

Effect of pornography on violence against women



Critically assess the case that the products of the contemporary pornography industry are both a cause of violence and discrimination directed against women and also ‘inherently harmful’.

‘Everyone says: ‘Oh, women want sex soft and pretty, like a Harlequin novel’. It’s as if women are being protected...’

Candida Royalle (2000: 545)

It is not the purpose of this essay to defend the contemporary pornography industry which to this day remains a ‘dirty’ and -to a large extent- a male-dominated, exploitative business, but rather to understand the reasons behind this sad reality. Pornography made its first prominent appearance in feminist discourse in the late 70s, when feminist groups such as ‘Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media’ (WAVPM) embarked upon their anti-pornography campaign in the San Francisco Bay area ^[1]. The so-called ‘sex wars’ of the 1980s brought about an unprecedented division within the feminist movement. Anti-pornography writers, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon -authors of the famous ‘Minneapolis and Indianapolis ordinances’ ^[2] - advocated the censorship of pornographic material, on account of its role as ‘a practice that is central to the subordination of women’ ^[3]. Other feminists put forth a liberal legal argument, invoking the First Amendment to the American Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech. Two decades later, the pornography debate has retained its relevance in feminist discourse. There is still heated disagreement over three interrelated issues: what is the definition of pornography? Does pornography cause violence and discrimination against

women? What is the best way to deal with pornography in the policy and legislation arenas? While critically assessing the anti-pornography thesis, I will argue in turn that most sexually explicit graphic material is not the cause but can mirror the misogyny and exploitation that characterizes modern societies; and that far from being ‘intrinsically harmful’ pornography can in fact be employed in the service of feminist ideas.

A necessary starting point if we are to understand pornography would be an analytically helpful definition. But this is itself one of the main points of disagreement between feminists. The pro-censorship side has emulated traditional definitions of pornography^[4] and equated sexual explicitness with violence and female subordination^[5]. Dworkin understands pornography as the platform where sexist ideology thrives by exhibiting male supremacy, discernible in seven interwoven strains: the power of the self, physical power, the power of terror, the power of naming, the power of owning, the power of money and the power of sex’^[6]. Contemporary porn depicts women as the helpless victims of men: bound, tortured, humiliated, battered, urinated upon or ‘merely taken and used’. Evoking the Greek etymology of the word, Dworkin (1990: 24) defines pornography as the ‘graphic depiction of whores’, (‘porne’ being the Greek for a cheap prostitute or sex slave). Thus pornography is conceived as something sexist, violent and exploitative by definition; in other words, as an intrinsically harmful phenomenon.

Even at this early stage, pro-censorship analysis seems to rest on shaky methodological grounds. First it involves a clearly circular argument which condemns pornography without trying to understand it, almost like arguing

that ‘ pornography is bad, because it is bad’. Second, the cross-cultural analysis of Ancient Greece is dubious, if not completely a-historical, since ‘ pornography’ is not an ancient but a Victorian neologism, invented in the 19th century, thus reflecting Victorian sensitivities rather than ancient realities. Third, the definition of porn as a field of violence and sexism logically entails a distinction from other, sexually explicit material that is not violent, demeaning and exploitative, but is based on sentiments of mutuality and reciprocity. Defining this emerging category, usually referred to as ‘ Erotica’, is a highly subjective endeavor and obviously unhelpful for an academic or a judge. Equating sexual explicitness to violence, misogyny and other value-judgments is not only counter productive to the search for a descriptive definition of pornography; it is also untrue, since it is often the case that ‘ soft porn’ or even altogether non-sexual material can contain much more disturbing scenes of violence and sexism than pornography itself ^[7]. Fourth, most of the anti-porn literature has applied its definitions of pornography in a vague and inconsistent manner, jumping from the ‘ graphic depiction of whores’ to the more mainstream concept of porn as cheaply produced ‘ smut’ for instant consumption ^[8]; and sometimes to a more inclusive definition containing phenomena as diverse as fashion, TV commercials, sex toys and sex education ^[9].

Methodological concerns aside, anti-porn definitions of pornography entail positions that appear to contradict the very essence of feminism. Anti-porn pronouncements on ‘ good, sensitive Erotica’ vis-à-vis ‘ bad, abusive porn’ are essentially pronouncements about ‘ good’ and ‘ bad’ sexuality. At the risk of caricature, this entails restrictions on sexuality of Orwellian

dimensions, and is contrary to the fights of the feminist, gay and lesbian movements for sexual liberation and diversity. One anti-porn author opines that 'erotica is rooted in eros, or passionate love, and thus in the idea of positive choice, free will, the yearning for a particular person, whereas in pornography the subject is not love at all, but domination and violence against women' ^[10]. Statements like this one seem to imply an acceptance of old patriarchal stereotypes of the form 'men are aggressive and polygamous by nature, while women are passive and monogamous' and that women do not, cannot or should not enjoy sex in itself. Paradoxically, Dworkin's (1990) synoptic treatment of the history of pornography exaggerates the passivity and helplessness of female victims and the violence of male domination to such an extent, that it unwittingly reinforces the very binary stereotypes that feminism has historically fought to uproot. Her presentation of women in pornography as 'whores', is at best patronizing, if not condescending and insulting towards female porn-workers, who often *choose* to follow that mode of subsistence. The choices of porn-workers deserve as much respect as those of women working in less stigmatized industries and, perhaps, even greater feminist solidarity ^[11].

Pro-censorship argumentation tends to revolve around two rhetorical devices. The first is the exaggeration of the amount and degree of violence contained in pornographic material, through the accumulation of undeniably disturbing images. The slide shows projected in WAVPM meetings and the material articulately described in Dworkin's book have been handpicked for their shock-value and power to disturb. Drawn primarily from the underground cultures of Bizarre, Bestiality and SM, most of these images are

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largely unrepresentative of the mainstream market, which is both highly diversified and specialized. Specialization is a key-point because of the basic fact that different people have different 'turn-ons'. Given that some people may find publicly disturbing, what others view as privately stimulating is no good reason to label porn in its entirety as intrinsically offensive. The second rhetorical device lies in the argument that pornography is not just a representation of imaginary violence but also a recorded reality or as put by MacKinnon, a 'documentary of abuse' ^[12]. Again this argument misleadingly conflates reality with representational fantasy. To claim that every woman - or man- that appears to be abused in a porn-movie *is* actually abused, is almost as naïve as claiming that every man shot-dead in, say, 'the Terminator', is actually dead. The anti-porn argument fails to take into consideration factors such as artifice, acting and role-playing ^[13]. While genuine cases of abuse are not absent from the porn industry, the vast majority of depictions of 'violence' occur in a role-playing context which carefully ensures the safety of the actors.

My view is that understanding pornography requires a descriptive definition which, instead of passing judgments over the moral credentials and political consciousness of its participants, focuses on the realities of the porn industry. In this light, modern pornography, as we know it, is the graphic representation of sexually explicit material, mass-produced and mass-consumed with the purpose of sexual arousal. Although it is not 'intrinsically evil', this industry is morally no better than the society that produces it.

The effect of sexually explicit material on its viewers and society at large is the second main component of the pornography debate. Anti-porn analysis has insisted on a theory of causality, whereby real rape, physical abuse and humiliation of women by men occur as a direct result of their exposure to the 'hateful values' ^[14] of pornography. In Dworkin's own words 'at the heart of the female condition is pornography: it is the ideology that is the source of all the rest;' ^[15]. By equating the representation of violence with injurious action, Dworkin evokes what neo-Aristotelian theorists of representation have termed as the 'Mimesis-model'. Derived from the Greek word 'mimesis', meaning 'imitation' or 'reproduction', the model positions the real both before and after its representation ^[16].

At a theoretical level the Mimesis-model can be sufficiently challenged by another Aristotelian concept, that of Catharsis. This would entail that far from reducing men to perpetrators of violence, exposure to the mock-violence of pornography -with all its artistic conventions and restrictions- would relieve them of the violent dispositions that lay 'hidden' in their psyche, in the same way that, say, a horror movie may give us pleasure without inciting violence and blood-thirst. The Catharsis-model fits particularly well to the very nature of pornography. Founded on a much-attested human desire for an occasional breach of taboo, porn tends to represent situations and feelings that may well be antisocial and very often remote from what the actual social practice is. Japan -a country with one of the lowest rape rates world-wide- sustains a huge pornographic industry that 'specializes' in violence and sexual domination ^[17]. The anti-pornography perspective fails to grasp this crucial distinction between social reality and

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harmless fantasy ^[18]. In terms of empirical evidence, psychological experiments on the alleged correlation between exposure to porn and violent activity are, at best, inconclusive ^[19]. Historical and cross-societal analysis is equally unpromising for the Mimesis-argument. Porn, in its modern sense, is a very recent creation ^[20]. And yet, the exploitation of women by men had predated it by thousands of years. At the same time, political systems that adhered to the systematic suppression of pornographic representations, such as the Soviet Union or modern Islamic states, had not been less exploitative or violent.

And yet, many anti-porn thinkers have insisted on censorship, despite the fact that this insistence has produced an awkward alliance with moral traditionalists from the Right ^[21]. If passed, the 1984 Minneapolis ordinance would have reinvented ‘pornography’ as a criminal offence, distinct from ‘obscenity’. This would have allowed women to take civil action against anyone involved in the production, or distribution of pornography, on the grounds that they had been ‘harmed’ by its portrayal of women. In the passionate words of Andrea Dworkin (1990: 224) ‘we will know that we are free when the pornography no longer exists. As long as it does exist, we must understand that we are the women in it: used by the same power, subject to the same valuation, as the vile whores who beg for more.’ If only, pornography was, indeed, the mother of all evil. Then sexism could be uprooted at one, simple, legislative stroke. But unfortunately, sexism, violence and exploitation are endemic to the economic structure of the modern society and pervasive of all our media. Pornography seems to have been singled out as a scapegoat for all forms of sexual prejudices in today’s

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world. The long-standing social stigma and visual honesty of the industry made it an easy target to right-wingers and left-wingers alike.

Censorship has not worked in the past and there is no reason to believe that it will work in the future. I believe that the only viable solution to the pornography problem is the exact opposite of censorship, namely support for 'the Politics of Representation' [22]. Women should try to 'capture' pornography, as producers, script-writers and directors, in a manner consistent with earlier feminist ventures into other male-dominated fields, such as literature, politics, media, religion, education and science. 'Going legit', would not only mean that society as a whole will take a less hypocritical stance to the realities of pornography but also that regulation would guarantee better working conditions for female porn-workers (e. g. unionization, safe-sex, better security, health and cleanliness) [23]. Most importantly establishing a feminine perspective within the industry would counterbalance the male bias from which it now suffers. Following the example of ventures such as 'Femme Productions' -launched by former porn-worker Candida Royalle and targeting a couple market- sexually explicit material written and produced by women can celebrate women's right to pleasure without complying to sexism and exploitation [24].

Pro-censorship feminists have been mistaken in defining pornography as problem. The explicit representation of sexual scenes is neither 'intrinsically harmful' nor a direct cause of violence. While men retain the reigns of an industry plagued with social stigma, porn will continue to be biased and

exploitative. Yet, in the right hands, pornography can become an instrument for feminist action.

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Footnotes

[1] Rubin (1992: 18)

[2] See Dworkin & MacKinnon (1988)

[3] MacKinnon in the Minneapolis hearings, cited by Rodgerson & Wilson (1991: 11)

[4] e. g. ‘ the written, graphic or other forms of communication intended to excite lascivious feelings’, in the ‘ American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language’, cited in Rubin (1992: 25).

[5] MacKinnon (1993: 22)

[6] Dworkin (1990: 24)

[7] Rubin (1992: 24, 26)

[8] e. g. compare pp 81 and 218 in Dworkin (1990)

[9] Rubin (1992: 28)

[10] Gloria Steinem, cited in Rubin (1992: 28)

[11] Cornell (2000: 551). For financial incentives for joining the porn industry see Royalle (2000: 541-2)

[12] cited in Rubin (1992: 31)

[13] For an excellent analysis of the difference between real violence and SM role-playing see Royalle (2000: 545-6)

[14] Dworkin (1990: 24)

[15] Dworkin, cited in Rubin (1992: 34)

[16] Butler (2000: 448)

[17] Sutton (1992: 28)

[18] Rubin (1992: 19); Royalle (2000: 546)

[19] Rubin (1992: 30)

[20] Rodgeron & Wilson (1991: 67)

[21] Barker (2000: 643)

[22] Cornell (2000: 553)

[23] Royalle (2000: 548); Rubin (1992: 33-4) Cornell(2000 : 552-3)

[24] Cornell (2000: 564)