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## Introduction

For better or worse, pornography has become the feminist issue of the decade. Sexual matters in general have moved from the shadow to the light of day – not just 'vanilla sex' (the separate denomination of which is itself telling), but homosexuality, sadomasochism, sex crimes (rape, child molestation, incest), erotic bondage, masturbation, bestiality, and so on. Pornography is part and parcel of the larger drift. But pornography is also different, set apart by its status as a second-order practice or a fantasy of practices rather than itself a 'practice'. Because pornography is representation and representation is amenable to interpretation, the logic goes, pornography offers a kind of key or master text to the practices that it portrays and that flood our daily news and entertainment. Read pornography right and you will understand those practices. Read pornography right and you will understand rape.

All this hinges, of course, on what 'right reading' might be, and it is on this point that feminism has split down the middle. For those on the anti-censorship side, pornography is a meaningful text about the sexual acts it represents. For those on the censorship side (conspicuously Robin Morgan, Catharine MacKinnon, and Andrea Dworkin), it is the enabling theory of the acts it represents: a charter for action, or, in Morgan's lapidary formulation, the claim that pornography is the theory and rape the practice. This is not a minor quibble. It hits our most basic sense of how to understand culture, what to do to improve our place in it, and with whom (the Moral Right or the American Civil Liberties Union) to throw in our political lot.

This volume stands on the anti-censorship side of the fence. Because the censorship position is commonly taken, by the media and the public, to be the feminist position, it has seemed all the more urgent for those of us on the other side to speak up. The essays in this volume vary greatly in what they have to say about pornography, but they are all animated by the spirit of dissent, and they all refuse a scheme that discounts dissenters as complicit with male domination. Pornography may be a 'meaningful text', but that is not to say that its meaning is transparent. Even in the case of a

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single, apparently simple image, 'real' or 'true' meanings are hard to come by. It is one thing to feel offended by that image, as a person and as a woman, but quite another to claim that it is transparently harmful. And pornography does not in any case devolve on one image, or one kind of image, infinitely duplicated ('rape'). It comprises a great variety of images and scenarios, many of which fall outside the standard scheme of male-female relations, many of which contradict one another, and many of which have little to do with women (as in the case of gay male or male transvestite pornography, for example) or even with men (lesbian pornography).

variety of image

Consider, for example, porn's fondness for dominatrix scenarios - images in which men are shown as the slaves and sexual servants of women. In practice, to judge from the accounts of sex workers, 'by far the most common service paid for by men in heterosexual S/M is the extravagant display of submission'. So writes Anne McClintock in an essay on the subculture of sadomasochism. Certainly this image, and this practice, pose problems for any monolithic understanding of pornography. It is not just that the usual positions are reversed; it is that the reversal - particularly when the subordinate male is dressed as a girl or woman - opens up the possibility that at least some male consumers at least some of the time are not uniformly 'identified' (the term is a tricky one) with the male-dominant role, but rather are aligned with what convention and the social unconscious designate as the powerless or effeminate position - the object, not the subject, of rape. Is it possible that even in the standard set-up (overpowering male, cringing female), male spectators may engage, at some level, not only with the dominant but with the submissive part? And what do we make of transvestite or 'she-male' pornography and self-portraiture, forms in which, as Laura Kipnis reminds us, there are no women, but which speak plainly to the desire to be feminine and arguably female as well?

problems for mono-

man id. sub.

Then there is the figure of Annie Sprinkle. Two essays - one by Linda Williams, one by Chris Straayer - explore the political significance of the woman who has worked (in chronological order) as masseuse, prostitute, burlesque and live sex-show performer, sex magazine writer, porn actress, porn director, and, most recently, avant-garde performance artist in her show *Post-Post Porn Modernist*. It is not only that Sprinkle's parodic relation to the business of sex and her spectacular and spectacularly public orgasms confound our notions of what it is porn actresses are and do. It is that Sprinkle herself, Sprinkle the phenomenon, obliges us to ask, as Williams notes, why we have drawn such a firm line between obscene pornography on the one hand and legitimate art on the other, and whether there might not be some political value, in terms of women's agency, of opening the categories up to each other (themes developed along other lines by Kipnis, Liz Kotz and Lynda Nead). Sprinkle is clearly unusual. Other accounts of porn actresses and sex performers are less happy, and Maureen Turim's essay on the Asian traffic in pornography reminds us just how heavily social traditions and economics can weigh on

porn/art - help agency to gen. up categories

women. But however special, Sprinkle's case stands as an object lesson – not because she has transcended the sex industry, but, on the contrary, because she stands so squarely within it and has insisted with such humour and integrity on its being acknowledged as the context of her own performance art. She has stayed with, and unabashedly inhabits, her own pornographic body. → Sprinkle - performance art

The pornographic body: this is the heart of the matter. Although our systems of censorship and our production codes concern themselves with the status of bodies 'up there' (on the photograph, on the canvas or screen), what is really at stake is the body 'down here', the body of the viewer. Pornography's shame lies in the fact that it has one simple, unequivocal intention: to excite its consumer. We are in general suspicious of forms (including music and dance forms) that aim themselves so directly at the body, and it is no surprise that the other two film genres that do so (horror, which is meant to speed the pulse and prompt screams, and melodrama, which is meant to jerk tears) are also consigned to the lower reaches of the status scale. In fact, as Lynda Nead, Jennifer Wicke and Laura Kipnis remind us, the debate on pornography is always linked, however covertly, with the debate on high and low culture. What is erotica (that favoured category of pro-censorship feminism) but a category that moves us less, a form that, as Nead says, 'allows the viewer to be aroused but within the purified, contemplative mode of high culture'? For Wicke, the association of pornography with mass culture and erotica with art is crucial to an understanding of the popularity of pornography in the academy. Pornography, she writes, 'is a secret sharer in the canon debate, and a hidden partner of the high art/mass culture conflict that rages beyond the perimeters of the canon'.

There is something awesome about the way that pornography can move our bodies, even when we don't want it to and even if we don't approve of the images that make it happen. (If the unconscious were a politically correct place, it would not need to be unconscious.) No wonder we fear pornography's effects, given its power to override or short-circuit our sense of propriety. The question is whether these effects translate into real-life behaviour – whether, again, porn is rightly read as a charter for action. For pro-censorship feminists, as for much of the general public, the answer is yes, and over the last couple of decades social researchers have devised increasingly clever experiments to prove the connection. The jury is still out, according to Lynne Segal's survey and analysis of evidence. So long has it been out, in fact, that we may consider the case to be in a kind of default. The only lesson to be drawn from the evidence is that there is no lesson: 'It is never possible, whatever the image, to isolate it, fix its meaning and predict some inevitable pattern of response, independently from assessing its wider representational context and the particular recreational, educational or social context in which it is being received.' Both Segal and Williams speak eloquently of the political consequences of the 'harm'-driven movement to censor pornography: it falls heavily on marginal or minority sexualities (conspicuously homosexuality); it shifts

shame of porn is + cause  
p. sexual  
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isolate image

the blame for real sexual harm from the perpetrator to the pornographer ("porn made me do it"); and it deflects attention from what are surely the far more influential 'gender messages' of the daily mainstream (billboards, magazine ads, sports events, film and television entertainment, etc.). It scapegoats, in a word.

→ even for more attention

→ absolute resp.

-scapegoat porn-

There is no doubt that the great bulk of pornography has been and remains created by and for men. But is that to say that its meanings can be so neatly reduced to the symbolic organisation of a phallogocentric world? Photographer Grace Lau and film-makers Bette Gordon and Karyn Kay (*Variety* and *Call Me*) give intriguing accounts of how they as women negotiate their way in the world of hardcore, and Liz Kotz shows how two women media artists (Lutz Bacher and Abigail Child) explore and appropriate the terms and forms of pornographic representation. For Gertrud Koch, the porn film's welter of real bodies and genitals must always exceed its organising phallogocentric fictions, and part of the pleasure for even the male viewer, but surely the female one, must lie in the 'details of a quivering world of objects' that elude the 'abstract, generalising mania of male perception'.

Koch's vision of pornography as producing something it can never contain, a 'shadow realm' that lies beyond symbolic systems, is a deeply utopian one. Not all the contributors to this volume would go that far, but they all share the conviction that there is no single 'right reading' of pornography, and that even the most standard forms of heterosexual pornography confess a deeply complicated relation to women and femininity, to men and masculinity, and to the terms of sexual difference that order our everyday lives. Above all, they share the conviction that to make sexually explicit material take the fall for, say, the battery of women on Super Bowl Sunday is simply and terribly beside the point.

no single 'right' reading of porn