

Pornography and Pleasure

Paula Webster

Every feminist in the New York metropolitan area has heard of Women Against Pornography. Indeed, in the last few years, pornography has become the focus for a great deal of feminist activity. In one of the best-organized and best-funded campaigns in movement history, women have been encouraged to examine their gut reactions to sexually explicit material and to take a political stand that condemns pornography as a major cause of violence against women.

Women from every part of the movement, and women who would have no part of the movement, came together around this issue. Political differences, both in theory and practice, were set aside as pornography was assigned a privileged position in the discourse on women's oppression. At least publicly, the link was unquestioned. Pornography caused violence against women. Moreover, not only did pornography cause violence against women, it was violence against women. Pornography made women victims, for it depicted women as subject to men's sexual lusts. The very existence of 42nd Street was an assault on women. All those pictures, films, advertisements degraded and therefore violated women.

A vast sea of feminist solidarity swelled around the issue of pornography. To move against the wave felt truly threatening. Although a few voices addressed contradictions in the anti-porn analysis,¹ no dissenting movement developed. Criticism was kept to a minimum. It is one thing to disagree with a group you are fighting

I had always had this fantasy about fucking a man with a strap on dildo... after years of searching I found someone who WANTED

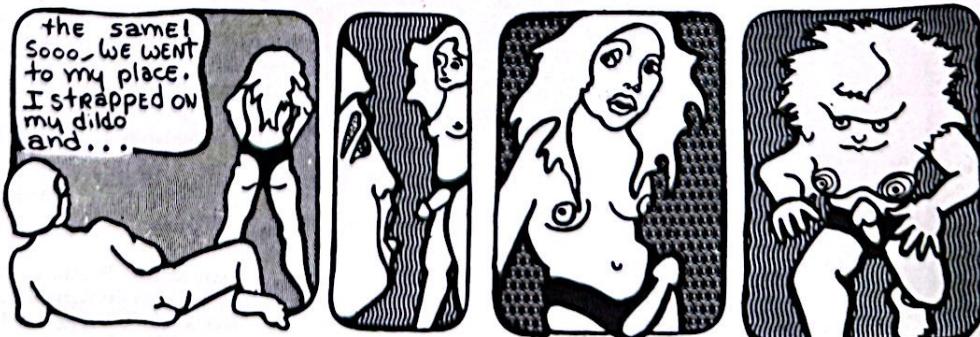
against, but serious discord within your own movement is problematic. We seem to fear that feminist solidarity, so precious to us all, will not survive any rigorous criticism.

Yet many women, under their breath, confided that something was missing from all this discussion of the production and consumption of sexually explicit material. Dogmatism, moralizing, and censorial mystifying tended to dominate the anti-porn campaign. What about encouraging an honest dialogue about our sexual imagination? The shifting of discourse might have opened the floodgates of many passions. So much remains unsaid about our eroticism, our fantasies, our sexual activities, our longings for satisfaction. Our pleasure, as it is constituted inside and out of heterosexuality and patriarchy, never got center stage. Because this was a movement to chastise men for their vices, women were not encouraged to talk about their relationship to sexuality.

But what did we really feel under the onslaught of sexual imagery provided by the campaign? I remember seeing a slide show with about 30 images of predominantly heterosexual couples engaged in intercourse (genital and anal), bondage, and sadomasochism. There were shots of individual women, bound and gagged, pictures of female dominatrixes, assorted album covers, posters, clothing advertisements, as well as a handful of very jarring images of self-mutilation and the now-infamous *Hustler* photos of women arranged as food on a platter or put through a meat grinder.

Despite the lecturer's claim that all reactions to the slides were encouraged, each slide was interpreted to reveal its implicit pernicious meaning. One viewer, for example, asked why the photo of a young girl about to have anal intercourse was described as "the violent rape of a child." The reply was that she was obviously under age, so at the least it was statutory rape. The lecturer added that anal intercourse was "very painful"; therefore it was unlikely that this "tiny young girl" could have been anything other than brutally injured. I thought this reply indicated certain biases about pain and pleasure and preferred positions. Yet the most important misunderstanding was that a mere representation was spoken of as a reality—as an actual event recorded by some Candid Camera. The multiplicity of issues around gender, power, and sexuality embedded in each slide was disregarded; only one way of seeing was acceptable. Our "visual guide" invariably revealed the real or implied violence of the slide. All images of women were suspect.

In one department store ad for girls' shirts the seductive looks of the child models were offered as proof positive that the evil influence of pornography had filtered down to the truly mass media and was spreading like a contagious plague through even the most mundane images. Such photos, not unlike ones we could all find in family scrapbooks of ourselves as pre-teens, were indicted as encouragement to incest. No one thought it strange that these ads, directed primarily at women consumers, did not incite these



women's lust for their sons, daughters, and other women.

To discourage and deny the charge that the campaign was anti-sex, erotica was held up as the *only* sexually explicit material that did not represent violence or cause it. "Erotica" became the code word for stimulation appropriate to a feminist consciousness, while "pornography" was defined as exclusively male and therefore "naturally" devoid of distinctions between sex and violence. The implications of this neat dichotomization and sex-typing of desire reflect, unchanged, the Victorian ideology of innate differences in the nature of male and female libido and fantasy. Men, we are to presume, because of their "excessive" drive, prefer the hard edge of pornography. Women, less driven by the "beast," find erotica just their cup of tea.

Given this map of the sexual world, it was most distressing that during the slide show no erotica was ever presented, leaving the impression that erotica itself is very rare, or so mundane that we can trust our memories to recall its charge. This category of images, absent and therefore mute, was considered essentially unproblematic. It was good, healthy sexual imagery—the standard against which pornography and perhaps our own sexual lives were to be judged. The subjectivity involved in dividing explicitly sexual material into hard-core, soft-core, and erotic was never challenged by the audience.

What is defined as pornography and what is defined as erotica no doubt depends on personal taste, moral boundaries, sexual preferences, cultural and class biases. These definitions have contracted and expanded over time; advocates of one or the other form of imagery have switched camps or staunchly defended their own. Just as normative attitudes about sexual behavior, masculinity and femininity, and the social relations between the sexes have shifted, so have attitudes about sexually explicit material. There are no universal, unchanging criteria for drawing the line between acceptable and unacceptable sexual images.

As feminists, we might question the very impulse to make such a rigid separation, to let a small group of women dictate the boundaries of our morality and our pleasure.

No discussion immediately followed the slide show. Divided into groups, we walked down 42nd Street, entering the shops and arcades where films, magazines, and live sex shows are offered to the male public. For the price of a subway ride, I could actually watch for a few minutes, in my own private booth, the act that for all my years in the nuclear family was considered dirty, disgusting, and therefore taboo. If pornography is propaganda, and I do believe that it is, it is not promoting the violation and degradation of women, but traditional heterosexual intercourse and gender relations. (Perhaps they overlap, but that is another story.) What is missing is romance, shared social status, worries about contraception and shame. The short film I saw was not about love, but it was undeniably about sex.

I was grateful for this opportunity to demystify a territory that had been off-limits to me as a woman. I felt relieved about the dangers of pornography, since I had viewed little violence and a lot of consensual sex. However, I was more curious than ever about the meaning and function of such a zone dedicated to solitary sexual stimulation and voyeuristic fantasies. The secrecy surrounding sexual activity had been, for me, the price all women paid for femininity. We were not to speak of our desires, only answer "yes" or "no." The tour evoked complex reactions, including envy, fear, and sexual arousal. The social and psychic repression of my female desire was giving way, every so slightly, under the barrage of sexual imagery. I was a fascinated tourist in an exotic, erotic, and forbidden land.

The tour and slide show raised many questions for me. What is the underlying appeal of pornography? And what does the volume of business done on 42nd Street say about sexual relations? What can pornography tell

us about the nature of desire and its relation to fantasy? Is pornography really any more dangerous to women than fashion magazines, television commercials, and cinema? Otherness in the guise of domestic purity and mindless submission seems more pernicious than Otherness in the guise of sexual activity. How, I wondered, can we begin to measure the effects of objectification in pornography when the Otherness ascribed to us at birth because we are not male already labels us as socially inferior? Such an ancient Otherness leaves little room for any avowal of our subjectivity. Moreover, reality and representation of reality are not the same. Objectification may be a function of representation. All the actors (male and female) in pornography are objectified. They do not speak. They are not individuals. They have no depth, no contours. They are the ritual performers of the culture's sexual paradigms. They are not the real, but a commentary on the real.

What I felt after the tour and slide show was the need for discussion of our many contradictory reactions to what we had seen. Yet the lines had already been drawn between bad and good sex, brainwashed fantasies and uncontaminated desire, danger and purity. The excitement of the unknown, the delight and terror at seeing so much active flesh (male and female), was never acknowledged. Like Mom and Dad, the tour leaders responded exclusively to our reactions of disgust. Our worst adolescent fantasies (or our best) were true. "They" will do anything to get *it*, to have *it*, to use *us*. To see pornography as a safety valve for the aggressive sexuality of men was mistaken. Pornography "really" acts to disinhibit male violence. If it is not done away with, we will see an increase in rape, battery, and child molestation. This final volley of doomsday prediction was not easy to recover from. To disagree was to be aligned with the brainwashed or the naive.

I am convinced that the current anti-porn campaign holds significant dangers for feminists interested in



From *Tits & Clits Comix*.

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developing an analysis of violence against women and extending an analysis of female sexuality. The provocative claims of the campaign create an enormous obstacle in the form of moral righteousness; they feed the old and voracious anxiety we experience when confronted with sexual imagery. Even more important, the campaign has chosen to organize and theorize around our victimization, our Otherness, not our subjectivity and self-definition. In focusing on what male pornography has done to us, rather than on our own sexual desires, we tend to embrace our sexually deprived condition and begin to police the borders of the double standard that has been used effectively to silence us. It is not in the interests of feminism to circumvent the vast area of sexual repression. And pornography is primarily about sexuality. It is important to wrench this ground out from under the barrage of moralizing so that we can understand the social construction of all our ideas about our own and male sexuality. While it is equally important to understand the cultural determinants of violence against women, I would suggest that these tasks remain separate for the moment.

I have serious reservations about certain tendencies within the anti-porn movement. Are we seeking to protect the ideal of Womanhood by claiming some natural female superiority in the realm of morality and decency? And don't we ignore the sexual socialization of both men and women in asserting that men "by nature" prefer this and women that? What about the subversive elements in pornography, which might help feminists to understand the conditions under which all sexual behavior is negotiated in a sexist society? If women are humiliated by pornography and feel degraded watching women get pleasure, then we might pause to ask if women feel humiliated by real, everyday heterosexuality and its demands. Power relations play an important role in our actual sexual lives. Can we really expect the realm of fantasy to be free of the residues of that power struggle?

As women, we have been brought up in a society where to be sexual in an active or "promiscuous" fashion is to transgress the rules for femininity. Not just the rules set up by men but the rules set and enforced by other women. We learned that men were the prince/beasts and we were their expectant princesses/martyrs, waiting to be

aroused by a kiss, leading to love and marriage and the protection of our vulnerable 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. Pornography might be seen as challenging this protected and confining corner into which women's sexuality has been pushed, for it negates the sacramental character of our sexual desires.

Indeed, I am convinced that por-



nography, even in its present form, contains important messages for women. As Angela Carter suggests,² it does not tie women's sexuality to reproduction or to a domesticated couple or exclusively to men. It is true that this depiction is created by men, but perhaps it can encourage us to think of what our own images and imaginings might be like.

Television, film, and our mothers all reinforce the notion that only bad girls like sex. If we reject this good girl/bad girl distinction, the split between the mother and the whore, the tour guide and the topless dancer, we begin to understand that neither has a better deal under patriarchy. The comfortable separation between feminists, especially academic feminists, and prostitutes, office workers, and other "exploited women" crumbles when we realize the extent to which all our bodies become commodities, whether

within or outside the nuclear family. In placing the gratification of men above our own, we pose absolutely no danger to male-dominated society. What I am suggesting here is not a withdrawal from sex, but an active pursuit of *our* gratification, with a sense of responsibility, entitlement, and enthusiasm. The good girl/bad girl distinction will fail to terrorize us and control our access to pleasure *only* if we set out to destroy the double standard.

Specifically, what we might take from male pornography is a vision of the mutability of sexual experience and a variety of directions for sexual experimentation. Whatever its limitations, pornography does demystify a number of sexual practices that have been taboo for women. As voyeurs, we can participate in homosexual activity, domination, group sex, and masochistic and sadistic orgies. With the clues we gather here about our own fantasies, we can begin to map out the zones of cerebral and fleshly arousal.

Pornography also offers women a multiplicity of vantage points for analyzing the sexual paradigms that frame all gender relations and constrain our sexual interactions. Pornography implies that we could find all races, genders, ages, and shapes sexually interesting, if only in our minds. Compare this to the pinched reality of a liberal ideology that snidely prods us to do our own thing against a background of political repression. While pornography itself is not a critique of society, its very existence in such a deeply anti-pleasure society speaks to an attempt to introduce a non-moralistic view of sexual practice. Of course, pornography is not a substitute for sexual practice, though it might be an addition to it. Even if women were to miraculously take over this industry, we would only be able to change the content so that *our* masturbatory pleasure was considered. It would not give us permission to act. That permission can only come when we accept that our desires will not make us victims, that our sensuality is not dangerous to our well-being. This will inspire us at the same time that we work to restructure society to be more hospitable to our desires.

My point is that a stance of moralizing about sexual imagery and, by implication, practice gets us no closer to defining how sexual activity and fantasy fit into our lives or our analysis of oppression. If we think that women

can only be the victims of sex, what strategies do we propose for taking control and altering this situation? Each heterosexually involved woman must ask herself if she will continue to refuse sexual autonomy and subjectivity in the name of femininity.

Perhaps it is premature to call for a truly radical feminist pornography-erotica. But to speak of our own desires and to organize for our own and our collective sexual pleasure would be a beginning. We could open the debate about the nature of female sexual desire. It is precisely in the private, secret, and "shameful" realm of our own sexuality that we have feared to take responsibility for being subjects. We easily talk about denying men pornographic pleasure, but this does not bring us closer to gaining our own.

The training we received as girls encouraged us to renounce acting on our own behalf and for our own pleasure. Our own sexual desires threatened Mom and Dad, and they told us how dangerous sex was, especially curiosity or experimentation. They warned us about men. The good ones would protect us and the bad ones would

exploit us. Now we are hearing these same echoes in a feminist campaign. Men are lustful and women are loving. They are violent and we are peaceful. They like rough sex... we don't.

Some feminists reject this classification of genders which stresses natural, immutable differences. The essence of male sexuality is not barely repressed violence or insatiable bestiality. Nor is female sexuality passive or characterized by efficiently sanitized longings. As we have come to understand that women are made and not born, we must conclude that men too undergo a similar social construction. Masculinity and femininity are social products that establish but do not reveal the true natures of these hierarchically opposed groups. Are we ready to give up the eternal enemy and challenge our feminization, which leaves us mute about our desires for pleasure, and so many other things? Once we take our eyes off them and renounce our obsessive concern with their thoughts, feelings, and actions, we can move from blaming to assessing our vision for change.

It is time to organize for our pleasure as well as our protection, to use

From *Wet Satin: Women's Erotic Fantasies*. Published by Last Gasp.
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pornographic images to raise consciousness about our desires and our fears. If we can switch our focus from men's pleasure to our own, then we have the potential of creating the discourse that will challenge the values of "good girls" (non-sexual women) and explore the bridge that connects and divides expression and repression. If we could imagine operating without all the internal and external constraints society has imposed on us, feminists might create a truly radical pornography that spoke of female desire as we are beginning to know it and as we would like to see it acted out.

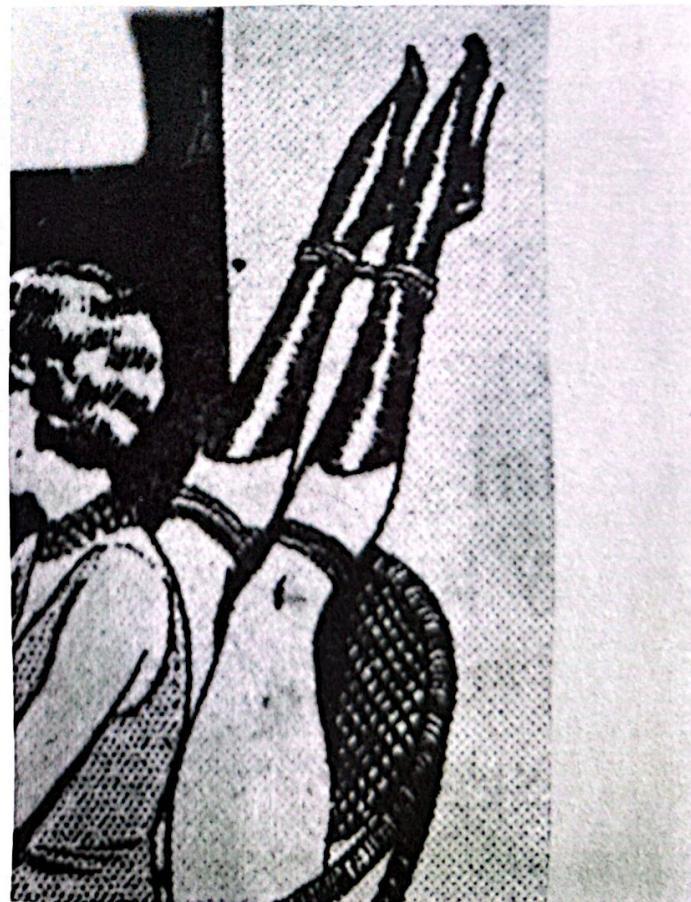
My special thanks to Sue Heinemann for a truly creative edit.

1. See Diedre English, "The Politics of Porn," *Mother Jones*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (April 1980), p. 20; Ellen Willis, in *Village Voice* (Oct. 15, 1979).

2. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

Paula Webster, a writer and anthropologist, is co-authoring a book called *Bound by Love: The Contradictions of Femininity* (Beacon Press).

She couldn't make up her mind She couldn't figure out who to be What to be Is her reality as powerful as her fantasy



Glenda Hydler. From *Purity pink and everything neat* (January/February 1978). Glenda Hydler, a writer and photographer, has been living in NYC since 1969.