

Feminism and Pornography:

Discussion Review

Pornography has always had its detractors, but the most vociferous criticisms in the past decade have come from within the feminist movement. *Take Back the Night* (edited by Laura Lederer and originally published in 1980), a collection of thirty-six essays by twenty-nine women, is the manifesto of anti-pornography feminism. It sounds the leading themes and major complaints: "Pornography is the theory, rape the practice" (Morgan, 131; all references are to the 1982 Bantam Books edition of TBN); pornography is misogynist propaganda, a species of hate-literature (Brownmiller, 18; Longino, 39; LaBelle, 168ff; Russell, 302); pornography is a mode of patriarchal control (Diamond, 183ff).

The reader is offered a picture of a nation awash in magazines and movies and books filled with women being bound, beaten, raped, mutilated, and killed for sexual pleasure. Many of the writers would suppress pornography if they could (e.g., Longino, 40; Yeamans, 247; Russell, 304), but no specific program for combatting pornography actually emerges from the book.

As a manifesto, TBN has the qualities that make for success: a sustained passion and an uncompromising view undiluted by careful qualification, patient argument, respect for consistency, attention to definitional precision, or caution in drawing conclusions. At the same time, such qualities diminish the book's instructive value to those who are ambivalent or confused about pornography, who wonder what the fuss is about but are willing to turn a sympathetic ear, or who for whatever reason want to understand and thoughtfully engage the feminist complaint.

Many of the writers do not define what they mean by pornography, and those who do, define the term in different ways (e.g., as sexually explicit material that degrades women, 28–29, as sexual stories men make up to arouse themselves, 152, as any use of the media to equate sex and violence, 247). Examples of pornography cited in the book range from *Vogue* magazine to snuff films. As a consequence, it is difficult for the reader to frame in any precise way the main theses of the feminist attack and to understand exactly what materials the writers would prohibit, control, regulate, or educate against—*Playboy*, bondage magazines, *Fanny Hill*, hard-core theatrical movies like *Behind the Green Door* and its cousins, peep show loops, "spread" magazines, *The Tropic of Cancer*, works by Aubrey Beardsley and Guy de Maupassant (TBN, 65), *Justine*?

TBN may well stimulate or provoke a reader to think more deeply about pornography, but it provides him or her with few analytical or argumentative resources for that task. The reader who is prompted to think further about pornography can turn with considerable profit to *Pornography and Censorship*, edited by David Copp and Susan Wendell (Buffalo: Prometheus Press, 1983). This volume contains seven philosophical essays (two reflecting feminist points of view, one dealing with conservative objections to pornography, and four dealing with the limits of free expression and the role of law), six empirical studies (an advantage over TBN, which contains only essays summarizing empirical work), and six excerpts from legal cases. In addition, there are extensive bibliographies and a long introductory essay.

A central theme in TBN and in the anti-pornography feminist movement generally is that pornography contributes to violence against women. There are two variations of this theme. On the one hand, it sometimes amounts to the claim that pornography helps sustain an ideological climate in which violence against women receives tacit approval. On this account, pornography's contribution to sexual violence is indirect: it supports a system culpably negligent in its protection of women.

On the other hand, pornography is also claimed to be *directly* related to the level of rape. This claim, versions of which are made by different writers in TBN, is difficult to formulate precisely because of the variety of meanings assigned to the word "pornography." Generally, however, the focus seems to be on pornography with *violent content*—on erotic depictions of rape especially.

The experimental findings included in *Pornography and Censorship* (PC) and the evidence described and discussed in TBN do not reassure us that violent pornography is harmless, but neither do they offer any clear answers about the relationship, if any, between pornography and sexual violence. In any case, the feminist argument against pornography does not rest only on hypotheses about causation of sexual violence.

Suppose pornography in all its forms turned out to be causally innocuous. Feminists, and anyone else for that matter, could still object, in the words of Brownmiller, "to the presentation of the female body being stripped, bound, raped, tortured, mutilated and murdered in the name of commercial entertainment"

(TBN, 253). Such presentations are morally rancid apart from whether they have ill effects. But Brownmiller also objects to more than violence; she objects to the "flagrant display" of the genitals of women in magazines and films (TBN, 18, 253-254). This pornography, too, she claims, "dehumanizes" women.

Such an objection seems to implicate the content of pornography. Is the content of all or almost all of contemporary pornography, violent and non-violent alike, morally objectionable? Does pornography present women in degrading ways?

A moral criterion for evaluating the content of sexual depictions is offered by Longino: "A representation of a sexual encounter between adult persons which is characterized by mutual respect is . . . not morally objectionable. Such a representation would be one in which the desires and experiences of each participant were regarded by the other participants as having a validity and a subjective importance equal to those of the individual's own desires and experiences. . . . Similarly, a representation of a nude human body (in whole or in part) in such a manner that the person shown maintains self-respect—e.g., is not portrayed in a degrading position—would not be morally objectionable" (TBN, 28-29). Pornography which depicts and endorses, e.g., rape fails this test, since manifestly the male protagonist in the depiction takes no account of the expressed desires of the female victim. But how much contemporary *non-violent* pornography can be morally faulted under this criterion?

Consider first the display of female nudes in sexually provocative poses, the stock-in-trade of the mass circulation magazines like *Playboy*. Is displaying the genitals for the observation and arousal of strangers "degrading"? If this means more than, "Does the model feel shame at what she does?" a theory of sexual morality—a theory of proper sexual behavior—will need to be introduced. What sort of theory is needed to condemn genital displays as unworthy?

There are no overt formulations of a substantive theory of sexual morality (that is, an account that would fill out the terms of the Longino criterion) in TBN, but one of its contributors, Kathleen Barry, has offered a sketch of such a theory in her book *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), another important text of anti-pornography feminism. She argues for a set of "new sexual values" to replace those dominant in patriarchal society: the new values "connect sex with warmth, affection, love, caring. . . . Sexual values and the positive, constructive experience of sex *must be based in intimacy*" (FSS, 267). "Sexual intimacy is not something to be given lightly. It is an experience to be *earned* by each from the other. . . . Sexual intimacy is not automatic, as depersonalized sexual experience is. It involves, in the deepest sense, experiencing the pleasure of physical and sexual closeness with another while being able to put oneself in the place of another, taking on the meaning of the experience of the other, creating not a private but a shared joy" (FSS, 267).

Her complaint is against the depersonalization of sex. Sex must be based on intimacy, and "privacy . . . is the first basis of intimacy" (FSS, 267). A view like this gives us grounds for directly condemning pornography: it violates the properly private and personal nature of sex. Any public lewd display of genitals is "degrading" because it opens for public gaze what ought to remain private; it offers promiscuously what ought to be offered on trust. Traces of this theme against impersonal sex can be found in several places in TBN: Robin Morgan condemns sex not initiated out of "genuine affection" (TBN, 127); Audre Lord condemns pornography as "sensation without feeling" (TBN, 296).

Although it gives us direct moral grounds for attacking the content of pornography, Barry's account of proper sex is not, on its face, a promising approach for feminists to adopt. The theory is far from new; the sexual values central to it are part of a very traditional moral theory about sex.

The traditional view of sex can be turned to good use by feminists, though, not as a grounds for criticizing the *content* of pornography but as an explanation for the corruptness of its *use*. When the traditional conception of sex as essentially private and personal is conjoined with the traditional double-standard, it yields the norm of female modesty. Women, but not men, are expected to confine sexual relations to spouse or lover. Impersonal, indiscriminate sex soils women. If we attribute this traditional norm to male users of pornography, then one can conceive of their use as having some of the moral characteristics of rape. Their viewing with arousal the publicly bared and provocative body of the female metaphorically violates her in that it violates her modesty. Their gazes invade what ought to be unseen. The female model is both enjoyed and soiled; desired and despised, in the same act. (For a similar analysis, see Garry, PC, 70-75). This analysis of what happens when pornography is consumed makes its use morally troubling, at least.

Longino's criterion about the content of pornography applies not only to depictions of female nudity but to depictions of sexual acts as well. The latter are not morally objectionable, she says, if the depicted characters regard each other's desires as equally valid. On this criterion, much of contemporary pornography should pass muster. The hundreds of thousands of ten-minute peep shows that fill the nation's adult bookstores, for example, typically portray heterosexual activity to the evident pleasure of all parties involved.

Even so, neither Longino nor the other anti-pornography feminists accept this kind of pornography as morally unobjectionable. It too is misogynist propaganda. The very satisfaction of the female participant in the peep show film is the source of the trouble. Pornography's crime is that it lies about women's sexuality. This argument advances at two levels.

The first has to do with the nature of women's sexual desires and satisfactions. Since most pornography

is made for male arousal, the ways women find gratification in the films and pictorials reflect the stereotypes and preconceptions and sheer wishes of the male mind—and the not very imaginative male mind at that. Women are instantly ready for sex, easily aroused by the male touch, mesmerized by the penis, love fellatio, are quickly orgasmic. This conception of women is not true to their actual sexual desires, so pornography fosters a false view of women's sexuality.

The second level of argument is more telling: pornography lies by suggesting "that the primary purpose of women is to provide sexual pleasure to men"

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(Longino, TBN, 33). Women are mere sexual objects, inferior beings whose primary value is "as instruments for the satisfaction of male lust" (Clark, PC, 54). How does pornography convey this message?

The content of a specific piece of pornography may indeed convey this message quite explicitly. Depictions that imply rape is okay imply that women ought to be accessible to male sexual use, their own different wishes notwithstanding. Nudes or non-violent sexual depictions may be accompanied by a text that explicitly conveys the same message. But the content of much pornography is ambiguous on this score: there are just the couples having sex or the models displaying themselves.

Contemporary heterosexual pornography is a special-interest genre: it caters to sexual arousal. So it quite obviously emphasizes and focuses on sexual features and acts. This is like other special-interest genres. A reader of hot rod magazines focuses on motor vehicles as objects of decoration and speed. This does not mean he fails to understand, however, that motor vehicles are also instruments of commercial, medical, industrial, and personal transportation. Both the special focus and the general fact can be accommodated in the single consciousness, and the reader can be able to respond in appropriate ways to vehicles.

Similarly, the focus on females as objects of sexual satisfaction provided by the pornographic film or magazine does not foreclose the user's conceiving of women, outside the context of the pornographic experience, as more than or other than sexual beings. The single consciousness can accommodate both a singular attention to female as sexual in one context and awareness of female as, say, equal working partner in

another. One can view another person as a sex object—object of sexual attention—without viewing that person as a mere object, i.e., as something with no independent interests and moral status.

If pornography is to lie in this strong sense, it must be because of what the viewer *brings* to the ambiguous content. The male viewer doesn't learn the lie from such pornography; he brings the lie to his interpretation of it. Men must already view women as existing primarily for sexual service in order to get this message from the ambiguous content of pornography.

The responsibility for this view of women seems most appropriately laid to other features of the general culture. Society is suffused with the sexualization of the non-sexual. Commodities, products, and services of all sorts are hawked by means of pretty faces and bodies and suggestive poses—female faces, bodies, poses. Movies and television introduce women into non-sexual story lines and roles as decorative and sexual. It is this repeated emphasis on woman-as-sexual in non-sexual contexts that most likely fosters the conception of woman as *only* a sexual being, "whose primary purpose ... is to provide sexual pleasure for men."

In contrast, the sexualization of women in explicitly sexual contexts—as in pornography—would not seem on its face the most effective vehicle for unambiguously promoting this false conception. The content of non-violent pornography won't, of course, obviously work against or undermine the conception where it is prevalent; pornography use may even reinforce it. But non-violent pornography does not author the lie about women.

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Lorenne Clark claims (PC, 53) that pornography won't exist in a non-sexist society. The most notable lack in the essays under review here is an articulate and defended normative theory of sex—one that tells us how to interpret such notions as "degrading," "mutually respectful," "treats another as a person," and so on. The reader gets no idea of what forms of heterosexual expression and entertainment can flourish in a non-sexist society, nor of how heterosexual expression and entertainment can find morally tolerable forms in a sexist world.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

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