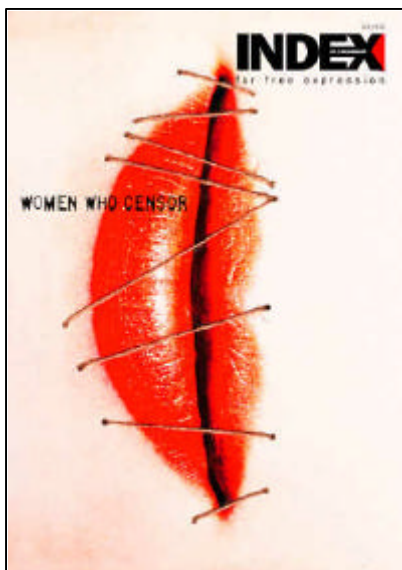


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News & Analysis

Women Who Censor: Pornographic Battles

Lynne Segal

Within feminism, battles over pornography have become the wars without end. We thought it had peaked in the USA in the 1980s, but the cannons are still firing. Despite the controversy their campaigns generate, those who see pornography as pivotal to women's oppression have built a popular base for anti-pornography feminism, and continue to make inroads into legal frameworks. This is why the issue of 'pornography' will not go away. From the close of the 1970s, it became impossible to write about sexuality, as a feminist, without being hi-jacked by, and forced to take a stand on, the issue of pornography.

It has become a disturbingly deadlocked debate. I have been positioned as part of the 'pro-sex brigade', yet we – opponents of the theories of the anti-pornography campaigners – have the least titillating lines. We are always forced to address an agenda which is not of our own making. The deadlock is hard to shift because the dispute, although superficially about evidence that pornography is harmful, is ultimately about competing feminist explanations for women's subordination and the place given to men and their sexuality as the root of women's oppression. Whether insisting that sexism does not reduce to the sexual, or that the meanings of images do not exist independent of their audience and context, those of us who oppose anti-pornography feminism have to keep arguing the boring case of 'sweet reason': to insist on complexity. This is a world apart from the fire and brimstone of anti-pornography feminism, whose leading theoretician, Catherine MacKinnon, and maestro of rhetoric, Andrea Dworkin, hit us with their pounding, repetitive prose and their sadistic sexual imagery to produce a type of passion seemingly all their own, but actually derived from evocative puritan barnstorming down through the ages. The one thing which pornographers and anti-pornographers have in common is the desire to arouse and shock: sexual denunciation, like the anti-masturbation rants of old, provides vicarious outlet for sexual passion, as well as for sexual fears and anxieties.

Whatever the rhetorical interplay between pornography and

anti-pornography, it is impossible to deny that the term is slippery. Over the years, its meanings shift and its productions diversify. 'Pornography', in its most widely accepted sense, always flaunts its illicit status: its existence as material designed primarily for sexual arousal, without redeeming social importance. The feminist Linda Williams has mapped the continuous changes in pornographic productions, as new sexual questions and anxieties come into play. In the early stag films of the 1920s the question of women's sexual pleasure was never an issue: men gawped at the forbidden display of female genitals (in screenings from which women were strictly excluded). In contrast, full-length porn movies from the 1980s purport to represent both men and women as sexual subjects, and the issue of satisfying women's (supposedly insatiable) desire drives the plot forward.

Misogyny unquestionably pervades much of the genre. Yet one of the main changes in recent decades has been the targeting of women as well as men as consumers of 'adult videos'. Launched in the USA, self-consciously pro-women pornographic outfits – like Candida Royalle's 'Femme Productions' or Annie Sprinkle's 'Post-Porn Performances' – have emerged, attempting to subvert sexism and portray female sexual agency in a positive light. The latter all routinely encounter the censor's firm hand, both in the USA and, when imported, here. Today it would seem truer than ever that the borders of the 'pornographic' shift and blur into other genres (the uncontrolled, non-commercial productions of nerds on the Internet creating endless new possibilities, and problems). Meanwhile, much of what anti-pornography feminists refer to as classic instances of 'pornography' are taken from the slasher and horror movie genre, with its own distinct history and ways of reading imagery and text.

However, despite all the changes in the genre, it still remains men who predominantly produce and consume most of the sexually explicit images of women (or men). Stock top-shelf 'wank-mags' cater overwhelmingly for men. Attempts to produce somewhat similar porn mags for women have had little commercial success. Here, as nowhere else in most men's lives, infantile grandiosity is fully catered for: men are inexhaustibly desiring, tumescent and irresistible; women insatiably available. Whether we respond with derision, sympathy, horror or indifference to what this suggests about men's ruling sexual trepidations will influence the stand we take on pornography.

In the women's liberation movement of the 1970s the analysis and politics of sexuality were always accorded a central place. Feminists initially sought to celebrate female sexuality: liberating it from male-centred discourses and sexist practices to uncover

women's own 'autonomous' sexuality. However, early ideas linking women's liberation to greater sexual confidence were soon overshadowed by the pressure of challenging the seeming tenacity of men's power over women. From the close of the 1970s, forceful feminist writing was insisting that predatory male sexuality was the overriding source of that power, and naming pornography as its chief incitement. Male 'sexuality' was irrevocably fused to 'domination', redefined as an urge to power.

Other feminists, as I did, saw these moves as part of a reaction to more conservative times and the setbacks faced by feminist activism – especially in the USA, where anti-pornography feminism arose at the close of the 1970s. Isolating sexuality and men's violence from other issues of women's inequality was not only a defensive tactic for women, but one closest to the rising tide of conservative backlash against radical politics generally. The Right has always liked to demonise sexuality, seeing it as the source of all our ills. Some feminists were now joining them.

The new feminist discourses against pornography were strengthened in 1987 when Catherine MacKinnon published *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. This added legal arguments to Andrea Dworkin's earlier indictment of pornography in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, published in 1981, which depicted pornography as men's literal domination and torture of women. MacKinnon declared pornography a 'violation of women's civil rights', arguing that it convinces men that women are inferior. Pornography should be seen as not merely a form of representation – sexist and offensive images or words – but as literally harming women and creating gender inequality. It causes men to injure and violate women both in its creation (a claim passionately and repeatedly rebutted by many sex workers themselves) and in its consumption: teaching men to injure and debase women through linking their sexual arousal to degrading images of women.

The women's liberation movement was not concerned primarily with censorship, either for or against. Rather, feminists saw cultural production of all kinds as a site for feminist struggle to authorise and encourage silenced voices. That said, feminist anti-pornography arguments are seductive because most mainstream pornography purveys blatantly sexist (and often racist) imagery. Pornography's standard servicing of men's narcissistic fantasies of female sexual availability is a continuing provocation when sexual harassment and rape remain endemic. It seems to offer a convenient scapegoat for rage against such abuses. Convenient, but hazardous.

It is hazardous because the argument that it is commercial

pornography that underlies the subordination and abuse of women in society is seriously misleading. First of all, anti-pornography feminism has systematically misrepresented the content of mainstream pornography as 'violence'. Secondly, it has consistently misrepresented studies of effects of pornography, falsely claiming they offer consistent and conclusive proof that pornographic images cause sex crimes. Thirdly, it disavows our knowledge of the peculiar nature of fantasy, with its complex, often contradictory, relation to actual behaviour. Fourthly, it eschews recent theories of representation, which reveal that meaning is seen as never simply fixed in advance, but determined by its broader discursive context as well as its specific interpretive audience. Finally, and most fundamentally of all, anti-pornography feminism fails to address the elementary point that the role of commercial pornography in depicting a crude, imperious and promiscuous male sexuality, alongside female receptivity and vulnerability, is completely overshadowed by, and entirely dependent on, the official discourses and imagery of science, medicine, religion and mainstream cultural productions (high or low), prevalent all around us.

While many may find the sexually explicit messages of commercial pornography offensive, in fact they mimic – yet also sometimes unsettle – the ways in which the most authoritative, revered, even sacred discourses of our culture depict women as subordinate, sexually passive and sexually available. There have, for example, been feminist critiques of the 'great' paintings of western art along these lines, and illustrations could be drawn from a whole range of genres. Many fields of knowledge rely on a taken-for-granted view of unalterable gender difference that does, in the end, imply the subordination of women. This is nowhere more prominent than in the recent flowering of 'new evolutionary theory', which flaunts its account of men's ever-ready sexual desire. Yet as sex therapists are all too well aware, the sexist metaphors and phallic hubris, both of recent scientific discourse and of traditional pornography, are far from reflecting a real world in which the male member is permanently erect and endlessly ready for unencumbered sex.

In her recent analysis of pornography, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler explores this failure of expectations. She suggests that pornography depicts just those 'unrealizable positions' that predetermine our social expectations of gender behaviour. Pornography in no way constructs that social reality; on the contrary, it serves to mock the impossible distance between gender norms and actual practices.

Nobody needs pornography to remind them of the hierarchical 'truths' of sexual difference. Some, indeed, turn to it to escape

them, identifying with who-knows-what position of domination or subjection as they gaze upon its products. It is dominant ideology itself, with its obsessive disdain for what it regards as the gross material body and its functions – of secretions, odours and open orifices; perspiration, pulpy flesh and fluctuating organs – which works to produce the quite inevitable pull of the tauntingly illicit.

Pornography is thus only one of many phallogocentric and misogynistic discourses that fashion our images of gender and sexuality – and the least esteemed, least convincing, often most contradictory one. Those who most eagerly insist on its unique offensiveness face the problem that surveys of what is packaged as pornography show that violent imagery is rare, rather than definitive of the genre, as anti-porn feminists claim. Moreover, men are more likely than women to be depicted as ‘submissive’ in the S&M or bondage imagery available. This means, of course, that were there any truth in our direct mimicry of the pornographic, feminists might well feel that they should be out fly-posting this well-established dominatrix pornography, rather than trying to eliminate it. A host of empirical inquiries, from the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark or the USA, have all failed to find any consistent correlation between the availability of pornography and sex crimes against women, many indeed have found negative correlations (not that this tells us anything about causality either). Overall, the main finding from the avalanche of correlational studies carried out over the last 20 years is that they are inconsistent, both with each other and with the claims of anti-pornography texts.

Nevertheless, it was anti-pornography campaigners, rather than their critics, who had most success in shifting the legal debate in favour of censorship during the 1990s. They boosted their appeal by joining forces with others campaigning against the less contentious injuries of ‘Hate Speech’ now flourishing in the USA, a move documented by Mari Matsuda and others in the 1993 *Words that Wound*. It is over a decade since MacKinnon and Dworkin first drafted their Model Ordinance, arguing that women can assert their civil rights and become fully human only once they win the battle against pornography. The Ordinance classifies pornography as sex discrimination (‘the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words’) and urges those who have suffered ‘harm’ from it to seek damages through the courts from its makers, sellers and distributors – public or private (MacKinnon 1987). After initial success in Minneapolis, the Ordinance was eventually defeated in various states of the USA following prolonged legal battles, but in Canada anti-pornography feminists (assisted by MacKinnon) were victorious, with the adoption of a modified version of the

Ordinance in the Butler Supreme Court decision in 1992.

Other feminists, who have – often reluctantly – felt compelled to fight the Ordinance, in and outside the courts, argue that the relentless pursuit of such legislative change is dangerous. It relies upon vague and ambiguous terms which are certain to backfire against the sexually powerless it supposedly protects. Their fears have been realised, at least according to those who have been monitoring the effects of the Canadian legislation. Since the Butler decision, straight mainstream pornography is flourishing. Representations of alternative sexualities, by contrast, are facing increasingly intense censorship according to a study made by Brenda Cossman et al, *Bad Attitudes on Trial: Pornography Feminism and the Butler Decision*. The misappropriation of this new Canadian law, not against many men's cosily familiar sexist pornography, but rather against the more unsettling productions of sexual minorities which might work to subvert them, has been the precise and predictable outcome.

In the area of race, similar predictable reversals have occurred. The speech of the powerful remains protected (as before), the speech of minorities gets censored. Thus it is the performances of black rap groups, 2 Live Crew and Salt 'n' Pepa which have recently been targeted for censorship in US courts. As others have noticed, this strengthens the racism of conservative critics, such as Stephen Macedo, who has declared that 'rap' is the special contribution of blacks to 'American cultural degeneration'. New obscenity legislation can be a dangerous thing in its strengthening of legal powers to discriminate against the productions of unpopular cultural minorities. This is why feminists opposed to anti-pornography legislation argue that it threatens to close down spaces which women are still trying to open up in exploring how to represent themselves as sexual agents. From this perspective, the last thing we want to do is to fix the meanings of words and images independently from seeking to understand their social context and audiences. o

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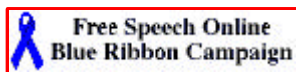
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