

Pornography & Pleasure

Beyond capital, beyond patriarchy

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

After years of reading essays in the seemingly endless debate over pornography in the feminist and anarchist milieu, one of many questions reverberates with the most resonance for me: will pornography exist in utopia?

Ellen Willis, in her essay “Feminism, Morality and Pornography,” states: “I imagine that in utopia, porn would wither away along with the state, heroin, and Coca-Cola.” But even in utopia, won’t some of us still write and make pictures that express our deepest erotic secrets and desires?

Will all forms of mediation be abolished when we experience mutual pleasure given freely in a community completely untethered from the coercive tyranny of commodified flesh? I envision a marvelous androgyny where hermaphrodites grow new parts and invent new ways of loving, but can I express this dream to others without language or visual images?

While everyone’s utopian view of sexuality differs, I believe the broader discussion which includes the porn debate, should focus on a redefinition of pleasure outside the torturously inscribed boundaries of the anti-pleasure society of patriarchal capitalism. Can we remove the thick veil of fear which separates us from taboo to allow the unmentionable to emerge from within us as we fulfill our revolutionary desire?

Does porn = rape?

Extensive rifts have emerged in the anarchist and women’s liberation movements over the last two decades around the issue of porn. At one pole of the argument is the party line of Women Against Pornography and the government’s Meese Commission on Pornography that defined all pornography as violence against women. Porn not only leads to rape; porn is rape.

A militant anti-porn movement has gained momentum and seeks to enlist all feminists in the fight, for if porn=rape, what kind of decent feminist would not agitate to abolish it? Several feminists and anti-authoritarians, firm believers in creative freedom and sexual liberation, troubled by the porn=rape theory and the uncomfortable collusion of feminists with the religious right, have formed clusters of anti-censorship dissent within their movements.

“Writing and pictures intended to arouse sexual desire,” as one dictionary defines pornography, do not possess innate violent or misogynistic characteristics. Porn can depict a distorted and plasticized notion of human beauty that fuels false insecurities and sexual stereotypes. Insofar as porn is created by heterosexual men for male pleasure and profit in a male-dominated capitalist society and insofar as porn reduces women to sexual object/ commodities to be viewed by a male gaze, it should be recognized as yet another mediated manifestation of a sexist society.

In her essay, Willis describes such phallic porn as a “psychic assault.” She elaborates:

“As I’ve suggested, there is a social and psychic link between pornography and rape. In terms of patriarchal morality both are expressions of male lust, which is presumed to be innately vicious, and offensive to the putative sexual innocence of ‘good’ women. But feminists supposedly begin with different assumptions—that men’s

confusion of sexual desire with predatory aggression reflects a sexist system, not male biology; that there are no good (chaste) or bad (lustful) women, just women who are, like men, sexual beings. From this standpoint, to lump pornography with rape is dangerously simplistic. Rape is a violent physical assault. Pornography can be a psychic assault, both in its content and public intrusions on our attention, but for women as for men it can also be a source of erotic pleasure. A woman who is raped is a victim; a woman who enjoys pornography is in a sense a rebel, insisting on an aspect of her sexuality that has been defined as a male preserve."

While anti-porn advocates have correctly identified the great bulk of porn as sexist and dehumanizing, any analysis, feminist or anti-authoritarian, that unequivocally moralizes and rants against pornography, runs the risk of simply reinforcing the traditional codes of femininity which relegate women to the restrictive "good girl" role and resurrects the tired Madonna/whore dichotomy. The "good girl" fulfills the feminine stereotypes of weakness and modesty that patriarchy promotes.

Paula Webster, in her essay "Pornography and Pleasure," argues for a different notion of female subjectivity and sexuality:

"The pursuit of sex threatens to make good girls bad, so we usually accept the cultural standard of sexual minimalism...few partners, fewer positions, less pleasure and no changing of preference. Nice girls don't talk about desiring sex. We talk about what they did to us. Women are allowed to be the objects of desire, to attract attention. But we have tended to refuse the role of sexual subject. Being forward, pushy, seeking sex are not acceptable. Being passive, teasing to please, are still preferred to seizing our own pleasure."

Webster delineates one serious drawback of the anti-porn movement by highlighting its tendency to "organize and theorize around our victimization...not our subjectivity and self definition." This urges women to "embrace our sexually deprived condition and begin to police the borders of the double standard that has been used effectively to silence us." She argues against the double standard (which celebrates sexual "promiscuity and permissiveness" in men and condemns similar attitudes and behaviors in women). Instead, women should actively pursue "our gratification and masturbatory pleasure" for "our desires will not make us victims" but "will inspire us at the same time that we work to restructure society to be more hospitable to our own desires."

Erotica and porn

Several activists have attempted to resolve the political implications of this discussion by relying on the false opposition of porn and erotica. "Erotica" is not only soft, romantic and "politically correct," it is completely inoffensive to bourgeois morality. As Webster states in her essay, where this fuzzy line is drawn usually "depends on personal taste, moral boundaries, sexual preferences, cultural and class biases."

Etymologically, the term pornography has explicit economic connotations ("writing about prostitutes") that are problematic in any anti-capitalist critique. But the word also suggests a certain "otherness" and outlaw nature that the recuperation of "Erotica" by hard-line moralists does not allow. Linda Williams echoes this discussion in her book-long feminist analysis of sexually explicit film and video, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*, when she uses the saying "one person's pornography is another person's erotica" and celebrates the fact that the "pat polar oppositions of a soft, tender, non-explicit women's erotica and a hard, cruel, graphic phallic pornography have begun to break down." We can become more precise when discussing specific examples of the multiple kinds of porn and erotica that exist in our contemporary culture and that could exist in the culture of our revolutionary desire, while avoiding whenever possible, politically charged generalizations using these confusing terms as all-encompassing banners. Can we explore new ways to distinguish alienating representations of the erotic from liberating ones? The positive potential of porn/erotica could be determined not by how explicit it is, but by whether it celebrates whole people rather than passive objects and exists outside the confines of commodity exchange. Or is all mediated representation, regardless of intent, inherently alienating?

Erotic commodities?

In a capitalist/sexist society, women are sexually exploited in all kinds of work. The humiliations of work resemble the humiliations of prostitution. Due to capital's gender inequities, women experience the humiliation more completely. As Paula Webster points out, "When we realize the extent to which all our bodies become commodities, the comfortable separations between feminists, especially academic feminists, and prostitutes, office workers, and other 'exploited women' crumbles."

Capitalism and Patriarchy promote the exploitation of women. The sexual violence of some videos and literature in the "Adult Bookstore" is connected with all the psychic and visual violence peddled by the war machine of mass media. Even more pervasive and dangerous than the "sleazy" porn most commonly attacked by anti-porn activists is the pornography of advertising, where sexually "alluring" images of women, on billboards, on television and in magazines, are used to sell products to people. This intense eroticization of the commodity unites sexism with compulsive consumerism and effectively helps people confuse their genuine sexual urges with a pale, profit-producing passion to shop 'til you cum with multiple ejaculations of cash. The "sex industry" should be abolished with all forms of industry and production which are the techniques for commodifying our flesh.

Can we re-imagine lust?

When we depart from the brutally constructed text of patriarchal pleasure, radical change can further the assertion of an autonomous feminist vision which re-imagines lust and desire outside the societal script and beyond the economy of capital. New vocabularies can be written. We can refuse to embrace the vehement moral vigilance and witch-hunt style hysteria of many anti-porn activists and recognize the liberatory potential of a humanized erotica. We will not endorse violence against women, or bodies as products, when we write our sexually explicit poetry of resistance. The core of our sexual beings will be catalysts for imagination and the place we experience the power of our dreams.

Our new erotica shall be contoured by an uncompromising revolt against industrialized skin. The putrid profit-oriented porn will be undesirable to us along with virtually all mass cultural interpretations of sex and gender. A completely different kind of porn will remain, and no morality cops under any reactionary or revolutionary banner will be allowed to suppress it. I have already seen glimpses of radical do-it-yourself porn created by subversive punks, drag queens, polysexuals, feminists and queers-erotic utopians of every stripe. At the margins of underground mail culture, a whole feast of sex 'zines are circulating.

Brenda Loew Tatelbaum, publisher of the feminist "porn" journal *Eidos* states: "Dworkinite 'groupies' and NOW cheerleaders' function as sexual freedom revisionists while trashing the historical contributions of feminist advocates of sexual freedom. Frances Wright, Victoria Woodhull, Tennessee Claflin and Emma Goldman all confronted patriarchal authority and challenged society's gender-based/ gender-biased taboos-as a natural alternative preferable to the coercive Church/ State sanctioned paradigm of marital procreative intercourse. Similarly, the past examples of woman-created literary and artistic erotica (by Sappho, Emily Dickinson, Isadora Duncan, Anais Nin, George Sand, Virginia Woolfe, Anne Sexton, Erica Jong, Alice Walker, Georgia O'Keefe, Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle) provide an alternative to the stereotypical language and images of male-created/male-defined/ male-controlled female eroto-sexuality..."

Almost fifteen years ago Sonny Tufts wrote in an article on porn in the Fifth Estate (see FE #290, March 1978) that "eroticism contains elements of rebellion against the sterile modern world. Like all rebellion, it is two sided: the smashing of taboos is both liberating and terrifying, both revolutionary and reactionary, depending on circumstances and the consciousness of the protagonists." Like Tufts, I remain "hopelessly utopian," and invite all debate and discussion to help create a post-patriarchal revolutionary discourse on love and desire. What kind of erotic writings and images are humanizing and liberating to you?

I will close with a long quote from Guy Hocquenghem's essay, "To Destroy Sexuality," which appeared in *Semio-text(e)*'s provocative "Poly sexuality" issue:

“What we want, what we desire is to kick in the facade over sexuality and its representations so that we might discover just what our living body is. We want to free, release, unfetter and relieve this living body so as to free all of its energies, desires, passions crushed by our constrictive and programmed social system. We want to re-discover the pleasure in shaking ourselves joyously, without shame, not because of need or compensation, but just for the sheer pleasure of shaking ourselves. We want to rediscover the pleasures of vibrating, humming, speaking, walking, moving, expressing ourselves, raving, singing-finding pleasure in our body in all ways possible. We want to be transsexual, autonomous, mobile and multiple human beings...”

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