

Philosophy of sex
essay: 'explain
mackinnon's critique
and critically assess
it' ...



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MacKinnon's 'Not a Moral Issue' begins by defining what she believes to be the differences between obscenity law and pornography. Obscenity is a 'moral issue' and is 'abstract'; pornography is a 'political practise' and 'concrete'. Obscenity law is concerned with the views and practises of birth control, nudity, ect. Pornography is 'sex forced on real women so that it can be sold... to be forced on other real women. ' MacKinnon asserts that the obscenity law is 'built on what the male standpoint sees' and so is pornography.

MacKinnon holds that pornography, by its very nature, involves the degradation and subordination of women. It is an 'institution of gender equality' enforcing the social construct of what constitutes female and what male. MacKinnon criticises the liberalist view of pornography, stating that what liberalists see as love, romance, pleasure and desire is, in the feminist view, the hatred, torture, violation and the lust for submission of male dominance. The liberalist view of pornography is 'a defence not only of force and sexual terrorism, but frees male subordination of women.

By the very aesthetic of pornography it encourages the male viewer to perceive women as objects to be obtained and used by men. Pornography, in MacKinnon's view, creates an 'accessible sexual object, the possession and consumption of which is male sexuality. ' MacKinnon also rejects obscenity as the relevant category for thinking about pornography, stating that 'their obscenity is not our (feminists) pornography. ' Obscenity law proposes to control what and how sex is publicly shown; which, she claims, changes according to what men in power find most suitable for maintaining male dominance.

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Obscenity law helps to keep pornography sexy and dangerous by limiting what men can legally have access to. However, MacKinnon asserts that men in power are afraid to define pornography because they are limiting what other men can and can't have, which in turn might make those men remove them from their places of power. Thus, in establishing what is considered obscene and what is permissible, it comes down to 'who's sexual practises threaten (the) system that can afford to be sacrificed to maintain' it?

MacKinnon goes on to say that she thinks that whatever is considered obscene is what doesn't turn the Supreme Court on, or what revolts them more, or makes them see themselves as a potential targets of sexual aggression. That what is obscene is whatever gets those men, those in power can afford to ignore, all hot and heavy. 'So anything can be done to a woman, but obscenity is sex that makes male sexuality look bad.'

Mackinnon claims that under the First Amendment, most pornography is protected; that men's 'right to inflict pornography upon women in private... is protected.'

She also states that it supports pornography, 'believing that consensus and progress are facilitated by allowing all views.' MacKinnon declares that, whilst others may claim that allowing freedom of 'speech', including pornography, frees the mind to fulfil itself; pornography, in fact, enslaves women and normalises the terror that enforces women's silence. She claims that under First Amendment logic the harm that pornography causes cannot be recognised, because it doesn't occur in a linear fashion.

Finally, MacKinnon concludes her critique by stating that it is the status of women that is at stake. Whilst the fact that pornography is mainly possessed and consumed by men may be essentially true, not all pornography depicts women as submissive objects to be obtained and used by men. Also, throughout her critique MacKinnon neglects the fact that women also are consumers of pornography; and that those women participating in such actions are usually consenting to it. MacKinnon continually refers to sex as being forced upon women, as a degrading and violent act of force.

Under her logic it could be argued that all women are in submissive roles and that at anytime they consent to sex it is because male dominant society and, underlying that, pornography, has conditioned them to have 'a lust for self-annihilation,' which is not true. Another issue is that many texts that would not generally be considered pornographic could be included under MacKinnon's definition of pornography; for example Ralph and FHM magazines don't contain any full frontal nudity, however they represent women as objects to be ogled by men.

Should such texts and other things that MacKinnon's definition may pertain to, like beauty contests, be banned or controlled? Finally, it is hardly true that women are forced to silence by sexual practises. Whilst women's sexuality may not be quite as openly accepted and applauded in society, it is not as grimly denied and repulsed as MacKinnon seems to think, and has little affect on their rights to equality and free speech. However it must be pointed out in her defence that her critique 'Not a Moral Issue' was presented in 1983.

In conclusion MacKinnon seems to over rate the effect of pornography on the everyday social structure and the harm that it causes. Her assumption that it sets the standards for all sexual acts and gender roles is over generalised, neglecting the fact many do not view pornography as a realistic portrayal of gender roles or the sexuality of gender. In the end pornography may not be promoting women's rights to equality, but it is hardly as damaging as she claims.