley McBay to appoint a committee of approximately 12 people, including LSC and non-LSC student members, faculty and staff to “review all X-rated and unrated films before these films are shown on campus to determine whether they meet its criteria.” A movie which did not meet the approval of the committee would be delayed six weeks so that those who intended to

²³ *The Tech*, Volume 104, Number 26

²⁴ Interview with Sasha Wood, April 19th, 2004.

²⁵ Interview with Lee Perlman, April, 2004

show it could provide sufficient warning to the community. Some questioned the ability of anyone, much less MIT administrators, to decide what constitutes objectionable material. Indeed, even the Supreme Court has struggled with the task.²⁶

Still, the Ad Hoc Committee on Pornography was established. Dean McBay appointed Niti Seth, associate director of Educational Video Resources in the Office of the Provost, chairperson without first seeking approval of the committee, angering many. In January of 1985, Seth resigned after several committee members purportedly “expressed consternation over the method of her appointment.”²⁷ When she left, an editorial in *The Tech* stated that as a result of her resignation, the Committee could begin to gain credibility. It may be credit to the impact *The Tech* has on the student body that the Committee remained relatively immune to the surrounding politics after Seth left.²⁸ Letters and public demonstrations quieted noticeably after the editorial was published.

Professor John Hildebidle of the literature department replaced Seth. The committee, according to Hildebidle, now consisted of about eight people, with a balance of men and women, LSC representatives and feminists, students and administrators. While he admits that screening pornography became “such a pain,” Hildebidle is comfortable that the Committee was honest in its decisions: “I don’t recall any gendered votes. I know that if that [. . .] had occurred we would have confronted it.” Ruth Perry, who sat on the committee, describes it as a “very weird experience.”²⁹ As to the ability of a Committee to determine the appropriateness of pornography, Hildebidle recalls that “We all agreed all we could do was make our own judgements

²⁶Miller vs. California, 413 U.S. 15, 24-25(1973).
Roth vs. United States, 354 U.S. 476, 492 (1957).

²⁷*The Tech*, Volume 104, Number 61

²⁸Interview with Hildebidle

²⁹Interview with Ruth Perry, May 16th, 2004

based on our own values.”³⁰

The new OSDA rules prohibited films which did not obtain committee approval from being shown on Registration Day of either term or during new student orientation. Also, pornography was now banned Kresge Auditorium, MIT’s main auditorium situated in front of the only all-female dormitory on campus. Female students had been subject to harrasment while walking to their dormitories by men leaving Kresge after watching LSC-sponsored pornography. Anyone wishing to show pornographic films would be required to notify the OSDA at least six weeks prior to the proposed showing date, would be “responsible for provision of arrangements [. . .] to assure suitable conduct during the showing of the film,” and would be “expected to show good taste” in advertising. (It is not clear what would constitute “good taste.”) Violation of these rules would result in a hearing in front of the OSDA.

These new rules did not calm the students on either side, who were as angry as ever. Complicating the controversy further, on August 29th, the Women’s Studies Office showed *Not a Love Story*, an X-rated documentary about the issue of pornography and its connection to violence towards women. Immediately, some students protested that Dean McBay “created a double standard” when she allowed the film to be shown even though the Office neglected to submit the film to the Ad Hoc Committee for screening. Ruth Perry, responded that screening the film was unnecessary because the “decision to show *Not a Love Story* was an effort to educate students about the issue of pornography and its connection to violence against women. We did not profit from the showing of ‘sexually explicit’ material or provide such material as entertainment.”³¹

Nevertheless, many students grew vocal in their anger towards Dean McBay for

³⁰Interview with Hildebidle, April 21st, 2004

³¹*The Tech*, Volume 105, Number 4

her handling of this issue and others, writing numerous letters to *The Tech* and to various administrators. When *The Tech* published an outspoken editorial calling for her resignation, MIT President Paul Gray responded with a letter to the editor expressing his support for Dean McBay, which was published on February 15th, 1985.

The Registration Day movie in spring of 1985, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, was not approved by the Ad Hoc Committee due to its explicit nature. Consequently, the event was delayed the mandatory six weeks. When it was eventually shown in early March, the responses were impassioned and varied widely. In addition to inciting the Profemina-sponsored protest in 26-100, the film was both celebrated and condemned and the LSC congratulated and derided.

According to one guest columnist in *The Tech*: “There is no subtlety, symbolism, or need for imagination, as body part after body part assault our senses in young Misty Beethoven’s rise to the epitome of female accomplishment, the perfect object for satisfying male oral-genital fantasy.”³² Another student, however, disagrees, calling those who condemned the film “proselytizing, prudish, and/or religious fanatics; or sexist-feminists, who think a film with submissive or abused females shapes people’s minds, or who see and [sic] portrayal of lustful, wanton sex as anti-female, or anti-human.”³³ These dichotomous responses, which are representative of two common opinions which arise in debates about pornography, illustrate the major problem with resolving the issue of pornography: that those who want to ban pornography and those who do not are not arguing about the same question. Those in favor of banning are generally worried about the effects pornography has on women and on society as a whole, while those who are not are more concerned with the principle of censorship. This makes it extremely difficult to discuss pornography at all much less

³² *The Tech*, Volume 105, Number 8

³³ *The Tech*, Volume 105, Number 9

come to agreement or compromise.

As one columnist noted in the spring of 1985, “discussions, accusations, protests, and demonstrations [. . .] filled daily life around the Institute.”³⁴ Feminist Activist Nikki Craft spoke on the feminist movement, including pornography, in a public lecture sponsored by Profemina in May of 1985. Craft founded the group “Outlaws for Social Responsibility,” whose mission statement includes that “Women’s safety and our very lives depend on challenging these women-hating, slanderous lies that pornographers are marketing about us.”³⁵

The LSC chose not to show a pornographic film on Registration Day for the fall semester of 1985 to avoid inciting further controversy. Still, Profemina chose the day to protest pornography and violence toward women. Carrying signs reading “Oppose sexist advertisers, movie-makers, and pornographers,” “Oppose violence against women,” “Down with Reagan’s attacks on women,” a few members of Profemina and several other students gathered in Lobby 7. Profemina released a statement regarding the demonstration:

“We are demonstrating today to establish a new tradition: a tradition of opposition to violence against women and the oppression of women. The old tradition on registration day was to show a pornographic film, which promoted violence against women on this campus.”³⁶

Meanwhile, the national organization Women’s Alliance Against Pornography (WAAP) sponsored a referendum to the Cambridge City Council which would “allow people to sue the manufacturers and distributors of pornography for damages on a claim of civil rights violation.”³⁷ The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ordered

³⁴ *The Tech*, Volume 105, Number 9

³⁵ *The Tech*, Volume 105, Number 22

³⁶ *The Tech* Volume 105, Number 32

³⁷ *The Tech* Volume 105, Number 35. Please see *Cambridge Chronicle, Sept. 12* or *In Harm’s Way*, Harvard Press 1997

the issue to be placed on the ballot for a vote after Suzanne Melendy of WAAP sued the City Council when it “refused to put the amendments on the ballot,”³⁸ The legality of pornography was being reconsidered at the national level as well. In 1986, after spending one year and half a million dollars, the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography released the two-volume, 1,960-page Meese Commission Report condemning pornography. In contrast to the 1970 Presidential Commission on Pornography, the document reported that porn “causes violent sex crimes and other antisocial activities.”³⁹ One commission member stated that

I, for one, have no hesitation in condemning nearly every specimen of pornography that we have examined in the course of our deliberations as tasteless, offensive, lewd and indecent. According to my values, these materials are themselves immoral, and to the extent that they encourage immoral behavior they exert a corrupting influence on the family and the moral fabric of society.⁴⁰

On October 5th and 6th, 1985, Ruth Perry and others organized a conference on pornography at MIT and Harvard, with well-known speakers, such as Catherine McKinnon, and varied discussions. Porn stars and prostitutes also attended. She held the conference in part to “demonstrate to the community that there was not agreement” amongst all feminists on this issue. “There always has been, always will be, stereotyping of the feminist position.” Tensions between two groups at the conference, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force and Women against Censorship, were so high that they refused to sit together at dinner the evening before the conference until Perry persuaded them. One attendee reported that he had “never been at such a bloodbath.”

³⁸*The Tech*, Volume 105, Number 41

³⁹<http://www.rotten.com/library/culture/pornography/>

⁴⁰<http://www.rotten.com/library/culture/pornography/>

Perry, a self-described “anti-censorship” feminist, thinks that pornographic movies should not be banned from MIT. She feels that the real problems with LSC Registration Day movies are that they were “commodifying” pornography (LSC charged for the event) and that the showings were anonymous (they were always held in large lecture halls). Perry proposed that pornographic films at MIT should be free and held only in rooms seating less than 50, so people would have to “own up to” their choice to watch. Perry, who felt that “both [pro- and anti-porn] views are essential, and feminist” tried to help each side understand the other. At a party at her house at the end of the conference, McKinnon, Kate Millet, an anti-censorship feminist speaker, and Perry stayed up until 3 A.M. playing and singing folk music. ⁴¹

There were other attempts by female faculty around this time to educate the public about pornography. For example, some attempted to generate discussion about the economics of the porn industry.⁴²

The Cambridge anti-pornography referendum drew support and opposition from left- and right-wingers alike. Some groups, such as the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force, Women against Censorship, the Prostitutes’ Union of Massachusetts, and No Bad Women - Just Bad Laws, consider themselves feminist organizations but do not favor the banning of pornography. Stereotypes about the gender and politics of each side probably made some uncomfortable about voicing their positions.

Similarly, many conservatives supported the ban, often for religious reasons. According to Mary Rowe, many religious students, both male and female, liberal and conservative, were offended by the films and registered official complaints. It is often noted that pornography is one of few issues in which the some on the Left ally with the Religious Right.

⁴¹Interview with Ruth Perry

⁴²Interview with Mary Rowe

The impending vote on the crucial legislation further instigated the heated controversy on campus, which peaked around 1985 and 1986 with many students from all sides of the debate angry or hurt. But when the Cambridge anti-porn referendum was defeated, debate lulled for a few years. It seemed for several months that the controversy was coming to a close.

Then, Adam Dershowitz, an undergraduate student who arrived in the fall of 1985 and was “upset” by MIT’s “censorship policy,” challenged it by showing the film *Deep Throat* on Registration Day in the main lounge of East Campus, the undergraduate dormitory where he lived. “There was a HUGE amount of flaming in the Tech [. . .] The Administration was not pleased.”⁴³

It wasn’t until nine months later that the administration decided to press charges on Mr. Dershowitz in a hearing in front of the Committee on Discipline (COD). While the administration had prohibited public showings of pornography without following their guidelines, they had neglected to specify exactly what would happen when the rules were broken. Again, pro- and anti-pornography students and groups, as well as non-MIT affiliates, voiced their opinions. Adam Dershowitz’s uncle, Alan Dershowitz, a law professor at Harvard University who has since published articles opposing anti-pornography policies in universities, testified that the MIT policy on pornography violated freedom of expression.⁴⁴

The COD ruled in favor of Dershowitz, effectively overruling the Ad Hoc Committee’s role. In a letter to Dershowitz which appeared in *The Tech* in November of 1987, the COD wrote:

The committee finds that the *MIT Policy Statement on Sexually Explicit Films* constitutes an excessive restraint of freedom of expression at MIT.

⁴³This appeared in a letter that Dershowitz wrote to another MIT student. <http://www.mit.edu/activities/safe/cases/mit-dershowitz/dersh-summary>

⁴⁴*The Tech*, Volume 107, Number 51

This freedom is fundamental to the broader principle of academic freedom and cannot be unduly abridged by administrative action. The Policy is, therefore, inappropriate for MIT. [. . .] By unanimous vote, the Committee thereby dismisses the charges against you.

As to the concerns that led to the formulation of the Policy Statement on Sexually Explicit Films, the Committee urges the MIT community to engage in a renewed vigorous debate to address these concerns.⁴⁵

Indeed, the COD decision sparked debate about pornography at MIT once again, with many women and men on campus upset. In response to the decision and ensuing debates, the MIT Faculty Policy Committee proposed “limited changes” in the *MIT Policy Statement on Sexually Explicit Films*. The proposal would require that any explicit films shown in dormitory common areas be screened and approved by the Ad Hoc Committee, but would allow sexually explicit films to be shown in Kresge Auditorium once again, limit the number of films that would need to be screened, and reduce advanced notification from six to three weeks.⁴⁶ Both Dean McBay and the COD felt this new proposal was “a step in the wrong direction.”⁴⁷

Student group Profemina also drafted their own more restrictive proposal, which appeared in *The Tech* in April of 1988 and described a detailed process by which films could be screened prior to showing in common areas of dormitories. (Their proposal included retaining the ban on pornography in public areas.) The Academic Council voted to reject the changes in favor of retaining the old policy.⁴⁸

As restrictions on X-rated films caused them to be banned from public spaces, and students began to show them in living spaces instead, some students began to protest their presence in undergraduate dormitories. In April of 1988, 32 residents of Senior Haus signed a petition asking for pornographic films to be restricted to private spaces

⁴⁵ *The Tech*, Volume 107, Number 51

⁴⁶ *The Tech*, Volume 108, Number 4

⁴⁷ *The Tech*, Volume 108, Number 8

⁴⁸ *The Tech*, Volume 108, Number 28

during Steer Roast, an annual two day party, and not to be paid for with house funds. The organizers of the event refused to consider the request⁴⁹ Random Hall residents considered adopting a policy on pornography after receiving a complaint about an explicit film shown in a common area of the dormitory in early 1989, but the proposal was rejected 30 to 13.⁵⁰

But these decisions became moot in 1990, when a new Academic Council policy ruled that “common areas” of MIT included MIT dormitories. The new policy also dismantled the Ad Hoc Committee. Now, the COD and ODSA would be notified only when a specific complaint was filed.⁵¹

Either the revised policy satisfied a large majority of the MIT community, which seems unlikely, or people were growing tired of the constant debate. In any case, the debate appears to have dissappeared suddenly after this new policy came into effect, with the exception of a few letters each year to *The Tech* whenever Dershowitz publicly showed Deepthroat to “celebrate free speech.”⁵²

The debate was renewed briefly once again in 1996 when, after the LSC’s 1986 voluntary moratorium on showing pornography ran out, the LSC once again considered showing “erotic films.” *The Tech*, Volume 116, Number 62 After mixed responses from the MIT community, it decided against it. In 1999, a pornography marathon was held on Registration Day, but it was not sponsored by the LSC.⁵³ Still, responses from MIT students and faculty varied widely. LSC has not shown pornography since.

Today, scattered pornography continues to be shown on MIT’s campus in various forms. Many dormitories, most notably Senior Haus and East Campus, continue to show pornographic films on occasion, seemingly inciting little criticism. However, it

⁴⁹ *The Tech*, Volume 108, Number 22

⁵⁰ *The Tech*, Volume 109, Number 14

⁵¹ *The Tech*, Volume 110, Number 1

⁵² Dershowitz states this as his goal in numerous letters to *The Tech*

⁵³ *The Tech*, Volume 119, Number 2

seems that the tradition of showing it on Registration Day is waning. It may be that easy access to information through the internet has made public showings of pornography obsolete.

It seems especially appropriate, then, that the most controversial public use of pornography on campus in the past several years was during the first 6.001 (Structure and Interpretation of Computer Programs) lecture in Spring of 1998, when nude frontals of two women were projected onto a screen in front of several hundred students without warning. One professor of the class, Harold Abelson, claims it was intended to educate students about common uses of computers. After many students and faculty responded angrily, Abelson also explained that he intended to offend students to illustrate the societal effects, both good and bad, of the information age.⁵⁴ He and the other professors later apologized profusely to their class.

Just as the societal context of the '70s and '80s was largely responsible for launching the MIT pornography debates, the political climate of the 1990s and the rise of the internet were vital in finding an end to the conflict. In addition to the availability of pornography through the internet, attitudes towards feminism and tactics used by feminists changed rapidly during the '90s.

Along with greater societal trends, some MIT-specific trends have decreased protest of pornography on campus. Professor Ann Russo's departure may have decreased interest in and knowledge of the relationships between pornography and violence on campus. Also, the more recent heads of the Womens Studies Department have focused less on high-profile events. Most events sponsored by the department now are associated with specific classes.⁵⁵

Many feel that the widely criticized actions of a few radical feminists on campus

⁵⁴*The Tech*, Volume 118, Number 8

⁵⁵Interview with Ruth Perry

have given feminism a bad name at MIT. For example, the Social Justice Cooperative, an MIT student group, has been condemned by many MIT students, even some of those who consider themselves proponents of equality for women, ever since a 1999 event: the SJC placed a “penis pinata” painted like an American flag in the student center so passers-by could “smash the patriarchy.” The message was lost on many MIT students.⁵⁶

This and similar actions have caused many students to be wary of making feminist statements for fear of association with this minority. One student even said “It’s to the point where if [a particular student] feels one way the other side wins by default.” It is illustrative of the current attitude on campus that being compared to Aimee Smith has become an insult for many on the Left at MIT. Students may be pressured to ignore the possibility of harmful effects of pornography for women because such opinions are closely associated with certain feminist events and people.

However, while pornography itself may seem a less urgent issue to students at MIT in 2004, the broader debates about free speech, tradition versus building community and political correctness, and the role of the university in our society are as alive as ever. The MIT official seal and class ring have been criticized widely by students and faculty because of their depiction of two males rather than a male and a female. Recently, MIT administrators ruled, after Scott Kreuger’s death by alcohol poisoning at an MIT fraternity, that all first-year students would have to live on campus. The policy has sparked a long-standing debate and caused some students to form the group ILTFP (I Love This Fucking Place) to take action to reverse the decision and prevent similar ones in the future. The administration also prohibited alcohol, even for non-minors, in public spaces of dormitories, causing outrage amongst students. Finally, a recent decision prohibiting displaying flags on the outside of windows of

⁵⁶ *The Tech*, Volume 122, Number 27

dormitories caused students to protest.

These subjects are today as controversial as pornography was in the 1980s; they demonstrate together that MIT students and faculty care passionately about administrative policy. While the LSC has not shown pornography on a Registration Day in five years, and discussion of pornography at MIT has lately been at a minimum, the argument is a complex one and a true resolution has never been reached. Many students on campus are still aware of the Registration Day pornography decision, though it seems that most know little about the details. MIT, where traditions are strong and debate is very highly valued, has probably not seen the end of the pornography debates.