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Understanding Pornography

by

Michael Robert Whealen

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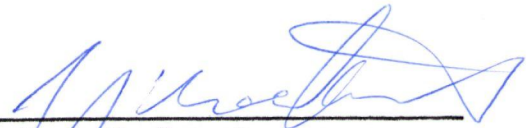
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Understanding Pornography" submitted by Michael Robert Whealen in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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ABSTRACT

Broadly speaking, this thesis is an attempt to think about what we might be, by exploring certain facets of what is. More narrowly, it argues that our understanding of pornography can constructively be broadened by considering the genre from the standpoint of contemporary feminist theory. Although such an approach certainly does not explain everything that there is to be understood about pornography, it does represent a useful adjunct to the more customary ways of thinking about pornography.

The first chapter begins by taking notice of how difficult it is to look at pornography objectively. Given this difficulty, it is suggested that a broadened understanding of the genre is the most appropriate telos for such a project. Following an exploration of some of the attempts to define what pornography is, the recent cultural past of the genre is briefly surveyed in terms of its trends, forms, and contents. The first chapter concludes by suggesting that the "question of pornography" has sociopolitical implications.

Citing certain evidence which suggests that pornography has a political dimension, the second chapter considers the genre in terms of how it is politically perceived today. These political perspectives on pornography are presented in terms of four broad categories: the extreme right-wing, the conservative, the rights-liberal and the radical-liberal points of view. In each case, it is suggested that these perspectives, while perhaps illuminating in various ways, are also problematic.

The third chapter begins by taking note of the fact that a political perspective on pornography is also a man's perspective on pornography, since politics in the West has traditionally been for the most part a male domain. As a consequence, the concern is expressed that a political presentation of pornography tends to overlook the opinions of virtually half the world's population, who are women. While it is not possible to get rid of this bias entirely, it is argued that feminist theory promises to give us a women's perspective on pornography, while remaining sensitive to the existence of gender bias in our perceptions, ideas, representations, and so on. The chapter concludes by developing a feminist framework for the understanding of pornography.

The fourth and final chapter uses the contemporary feminist framework developed in the third chapter in order to present an understanding of pornography in a feminist/women's context. On the basis of this particular reading of the genre, it is suggested that the pornography of the recent cultural past can plausibly be construed as conveying a very specific message, irrespective of its ostensible sexual content. This message, from a feminist standpoint, is that it is all right -- and perhaps even pleasant -- for human beings to relate to each other according to social rituals of domination and subordination. Pornography, in this way of seeing it, is the lichtbild (inverted projection) of social interactions that are structured according to the gender domination of women by men. The thesis concludes with a consideration of the drawbacks of such a way of looking at pornography, while still suggesting that there is something to be said for it.

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Generally, I would like to express my sincerest appreciation to the office staff and professors who make up the Department of Philosophy at the University of Calgary. In a very real sense, this thesis would not have been written without them. More specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Kai Nielsen for a number of things. It was Dr. Nielsen who first exposed me to the world of critical social theory, by way of the reading course that he was kindly able to provide in the Winter of 1987. Had it not been for this, it is doubtful whether I would have even begun to untangle the complex web of issues that makes up the substance of this thesis. Moreover, in looking patiently at successive drafts of this thesis, Dr. Nielsen was unfailingly helpful in his comments. But perhaps Dr. Nielsen's most valuable contribution to this project is a function of what it was that he did not do over the time that it was being written. As my advisor, he allowed me to pursue my researches into pornography without hindrance, until such time as I felt that I understood the genre adequately. At no time did he suggest that I tailor either my approach or conclusions to any preconceived "master-plan." While such an allowance of academic latitude may be risky, the spirit of free inquiry that it facilitated was profoundly appreciated. Special thanks are also due to Vickey Kung, for technical assistance.

A child, fond of an innkeeper named Adam, watched him club the rats pouring out of holes in the courtyard; it was in his image that the child made its own image of the first man.

--- Theodor W. Adorno

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Chapter One

Introduction

If the use of sexually explicit material is to be understood fully, the scope of thinking about the issue should be broadened substantially.¹

Because it simply is the case that we all have physical bodies and think of ourselves -- to varying degrees, it is true -- as gendered beings, it is extremely difficult to be objective about pornography. For two things that can generally be said about pornography as a genre without fear of contradiction is that it is very much concerned with the depiction and/or description of bodies and gender. Plainly, if it was the intent of this thesis to render judgement on pornography on the basis of an impartial and objective assessment of the genre, it would be necessary for us to somehow do so from an ideal, Archimedean point. Granted, to the extent that gender identity is, some argue, a culturally relative phenomenon,² we might hope to attain at least some measure of such a transcendent, reflective objectivity. But this does nothing at all to address the problem of objectivity as this problem relates to our nature as embodied beings. We cannot now -- nor does it appear to be the case that we will be able to in the immediate future -- transcend our embodiedness.

Given that only this relative degree of objectivity is possible, this thesis will make no attempt to offer up any kind of absolute judgment on pornography. Rather, more in the tradition of critical social theory, it will be argued over the following pages that our understanding of pornography can constructively be broadened by considering the genre in the context of the "lifeworld" in which the pornographic is found.³ Thus, what follows is more or less an archaeology of pornographic representations as artifacts of the recent cultural past.⁴

An indispensable resource for such a study is the Final Report of the United States Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, released in 1986. Although by no means an uncontroversial study,⁵ it does provide a reasonably exhaustive survey of the kinds of pornography currently on the market in the United States. To the extent that pornography is a thematic "body" of representations, it is perhaps best approached initially in terms of its form and content. Adopting this common methodological distinction, then, over the next few pages an attempt will be made to broadly survey the pornography that is currently available on the North American market, according to the investigations conducted by the Attorney General's Commission.

However, we first have to know what we are talking about when we refer to "pornography." While space does not permit anything like an exhaustive explication of what ultimately constitutes the "pornographic," we can, nevertheless, get something of an appreciation for the complexity of the problem by considering a limited number of attempts made in various spheres to come up with an adequate definition of the "pornographic."

In common parlance, the definitional difficulties would not seem to

represent much of a problem. Many of us seem to just "know," intuitively, that something is more or less "pornographic" when it involves the depiction or description of sexuality in some context that could reasonably be construed as being offensive to public morality and/or some standard of "good taste." The point is, that in common parlance, distinctively pejorative connotations are attached to something that is designated as "pornographic." However, although representations and/or activities that would qualify for the application of the term "pornographic" abound (for instance, one thinks of child pornography), clearly there are more troubling instances, wherein one person's "porn" is another person's avenue to greater fulfillment via a widening of the horizons of sexual experience. Persons of the latter persuasion might argue -- and with considerable justification -- that the very designation of "pornographic" -- with all the pejorative connotations that go with it -- is problematic.

Moreover, there is the slippery problem of the conflation of morality and aesthetic standards that lurks in the attempt to define the pornographic according to standards of "public morality" and "good taste." For instance, I happen to find Dr. Ruth's syndicated radio talk show, Sexually Speaking, extremely offensive from an aesthetic standpoint. But is it "morally objectionable"? Personally, at least, I think not. But then, obviously, my aesthetic and moral standards are not necessarily shared by the general public, either. So, in a number of ways, an appeal to common standards is problematic when it comes to deciding just what is -- or is not -- "pornographic." The literary critic Northrop Frye makes a valiant attempt to get at the essence of the pornographic

when he writes of the need to differentiate between

. . . erotica [representations] concentrating on physical acts of heterosexual love, and exotica, [representations] presenting perverse or deviant sexuality, including incest, sadism, and masochism.⁶

One thing that Frye is trying to accomplish in making the distinction that he does between "erotica" and "exotica" is quite laudable. Frye is a literary man and, accordingly, it seems quite understandable that his category of "erotica" is designed -- by a process of the exclusion of "exotica" therefrom -- to preserve what he sees as "worthwhile" sexually explicit works of art from the censor's axe. If history is any witness (and as we shall see, it is), such an effort is certainly worthwhile. But as necessary as such an effort to preserve and protect the sexually explicit canon may be, such a distinction also carries some problems in its train. For Frye's canon -- those works which he would place under the rubric of "erotica" -- is something of an exclusive club. There is obviously no room in it for such powerful creations as Jean Genet's Our Lady of the Flowers⁷ -- or, for that matter, any other works of art that describe or depict anything other than "physical acts of heterosexual love." These works would fall under the pejorative designation of "exotica" and, presumably, be subject to censorship. What is wrong with this, is that it assumes that homosexual and lesbian "acts" are "exotic" in the sense of being "perverse" or "deviant," and that "heterosexual love" is natural. A lot of people would disagree vehemently.

Be that as it may, however, Frye does make an important point, at least to the extent that his attempt to define the pornographic represents an effort to insist that not all of what all too often gets labelled as "pornographic" in the pejorative sense of the term necessarily merits that designation.

There have been a number of attempts in recent years on the part of various commissions and committees to come up with a workable definition of what constitutes the "pornographic." In Great Britain, the 1978 Williams Report (named after the philosopher Bernard Williams, who chaired the investigation) attempted to define pornography as "a description or depiction of sex involving the dual characteristics of (1) sexual explicitness and (2) [the] intent to arouse sexually."⁸ This definitional attempt certainly has the merit of brevity, and it also manages to some degree to avoid the "judgemental" categorizations that plagued Frye's definition. But what an astonishing number of depictions and descriptions would qualify as "pornography" were we to accept it! There is also the problem of "intent," which is notoriously difficult to determine in many cases.

In Canada, our own Fraser Committee on Pornography (1985) came to what may strike many as a typically Canadian conclusion, when they observed that defining the pornographic was an exercise in futility.⁹ More recently still, the abovementioned Final Report of the U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986) -- after sympathizing profusely with the definitional problems acknowledged by the Frazer Committee -- committed the following howler to posterity:

. . . we [the Commission members] all feel after our work on this Commission that the late Justice Stewart was more correct than he is commonly given credit for having been in saying of hard core pornography that although he could not define it, "I know it when I see it."¹⁰

But the truth, it seems, can sometimes be discovered in the most obtuse of observations. The late Justice Stewart's comments are a case in point, especially given his reference to "hard core" pornography. For while a certain subjective element of judgement is intrinsic to the "soft core/hard core" distinction, there does seem to be something that can be said for such a differentiation, cautiously applied. In other words, there is a relatively wide consensus to the effect that at least some kinds of pornography deserve the pejorative connotations that attach to the "hard core" label. A notorious example of this "pornography in the pejorative sense of the term" is the 1979 underground film Snuff. Although one is exceedingly reluctant to promote this evil little production by even talking about it, doing so will give us an idea why we ought to at least look askance at certain kinds of porn. What follows is an abbreviated synopsis of the "plot" of this film:

A band of mystics proceeds to murder a number of random people. . . . In one scene a cult member revenges herself upon her ex-lover by castrating him with a razor. The actual cutting is not shown -- just scenes of his face contorted by agony. After that gruesome scene, the blood-crazed devotees prepare for the long-awaited sacrifice of their "perfect

victim," an unborn child ready to burst forth from the womb of a beautiful blond woman. . . . First they shoot her wealthy lover, and then they surround the bed where she lies, cowering in fear, with her enormous stomach protruding beneath the satin sheets. The dagger is held high in an invocation to the "powers of evil," and then plunged savagely into her stomach, which explodes with the sounds of gushing blood and gurgling amniotic fluid.

Then silence for a moment before the camera pulls back, and we see the production crew of the film talking about the success of that final scene. A pretty young blond woman who appears to be a production assistant tells the director how sexually aroused she was by the stabbing finale. The attractive director asks her if she would like to go to bed with him and act out her fantasies. They start fumbling around in bed until she realizes that the crew is still filming. She protests and tries to get up. The director picks up a dagger that is lying on the bed and says "Bitch, now you're going to get what you want." What happens next goes beyond the realm of language. He butchers her, slowly, deeply, and thoroughly. The observer's gut revulsion is overwhelming at the amount of blood, chopped-up fingers, flying arms, sawed-off legs, and yet more blood oozing like a river out of her mouth before she dies. But the climax is still at hand. In a moment of undiluted evil, he cuts open her abdomen and brandishes her

very insides above his head in a scream of orgasmic conquest.

The end . . . fade into blackness.¹¹

Can there be any doubt as to the suitability of the designation "hard core," as far as Snuff is concerned? Surely like Justice Stewart, this is something that we would know as hard core when we saw it. Snuff is "bad business" and -- notwithstanding the very real dangers of censorship -- we would probably want to think twice about making such misogyny generally available for public distribution.

Perhaps, then, given the apparent difficulty that exists in defining what is, and is not, pornography, we can begin by seeing depictions or descriptions of sexually explicit activity as existing along a continuum from the hard core to the soft core. In between, we would have an almost endless series of gradations. And, as the extreme antithesis of Snuff, we would have at the soft core end of the spectrum, works of art like Nonnos's Dionysiaca:

Fleet Nicia [Nonnos writes] had finished her wonted hunt for game; sweating and tired by hard work in her beloved highlands, she was bathing her bare body in a mountain cascade. Now longshot Eros made no delay. He set the endshining beard of a winged arrow to the string, and rounded his bow, and buried the whole shot in the heart of love-maddened Lyaios. Then Dionysos saw the girl swimming in the water bareskin, and his mind was shaken with sweet madness from the fiery shaft. This way and that he went: now eyeing the clustering curls of her hair, shaken by the circling breezes as she hurried on her course; spying her bright neck, when the

tresses moved aside and bared it till it gleamed like the moon.¹²

This lovely and powerfully evocative piece of writing gives us an indication of precisely what it is in the "pornographic" that critics like Frye want to preserve from the censor. Dionysiaca is a celebration of life that is as vital and necessary in our modern, administered society, as it was in the bellicose years when it was composed. In fact, we might not be too far off the mark if we were to say that it is above all in "pornographic" works like this that the utopian moment of promise so well described by Theodor Adorno persists: "No differently will the world one day appear, almost unchanged, in its constant feast-day light, when it stands no longer under the law of labour, and when for homecomers duty has the joy of holiday play."¹³

But the idea of a pornographic continuum ranging from soft core to hard core is not, in itself, a sufficient description of pornography. If what one is after is comprehensiveness, it often proves to be the case that Marxian-oriented philosophers go a long way towards meeting such requirements. There is, for instance, Alan Soble's definition of pornography in his recent study Pornography: Marxism, Feminism, and the Future of Society (1986). After devoting a number of pages to the problems that attend an attempt to come up with a comprehensive definition of pornography, Soble offers his own definition:

Pornography [he writes] refers to any literature or film (or other art-technological form) that describes or depicts sexual organs, preludes to sexual activity, or sexual activity (or related organs and activities) in such a way as to pro-

duce sexual arousal in the viewer or user; and this effect in the viewer is either the effect intended by both producer and consumer or a very likely effect in the absence of direct intentions.¹⁴

The one objection that might be raised as far as this definition is concerned is a minor one, and has to do with its instrumental/technological connotations. For Soble's terminology is at times almost surgically precise, or dismembering. He writes, for example, that pornography is an "art-technological form" that "describes or depicts sexual organs, preludes to sexual activity, or sexual activity (or related organs and activities" Both of these assertions may be true across the hard core/soft core pornographic continuum, but such a clinical way of speaking about pornography detracts, one might argue, from the Benjaminian "aura" that surrounds works like Nonnos's Dionysiaca.

However, such a demystifying quality also works in favor of this definition, to the extent that Soble's description of "pornography" includes within its parameters a number of "art-technological" forms that we might not usually designate as pornographic, but which probably should be included in that designation. One thinks, for instance, of those greeting cards that depict scantily-clad women traipsing through flowery meadows in a penumbra of mist. Such material probably is "pornographic," in the soft core sense of the term.

Then there is the consideration, apropos of Soble's definition of pornography, that something very akin to enchantment, or mystification characterizes the interest generated in the consumer by pornographic

materials. This is only to draw attention to the fascination that pornography holds for many people: one's gaze lingers over pornography. Pornography is offered clandestinely for sale, and it is, more often than not, consumed privately by those who are interested in it. Given the mysteriousness of pornography, then, one might want to argue that definitions like Soble's are very much needed.

Also noteworthy is Soble's insistence that we look at pornography as an "art-technological form." For hyphenating the designation reminds us that there is a difference between, say, sexually explicit Greek statuary as "art," and mass-produced, "technological" pornography like Playboy magazine. In the latter case, for instance, we are dealing with a commodity that reaches (and therefore influences to varying degrees) a vast audience.¹⁵ Playboy, quite unlike our hypothetical Greek statue, exists to sell sex; that is its whole *raison d'être*.

So in what follows, Soble's definition will serve to distinguish what is pornography from what is not pornography -- with, of course, the added proviso that the idea of a continuum ranging from soft core to hard core has a certain value and should accordingly be maintained, especially in extreme cases like Snuff and Dionysiaca.

Pornography, as Alan Soble's demystifying definition of the genre implies, is big business today. Depending on whose statistics we accept, the porn industry generates anywhere from four to six billion dollars a year in sales in the United States alone.¹⁶ As the Attorney General's Commission noted in their Final Report, certain general trends are discernible in the industry at large. Perhaps most noteworthy among these trends is the industry's "coming of age" in the last 20 to 30 years.¹⁷

Whereas in the 1950s most "adults only" pornographic outlets "were dark and dingy stores and theaters located in the less desirable parts of urban areas,"¹⁸ the industry today has become "a big business with large scale distributors, theater chains, and technological advances."¹⁹

Another major trend is the one that has seen an increasing explicitness in the depiction and/or description of sexual activities in pornography in the last 30 years. The typical pornography of the 1950s, for example, depicted scantily-clad women in seductive poses.²⁰ Generally, this kind of material was hard to find, and distribution of pornography was for the most part effected through "trunk sales" -- that is, the sale of materials out of the trunk of the seller's car.²¹ However, the early 1960s saw a proliferation of pornography that was increasingly visible and increasingly explicit.²² Along with a quantitative increase in the amount of pornography available over the last 30 years, the genre has in general become increasingly realistic and technologically "finished" in its presentations.²³ Another general trend worth noting about the industry today is the marketing acumen that it exhibits. There is perhaps no better indicator of this, than the proliferation of "specialty" pornography that caters to what might be called "exotic" sexual preferences. For example, in their survey of pornographic outlets in six major American cities, the U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography commonly found pornography bearing such suggestive titles as "Amputee Times" (a magazine), Bizarre Bisexual Sisters in Submission (paperback book), Lesbian Dog Sex, and Studs in Chains (films).²⁴

In something less than 30 years, then, both pornography as a genre and the industry that produces, distributes and sells it, have undergone remarkable changes. Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of these changes reflect the tendency of businesses in late capitalism to colonize marginal areas where there is a potential for commodification.²⁵ For example, the industry itself has become concentrated, vertically integrated, and marketing-oriented in its operations. What this suggests is simply that any attempt to understand pornography must take this "commodification" of the genre into account.

One of the ways that this commodification of pornography makes itself apparent is in the formal diversity of the genre today. In the 1950s, the little pornography that was available took predominantly three forms: eight millimeter film, paperback books, and soft core magazines.²⁶ However, today, pornography is available in virtually every imaginable format. There are three kinds of motion picture film available, eight, sixteen, and thirty-five millimeter; paperback books, illustrated paperback books, two sizes of video tape cassettes, magazines, cable and satellite porn for television, telephone pornography, tabloids, photo sets, audio tapes, peep shows, and even computer network pornography.²⁷

The diversity of pornographic forms in existence today is matched by a similar explosion in the content of pornographic depictions and descriptions. Whereas, in the 1950s, photographs of partly-undressed women were considered risqué, subsequent specialization suggests that virtually anything goes today. Granted, by far the majority of con-

temporary pornographic representations depict naked, or nearly naked, women.²⁸ But there is also pornography that depicts or describes the sexual activities of heterosexual couples and/or heterosexual groups, homosexuals, lesbians, transvestites, scatologists,²⁹ children, animals, animals and human beings, paraphiliacs,³⁰ sadists, masochists, sadomasochists, practitioners of bondage and discipline, and so on. There is literally something for every "taste" in contemporary porn.

So in recent years, we have witnessed what is incontestably an historically unprecedented proliferation of pornography in society.³¹ There is more of it, its forms have multiplied, and its content depicts or describes virtually every sexually explicit activity conceivable (and undoubtedly some that are not conceivable until they are "suggested" to the consumer by pornography). Perhaps understandably, one is led to ask a question here: is this proliferation of pornography a "good" thing, or a "bad" thing? Should we be taking some action about it, or should we let it alone? Or should we do nothing at all? The person who has no opinions whatsoever apropos of these questions would appear to be a rare find, indeed.³² Much more frequently, this question tends to polarize the majority into two large groups: those who argue that there is nothing "wrong" with pornography, and those who see it as a problem. Notice that, as far as these two large bodies of opinion are concerned, the concern seems to be with the social consequences of pornography. That is, both the promoters of pornography and its detractors are primarily concerned with the social effects of various kinds of pornography. That this is the case suggests that there is a political dimension to the con-

cerns that tend to get voiced about pornography. It is these political concerns that will be addressed in the next chapter.

Notes to Chapter One

¹ United States, Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, Final Report, 2 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1986), 1: 236. Hereinafter, this will be referred to as the Final Report.

² One the sociocultural determination of gender identity (i.e., gender is what culture constructs, while sex is what nature provides), see Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), especially pages 8-10, 73-74 and 173-177.

³ The concept of the "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt) is borrowed from the work of the critical social theorist, Jürgen Habermas (see, for example, his "A Reply to My Critics," in John B. Thompson and David Held, eds., Habermas: Critical Debates [Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982], 227). The basic structures of the "lifeworld" are culture, society, and personality. Accordingly, this thesis will attempt to provide an understanding of pornography at three functional levels: pornography as a mode of representation (the "cultural" level), as a means of intersubjective communication (the social level), and porn as something that is used, or consumed, by particular individuals (the personal level).

⁴ The objective throughout this thesis is, in the modern tradition, to use philosophy in order to understand what John Dewey called the "problems of men" (with pornography being perceived -- at least by some persons -- as a contemporary "problem"). Some things follow from this. For instance, if we are to understand pornography, it will be necessary to reflect on the genre. Reflection, in turn, implies the

existence of a temporal gap between the things to be understood (pornographic depictions and descriptions), and the understanding that is subsequently acquired as a result of that reflection. Accordingly, what we are really looking at in a thesis that essays to achieve a broadened understanding of pornography as a "problem" for men and women, is always the pornography of what Burkhardt Lindner has called the "recent cultural past" ("The Passagen-Werk, the Berliner Kindheit, and the Archaeology of the 'Recent Past,'" New German Critique No. 39 [Fall 1986], 25-46). Ultimately, this is perhaps only a convoluted way of stating the obvious fact that reflective understanding is always a retrospective affair; however, when one is trying to achieve an adequacy of thought to thing, it is sometimes necessary to state the obvious.

⁵ Some critics alleged a conservative bias, apropos of the Final Report's conclusions. However, I will be relying on it mostly for descriptive purposes here, so this should not be a major problem.

⁶ "Pornography," Northrop Frye, et al., eds., The Harper Handbook to Literature (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1985), 362. Where Frye refers to "literature," I have substituted "representations" in parentheses, without, hopefully, obscuring the sense of his definition.

⁷ Jean Genet, Our Lady of the Flowers, trans. Bernard Frechtman (1943; N.Y.: Grove Press, 1963). A major theme in this powerful book is found in Genet's attempt to depict homosexuality as a "norm," rather than a "deviation." Frye would certainly see this as "exotica," as far as his definition (note 6, above) is concerned.

⁸ Cited in the Final Report 1: 227-228.

⁹ Cited in the Final Report 1: 229.

¹⁰ Final Report 1: 229.

¹¹ Excerpted from Beverley LaBelle's description of the film in "Snuff -- The Ultimate in Woman-Hating," in Laura Lederer, ed., Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1980), 273-274.

¹² Nonnos, Dionysiaca [Dionysos] 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1963), 2: 3.

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life, trans., E.F.N. Jephcott (1951; London: Verso-NLB, 1974), 112.

¹⁴ Alan Soble, Pornography: Marxism, Feminism, and the Future of Society (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1986), 46.

¹⁵ The degree of influence of mass-produced images is currently a subject of much debate among social scientists. For instance, see the discussion of using sex as a tie-in to sell commodities in advertisements in Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1976), 38-43. Ewen argues that this is a highly effective technique, which in turn would suggest that the content of mass-produced pornography has an effect on its consumers. But more recently, Michael Schudson, in his study Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1986) has argued that the real effectiveness of such a tie-in is debatable.

¹⁶ Mariana Valverde, in "Pornography," in Margie Wolfe and Connie Guberman, eds., No Safe Place: Violence against Women and Children (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1985), 153, puts the figure at six billion dollars. Soble, in his Pornography, argues, however, for a figure of four billion dollars in annual sales, and warns that opponents of porn tend to inflate the amount (3). The Final Report (2:1353) equivocates, saying only that the annual sales are in the "billions." Whatever it is, the point is still that porn is big business.

¹⁷ Final Report 2: 1354.

¹⁸ Final Report 2: 1353.

¹⁹ Final Report 2: 1366.

²⁰ Final Report 2: 1353.

²¹ Final Report 2: 1355.

²² Final Report 2: 1356.

²³ Final Report 2: 1361.

²⁴ Final Report 2: 1505-1610. These curious titles were selected from the more than one hundred pages of titles of sexually explicit books, films, and magazines listed by the Commission based on their survey.

²⁵ On the commodification by colonization of non-inclusive goods and services in capitalism, see Immanuel Wallerstein, Historical Capitalism (London: Verso-NLB, 1983). Also worthwhile is Ernest Mandel's

Late Capitalism, trans., Joris De Bres (1972; London: NLB-Atlantic Highlands-Humanities Press, 1975), especially chapter 12, "The Expansion of the Services Sector, the 'Consumer Society' and the Realization of Surplus-Value," 377-407.

²⁶ Final Report 2: 1353.

²⁷ Final Report 2: 1375-1471. Eight millimeter porn films are called "loops" in the trade. They are short (five minutes or so) clips made for private viewing in peep-show booths (Final Report 2: 1375). While eight millimeter films are declining in use, sixteen millimeter are growing in popularity since they can be converted at little cost to eight or thirty-five millimeter formats (Final Report 2: 1376). Porn films shown in the larger "adult theaters" are usually thirty-five millimeter (Final Report 2: 1376). Generally, magazines like Hustler, Playboy, Oui and so on, are declining in sales volume, with the slack being more than taken up by the rapidly expanding video tape cassettes of sexually explicit material for "home use" (Final Report 2: 1400; 2: 1387-88). What I have called "telephone pornography" is called "Dial-A-Porn" in the trade. Something that has only become widespread in the last 8-10 years, the customer places a call to the service, gives his charge card number, and gets and is billed for -- at rates anywhere from \$15.00-\$45.00 a minute -- a few minutes of "dirty talk." These services are widely advertised in middle-of-the continuum porn magazines like Hustler and Penthouse. For example, a typical ad for this service in Hustler 10, No. 5 (November 1983) depicts a young, naked, attractive woman, spreadeagled (known in the

trade as a "beaver-shot") holding an antique telephone. The copy reads "SHERRI'S LIVE PHONE SEX/The Way You Like It!/Call Me Now And I'll Cum Just For You . . ./ MC, VISA, AMEX," with a telephone number (149).

"Photo sets" are a curious form of pornography. Mostly shot and used by pedophiles, they almost invariably depict children engaged in sexual activities with children or other adults (Final Report 2: 1463-1464). Pedophiles trade and/or sell them to other pedophiles. Clearly the "cottage industry"-like nature of this form of porn is a reflection of the general disapproval of most members of our society with child pornography. "Peep shows" -- which are immensely lucrative for those who own and/or rent the booths in which they are shown -- are small booths built to accomodate one or at the most, two, customers. On entering the booth, the customer inserts coins or tokens into a mechanism and gets in return a limited-time showing of either a pornographic film, or (behind a glass partition) a live pornographic performance.

"Computer network pornography" involves computer clubs whereby the participants share sexual fantasies and/or communicate their sexual preferences with each other (Final Report 2: 1437). Increasingly, "Dial-A-Porn" services employ computers with recorded messages for customers (Final Report 2: 1428). As for the balance of the formats described, I assume that they are widely enough disseminated not to require any description on my part.

28 Final Report 2: 1375. Based on the Commission's survey.

²⁹ "Scatologists" are consumers of pornography who are sexually excited by displays of urination and/or defecation.

³⁰ The label of "paraphiliac" is psychiatric jargonese for what used to be called "fetishist" behaviour. This kind of pornography describes or depicts objects (for instance, garter-belts, spiked-heel shoes, etc.) that are deemed to have a "special" sexual value-connotation for certain persons in a sexual context. See W.R. Deitz and John Evans, "Pornographic Imagery and Prevalence of Paraphilia," American Journal of Psychiatry 139 (1982), 1-26.

³¹ I base this judgement on a study of three historical surveys of pornography: Paul J. Gillette, ed., The Encyclopedia of Erotica (New York: Award Books, Ltd., 1967); Edward Lucie Smith, ed., Eroticism in Western Art (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972); and H. Montgomery Hyde, A History of Pornography (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965).

³² Final Report 2: 346-349. On the basis of a survey conducted by the Commission in four American cities during the latter half of 1985. Out of 1252 adult respondents polled, only 46 individuals had no opinion whatsoever on whether pornography should be controlled by law enforcement agencies.

Chapter Two

Recent Perspectives on Pornography

One is used to thinking of pornography as part of a larger movement toward sexual liberation. In the idea of the pornographic image we imagine a revolution against silence. We imagine that eros will be set free first in the mind and then in the body by this revelation of a secret part of the human soul. And the pornographer comes to us, thus, through history, portrayed as not only a libertine, a man who will brave injunctions and do as he would, but also a champion of political liberty.¹

As this quotation and a number of recent studies suggest, we have good reason to believe that the "problem" of pornography is a political issue.² This seems to be a reasonable proposition, since those who have opinions about pornography tend largely to be concerned about the genre's effects on people in society. That is, they see pornography as advocating a certain "lifestyle," or form of conduct for those who consume (or might) consume it. And -- depending on the political bent of the person proffering the argument -- this lifestyle, or form of conduct, is either a "good" or a "bad" way of structuring interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, this chapter will explore the political ramifications of

pornography.

We can usefully think of the extant political perspectives on pornography as ranging along a continuum from the extreme right-wing to the radical-liberal point of view. So, bearing in mind that this is a general classification, we have opinions on the genre from individuals who as a rule represent the following broad spectrum of political opinion: i) the extreme right-wing; ii) the conservative; iii) the rights-liberal; and iv), the radical-liberal. Certainly it would be convenient if we could say that the increasing drift from right to left that I have outlined here found a precise correspondence in how representatives from these various groups thought about pornography. For instance, on the extreme right, we would have those extreme right-wingers who tended to look on pornography as an anathema, something that should be literally wiped off the face of the earth. We would then move neatly along the spectrum of opinion in the direction of an increasing tolerance, arriving finally at the radical-liberal beliefs. Presumably, given this ideal schema, representatives of this last group would advocate the wholly unrestricted dissemination of all kinds of pornography in contemporary society. Unfortunately, things are not that simple, as we shall see in turning to consider the extreme right-wing position on pornography.

What can we say about this species of homo politicus? Certainly the type is familiar, and many would perhaps point to Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority as being most typically representative of this position. In this aggregate category of opinion on pornography, if the world is indeed seen as being a strange and menacing place -- filled

as it is to the premillennial dispensationalist with supernatural powers, evils, and taboos -- then pornography is somehow something even worse. Typically, Falwell and other "right thinking" men like him hold that men and women are always sniffing about for chances to sin -- and that the Devil and his minions are ever-ready to accomodate them with temptation (which, perhaps not suprisingly, frequently involves sexual "transgressions"). Accordingly, to this extreme way of thinking, society has an obligation to protect certain of its members from the evils of pornography. What is needed, according to this school of thought, is effective legislation; stern judicial measures that will basically restrict all kinds of pornography in contemporary society.³ Generally, pornography ought to be banned because it turns our thinking away from spiritual matters, and towards the flesh. And the "flesh" is of the Devil. Perhaps worse still, in this way of thinking, there is an extremely slippery slope that leads almost imperceptibly from Dionysiaca to Snuff, and thence to eternal Damnation. The Righteous therefore have an obligation to grind all pornography to dust under their feet: for only in this way -- only by stamping it out -- will men and women be Saved.

Again, it is important to bear in mind that the position presented above is that of the extreme right-wing. Admittedly, not all right-wingers belong to organizations like Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist Church -- in fact, some of them aren't even religious, in the strictest sense of this term. But they do share a common perspective when it comes to pornography, and this perspective holds that porn is not a good thing.

What is one to say concerning this particular perspective? Although the temptation is strong -- especially in light of recent revelations about the Bakkers and Jimmy Swaggart -- to mount an ad hominem campaign against those who espouse this point of view on porn, one should probably not stoop to their customary way of dealing with their adversaries. Quite possibly, it is sufficient to point out that this comprehensively condemnatory way of looking at porn draws its very strength from that which it purports to abhor above all else: the degradation of human beings. What is meant by this can be elucidated by comparing the extreme right-wing position on pornography to pimping. The similarities are remarkable. Both the pimp and the right-wing anti-porn crusader, for example, depend on the naiveté and the fear of their respective victims. Both social types extend to their quarry a few simple precepts to live by -- the pimp tells the members of his "stable" that "johns" (i.e., customers) are only after one thing (sex), and the anti-porn crusader tells his proselytes that the annihilation of "sinful" pornography will either bring the Day of Judgement that much closer or, in less extreme versions of the story, lead to the truly just society. And both the pimp and the anti-porn zealot diminish the intrinsic worth of those under their care by regarding them as incapable of making reasoned, autonomous decisions concerning the conduct of their own lives. In both cases, what is concealed beneath an ostensibly benevolent paternalism, is a particularly nasty assumption about human nature. This is basically that human beings are stupid and weak creatures, who need to be firmly led by the nose.⁴

Although this extreme right-wing position on pornography is un-

tenable, it is only fair to point out that there are some anomalous dissenters in the camp. For at least some right-wingers would appear to advocate the completely unrestricted dissemination of pornography in contemporary society. Persons espousing this view (at least in theory) can be called the laissez-faire right-wing school of thought about porn. More properly dubbed the classic liberal school, perhaps (although such a designation tends to occlude the extreme moral rigidity that is characteristic of the right), this is the kind of "freedom-loving," pioneer-spirited position that deeply mistrusts any attempt on the part of the state to intervene in the sphere of private life. Accordingly, the laissez-faire right-winger is vehemently opposed to any attempt to regulate the market -- whether this market is one for apples or pornography. If those who espoused this position were consistent, they would be compelled to conclude that producers of pornography had the right to sell whatever they wanted to sell to whomever they wanted to sell to. And conversely, the consumer would have the right to access pornography of all conceivable kinds, without any restraints at all. Unfortunately in the case of Dionysiaca -- and perhaps fortunately as far as porn like Snuff is concerned -- this laissez-faire school is not consistent in this respect, since they share with all right-wingers the imperative view of pornography as something that is intrinsically "evil." Presumably this latter perspective overrides their advocacy of a completely free market.

Closely on the heels of these problematic right-wing stances on pornography comes the conservative position. In his article "On the Discourse of Pornography," Roger Paden explores this position at length.

Following his overview of conservative perspectives on pornography, Paden elucidates the gist of the conservative arguments about porn:

. . . on the conservative view, what is immoral about pornography is not that it possesses a characteristic that is, in itself, immoral, nor even that it may cause the viewer to feel disgust, but that it can cause a fundamental, though perhaps unconscious, change in the character of the consumer; a change which these conservatives view as pernicious both to the consumer and to society. This change can best be thought of as a change in character, from what might be thought to be a civilized state to a pre-social, natural state. . . . In the natural or unsocialized state people exist as Hobbesian individuals, unable even to "restrain themselves by observing rules they collectively give themselves." The self-centered narcissism of these people is so extreme that, devoid of empathy, they are likely to commit all kinds of "non-consensual acts." The contrast with the blushing citizen of a republic is extreme.⁵

Thus to the conservative, pornographic depictions and descriptions are seen as dangerous, because they feature men and women in a "savage" (i.e., unrestrained, unsocialized) state of activity. The conservative worries that over-exposure to the representation of such a state of being will incite the consumer of pornography to emulate this dangerous mode of conduct in civil society. Hence, the conservative typically argues, the need to regulate pornography to varying degrees. Like the extreme right-winger, the conservative usually advocates the in-

tervention of the state to facilitate this regulation of pornography. However, unlike the extreme right-winger, the conservative more carefully supports only a limited form of censorship. That is, only those who are most susceptible to the dangers of the genre -- for instance, children -- should be "protected" from its influence. And finally, persons of the conservative political persuasion are far from withholding all pornography from those who might be negatively influenced by it. Dionysiaca, presumably, would be considered "acceptable" due to its aesthetic merit, while pornography like Snuff would merit censorship.

But one sees a number of problems with this conservative position on pornography. For one thing, it evades the fact that it is often extremely difficult to distinguish between erotic art and pornography. Certainly, in the extreme cases of Dionysiaca and Snuff, this would not appear to be a problem. But it is a problem for perhaps the vast majority of pornographic representations which, depending on subjective factors, can quite legitimately be seen as "art" or "porn," depending on one's preferences. While I may personally fail to see any aesthetic merit in the depictions of nude women presented in magazines like Playboy, others may. Granted, in order to circumvent this subjective element, the conservative might have recourse to something like general public standards, but we know that such standards change through time, so that what was considered salacious in the 1960s, might be considered merely "provocative" in the 1970s.

Another objection to the conservative perspective on pornography has to do with the metaphysical status of the "pre-social, natural"

man who conservatives fear as a consequence of the indiscriminate consumption of pornography. Is it possible to envision a "pre-social" human being? To the extent that society is necessarily antecedent to every individual who is born into that society, the answer would have to be that what we have here is an imaginary human being.

The other possibility, of course, is that this Hobbesian individual posited by the conservative is an abstraction from actually existing social conditions. That is, many would argue that the unrestrained, natural man feared by conservatives is already everywhere amongst us today. But whether this is true or not, what we have seen is that the conservative perspective on pornography is problematic for a number of reasons.

The next political perspective on pornography is espoused by what I have called the "rights-liberal" school of thought. Generally, persons of this political persuasion tend to believe that pornography should either be completely, or almost completely, unrestricted in its dissemination in society. Certainly, there are limits to what the typical rights-liberal would tolerate: Snuff, for example, would probably be a candidate for censorship. But for the most part, censorship would only be acceptable to the rights-liberal in rare and extreme cases. By far the majority of pornographic representations ought to be allowed, since porn -- in this way of looking at it -- preserves a valuable "moment." The genre speaks to us of delight, pleasure, and the life of the body. And some of it, rights-liberals would remind us, even merits the designation of "art": Dionysiaca being a case in point.

This is essentially the stand taken by men like Hugh Hefner, the editor of Playboy magazine. Generally, the rights-liberal articulates his defense of pornography by insisting that we need to make a clear distinction between "hard-core" and "soft-core" pornography. Representative of the latter would be works like Nonnos's Dionysos, which almost certainly does have a certain aesthetic value, and at the same time, speaks to us of pleasure and the life of the body. In a more contemporary vein, we could perhaps think of Playboy magazine as being "soft-core" porn. While it is arguable whether or not the redeeming social value of this publication can be justified by an appeal to its ostensibly "aesthetic" nature, we ought to be prepared to concede that Playboy does have a certain social value to the extent that it celebrates pleasure and the life of the body. So perhaps we can say that, as far as the rights-liberal perspective is concerned, the social value of "soft-core" pornographic representations can reside either in the aesthetic worth of the representations, or in the extent to which they celebrate sexuality, or both of these attributes together.

That leaves the converse pole of this distinction, "hard-core" pornography. Typically, the rights-liberal would suggest that this kind of pornography ought to be restricted to some degree. Moreover, he would suggest that "hard-core" pornography could be identified in two ways: first, that this kind of sexually-explicit depiction or description would possess neither aesthetic worth, nor anything that could normally be construed as being anything like a celebration of the life of the body. And secondly, that "hard-core" pornography was distinguishable to the extent

that it somehow -- either directly or indirectly -- associated pain and suffering with the depiction or description of sexual pleasure. Again, Snuff would seem to be a prime candidate for the designation of "hard-core" pornography. It is hard to see how this film possesses any aesthetic merit, it is by no means a "celebration" of the pleasures of the body in a relational sense, and the film certainly associates pain and suffering with sexuality. Accordingly, like the conservative, the typical rights-liberal would argue that hard-core porn like Snuff ought to be banned -- if for no other reason than that at least some persons might be encouraged by it to emulate in practice the conflation of violence and sexuality that the film effects. (However, we must add here that by no means all rights-liberals would argue in this fashion, as we shall see.)

The general distinction between "soft-core" and "hard-core" pornography that is central to this version of the rights-liberal perspective on porn merits closer scrutiny. First, then, let us consider the assertion that hard-core pornography of a violent nature may encourage certain individuals to act in a harmful and aggressive fashion towards others with whom they have sexual contact. Is there any substance to this implied relationship? Not by any means. In fact, there is some research which suggests that there is no correlation at all between the consumption of violent or sadomasochistic pornography and the subsequent commission of violent acts by the consumer.⁶ And there is also at least one very thorough study which would appear to indicate that the consumption of violent porn has a cathartic effect for users.⁷

This last study suggests, then, that the incidence of sex-related violence may actually be diminished by the consumption of "hard-core" pornography. So, to the extent that at least some evidence suggests that persons are not incited to commit acts of sex-related violence as a direct consequence of the consumption of "hard-core" porn, the rights-liberal's rationale for restricting this kind of pornography is lost.

And then there is, of course, the added worry of just where one should draw the line between "pleasure" and "pain," or the representations of pleasure and pain. For it is clearly a fact of contemporary sexual behavior that at least some couples derive considerable pleasure from inflicting moderate degrees of pain on each other during lovemaking. One need only think here of the playful "love-bite." Far from being a sadistic practice, this custom is a normal -- and often intensely pleasant -- aspect of many persons' sexual activities. So in this sense, the deliberate infliction of pain is an integral aspect of at least some persons' sexual pleasures. Yet we recall that the rights-liberal's typical designation of what constitutes "soft-core" porn includes those representations that celebrate pleasure and the life of the body, while his definition of "hard-core" porn involves (but is not limited to) depictions or descriptions of the deliberate infliction of pain in a sexual context. How would this rights-liberal have us classify a pornographic videotape that depicted, say, a man administering a "love-bite" to a woman during the act of coition -- a bite that was of sufficient force to cause the woman in question to cry out? Would this be "soft-core" pornography (and therefore not, per the rights-liberal, subject to censorship)? Or would it be "hard-core"

porn (and therefore subject, according to this argument, to restriction)? We can't tell -- which again suggests the problematic nature of this distinction.

But we are not yet finished with the kinds of arguments put forward by rights-liberals. For they would in fact appear to be on much firmer ground when they argue along the lines of Fred Berger, who reminds us of the rather painfully evident historical truth that "an enormous array of serious, even important literature and art has fallen to the censor's axe."⁸ And, indeed, one does not have to look too far back into the past to find representative examples of "classics" that have "fallen to the censor's axe," as Berger puts it. One thinks immediately here of the repeated efforts that were made to suppress works like Theodor Dreiser's An American Tragedy, D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover, Erskine Caldwell's God's Little Acre, Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness, or James Joyce's Ulysses, to name but a few of the great works that have suffered from the consequences of censorship in our relatively liberated century alone. The world, so this version of the rights-liberal's argument goes, is poorer for such losses. And it would seem that he was in fact quite correct in so arguing.

But how does the rights-liberal justify this position, when he has to? Frequently, he tends to appeal to sacred first principles, just as Berger does when he writes (immediately after the comment about the censor's axe) that

Our First Amendment prohibits government from abridging freedom of speech and press. Whatever interpretation is to be given that amendment, it is, in fact, stated in absolutist terms, and

carries no mention or definition of pornography.⁹

What we see in more extreme rights-liberal justifications of the right to consume pornography such as Berger's, is that censorship is construed as being very much a slippery slope kind of affair: since a little restriction may lead to a lot more, none of it is to be tolerated. Thus to Berger's way of thinking in this passage, the Founding Fathers saw the dangers of censorship -- and the acuity of their vision is appropriately realised in the "absolutist" freedom of expression that is unequivocally guaranteed by the First Amendment. (When we think about this position, we should also bear in mind the fact that there is no conclusive evidence to the effect that even the most violent pornography has any directly deleterious consequences for society-at-large.)

How viable is this particular "absolutist" defense of the unrestricted dissemination of all kinds of pornography in contemporary society? Does the Constitution of the United States in fact establish an absolute right to describe or depict anything whatsoever? For the most part, we would have to answer that it does not. For, as the Final Report of the United States Attorney General's Commission on Pornography recently observed, apropos of this question,

. . . closer examination reveals that the First Amendment cannot plausibly be taken to protect, or even to be relevant to, every act of speaking or writing. Government may plainly sanction the written act of writing checks backed by insufficient funds, filing income tax returns that understate income or overstate deductions. . . . In none of these cases would First Amendment de-

fenses even be taken seriously. The same can be said about sanctions against spoken acts such as lying while under oath, or committing most acts of criminal conspiracy.¹⁰

So it should be apparent by extrapolation that a defense of the unrestricted dissemination of all kinds of pornography that is articulated on the basis of "absolute" First Amendment constitutional principles encounters problems even before such a defense attempts to come to terms with the difficult question of just what "kinds" of pornography should (or should not) be protected. Thus we see that there are problems with this version of the rights-liberal argument, just as there were problems with the earlier attempt to differentiate in a definitive way between "soft-core" and "hard-core" pornography.

At the far left end of the political spectrum of thought about pornography we encounter a more radical body of opinion. I have called this the "radical-liberal" school of opinion concerning pornography. Persons of this political affiliation tend to argue that pornography as an expression of sexual freedom constitutes a powerful means of rebelling against various kinds of oppression. It follows from this opinion that the distribution of pornography should be completely unrestricted (or so the radical-liberal would be inclined to argue). The idea here is that sexuality -- or its more overt descriptions or depictions -- constitutes a transgression against the established order. It is tempting to cite the Marquis de Sade as the principal exponent of this view of pornography, but to the extent that at least some philosophers have seen in de Sade's work the consequences of a repressive yet aggressive bourgeois morality carried to

its obvious conclusion,¹¹ this would be problematic. So, in a more contemporary vein, we might perhaps think of the great French philosopher of transgression, Georges Bataille.¹² In their work Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari provide a succinct summary of the radical-liberal perspective, as it was espoused by thinkers like Georges Bataille:

Desire [they write] is revolutionary in essence. . . . No society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of servitude, exploitation, and hierarchy being compromised.¹³

This is exciting -- and to a degree, passionate -- rhetoric. Here, the radical-liberal advocate of the unrestricted dissemination of coercive pornography becomes the Revolutionary Hero, storming the barricades of oppression with his transgressive representations of the life and energy of the body. Thus men like Hugh Hefner, Larry Flynt and Bob Guccione put themselves across in their mass circulation magazines as champions of freedom and enlightenment.¹⁴

However, as a number of former radical-liberals have come to appreciate -- in the course of an awakening that is itself perhaps not wholly unrelated to their growing awareness of the extent to which their "revolutionary" programme has been coopted by men like those named above -- there are some serious problems with this defense of the unrestricted dissemination of porn on the basis of its revolutionary potential. Perhaps more than anyone else, the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault has worked to expose the contradictions that plague the radical-

liberal defense of pornography for its transgressive aspects. In his "Preface to Transgression," Foucault wrote that perhaps transgression was, in the last analysis,

like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night which it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.¹⁵

Foucault is not only saying, in this characteristically dense and dialectical passage, that the transgressor needs the "night" of oppression from within which he rebels -- he is also saying that the dark obscurity of oppression defines the very limits of the transgression that moves against it. This is wholly consistent with Foucault's way of looking at power (oppressive or creative)¹⁶ as a constitutive network of multiple and intersecting forces that create self-disciplined subjects who are always-already defined by the oppression that they are struggling against. From a historical perspective, his point is that oppressive power no longer exercises dominion by means of the heavy-handed denial of the "dangerous" sexual body, but instead draws strength and definition from the very act of transgression that, so deceived, moves against it. For Foucault, power -- far from defining its strength by censoring desire (repression) -- is constitutive of that very desire: oppressive power works through discourse, creating in embodied subjects the very

form of the idea of what the "forbidden," or transgressive, is. So it is by no means the case that -- as many radical-liberals often assume -- desire has escaped utilization by the forces of oppression. Foucault argues in volume one of his History of Sexuality that modern society has historically been characterized by the progressive installation of a complex apparatus for the utilization of ostensibly transgressive desire as a means of oppression.¹⁷ This apparatus can be seen at work in, among other loci, the social practice of the confessional, where "power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law."¹⁸ So where there is "sexuality," or desire -- or for our purposes, representations of these phenomena -- there oppressive power is already resident.

Accordingly, with Foucault's way of looking at sexuality and oppression, the pornographic representation is revealed not as a form of rebellion but, rather, as the formal manifestation of an oppressive power that is always-already resident in desiring subjects. Seen from this perspective, the radical-liberal argument for the unchecked dissemination of pornography due to its "revolutionary" potential, is untenable: both oppression and the representations of desire form a closed and mutually-reinforcing system that has as its telos the justification of the status quo. The so-called "transgression" is in reality merely a covert form of collusion with the forces of oppression. After all, are there any among us who are really willing to argue that a genuinely revolutionary potential resides in the kind of magazines published by a

Larry Flynt, or a Bob Guccione? Far from it -- these are men who have a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo.¹⁹ They are not "revolutionaries" in anything more than the superficial sense of the term.

However, having argued in this vein, I want to make it very clear that I am not by any means suggesting that either freedom of expression or efforts aimed at subverting the existing order of things are a waste of time. Censorship and other forms of oppression are a very real danger, as our century's experience with the Nazis shows time and time again. However, what we have seen is that those who attempt to justify the continued persistence of pornography on the basis of the dangers that might follow from restricting it present a problematical argument. And similarly, philosophers such as Michel Foucault would seem to have given us some good reasons for at least looking askance at the radical claim that some kind of revolutionary, anti-oppressive energy fades and dwells in the supposedly transgressive nature of pornography.

But, in a larger sense, what has become apparent in the course of looking at each of the political positions on pornography that were developed in this chapter, is that they all exhibit certain shortcomings. To a degree, this is to be expected, given the aforementioned problem of objectivity mentioned in the first chapter. But are there perhaps other factors that are at work here, factors of a political nature that are getting in the way of our attempt to understand pornography? The answer to this question forms the substance of the next chapter.

Notes to Chapter Two

¹ Susan Griffin, Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1981), 1.

² In addition to Griffin's characterization of the pornographer as a "champion of political liberty," see William E. Brigman, "Pornography as Political Expression," Journal of Popular Culture (Fall 1983), 129-134; and Dennis R. Hall, "A Note on Erotic Imagination: Hustler As a Secondary Carrier of Working-Class Consciousness," also in the Journal of Popular Culture (Spring 1982), 150-156.

³ As Frances Fitzgerald has pointed out in her study of contemporary American evangelistic movements, this "type" of right-winger has increasingly taken a vocal, proactive stance about "problems" like pornography. One might almost want to speak of the politicization of sin. See generally Fitzgerald's Cities on a Hill: A Journey Through Contemporary American Cultures (1986; London: Pan Books Ltd., 1987), 121-201 for an absorbing discussion of the recent politicization of Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist empire. It is in light of considerations like this that I have included this "fringe" group in the roster of political perspectives discussed.

⁴ This characterization of the mentalité of the pimp is taken from Kathleen Barry's Female Sexual Slavery (1979; New York: New York University Press, 1984), especially pages 121-137.

⁵ Roger Paden, "On the Discourse of Pornography," Philosophy and

Social Criticism (Spring 1986), 19.

⁶ For example, the conclusion that the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography came to after exhaustive research over the years 1967 through 1970 was that

. . . empirical research designed to clarify the question [of the relationship between the consumption of pornography and the subsequent commission of violent, sex-related acts] has found no evidence to date that exposure to explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal behavior among youth or adults.

(Qtd. in Kathleen Barry, Female Sexual Slavery 234)

More recently, similar findings were reported by two leading sex researchers, Neil Malamuth and Ed Donnerstein, in "The Effects of Aggressive-Pornographic Mass Media Stimuli," Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 15 (1982), 104-132.

⁷ The cathartic hypothesis was first put forward officially by J.L. Howard, C.B. Reifler, and M.B. Liptzin, "Effects of Exposure to Pornography," in Technical Reports of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, vol. 8 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 27-49.

⁸ Fred R. Berger, "Pornography, Sex and Censorship," in Alan Soble, ed., The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 328.

⁹ Berger, 329.

¹⁰ Final Report 1: 251.

¹¹ This is the view of de Sade argued for by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (1944; London: Allen Lane, 1973), 81-119.

¹² There is an excellent discussion of Bataille as an advocate of revolutionary sexual transgression by Michel Foucault in his "Preface to Transgression," Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1977), 29-52.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Robert Hurley (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 116.

¹⁴ Hefner, we probably know. Flynt is the publisher of Hustler, and Guccione the publisher of Penthouse. The self-serving imperatives that underlie many of their protestations about infringements on freedom are nicely epitomised by one of Larry Flynt's publisher's statements titled "The Politics of Porn" in an issue of his magazine (Hustler 10, No. 5 [November 1983]). Reflecting on his obscenity trial in Cleveland that year, Flynt writes in part that

My previous courtroom experiences convinced me that if anyone got justice, it was a fluke. But I refused to give up hope. If I was found not guilty . . . I would be an embarrassing reminder of the 1973 Supreme Court decision allowing local communities to set their own standards for obscenity.

I am not [Flynt goes on] defying the law. I am exercising my rights under the law. . . . The First Amendment and the Bill of Rights belong to me and to the people as much as they belong to Reaganites and the Falwellians of the world and their Moral Majority. . . If you have difficulty obtaining Hustler in your community because of censorship problems, I suggest that you subscribe now. (5)

¹⁵ Foucault, "Preface to Transgression" 35.

¹⁶ When Foucault argues that power is "creative," my reading is that what he means is that power constitutes (discursively) regimes of truth as a form of power/knowledge; not that power is "creative" in the playful, or joyous sense of the term. See Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books-Random House, Inc., 1980).

¹⁷ Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume 1: 17-49.

¹⁸ Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume 1: 83.

¹⁹ Their degree of interest in the status quo is appropriately highlighted by Mariana Valverde who, in her discussion of Hugh Hefner's business empire, points out that Playboy shares "are traded in American stock exchanges like those of any other company." More precisely,

According to the investors' Bible, Moody's, the corporation's assets in fiscal 1982-83 were worth over \$138 million (U.S.), and its various subsidiaries did a combined total of \$194 million worth of business. (Qtd. in Guberman & Wolfe, eds.,

No Safe Place 138)

Chapter Three

Towards a Different Perspective on Pornography

In the last chapter, we considered how various representatives of homo politicus thought about pornography and its real or imagined social consequences. In each case, what we saw was that these typical positions, while they may have been illuminating in various ways, were also problematic. Accordingly, one seems justified in asking whether or not there might possibly be some factor that got in the way of our attempt to understand pornography by donning political "spectacles" in order to look at the genre. Is there -- or can there be -- something about politics that is inherently biased in some way? In attempting to answer this question, some philosophers might want to call our attention to the historical and contemporaneous fact that politics in our culture is overwhelmingly the concern of men. Although this has been changing just in the last seventy-five years or so (at least as far as the West is concerned), one is still for the most part correct in arguing that politics is overwhelmingly a man's affair. This is true today, and it was also true of those historical cultures that have played such a central part in making us what we are today. As one critical social theorist has observed, "Of all the ancient patriarchal societies, the cultures of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome have most influenced Europe and North America."¹

Now, if a patriarchal bias does "infect" our culture, what does this mean as far as our attempt to look at pornography through political "spectacles" is concerned? It means that we carry certain patriarchal elements, or ways of thinking, into our inquiry, along with the very political categories that we are using to talk about opinions on pornography. This is so because, as Max Horkheimer wrote, "The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed . . . through the historical character of the perceiving organ."² A patriarchal gender bias pervades even our cognition, not to mention our contemporary politics and our past.

So it might be more correct to say that, in looking at pornography as we did in the last chapter in a political context, we were also looking at the genre from a men's point of view. But there is a problem here, given that what we are after is an enhanced, or broadened, understanding of the genre. For in putting on political spectacles in order to understand pornography, we have oriented our vision according to a masculine perspective. As a consequence, it could be argued that we have prejudiced our attempt to understand porn precisely to the extent that we have neglected what approximately half of the world's population -- that is, women -- have to say about the genre. This is a rather comprehensive oversight, to say the least.

This chapter will begin the task of remedying this oversight, in anticipation of what will hopefully strike the reader as being a more comprehensive (because more inclusive) understanding of pornography, as this will be developed over the ensuing pages. Ideally, such an understanding will take into account both men's and women's perspectives

on pornography. However, first, it will be necessary to "clear the way" to some degree for a perspective on the genre that truly is a women's perspective -- and not a men's perspective standing in for a women's perspective. Contemporary feminist theory seems perfectly suited to such a project, for a number of reasons. For example, contemporary feminist theoreticians are highly sensitive to the pervasiveness of a patriarchal bias in our culture, as the following quotation indicates:

Masculine dominance is not something that can be neatly removed, like a decrepit porch off an otherwise strong house.

It is more like the frame of a building, shaping family life, the paid workforce, political institutions, education, art and science.³

Even more pointedly, exponents of feminist theory clearly appreciate the extent to which a patriarchal bias structures even our theories and cognition in subtle yet pervasive ways. As Jane Flax has programatically written, the very task of what she calls a "feminist epistemology" is to "uncover how patriarchy has permeated both our concept of knowledge and the concrete content of bodies of knowledge, even that claiming to be liberatory."⁴ If this proves to be the case, it would appear that one could hardly ask for a better way of looking at porn through "women's spectacles," while still remaining sensitive to the inbuilt patriarchal bias of our culture.

But this is not to suggest that we can afford to cavalierly dismiss political considerations entirely from our analysis. As mentioned earlier, the questions that attend the various debates on pornography today are inherently political questions, because they are concerned with the

ways in which persons do -- or should -- relate to one another in civil society. Given this political aura that surrounds the contemporary question of pornography and its effects, it would appear to follow that while the women's "spectacles" through which we hope to look at pornography must be sensitive to patriarchal bias, such spectacles clearly cannot afford to obscure the ways in which the political is associated with pornography, either. Again, contemporary feminist theory meets our requirements. As one of its better-known practitioners has observed, "Feminist concerns about porn cannot be considered in terms of how they 'relate to' political positions; rather, these concerns are political."⁵

But it might be objected that we are here -- with this feminist politicization of the issue of pornography -- back in men's territory (since it was argued earlier that the political world was a man's world). To a degree, this is true. However, feminists would want to point out that, just because men have traditionally been in charge of our society's political affairs, does not mean that they have any exclusive claim to this domain. Nor does it mean that, in society at large, there cannot be exceptions to the rule -- that is, women who are involved in the political world that is for the most part controlled by men. However, if this latter point is true, one might be entitled to ask what the point of making a distinction between men's and women's perspectives really is? Again, as feminists point out, there is evidence to suggest that men and women actually do think differently:

What is striking . . . is that certain psychological studies suggest that there may be sex-linked differences in cognition.

For instance, some studies seem to show that boys tend to bracket together objects (or pictures of objects) whose intrinsic characteristics are similar, whereas girls weight more heavily the functional and relational characteristics of the entities to be compared. For instance, boys frequently bracketed together such entities as a truck, a car, and an ambulance, while girls bracketed such entities as a doctor, a hospital bed, and an ambulance. More generally, women are more sensitive to, and likely to assign more importance to, relational characteristics (e.g., interdependencies) than males, and less likely to think in terms of independent discrete units. Conversely, males generally prefer what is separable and manipulable.⁶

So there would appear to be differences in the way men and women think; but these differences are not so great that they preclude communication across what some feminists call the "gender barrier." Nor do these different cognitive orientations, or paradigms, mean that women cannot on occasion think "in terms of independent discrete units," or that men cannot on occasion think relationally. After all, in social reality, men and women are communicating with one another all the time.

However, what we ought to get from this insight into the differing cognitive orientations of men and women is that a general women's perspective will be more sensitive to relational elements than a man's. This is an important consideration when it comes to the question of

perspectives on pornography, because "relationality" is an important theme in many pornographic representations. The consumer of porn, for instance, relates to the pornographic object or activity that she or he is consuming. And some pornography quite explicitly depicts couples relating one to the other. These are, of course, all in various ways questions of social relationships. And once again, we see the suitability of feminist theory in providing us with what will be distinctively a women's perspective on the genre. For as Jane Flax has noted, ". . . a basic premise of feminist theory is that human beings are created [and maintained, one might add] in and through relations with other human beings."⁷ And as far as the socio-relational content of at least some pornography is concerned, feminist theory also comes through with "flying colors" here, as well. As Ann Snitow puts it, "Since sex is social, we agree that its symbolic representation is important, that the imagery of sex is worth feminist attention."⁸

Contemporary feminist theory, then, would seem to be almost perfectly suited to serve as a means of understanding how "the other half" of the world sees pornography. It is sensitive to the pervasive influence of gender bias, politically "sophisticated" (in the non-pejorative sense of the latter term), and capable of construing pornography as an intersubjective, communicative social practice. But one must be careful here. For the objection could be raised that, while most feminists do happen to be women, feminist theory per se has no right whatsoever to stand in as the voice of all women. In fact, when we think about this, we might even want to argue that, as far as wo-

men as a whole in Western society are concerned, feminists make up a distinct -- albeit sometimes conspicuous -- minority. So, is it entirely "fair" to present a women's perspective on pornography through the filtering spectacles of what feminist women have to say concerning the genre? There is a simple answer to this question; an answer that is a function of a characteristic of feminist theory itself. For intrinsic to the very idea of contemporary feminist theory is an abiding suspicion of totalities -- or those who purport to speak on the behalf of totalities. We can, once again, quote Jane Flax on this feminist "hermeneutics of suspicion":

Any feminist standpoint will necessarily be partial. Each person who tries to think from the standpoint of women may illuminate some aspects of the social totality which have been previously suppressed within the dominant view. But none of us can speak for "woman" because no such person exists except within a specific set of (already gendered) relations -- to "men" and to many concrete and different women.⁹

So feminists have no intention of speaking for all women, since they tend to see the very category of "all women" as being something of a metaphysical conceit. In fact, as feminist theoreticians like Annette Kolodny have observed, there isn't really a "feminist theory" per se -- if by this is meant a single, monolithic bloc of doctrine.¹⁰ Rather, feminist "theory" is more properly a plurality of theories, just as the category "women" is really made up of "many concrete and different women."

Another misconception about feminist theory that should be addressed here is the one which holds that all feminists are, without exception, opposed to pornography. What we already know about the opposition of feminists to totalizing gestures should already make us suspicious of such a sweeping generalization. But if it does not, we would do well to listen to what Varda Burstyn has to say concerning this assumption in the significantly-titled work that she edited,

Women Against Censorship:

Most media have conveyed the impression that all feminists have a uniform assessment of pornography and uniformly advocate its censorship. In fact there is no consensus on either of these points.¹¹

So, at least as far as this last potential reservation is concerned, it does seem to be the case that contemporary feminist theory promises to give us a reasonably good chance of ascertaining just how at least some women see pornography and the role that it plays in our society. Indeed, if there is a problem with contemporary feminist theory, then that problem resides in the very protean nature of that plurality of analytic approaches that fall under the general rubric of feminist theory. This is particularly a problem for a male writer who is trying to present feminist theory. Culturally "trained" to think in a (masculine), particularistic and teleological fashion, it is not always easy to adjust to the protean and relational paradigms that characterize contemporary feminist theory. But it must be at least attempted. Accordingly, if my reader finds -- in the course of the more "integrated" exposition of feminist theory that follows -- that certain

concepts appear and reappear, and that certain key themes turn back in upon themselves, I would ask her or him to look on this more as being evidence of a successful, relational exposition of feminist theory, than a sign of "sloppy thinking." An attempt is being made on the author's part to write against the very gender identity that society has assigned him.

A few pages ago, certain evidence was provided which suggested that men and women tended to think in ways that were markedly different, depending on the gender of the thinker. Since this hypothesis is central to feminist theory, it merits a more thorough elucidation here. While one must be very careful about making such sweeping generalizations as this, it nevertheless does seem to be the case that such tendencies exist. For example, in their intensive¹² study of how persons in contemporary urban America related to the objects in their immediate environments, the social scientists Mihaly Csikszentmihali and Eugene Rochberg-Halton found significant differences in the importance that men and women ascribed to their possessions.¹³ That is, men assigned a higher value to things of one kind, while women valued things of a different kind. Objectively, these findings lend credence to the hypothesis advanced about subjective consciousness by Merrill B. and Jaakko Hintikka, when they wrote that

. . . certain psychological studies suggest that there may be sex-linked differences in cognition [between men and women. . . . Generally, women are more sensitive to, and likely to assign more importance to, relational characteristics (e.g., interdependencies) than males, and less likely to think in

terms of independent discrete units. Conversely, males generally prefer what is separable and manipulable.¹⁴

Those of us who are sticklers for precision will probably take issue with all the qualifications in this passage. But what we ought to admit is that these are necessary qualifications, given the kind of world that we happen to inhabit. That is, while we live in a world where there simply are (ontologically speaking) two large and usually distinct gender groups, it is nevertheless equally true to insist on the fact that each of these groups is comprised of particular individuals, who each tend to see things in their own unique ways. But this is not, at the same time, to deny that there is a certain parity of perspective according to gender. Given the existence of frequent communicative interchanges on the part of individual men and women across these two gender groups, we should not expect to find women thinking only in a relational way, or men only in a particularistic fashion. As far as individual men and women are concerned, quite the converse may often be the case.

So it would appear that feminist theory has a need to maintain a certain distinctness in thought according to gender, while at the same time recognizing that the gender "barrier" does not preclude a certain crossover, whereby it is possible for individual men to occasionally think relationally, and individual women to think in a particularistic fashion from time to time. Feminist theoreticians accomplish this by seeing the gender barrier as being more like a permeable membrane than an insuperable barrier. Thus women -- who, according to feminists, tend

to think relationally -- have nothing to prevent them from "borrowing" particularistic male thought paradigms when the occasion demands such a response. Similarly, individual men are quite capable of "borrowing" the relational thought paradigms that characterize women's thinking to varying degrees.

As an example of this, consider a purely hypothetical situation wherein a woman is addressing a traditionally male political body. We can call the woman in question Mrs. "T," and the predominantly masculine audience that she is addressing, the House of Commons. Let's say, then, that Mrs. "T" wants the House to vote in favor of a bill she has introduced. How would she go about doing this, according to the feminist account of the "borrowing" of thought paradigms across a permeable gender membrane? Above all else, of course, Mrs. "T" will want to tailor her presentation to her audience. In order to do this effectively, she would want to adopt a masculine discursive register; to speak "as if" she were a man. Now, considering the particularistic, or denotative characteristics of men's thought, it would make sense if Mrs. "T" was to tailor her appeal in this form. That is, her enunciation will be "crisp," her language precise, her sentences short, and the content of what she is saying closely tied to specifics. All these techniques will help Mrs. "T" to be heard by her male audience. And we could, of course, reverse the gender identities of our hypothetical individual and group, to find an individual man speaking in a relational register to a group predominantly comprised of women. One notes, too, that Mrs. "T's" means of persuasion needn't necessarily be a deliberate choice on her part. Human beings commonly do adjust

their messages to the particular audiences they are addressing.¹⁵

Certainly there are other ways by means of which an individual of a particular gender can make her or himself heard by an individual or group of the opposite gender. One could, for example, simply shout. But the point is that seeing the so-called gender barrier as being more like a permeable membrane than an impervious wall allows feminists to insist on the importance of gender, while at the same time providing a satisfactory account of individual variations within the two large gender groups.

But if all this is true -- that is, if men can speak as if they were women, and women as if they were men -- then why even maintain the idea of gender difference at all? For one thing, it does serve to underline an important ontological fact about human beings. This fact is that there simply are men and women in the world. Thus, feminists distinguish between the biological reality of our sex, and the socioculturally determined idea of our gender. One is, feminists suggest, more or less the gender that one is taught to believe one is, while one's sex is, ontologically speaking, exactly what it is (admittedly, androgyny is an exception -- albeit a very rare exception -- to both of these general rules). In the overwhelming majority of cases, gender and sex coincide. That is, a person of the male sex will more often than not think of himself as a man, while a person of the female sex will for the most part think of herself as a woman. We should also bear in mind here that feminists are by no means denying substance to gender (as opposed to sex) because of its status as an "idea." To the extent that gender is an aspect of our

sociocultural being, it has as much reality as our nature as sexed beings. Gender, then, is a phenomenon of the lifeworld.

Feminists offer psychological, social, and historical explanations for the existence of gender in society. That is to say, gender is not merely a reflection of our sexual identity in the ahistorical biological sense of the latter term. Socially, as one feminist has observed, "because of their social experience, men and women conceptualize their societies and communities differently."¹⁶ And, historically, it happens to have been the case in the West that "men more frequently engage in political activities and public discourse and have the definitional problem of bounding their own society or community off from others."¹⁷ So, many feminists argue that it is the sociohistorical activity of politically defining the parameters of the community that encourages men to think in a particularistic, denotative fashion. Men, feminists are inclined to suggest, are for the most part ostensibly-oriented creatures.

Conversely, when it comes to explaining why it is the case that women in our society tend to think along relational, or ntological lines,¹⁸ feminists also have recourse to sociohistorical explanations. Women, many feminists point out, are almost universally charged with the social responsibility of acting as "primary caretakers" in their communities. That is, they labor at raising children and nurturing men -- or more generally, they are preoccupied with attending to the needs of others. As one feminist writes,

. . . there appears to have been so little historical and

cross-cultural variation in certain crucial aspects of the division of labor by gender that it and the whole sex gender system it generates, appear natural.¹⁹

This insight into the existence of a fundamental division of labour according to gender does, it is true, run the risk of reiterating a tedious truism, to the effect that "men hunt, and women raise 'kids.'" But what feminists are trying to draw our attention to is much more important than this "truism." Gender, they are pointing out, is for the most part what culture constructs -- not what nature provides. It is a form of socialization, a particular way in which societies are organized according to a (sexual) division of labor.

Although some feminists accuse Karl Marx of a certain patriarchal bias,²⁰ many other feminist theoreticians -- bearing in mind the way in which gender is maintained through a division of labor -- suggest that Marxian theory has much to offer feminist theory.²¹ This latter position seems to make sense, especially for the development of a feminist theory that is concerned with interpreting a genre that, like pornography, is predominantly a product of a capitalist milieu in the genre's recent cultural past.

Like Marx, feminists also suggest that there are some very good reasons as to why our extant (gendered) way of organizing labor should be subject to a radical restructuring. The need for a restructuring of the division of labor (according to gender identity) is manifest at two levels. At the level of social activity, its consequence is the exploitation of one gender by the other principal gender. As a recent

United Nations report concludes, women "constitute half the world's population, perform nearly two thirds of its work hours, receive one tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property."²² This clearly indicates that women are exploited by men; one can no doubt appreciate why feminists speak angrily of the "super profitability" of women's labor in this context.²³

At a "superstructural" level, men also enjoy a distinct advantage that is a function of their aggregate gender identity. Rom Harré has called this advantage "cognitive authority."²⁴ Men, as the United Nations report makes amply clear, have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in the realm of beliefs, ideas, and values. Here, we see the reason why politics is traditionally considered to be the concern of men. Men run the show. And, given that they do, feminists suggest, it should accordingly come as no surprise that it is men that occupy those institutional positions in our society that make it possible for them (i.e., men) to direct the "show" according to their own gender-interests. With this privilege goes a concomittant form of cultural hegemony that Harré identified as cognitive authority. It is manifest, feminists claim, in the very way we look at the world. As Linda Myers has observed,

. . . the Western worldview is fragmented with its separation of spirit and matter. . . . Rather than emphasize the dynamic unity of all things [ntuologically], such a system focuses on the segmentation of the phenomenal world (e.g., separating mind and body, persons against nature, self and other, and

so on.²⁵

Although it is undoubtedly important to acknowledge the fact that this particularistic cultural/epistemological orientation has been changing in the last seventy-five years or so of Western history,²⁶ we would surely not be misrepresenting the position of women in the West from a historical standpoint if we were to insist that -- by and large -- their relational cognitive orientations have been comprehensively subordinated to the particularistic orientations that characterize men's thinking. One sees that there is a vicious circle-like dimension to these superstructural effects of gender asymmetry, whereby men's authority at a cognitive level underwrites the predominance of position that men enjoy at the social/institutional level, and vice versa. All in all, this means that the entire lifeworld is formidably suffused with a deep patriarchal bias.

Gender asymmetry is also perpetuated by the way in which children are raised in a society where a division of labor according to gender is the rule. This is the psychological component of the feminist explanation of gender that was referred to earlier. Although it is, once again, important to point out that not all feminist theoreticians espouse this mode of explanation,²⁷ that revisionist branch of psychological theory known as "object relations theory" offers what many feminists²⁸ feel is the most cogent developmental account of gender asymmetry that is currently available. It therefore merits our attention here.

Starting with the premise that "[b]oth individual male development and patriarchy are partially rooted in a need to deny the power and au-

tonomy of women," a feminist version of post-Freudian object relations theory attributes the recapitulation of this need (via constitutive, patriarchal social relations) in significant part to cognitive paradigms that are internalized in male children early in their lives.²⁹ (Since, as we have seen, feminists argue that the "problem" in the lifeworld is a problem perpetuated by men, feminists understandably focus most of their theoretical attention on the cognitive development of male children, in their relation to their female primary caretakers.) So, attending to the development of the male child in a patriarchal social world over the first five years or so of that male child's life, many feminists suggest that it is during these formative years that some of the most lasting ideas of gender identity and conflict are formed in the child's mind. As Jane Flax puts this,

. . . the self is formed in part in and through relations with others. These persons and feelings about them are internalized; they become an "internal object" and the self is formed out of internal objects, the relations between them, and one's innate constitution.³⁰

In this way, both the idea of the mother and the relation that the son has with the mother become a constitutive part of the son's self. Since, from his earliest recognitions of others, the son identifies with the "other" most familiar to him (the mother, or other -- almost invariably female -- primary caretaker), his self-concept bears a certain affinity to that other. (This follows from what we might call the cognitive plasticity of the young child's mind, and the child's tendency to learn by mimesis -- by mimicking those around him.)

Indeed, if it were not for the risk of misunderstanding that attends such an assertion, we might even want to say that the male child in these early and formative years thinks of himself as a female.

Feminists are not, however, advocating a rigid determinism here, whereby little boys have female self-concepts in these early years solely by virtue of their frequent exposure at this time to their mothers as their primary caretakers. For, as Flax observed, object relations theory insists on the fact that the self is "formed out of internal objects, the relations between them, and one's innate constitution."³¹ Feminists agree -- while at the same time insisting that, since the social is primary, the first two factors are more central in the process of "self-creation" than the third, "innate" constellation of factors.

Now at some point in the male child's life, this "cognitively-female" son must begin the task (which is both conscious and unconscious) of bringing his self-concept into line with the demands placed on him by patriarchal society. That is, he must conform as he ages to the masculine-gendered role expectations that a patriarchal society imposes on its male members. He must develop a masculine self-concept, or identity. One can quite easily see the groundwork being laid here for a protracted psychic "war between the sexes" in the mind of the male child. Originally possessed of a predominantly female self-concept, the male child is under increasing pressure to "adjust" this self-concept so that it is more in line with the expectations of a patriarchal sociocultural milieu. Admittedly, this gender individuation is never a "total" phenomenon, else how would one explain the social given of varying degrees of homosexual identity? But it is the pre-

ponderant drift of individuation for males in a patriarchal society.

As Flax characterizes the consequences of this transformation,

The boy by age five will have repressed the "female" parts of himself, his memories of his earliest experience and many relational capacities. He will have developed the "normal" contempt for women that is a fundamental part of male identity under patriarchy. . . . The boy deals with the ambivalence inherent in the separation-individuation process by denial (of having been related), by projection (women are bad; they cause these problems) and by domination (mastering fears and wishes for regression by controlling, depowering and/or devaluing the object).

These defenses become part of ordinary male behavior toward adult women and to anything which seems similar to them or under their (potential) control -- the body, feelings, nature. The ability to control (and be in control) becomes both a need and a symbol of masculinity. Relations are turned into conquest for power. Aggression is mobilized to distance oneself from the object and then to overpower it.³²

So what a feminist object relations theory explains is how, in a society where the most frequently encountered (i.e., binary) form of social relationality is gender asymmetrical, this ritual of domination and subjugation is interiorized and reproduced in individual members of that society. Moreover, it also predicts some of the consequences of the reproduction of this form of domination: per Flax, men in such a culture

will deny their historical relatedness to the "other" (i.e., women, the primary caretakers). Men will also project their ambivalence (which results from their earlier and paradoxical experience of separation/individuation) onto women, making them in their imaginations into something other than what women are. Moreover, men in a patriarchal culture will be driven to dominate -- or control -- the "other" (i.e., other persons, things, nature, the comprehensive category of the "not me"). Finally, part and parcel with the need to control and dominate, men will display aggressive behaviour towards his "other" in such a culture.³³

These troubled relationships that feminists claim men have with their "others" in patriarchal cultures are manifest in a number of ways in the lifeworld. For instance, the broad, general problem of relatedness that feminist theoreticians point to does much to explain why it is the case that so many persons feel alienated and isolated in modern (patriarchal) societies. These feelings, feminists would suggest, represent our subjective apprehension of the damaged nature of our gender asymmetrical social relationships: persons who relate to one another on the basis of ongoing rituals of domination and subjugation are not happy about what they are doing.

Among the forms in which ambivalence will make itself manifest in the lifeworld will be systematically distorted communication. That is, the shape of those representational forms by means of which we communicate with one another will be "twisted" by men's ambivalence towards women in a patriarchal culture. Woman will be represented as being other than what she actually is: she will be (both in individual minds

and in depictions and descriptions), an "animal" ("cow," "pig," "bitch," "dog," and so on), a "spiritual being" (Beatrice, Holy Mary), the "incarnation of evil" (the "bitch," the "temptress," Eve), and so forth.³⁴

In this patriarchal lifeworld, men's desire to control and dominate women will be manifest as the comprehensive subjugation of women. But through the process of representation -- whereby a given object can be subjectively realized in a multitude of forms -- this subjugation will become culturally comprehensive. That is, relating to the "other" will become synonymous with controlling and dominating the "other" -- again, considering this "other" in all its perhaps inexhaustible and protean manifestations. And, of course -- to the degree that this comprehensive subjugation of the "other" is quite possibly most effective when it proceeds by means of aggression -- the patriarchal lifeworld will be marked by violence and conflict.

Once more, it is probably a good idea to remind ourselves here of the suspicion that feminists exhibit when it comes to totalizing explanations of any kind. That is, some of the consequences that I have attributed to patriarchy in the passages immediately above this one may be explained with equal or perhaps more adequate plausibility as effects of, say, class differences, or particular modes of production. Thus, a Marxist-oriented feminist might want to grant equal explanatory weight to both gender and class, depending on the concrete situation that she was interpreting. But the point -- perhaps above all else -- is that gender asymmetry has become a kind of "second nature" in the lifeworld.³⁵ That is, it appears to us as being a part of the "natural" order of things, when in fact this fundamental asymmetry is a cultural

construct that can be changed. We change it by becoming conscious of it -- by observing its pervasiveness, and then realizing that our relations with the "other" needn't necessarily conform to the paradigm of domination and subjugation. This is what the feminists are trying to get across.

Something that is especially interesting in the context of pornography, is the very important role that representing plays in the perpetuation of gender asymmetry. If gender asymmetry is not "natural" in any autochthonous sense of this term, then this means that it somehow has to be artificially maintained in the lifeworld: it must be passed down through successive generations as an institution. The idea that men are superior to women must be perpetuated and maintained beyond the temporally-limited life of the individual man. Many feminists maintain that the process of representation acts as a kind of central vehicle for the maintenance of gender asymmetry; a proposition that seems to make sense when we reflect on the very pervasive nature of patriarchy. So, feminists argue, it is in our representations -- our descriptions, depictions, thoughts, ideas, speeches, and so on -- that patriarchy is perpetuated, transmitted, and maintained. As Susanne Kappeler writes,

Representations are not just a matter of certain objects -- books, images, films, etc. The structure of representation extends to "perceptions" and self-images, the anxious pose of the bourgeois community in front of the camera of public opinion, the self-representation through "high culture" of a dominant social minority. Representation is thus one of

the most fundamental structures of conceptualization, centered on the subject. . . .³⁶

When we ground this "wide-angle" view of representation in the social milieu, we see that representation is a form of social praxis: that is, we create and use representations in order to relate to each other intersubjectively in the lifeworld. And the social practice of representation, as Kappeler has suggested in the quotation above, conforms to a distinct structure. This structure is comprised of what can be reduced, for the sake of explanatory simplicity, to three principal moments: there is the subject who creates the representation (the "I who speaks, writes, depicts; the author), the object, or "vehicle" of representation (the picture, text, work of art, etc.), and the "receiver" (the person who reads/understands/sees the message). Sometimes, as Kappeler points out, the subject who is creating a certain representation, appears to be absent from that representation itself. But, in reality,

As a speaker [for instance], I am always present as the subject of my speech: I may represent myself by means of the pronoun "I" within my utterance, or I may never say "I" or "me" at all, and yet I am implicitly present, the author of my speech, the speech the token of my presence.³⁷

So, reminding ourselves that we are still considering representation as a form of social practice, what we can say is that -- either implicitly or explicitly -- the representing subject always goes along with the object of representation. As we will see, this insight is essential to a feminist attempt to understand pornography.

What has been said above by no means exhausts that rich, promising and diverse body of thought that I have been calling "contemporary feminist theory," above.³⁸ But we have now arrived at a point where we can summarise what we have discovered, before moving on to a feminist attempt to understand pornography in the next chapter. We have seen, then, that for a number of reasons, contemporary feminist theory promises to be ideally suited to an attempt to understand pornography from a woman's point of view. Contemporary feminist theory is highly attuned to the myriad ways in which a patriarchal bias informs our politics, our theories, and our representations. It offers, via object relations theory and a theory of representation, a plausible account of how gender asymmetry is reproduced in the lifeworld of the recent cultural past. It is a means of inquiry that -- in marked contrast to the social hyperopia that distorts men's perceptions of pornography -- is sensitive to the constitutive importance of the social in the make-up of the individual and her/his thoughts and representations. Remaining perennially suspicious of totalizing gestures, contemporary feminist theory is nevertheless not "above" borrowing useful concepts from more synthetic universes of thought such as Marxism, or post-Freudian psychology. It is concerned with sexuality, and how sexuality is represented in pornographic representations. And contemporary feminist theoreticians are certainly sensitive to the political element of pornography -- to how pornography may act as a representational practice that reproduces and perpetuates the domination of one gender class over another through time. So, all this considered, let us now put on the spectacles of a contemporary feminist theoretician, in order

to look at pornography from this different perspective.

Notes to Chapter Three

¹ Varda Burstyn, "Political Precedents and Moral Crusades: Women, Sex and the State," 4-31 in Varda Burstyn, ed., Women Against Censorship (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, Ltd., 1985), 15.

² Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," 188-243 in Critical Theory: Selected Essays, Max Horkheimer, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, et al. (New York: A Continuum Book-Seabury Press, Inc., 1972), 200.

³ Burstyn, "Political Precedents" 6.

⁴ Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics," 245-281 in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science. (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing, Co., 1983), 269.

⁵ Susanne Kappeler, The Pornography of Representation (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 14-15.

⁶ Merrill B. Hintikka and Jaakko Hintikka, "How Can Language Be Sexist," 215-225 in Harding and Hintikka, eds., Discovering Reality, 145-146. See also Stephen J. Gould, "Gender Differences in Advertising Response and Self-Consciousness Variables," Sex Roles (March 1987), 215-225, for further support of this hypothesis from a non-feminist point of view.

⁷ Flax, "Political Philosophy," 247.

⁸ Ann Snitow, "Retrenchment Versus Transformation: The Politics of the Antipornography Movement," 107-120 in Burstyn, ed., Women Against Censorship, 114.

⁹ Jane Flax, "Gender as a Problem: In and For Feminist Theory," Amerikastudien/American Studies 31, No. 2 (1986), 213.

¹⁰ As Kolodny writes, "as yet, no one has formulated any exacting definition of the term 'feminist criticism'" (qtd. in Alice A. Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1985], 52).

¹¹ Varda Burstyn, Introduction, 1-3 in Varda Burstyn, ed., Women Against Censorship, 2.

¹² The study (see note 13, below) involved extensive surveys and subsequent in-depth interviews with more than 2,700 Americans in Evanston and Rogers Park, Ill., from April 1977 to January, 1978.

¹³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981). Among the gender-related differences in the perceptions of everyday objects described by the researchers were:

Males mention significantly more TV, stereo sets, sports equipment, vehicles, and trophies. Females more often mention photographs, sculpture, plants, plates, glass, and textiles -- all with a frequency that is significant at least at the .005 level of probability. This means that males cherish objects of action

more frequently (44 percent vs. 30 percent for females), whereas women prefer objects of contemplation (45 percent vs. 29 percent for men). (106)

¹⁴ Merrill B. Hintikka, "How Can Language Be Sexist," 139-148 in Harding and Hintikka, eds., Discovering Reality, 146.

¹⁵ On the adjustment of speech to context as reception theory understands it, see generally, Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans., T. Bahti (Minneapolis, Minn.: The University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Kathryn Pyne Addelson, "The Man of Professional Wisdom," 165-186 in Harding and Hintikka, eds., Discovering Reality, 180.

¹⁷ Addelson 180.

¹⁸ "Ntuological" thinking is thought wherein various sets are seen as being interrelated through "networks." See Linda James Myers, "The Deep Structure of Culture: Relevance of Traditional African Culture in Contemporary Life," Journal of Black Studies 18, No. 1 (September 1987), 72-85.

¹⁹ Addelson 181.

²⁰ Nancy C.M. Hartsock, for instance, in her Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1985), argues that certain essential Marxian concepts, such as "human labor power" and "class," are "gender-blind." Accordingly, she suggests, Marxism gives a gender-biased account of social production and an incomplete

account of the actual social life-processes of human beings (149).

²¹ See, for instance, June Howard, "Toward A 'Marxist-Feminist Cultural Analysis," The Minnesota Review No. 20 (Spring 1983), 77-92.

²² Quoted in Burstyn, "Political Precedents" 23.

²³ Varda Burstyn's expression in "Political Precedents," 9.

²⁴ Rom Harré, "Some Reflections on the Concept of 'Social Representation,'" Social Research 51, No. 4 (Winter 1984), 933.

²⁵ Myers 75.

²⁶ I am thinking here of the more holistic and relational world-views that developed in late nineteenth-century physics, for example. Interestingly, there may be something more than mere coincidence in the fact that this "new," post-Newtonian worldview was roughly contemporaneous with the first wave of feminism in Europe in the early 1900s. Although he does not make this specific connection, an absorbing description of these two cultural changes is found throughout Stephen Kern's absorbing study of mentalités, The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983).

²⁷ Jane Flax, for example, has changed her opinion at least once on the explanatory suitability of a post-Freudian object relations approach to gender. For example, in her contribution to Harding and Hintikka's Discovering Reality ("Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious," 245-281), Flax defends the approach and even counters some anticipated objections to it (1983; 253-254). However, in her 1986 article "Gender as a Problem," she concludes in part that "the very search

for a cause or 'root' of gender relations" is problematic (205). For the purposes of this thesis, I have accepted Flax's 1983 position. For an answer in anticipation to the objections raised by Flax in 1986, see Sandra Harding, "What Is the Real Material Basis of Patriarchy and Capital," 135-163 in Lydia Sargent, ed., Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism (Boston: The South End Press, 1981), especially pages 149-150. This anthology is also a good introduction to the problem of "marrying" Marxism to Feminist Theory.

²⁸ Although I cannot support this assertion, I was left with the impression that, on the whole, more feminists accepted various versions of object relations theory than did not.

²⁹ This explication of object relations theory is from Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious," 248-255.

³⁰ Flax, "Political Philosophy," 246.

³¹ Flax, "Political Philosophy," 246.

³² Flax, "Political Philosophy," 253.

³³ It is useful to bear in mind here the concept of the movement of paradigms across a permeable gender "membrane." That is, all of the behavioural dispositions can be manifest in women as well as men.

³⁴ Susanne Kappeler has a fascinating catalogue of how women are imaginatively perceived by men in her book The Pornography of Representation. Among other visible forms, she mentions "objects" (58), "art" (57), "animals" (65), "Nature" (67), "pets" (70), "angels" (75),

"wild-animals" (75), and "dolls" (78). No doubt there are more.

³⁵ I first encountered the idea of "second nature" as enchantment in Theodor W. Adorno's Negative Dialectics, trans., E.B. Ashton (1966; New York: The Seabury Press-Continuum Books, Inc., 1973), where it is explained at length on pages 354-358. Adorno's style is so deliberately contorted, however, it is better to go to his appreciative critic Gillian Rose for an explanation of what "second nature" means. Like many feminists, Adorno, Rose writes (The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno [N.Y.: The Macmillan Press, 1978], 79-80),

. . . is more interested in the history or formation of whatever a specific society regards as "nature" [what appears to be "natural" to the subjects in society]. This is what he calls "second nature" "Nature" refers, then, to the cultural forms which result from a specific mode of social interaction.

³⁶ Kappeler 32-33.

³⁷ Kappeler 52.

³⁸ I have tried to develop those aspects of contemporary feminist theory that are directly relevant to the analysis of pornography that will follow in the next chapter. Accordingly, I have said nothing about several aspects of feminist theory that are, nevertheless, important. On the importance of "difference" in feminist theory, see Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds., The Future of Difference (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1980). On the affinities that feminist theory shares with "deconstruction" and "poststructuralism," see Alice A. Jardine's Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity.

Chapter Four

A Feminist Understanding of Pornography

The feminist critic is traditionally concerned with the relationship between "fiction" and "reality" (the latter perceived, ultimately, as the truth) -- with how the two intersect, mime each other, and reinforce cultural patterns.

-- Alice Jardine¹

As Jardine suggests in this characteristically dense passage, a feminist/women's reading of pornography ought not to begin solely with the "thing itself" -- the "particular" pornographic depiction or description -- but, rather, with a consideration of how pornography functions in the lifeworld. This suggests an approach to the genre that stresses social being (Jardine's "reality") as the constitutive milieu and preeminent determinant of pornographic representations. This is only to say -- consistent with feminist theory's emphasis on the primacy of the social/relational -- that while it is real individuals who produce and consume (pornographic) representations, the minds of these individuals are profoundly vectored by the social milieu into which these individuals were born: for feminists, pre-existent society is the major objective determinant of individual minds.

But at the same time, feminists would argue, this "ultimately real" and preeminently determining state of social being does not pre-

sent itself as a whole "incomunicado," or in dumb silence. For by definition, social being is largely realized in and through those intersubjective communicative practices (speech, activity, mime, depiction, description -- above all modes of representation) and subjective ideas that the various actors who make up the reality of the lifeworld produce and have to themselves and/or for others.

A relevant case in point: I have an idea of myself as being of a certain gender, and I represent myself in various ways as such to society. Similarly, I have ideas of others in society as gendered beings, and I both think about and represent them as such. But while it is true that these various gendered ideas and representations that I have and make are largely what my culture has constructed for me -- rather than what "nature" has provided -- it by no means follows as a consequence of their "fictive" status as ideas and representations, that they are not "real things" in the lifeworld that, moreover, have real consequences for that lifeworld. More simply, what we might say is that while gender and representations of gender are "fictions," they nevertheless do have real social consequences. This consequence is, from a feminist standpoint, that our social relations are gender asymmetrical.

Accordingly, an adequate feminist/women's attempt to understand pornography must as much as possible remain grounded in the pre-eminently constitutive reality of the lifeworld. But, to the extent that this lifeworld is, in reality, an inextricable amalgam of social relations and material conditions (analogous to Marx's "base") and "superstructural" phenomena (gender, second nature, ideas and repre-

sentations, etc.), such an attempt to understand pornography cannot afford to dismiss the latter realm as merely epiphenomenal in kind. In common with all representations, pornographic depictions and descriptions have consequences and say something about the nature of the lifeworld that is constitutive of them. Even at this early stage, one may extrapolate from gender asymmetrical social relations the fact that our ideas and representations will be pervasively "infected" with a patriarchal bias. A feminist reacts, however, not by criticizing the ideas/representations themselves, but the asymmetrical social relations that are constitutive of those representations and ideas. This means that a feminist/women's attempt to understand pornography will be a critical endeavor. Such a critical approach -- critical, that is, of the gender asymmetrical social relations that typify the lifeworld -- also bears hidden fruit. It reminds us that, while explanatory primacy ought to be given to the social, one should not hypostatize that realm; for it is, after all, a patriarchal domain -- both now, and probably for a long time to come.

What one is striving for under such conditions is, ultimately, the rough adequacy of "thought" to "thing" (with "thought" as the method, and pornography as the "thing" ultimately to be understood). Yet, perhaps maddeningly, one must also bear in mind that whatever parity of thought to thing we do achieve, this will only be a partial parity. This follows naturally, as it were, from feminist theory's abiding suspicion of totalizing gestures, not to mention its pluralism as theory. Dialectics would appear to offer a compromise -- albeit an uneasy one -- between these two imperatives.

To state the objective, then: What will be offered over the course of the following pages will be one partial feminist attempt to understand pornography through the spectacles of a dialectical critique of those social relations, ideas, and representations that, in part, make up the lifeworld of the recent Western cultural past. "Objectivity" in this task is at this point neither pretended nor desired. Rather, an "impartial" perspective on pornography will be attempted only after we have seen how a feminist might reasonably understand pornography.

One begins, of course, with the social. What the feminist critic first sees at the level of comparatively recent Western social reality is a constantly changing ensemble of particular human beings, existing in a dense web of constantly changing and shifting relationships. Perhaps something else that is noticed quite early on is the astonishing preponderance of "things" in this world. These things -- money, food-stuffs, furniture, vehicles, books, pictures and all the other artifacts of material culture -- mediate between these particular human beings: the nexus rerum, someone once called this. Also remarked upon by our feminist observer is the fact that these human beings are social beings, for the most part. That is, they exist as individuals by virtue of their interrelatedness. Things establish this interrelatedness; but so, obviously, do less material bonds. Whatever the means, they do relate. And more often than not, these interrelations conform to a dyadic configuration; that is, with one individual relating to an other individual intersubjectively.

Something else that is apparent to our hypothetical observer is

that the interactions of these interrelating pairs of individuals have a distinct qualitative dimension: they are manifest, in fact, as what can be seen as a kind of qualitative continuum, ranging from the "erotic" to the "thanetic."² So at one end of this continuum are individuals who interact, at any given moment, "erotically"; that is, their relationships are pleasant and the individuals so involved manifest varying degrees of reciprocal interest, respect and/or concern for each other. At the other end of this relational continuum, there are found certain relationships that are more properly called thanetic in kind. In these dyadic relationships, one individual dominates another individual, to the advantage of the former and without the express consent of the latter. Of course, by no means all of these relationships are either "erotic" or "thanetic"; these are, rather, only two extreme points on a theoretical continuum. Sometimes, in fact -- at least as far as our hypothetical observer is concerned -- it can be extremely difficult to distinguish an erotic interaction from a thanetic one. And, equally important to note, sometimes one can't even call a particular interaction erotic or thanetic.

Moreover, the particular individuals whom we are talking about also tend to appear to each other phenomenologically as "belonging to" two distinct genders. This is how these gendered individuals generally represent themselves to one another as they interrelate -- as beings who are for the most part either "men" or "women." In fact, this is such a common mode of presentation within the context of dyadic interrelations, that we can say it makes for the apparent existence of two kinds of individuals, men and women.

Another notable feature of our contemporary social reality is that those dyadic relationships that obtain across these two gender kinds are more often of a thanetic quality than they are erotic in kind. More to the point, men seem to dominate women. This preponderant lack of parity is manifest in a number of forms. For one thing, and as we saw in the last chapter, the women have fewer material possessions than the men. Also, the men are by and large in charge of running this society's basic organizing institutions: they are its lawmakers, its politicians, its rulers, its defenders, and so on. We should probably also take note of the fact that at least some of these men (admittedly they are a minority) engage in an extremely thanetic dyadic relationship known as rape. In this form of interaction, an individual man engages in intimate sexual relations with someone who is more often than not an individual woman. For the most part, the woman does not consent to this "relationship," and only very rarely does this mode of interaction across genders move in the opposite direction, with a woman relating to a man by raping him without his consent.

Admittedly, in many of these cases of gendered individuals relating to one another in contemporary society, we would be more correct to characterize the interactions in question as "erotic." But by and large, and quantitatively speaking, these relations across gender are thanetic. Something else that we notice about these social relationships in general is that the men and women who make them up are in the habit of giving substance to them by representational practices. This is, in fact, perhaps the major way in which individual men and women facilitate their relationships, erotic or thanetic, with each other. Now, some of these representational forms — such as speech — are quite ephemeral in kind. Others, however — such as the pornographic ones that concern us here —

have much more duration: objectified as depictions or printed descriptions, they tend to persist. In addition, many of these more substantive representations exhibit a tendency to "mean beyond" themselves. That is, in addition to the latent significance they possess by virtue of their status as objectifications of the human desire to communicate, these representations are usually about things; they have significant content. In this way, representations mean beyond themselves.

Pornography, for instance, is about sex and pleasure: by far the majority of it is concerned with depicting and/or describing men and women (or both) in such a way as to make these men and/or women appear desirable to the viewers or readers of the genre. This is why pornography exercises such fascination for so many of us; at two levels, it speaks to us of involvement with other human beings. At one level -- the level of its existence as an objectification of the desire to relate -- pornography, like any other significant symbol of human interaction, stands for our need to interact with others. And at a second level, this relational message is reinforced by the fact that many of us want to become involved with the persons who are so appealingly described or depicted in pornographic representations. All pornography exhibits this bivalent significance -- even if it is true that the content of the second (desiring) message is not always universally appealing to all individuals. But, more often than not, what we can say apropos of this second message of pornography, is that it generally proceeds as a consequence of the description or depiction of women -- who are presented as the objects of desire for men. This is only to point to two truths about the genre: the majority of its subjects are

women, and most pornography is consumed by men.

In one sense, the social fact that men are our preponderant consumers of pornography adds substance to the assertion that most porn is about the pleasures (real or imagined) of relationality across the genders. For -- and let us be completely frank here -- it simply happens to be true that most of the pornography consumed by men happens to be used either as an aphrodisiac to enhance the pleasure of subsequent sexual activity with a woman or (and certainly this is the more frequent use), as a means of enhancing the pleasures of masturbation. The preponderant use of porn, then, conforms to a paradigm where men experience pleasure as a consequence of relating to representations of women.

But, in another sense, it surely must strike us as being more than a little odd that this male-oriented genre -- which is, as we have seen, so manifestly concerned with describing or depicting relationships and the pleasures that may result therefrom -- must be hidden away, and concealed. For it must be accepted that in our society, almost all pornography is offered clandestinely for sale and/or it is consumed in private. The general explanation for the privatization of pornography is that women and children must be protected from the influence of sexually explicit representations. However, this is a poor defense, for at least two reasons. First, if there is something "dangerous" about pornography, then surely it is just as dangerous to the majority of men who are its consumers, as it is to women and children. Why, then protect just women and children from its

supposedly pernicious influence? Secondly, and perhaps more to the point, we ought to ask ourselves what it says about our society when we find it necessary to protect certain of its members by deliberately concealing from them a class of representations (pornography) that, in aggregate, speak to us of a conjunction of relationality and pleasure? Why, in other words, do we feel guilty about associating social interaction with pleasure, as it so often is associated in pornographic representations?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to open up a temporary rift in the social world that we have been exploring. For, as committed feminists would be quick to point out, any thorough exploration of the contemporary social terrain ought to take into account the gap that exists between things as they are, and things as they appear for the inhabitants of that terrain. Some social phenomena -- for example the thanetic domination of one gender (women) by the other (men) -- of course appear both at the level of reality and appearance. But this is not the same thing as saying that the individuals in question are necessarily all aware of the existence of gender asymmetry. Some are. But others are not. Or, rather, it would be more correct to say that the latter persons are not able to see the existence of gender domination because their vision is occluded by false consciousness.

Feminists call this false consciousness that prevents certain individuals from seeing the unpleasant reality of gender domination at the level of social reality the ideology of patriarchy. In particular, patriarchal ideology offers up certain rationalizations for the existing gender-asymmetric order of social relations in our society. Although

these occluding rationalizations may take many forms,³ it should be apparent that the most effective forms of patriarchal ideology will be precisely those ones that both last the longest as forms, and at the same time offer their recipients a good reason or reasons for accepting them. Pornographic representations, feminists claim, satisfy both of these requirements perfectly. As representational forms, pornographic depictions or descriptions have the virtue of duration (in contrast, for example, to speech), and they offer the consumer pleasure in return for the consumer's acceptance of them.

How this works can best be appreciated by considering an extremely common practice employed in retail merchandising. This technique is called "cross merchandising," and the merchant's objective in using it is to maximise his/her profits by creating an illusion of value received in the mind of the consumer. (It will be easier to follow the analogy here if the reader can bear in mind that pornographic representations are humanly-made artifacts that, just like cans of soup in a grocery store, "contain" labor and appear, accordingly, as having a certain value both to the producer and the consumer of these commodities.)

In practicing cross merchandising, then, the merchant secures a high traffic area in his establishment, and sets up a display in order to "get his message across." This is called cross merchandising only when at least two products are involved in this display. One of these products has, the seller knows, a recognized appeal for the consumer (a retail price that is at or below cost is the commonest form that

this appeal takes). This product is then "tied-in" with another product, priced so as to realise a high rate of return for the seller. To top all of this off, the retailer frequently adds what is known in the trade as "point-of-sale material" to his display. This material serves two purposes: it serves as an eye-catcher and, in the form of contests, coupons and so on, it gives the buyer a further incentive to make a purchase. The whole idea behind cross merchandising is to use the low margin product (as well as the point-of-sale material) as a "loss-leader," in order to get the buyer to purchase the high-margin item on impulse. Interestingly, this merchandising technique enjoys an extremely high rate of success, irrespective of whether or not the two products so displayed are related in any way beyond their proximity in space.⁴

The relational psychology involved in cross merchandising is one wherein the vendor tries to convince the prospective buyer that s/he is putting one over on the seller when s/he (the prospective customer, that is) takes advantage of the "ridiculously low price" at which the loss leader is offered. However what has actually happened -- given that displays of this kind commonly result in a three or fourfold increase in movement for the high-margin item⁵ -- is that the vendor has lost almost nothing on the so-called loss leader, and has realized what are often exorbitant margins on the item that he wanted to move in the first place. And, taken advantage of, the customer leaves satisfied, under the illusion that s/he has got the better of the seller.

Pornography as an ideological genre works in a fashion remarkably analogous to the trade practice of cross merchandising. Only here, the

process of consuming the pornographic representation stands in for the multiple purchase that is the effect of cross merchandising. For it is no coincidence that, in the private activity of consuming pornography, a very clearly delineated and virtually invariant paradigm relation obtains. In this paradigm, the consumer of pornography (who is more often than not a male) dominates the pornographic object (the inert, albeit meaningful representation) in the overall context of a meaningful social relation (i.e., the relational content-message of the pornographic representation). What an intriguing constellation: pleasure, domination, and relationality. And all in the overarching context of a sovereign (because private) subject who always maintains the superior "position."

Putting this in another way, we can say that the promise of pleasure is the "loss leader" that is tied in with the "high margin" item (which in this case is the ideology that legitimizes the domination of women by men). The average buyer -- the man -- is attracted by the promised message of relational pleasure that is contained in pornography, and he picks up the patriarchal ideology in the process. The vendor in this case is patriarchal society -- the men who enjoy the majority of privileged positions in this society and who, accordingly, "profit" from the general dissemination of representations that effect what is ultimately a conflation of domination and pleasure.

All along, what feminists like Susanne Kappeler have been saying is that it is ultimately pointless to focus on the content of pornographic representations.⁶ For instance, the content of a pornographic photograph

may be quite blatantly ideological (an example would be sadomasochistic porn depicting a man torturing a bound and gagged woman). Or, its message may be ostensibly quite innocent (as in the case of a Playboy centerfold). But even in the latter case -- where there is no apparent domination -- what we still have in use is an ideological text that is about domination. This follows from what we have called the constellation of moments that is involved in the consumption of pornography. For even with the example of the centerfold photograph, what we see as a consequence of its actual use is pleasure being experienced by a dominant subject (the consumer of the pornographic photo) in relation to his mastery of a subjugated object (the pornographic representation).

Now the objection might be raised here that pornographic representations by no means invariably describe or depict only women, just as the consumers of pornography are not invariably men. However, such an objection misses the feminist's point, which is that the significance of pornography in the social realm is a function of the act of consuming pornographic representations, rather than of the particular gender identity that is manifest in pornography. Importantly, the very fact that it is pleasant to consume pornography acts as a kind of reinforcement of a cultural practice -- domination -- that, while it commonly occurs along the lines of gender, is not exclusively confined to gender.

But the ultimate objection that feminists have to pornography is not specifically a function of pornography "in itself." Rather, their objection is that the trained consumer of pornography (the one who has

learned to associate objectification-with-pleasure-with-domination-with-relationships) carries this learned paradigm set over into actual social relationships. The message that he -- or, if the consumer who has adopted this paradigm is a woman, she -- brings to these relationships is more or less that it is all right, and yes, even pleasant, to relate to others by dominating them. This is where the real harm is done. So pornography, one might say -- in an observation that holds equally across the continuum from Dionysiaca to Snuff -- is the licht-bild (inverted projection) of social relations that are structured according to interactive rituals of domination and subordination across the genders. This is why pornography is hidden -- why, in the private process of consuming it, we so often feel "ashamed of ourselves." For pornography, in all its myriad forms and ostensibly different contents, bears this hidden message that we grasp intuitively each time that we consume it: to be social, in the most passionate way imaginable, is to subjugate others in the relations that we have with them.

Finally, the objection could be raised here that the paradigm I have outlined as being intrinsic to the actual use of pornography might also be applied to the "canon," to those great erotic works of art that we "love," in order to "silence" them with censorship. This is a liberal view of things, which assumes, in Susanne Kappeler's words, "that some of it [i.e., pornography] -- the non-violent sexual material, the art, the 'legitimate' fiction -- has to be 'rescued,' rescued it seems from abolition."⁷ But as Kappeler goes on to point out, the purpose that this serves is perhaps to rescue such pornography

from the process of analysis and critique. We need to see, feminists argue, the profound extent to which a patriarchal ideology permeates all representational practices in a patriarchal society. Once we see this, as well, it does not follow necessarily that we are obliged to censor these patriarchal representational practices. For the problem is with ourselves -- not with those representational forms that "talk about," or reflect, social relationships that are structured according to a fundamental gender asymmetry. We simply do not know, in any conclusive way, how much of an effect representations that embody a patriarchal bias really have on actual human beings.

However, these points having been made, it is probably wise to conclude our attempt to acquire a broadened understanding of pornography by expressing a few reservations about the feminist reading of the genre and its social consequences. Given the very prevalence of patriarchal bias in the history of our recent cultural past, I have deliberately attempted to provide an extremely sympathetic version of feminist theory's construal of the genre. One can think of this as an attempt to restore something of a balance between men's perspectives on the issue, and women's (feminist) ideas about it. However, while we must once again bear in mind that not all feminists by any means advocate censorship, there is certainly more than a suggestion in feminist theory as I have presented it, that we might just possibly want to consider censoring pornography due to its ideological content -- even if we are not sure that this ideological content effects persons' behavior. Perhaps here, we can afford to be more

sympathetic towards that (masculine) political perspective -- that of the rights-liberal -- which fears the "slippery slope" of censorship. For if history has anything to teach us in this respect, it would seem to be true that a "little censorship" can, in many cases, lead to a lot more censorship. Given porn's already politicized nature, one can see how easily a particular government might begin (even under the guise of responding to, say, a vocal feminist interest-group's demands) by passing more legislation to limit pornography on the basis of discouraging "non-coercive" social relations, and then easily go on to introduce other "regimental" legislation that, perhaps not coincidentally, served the interests of the "socially concerned" "democratic" party then in power. To the extent that this is a possibility with analogous historical precedents (National Socialism under the Third Reich), we ought certainly to think twice about extending the "blue laws" that already restrict pornography to varying degrees. Freedom of expression is important: even if we happen to be deeply troubled by the substance of what is being expressed, as some feminists certainly happen to be when it comes to pornography.

Another reservation concerning the feminist reading of pornography that I have provided above has to do with trends manifest in the genre itself. It was noted in the first chapter that porn has changed tremendously -- in form, content and mode of presentation -- even in the thirty or so short years that constituted the recent cultural past of the genre explored in this thesis. Now, whatever our particular opinions might be as to the significance and appropriateness of these changes, that they have occurred would suggest that pornography is at least po-

tentially capable of being something more than what it currently is. And if this is a possibility, would it be anything more than facilely optimistic to hope that, given the kinds of changes in our social relationships advocated by feminist activists (if that is not a pleonasm), what we might possibly begin to see would be a new kind of "pornography"? More properly called sexually explicit depictions or descriptions in such a utopian perspective, perhaps, such representations would be "erotic" in the best sense of that term: domination would no longer be the "message" that these representations would convey. Given this utopian possibility, are we quite as prepared as we perhaps once were, to agree with those extreme feminists who argue that there is nothing worthwhile about porn at all? This is a question that each of us must answer on her own. But it is hard to see how "[a]fter the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come," one can wholly reject a genre which may contain, howsoever faintly, the very promise of "the redemption of the hopes of the past."

Notes to Chapter Four

¹ Alice A. Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1985), 60.

² The erotic/thanetic distinction is applied to kinds of pornography by Rosemary Tong in her article "Feminism, Pornography and Censorship," Social Theory and Practice 8, No. 1 (Spring 1982), 3.

³ For example, there is patriarchal ideology as speech -- the voice of the father, the Word of God. Then there are social practices that ultimately boil down to patriarchal ideologies: for example, the practice which holds that women should fill the role of being primary caretakers of children in our society, and therefore responsible for the socialization of children into their appropriate gender roles. And so on, no doubt ad infinitum.

⁴ This account of cross merchandising is an amalgam of the writer's own experience and "Retailing," chapter 14 of E. Jerome McCarthy and Stanley J. Shapiro, Basic Marketing: Second Canadian Edition (Georgetown, Ont.: Irwin-Dorsey Ltd., 1979), 367-401.

⁵ McCarthy and Shapiro 376.

⁶ As Susanne Kappeler writes (The Pornography of Representation [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986]), 3: ". . . a first shift of ground for a feminist critique of pornography, involves moving from a content orientation to an analysis of representation."

⁷ Kappeler 39.

Note: In those cases where an article appears in an anthology, the name of the anthology and the editor(s) appear in the chapter notes after the name of the author of the article and its title.

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