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Sexuality and Power in Pornography

That pornography causes controversy is certainly not news in the Western world.  However, the issue of the legality of hardcore films seemed to be settled in 1986 when the Supreme Court upheld the pornography ordinance in Indiana penned by the famous outspoken feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon.¹ Nonetheless, with laws and ordinances set aside, at least in the United States, the complex relationship between power and sexuality in pornography continues to fuel a heated debate. Currently, in feminist circles there are two opposing sides: the anti-pornography feminists and the anti-censorship radical feminists. The first group, the anti-pornography feminists, argues that porn influences a male-dominated society and oppresses women. On the other side of the spectrum are the anti-censorship radical feminists, who see pornography as an outlet to express female sexuality in a way that may provide the opportunity to liberate women.

Since the ordinance was refuted as a violation of the first amendment shortly after it was brought to court more than twenty years ago, the two parties continue to disagree about what, if anything, should be done about pornography. As Amy Allen (2001) illustrates in the article, 'Pornography and Power,' what causes both feminist parties to have inadequate arguments are their distinct definitions of power that lead to narrow-minded views of an extremely intricate issue. In this paper I will look critically at both sides of the argument regarding power in pornography. In so doing, I will assess why current feminist definitions of power are insufficient and why they have failed to fuel any major social movements. After examining the arguments, I will tread in the complex

¹ Allen, Amy. "Pornography and Power." *Journal of Social Philosophy*. 32 (2001): 512-531.

waters of not only which gender has power in pornography, but also how it affects society's concept of gender as a whole. This is important because pornography plays an important role in shaping perceptions of our bodies, gender, sexuality, and intimacy.² I argue that pornography plays a negative role in society, irrespective of whether or not the woman featured in the film appears to "have power."

Background

The pornography industry developed shortly after World War II as an underground business. Usually linked with organized crime, the materials were mostly sold on the black market and were kept away from public life. Today, pornography is a flourishing business raking in billions of dollars annually.³ Once shown primarily in theaters, which required the audience to leave their houses and risk being seen masturbating in public in the 1960s, XXX films have evolved from the VHS tape to the DVD, and have been booming since the invention of the Internet in the '90s. According to Adult Video News, 11,000 new DVDs were released in 2002. With the expansion of porn on the Internet, it is difficult to tell how much of the population, including children, view porn. And with the immersion of YouPorn.com, where the audience can post their homemade videos, it is difficult to determine how many are now involved in making porn.⁴

When I use the term 'pornography' in this paper, I will be referring to the sexually explicit materials using adults engaged primarily in heterosexual sex, which makes up the

² Jensen, Robert. *Pornography and Sexual Violence*. Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse. National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2004. 27 Apr. 2008 <<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/documents/arpornography/arpornography.html>>.

³ Jensen, Robert. *Pornography and Sexual Violence*.

⁴ Ibid.

bulk of the market. But to many, pornography is also defined as material depicting sex in a context of domination or degradation where the primary domination/subordination dynamic eroticized is gender.⁵ To which gender the power is ascribed is where the debate between the feminist parties arise.

Porn as oppressor of women: Anti-pornography feminists


Anti-pornography feminists believe that we are currently living in a culture in which pornography reinforces and sexualizes women's subordinate status in society.⁶ They claim that in pornography it is *always* the woman who is being overpowered and dominated by the man. In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, anti-pornography advocate Andrea Dworkin writes that, 'The major theme of pornography as a gender is male power, its nature, its magnitude, its use, its meaning... Male power is the *raison d'être* of pornography; the degradation of the female is the means of achieving power.'⁷

For the group that holds this negative viewpoint, pornography oppresses women because of the message it conveys to the audience. Jensen (2004) describes the major themes he recognizes throughout most pornography: 1) All women at all times want sex from all men 2) Women enjoy all sexual acts that men perform or demand and 3) Any woman who does not at first realize this can easily be turned with little force. In porn, women are the nymphomaniacs that men fantasize about who will take sex in any position with a number of men. They are regarded as sexual objects that are put in a subordinate position by the males in the film.

⁵ Jensen, Robert. *Pornography and Sexual Violence*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dworkin, Andrea. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. (New York: Plume, 1979): 24-25.

For the outspoken anti-porn advocates Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, pornography is a reflection of what males want in society. As MacKinnon describes it: 

From the testimony of pornography, what men want is: women bound, women battered, women tortured, women humiliated, women degraded and defiled, women killed. Or, to be fair to the soft core, women sexually accessible, have-able, there for them, wanting to be taken and used, with perhaps just a little light bondage. Each violation of women—rape, battery, prostitution, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment—is made sexuality, made sexy, fun, and liberating of women’s true nature in the pornography.⁸


Dworkin and MacKinnon believe that domination is prior to gender, or in other words, that domination creates differences between genders, not that differences in men and women cause the need for one to dominate the other. On the other hand, they argue, the dominant group creates gender differences in order to maintain their dominance over the subordinate. Anti-pornography feminists strive to challenge this system of domination, for the solution to the problem does not simply lie in making women dominant over men, because as MacKinnon argues, ‘power and powerlessness *is* the sex difference.’⁹

This theory is widely criticized because of its narrow definition of power where women are always powerless with men always dominating them. Allen (2001) argues that the anti-pornography feminists’ dyadic master/subject definition of power is inadequate to make sense of power relations presently, and that they must consider factors such as race, class, and sexuality. After all, is it not absurd to say that a white middle-class heterosexual woman holds power over a homosexual black man on welfare in society?

⁸ MacKinnon, Catharine. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987): 200.

⁹ MacKinnon, Catharine. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987): 123.


Radical anti-censorship feminists dismiss this dyadic power/powerless relationship. They believe that claiming women are powerless *no matter what* and that they are objects that are always dominated by men in porn provides them with no agency and in fact suppresses female sexuality. In her article, ‘Talk Dirty to Me,’ Sally Tisdale believes that anti-pornography feminists:

Are concerned with how men act and how women are portrayed. Women cannot make free sexual choices... What a misogynistic worldview this is, this claim that women who make such choices cannot be making choices at all—are not free to make a choice. Feminists against pornography have done a sad and awful thing—*They* have made women into objects.¹⁰ 

Porn has potential to empower: Anti-censorship, “Radical” Feminists

For feminists who oppose censorship in porn, to say that women are the ones dominated by men—and that’s that—illustrates a picture in which women will never have the opportunity to hold power. They are continuously the victims in sex, and they have no agency when it comes to making sexual decisions. The radical feminists who advocate feminist porn view power in a less obsolete form, in which pornography has the influence to empower women sexually. And it can be viewed in a positive light:

Pornography has served to flout conventional sexual mores, to ridicule sexual hypocrisy and to underscore the importance of sexual needs. Pornography creates many messages other than women-hating: it advocates sexual adventure, sex outside of marriage, sex for no reason other than pleasure, casual sex, anonymous sex, group sex, voyeuristic sex, illegal sex, public sex. Some of these ideas appeal to women reading or seeing pornography, who may interpret some images as legitimating their own sense of sexual urgency or desire to be sexually aggressive.¹¹

This pro-porn feminism position challenges the hierarchy of men having sexual 


power over women, and argues that women can use sexuality to their advantage to hold

¹⁰ Tisdale, Sally. “Talk Dirty to Me.” *Harpers*. (February 1992): 37-46

¹¹ Duggan, Lisa, Nan Hunter, and Carole Vance, “False Promises,” in FACT Book Committee. *Caught Looking*, 82.

dominance over men. This form of feminism often is referred to as, ‘fuck-me feminism,’ in which women are empowered by reclaiming their sexual objectification. Radical anti-censorship feminists believe that sexual objectification is inevitable for women under society’s current system of patriarchy, so for women the opportunity to control the situation is everything. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards write in *Manifesta*, ‘Feminism isn’t about what choice you make, but the freedom to make that choice.’¹²


From TV to Reality

Although these anti-censorship feminists contend that some women may use pornography to empower themselves sexually, what they fail to consider are the overall effects that pornography has on society. Even when women have the power to choose that they want sex or the kind of sex they desire, the picture that some pornography paints may be different than that intended by the individuals involved. Joanna Angel, a so-called feminist pornographer, was quoted saying that, ‘You could do a porn where a girl is getting choked and hit and spit on, the guy’s calling her a dirty slut and stuff and... that can still be feminist as long as everybody there is in control of what they’re doing.’¹³ So even though the woman in the porn is claiming to possess the power because she enjoys the sex and she chooses to engage in it, the question that needs to be asked is, what kind of message are these degrading acts—spitting on, hitting, comparing the women to a prostitute—conveying to the viewer? 


¹² Baumgardner, Jennifer and Amy Richards quoted in Allen.


¹³ Mantilla, Karla. “Backlash and a Feminism That is Contrary to Feminism.” *Off Our Backs*. 37 (2007): 58-61.

While for some individuals using pornography can be sexually liberating, the concept as a whole still keeps women subordinated to men.¹⁴ Even after her death in 2005, Dworkin may still be widely criticized for her highly radical beliefs against pornography, but despite this, some of the messages she attempted to convey should be considered. Like Foucault, she showed how deeply persuasive power relationships are encoded into our concept of sexuality and in how many complex ways everyday life normalizes those relationships.¹⁵ To this extent, pornography continues to be an important factor in a male-dominated society.

After numerous studies, there are still no definitive answers for what effects pornography has on viewers. While one cannot say that pornography causes sexual violence, it is true that as porn has become more acceptable, both legally and culturally, the level of brutality against women has intensified.¹⁶ As Jensen (2004) shows through interviews with rape victims and sex offenders, pornography is an influence on behavior.

In one report a prostitute described how one john snapped at her and said:

I know all about you bitches, you're no different; you're like all of them. I seen it in all the movies. You love being beaten [begins punching the victim violently]. I just seen it again in that flick. He beat the shit out of her while he raped her and she told him she loved it; you know you love it; tell me you love it.¹⁷

In an interview with a 34-year-old man who raped women and sexually abused girls from Dines, Jensen, & Russo (1998), pornography is also mentioned:

There was a lot of oral sex that I wanted her to perform on me. There were, like, ways that would entice it in the movies, and I tried to use that on her, and it wouldn't work. Sometimes, I'd get frustrated, and that's

¹⁴ Mantilla, Karla. "Backlash and a Feminism That is Contrary to Feminism."

¹⁵ Pollitt, Katha. "Andrea Dworkin, 1946-2005." *The Nation*. 2 May 2005: 8.


¹⁶ Jensen, Robert. *Pornography and Sexual Violence*.

¹⁷ Silbert & Pines quoted in Jensen, Robert. *Pornography and Sexual Violence*.

when I started hitting her... I used a lot of force, a lot of direct demands that in the movies the women would just cooperate. And I would demand stuff from her and if she didn't, I'd start slapping her around.¹⁸

Jensen has concluded from his research that pornography can contribute to a user's difficulty in separating sexual reality from fantasy. So although the woman possesses sexual power in the film, that message may not be clear to the viewer, thus providing him with false expectations about what women want.

And, frighteningly enough, the sexual "freedom" and control some women appear to convey in pornography may in fact be a lie. Linda Boreman, (known by her stage name, Linda Lovelace) shocked audiences when she admitted to having a gun to her head while filming the 1972 erotic film, *Deep Throat*, the most financially successful film in the history of pornography.¹⁹ Described in her 1980 biography *Ordeal*, written by Mike McGrady, Boreman also explains how she was coerced into prostitution and pornography by her then-boyfriend Chuck Traynor. She later became a member of the anti-pornography feminist movement, testifying in Congress against pornography. In an interview with MacKinnon, Boreman reflects on her nightmare experiences in the industry:

They treated me like an inflatable plastic doll, picking me up and moving me here and there. They spread my legs this way and that, shoving their things at me and into me, they were playing musical chairs with parts of my body. I have never been so frightened and disgraced and humiliated in my life. I felt like garbage. I engaged in sex acts for pornography against my will to avoid being killed...The lives of my family were threatened.²⁰ 

¹⁸ Jensen, Robert. *Pornography and Sexual Violence*.

¹⁹ Martin, Douglas. "Linda Boreman, 53, Known for 1972 Film 'Deep Throat'" *The New York Times*. 24 Apr. 2002. 27 Apr. 2008
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0CE5DE163EF937A15757C0A9649C8B63>>.

²⁰ MacKinnon, Catharine. *Are Women Human* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2006).

In a multi-billion dollar industry where some women are forced to participate, it seems unlikely that women would ever gain power. The effect of pornography on women is largely unexplored, but physical damage and heavy drug and alcohol abuse is common among those involved in the industry.²¹ So for the anti-censorship feminists who depict pornography as too perfect a situation for sexual liberation I ask: How far are women willing to go to empower themselves? What are they willing to risk to be portrayed as having sexual power on computer or television screens?

Conclusion

Due to issues with the first amendment, anti-pornography feminists have made little impact in recent years and pornography remains a moneymaking industry. Even with the economy in recession, billions of dollars still flow into the pornography industry. Perhaps the so-called “pro-porn” feminists figure if they can’t beat them, they might as well join them, for more pornography under a feminist genre have been implemented into the industry. “Feminist porn” places more of the emphasis on the relationship that develops between the characters that engage in intercourse than typical mainstream porn does. The option of pornography focusing on romantic relationships for a female audience has been a topic covered in a variety of women’s magazines and television talk shows.

But as I have shown in this paper, the controversy over pornography should not rest solely on what gender appears to dominate the other when it comes to sex. Instead, one must recognize that the power implications are far more complex than the male having control over the female—a degrading for women because they are objectified—or

²¹ Jensen, Robert. *Pornography and Sexual Violence*.

that when the women wants sex she can use this to empower herself. It is difficult to have a discussion when considering an industry where many of the women have been sexually abused or are frequent drug users even before looking into the camera of their first XXX flick.²² It will be interesting to see what influence Internet sites such as YouPorn.com, which is filled with independent films, will have over the concept of power and gender in the future.

²² Radin, Robert. "My Sister's Secret Life." *Marie Claire* Apr. 2008: 131+.

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