

## On pornography

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# On Pornography

[Added November 2003: What follows is an email dialogue with two young men. Mike was the editor of an e-journal in Britain, Eric wrote to me from the US after reading my comments on pornography in that journal. Mike had earlier published a paper of mine called 'What Is Feminism?' in a student e-journal he was involved with.]

22.9.1997

Hello Mike, Here are your questions (only slightly reworded) and my replies. I haven't answered the questions one by one because I want to by-pass their suppressed premises. Nonetheless, I think you'll find answers to all of them in what I have said.

Mike's questions on pornography:

- Isn't pornography when all is said and done, just a collection of photographs?
- While some may say that pornography is disgusting, isn't the case that in reality they are not really doing what it seems and that it is just an illusion?
- What is pornography?
- Is there anything wrong with pornography, if so then what is it?
- Could you classify page three girls as pornographic and if so then why?
- If pornography is against the interest of women, then why do some women allow themselves to become the subject of it?
- Could you justify physically preventing a woman from taking part in a pornographic movie?
- What do you think to the argument that pornography is a means of catharsis, capturing the sexual energy that might otherwise be employed in rape?
- If you were to ban pornography would you not be insulting women by telling them what is good and what is bad for them?
- Who is most at fault when it comes to pornography, those that are the subject of it, those that take the photographs, those that publish the pictures or those that buy them?
- Is pornography not a moral issue rather than a legal issue and therefore shouldn't it be up to the individual rather than the law as to whether they can look at pornography?

- Can men be the object of pornography?
- If pornography is about domination, is there anything wrong with women appearing to dominate men in a pornographic pose?
- What would be the effects of banning pornography?

*Denise Thompson's responses to Mike's questions on pornography:*

Let me structure these responses around some questions of my own.

- Why are you interested in pornography? I myself find it so tedious, in the sense meant by Hannah Arendt when she referred to 'the banality of evil', that I have difficulty even thinking about it.

If you want to know the feminist standpoint on pornography, then I suggest you start with Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. This is one of the great books of the twentieth century. The woman should be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at least for exposing the roots of war so clearly. Instead she and others have been crucified for telling the truth about pornography. Her treatment by the supposedly non-pornographic media, as well as by some who call themselves 'feminists', says something terrible about the dominance of pornographic culture.

For an answer to your question about 'catharsis', read Susan Griffin's *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*, pp.93-103 (in the Harper and Row hardback edition, 1981). Griffin points out that the 'catharsis' argument says something weird about men. It says that they are inherently cruel and violent, and that those traits are ineradicable and must be pandered to. It also says something weird about violence, that it can be overcome by constantly feeding the propensity for it.

For a wealth of detail about the law, research and feminist campaigns, see the volume edited by Catherine Itzin *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

- Why do you think that the debate is still open? There is not a multiplicity of feminist stances on pornography, nor even just two, 'for' and 'against'. There is only one. I can't emphasise this strongly enough. Any stance favourable to pornography, or even neutral, is anti-feminist because it is anti-woman, and inhuman because it reduces 'humanity' to the penis and not only condones but glorifies violations of human rights, and either no one notices or this dehumanisation is defended as 'free

speech'. If there were not a word for it already, feminism would have had to invent one to name that misogynist ideology which dehumanises everyone, and which permeates every facet of male supremacist culture. So, yes, the 'page threes' of the tabloid press are pornographic, along with a great deal of literature and art and most of advertising and anything else to the extent that it shows contempt for the humanity of women by purveying women as nothing but objects for male consumption.

- As for the question, 'What is pornography?', your own questions contain a number of implicit answers to this question, namely that it is
  - 'just a collection of photographs',
  - 'disgusting',
  - 'just an illusion' whereby those portrayed in the photographs 'are not really doing what it seems',
  - 'against the interest of women',
  - 'a means of catharsis',
  - 'about domination'.

Listed in this way, these characterisations don't give a very coherent account. Some of them are even mutually exclusive, e.g. 'just photographs' and 'against the interest of women'. Of course, they weren't intended as definitions, and so it's hardly surprising that no very clear account of what pornography is emerges from them. Nonetheless, they do contain suppressed meanings.

For example, the word 'just' in the phrases 'just photographs' and 'just an illusion' implies that pornography is something harmless and unreal, indeed, harmless because it is unreal. But in what sense is pornography 'unreal'? It is real enough as a multi-billion dollar industry with producers, commodities and consumers. It is real enough in that men keep buying it and consuming it. It is real enough in that it has an effect on those who use it. It is real enough in that actual behaviours must have taken place for them to be photographed and filmed. And it is real enough in the meanings and values it espouses and purveys.

Those meanings and values convey a series of dehumanising messages: that 'humanity' resides in the possession of a penis and that, therefore, women are not human; that, because the penis is the symbol of 'human' status, whatever the penis wants the penis gets no matter who gets hurt in the process; that, because women are not human, they can be used as objects for male titillation; that, because women remain intransigently human nonetheless, they can be gleefully degraded over and over and over again.

What pornography means depends on where you stand morally and politically.

- What does banning have to do with it? Why does every soft option on pornography bring up the question of censorship? Feminism has no power to censor anything. Certainly, feminism argues that pornography ought not to exist. It also argues that male supremacy ought not to exist. But this cannot be brought about by banning anything. It requires nothing less than a revolution in human consciousness.
- Why do you interpret criticism of pornography as a matter of telling people what they can and can't do? Certainly, the feminist message is that pornography is a moral evil which ought to be eradicated. But that message has no coercive force, only a moral one. What people do in the face of that message is their own responsibility, as long as they are not being coerced physically, emotionally or economically. It is not feminism which controls the means for exercising those coercions.

Let me leave you with the words of Andrea Dworkin:

pornography is the male's sacred stronghold, a monastic retreat for manhood on the verge of its own destruction. As one goes through the pictures of the tortured and maimed, reads the stories of gang rape and bondage, what emerges most clearly is a portrait of men who need to believe in their own absolute, unchangeable, omnipresent, eternal, limitless power over others ... Dachau brought into the bedroom and celebrated, police torture and thug mentality brought into the bedroom and celebrated ... the pictures and stories lead right back into history – to peoples enslaved, maimed, murdered – because they show that, for men, the history of atrocity they pretend to mourn is coherent and utterly intentional if one views it as rooted in male sexual obsession ... The private world of sexual dominance that men demand as their right and their freedom is the mirror image of the public world of sadism and atrocity that men consistently and self-righteously deplore. It is in the male experience of pleasure that one finds the meaning of male history (*Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, pp.68-9 - Women's Press edition, 1981).

4.10.1997

[A response to an email from Eric, dated 2.10.1997:]

Hello Eric. Nice to hear from you. I've extracted six main questions from what you wrote. But before I answer them, let me say that the arrangement I have with Mike is not a series of comments on pornography, but a series of discussions on FEMINISM. As I said in my previous comments, I find pornography terribly boring and I don't even want to think about it. It was Mike's idea to start with pornography, not mine.

Well, here goes:

1. You say that you've 'never believed there to be a single "feminist standpoint" on ANYTHING'. But, you see, there is a coherent and consistent feminist standpoint, and it revolves around the notion of a moral and political struggle against male supremacy, that is, a social system structured according to the principle that only men count as 'human'. It is therefore also a struggle for the human status of women (which would also lead to a genuinely human status for men because it would not be based on the dehumanisation of anyone).

This standpoint provides criteria of judgement about the way the world is, and about how we want to live our lives and what we will accept and what we will refuse complicity with. It provides ethical standards of evaluation, of anything from the most personal, private and intimate feelings to grand public institutions. It is not a libertarian ethic of 'anything goes'. The freedom which feminism promises is inextricably entwined with responsibility - we are free to the extent that we are responsible for our own actions, and unfree to the extent that we are not responsible because we are constrained or coerced, including by being kept in ignorance of alternatives. Whether or not this comprises a 'single' feminist standpoint, I don't know, since it's not terminology I would use. I do know, however, that feminism has no coercive power, only a moral one, and that it has invariably been critical of all forms of domination.

2. There's also another consideration arising out of any assertion to the effect that 'there's no single feminist standpoint', and that's a logical one. No standpoint can maintain two contradictory positions at one and the same time. You ask: 'Doesn't Dworkin represent >A< feminist standpoint', in contrast to 'other viewpoints which are equally "feminist"'? Well in one sense, yes, of course. Neither Andrea Dworkin nor

anyone else has said all there is to say about pornography from a feminist standpoint. But in another sense, it depends on those 'other viewpoints'. It is simply not possible BOTH to agree with what Dworkin says AND to hold that pornography is some variant either of harmless innocent fun or of revolutionary practice. It's a matter of logic – what Dworkin says rules out any possibility of defining pornography as harmless or politically revolutionary, and that IS the feminist standpoint.

3. You ask about a 'distinction between erotica and pornography'. I think that any such distinction ignores the feminist exposure of what used to be called 'objectification', but which I would prefer to call 'fetishism'. This refers to any activity whose real meaning comes from interactions between people, but where objects are substituted for people, or people are used as objects instead of being related to as unique, valuable and irreplaceable ends in themselves. Looking at 'erotic'/pornographic pictures is not an interaction between people because there's no one else there, and yet the sole reason for doing it is to elicit sexual desire. What does that say about a male sexual desire which is satisfied by objects instead of real human beings? The men who pay billions of dollars to consume pornography (or 'erotica' – Andrea Dworkin argues that it is only a more classy form of pornography) are unlikely to be able to relate sexually to women as real human beings in their own right. (The case of gay male pornography is possibly somewhat different because the objects are other men, but it is still fetishistic).

The feminist critique of pornography is part of the feminist exposure of sex as central to women's oppression. This feminist argument was based on empirical observations and experience – of rape, sexual harassment, incest, domestic violence, prostitution – and on a non-erotic reading of what pornography actually said. So much feminist energy has been devoted to criticising pornography because it is male supremacist sexual ideology writ large and shameless. It is a blatant, thoroughly explicit depiction of what men ought to think of women and how they ought to behave sexually towards women, if men want to be loyal followers of the meanings and values of male supremacy. I suspect the anti-pornography campaigners thought that they only needed to point this out, and that people would be so horrified that something would be done about it. Sadly, that is not what has happened. Instead, the feminist campaigners have been vilified, ridiculed and misrepresented, and pornography has been defended as anything from 'free speech' to 'a woman's right to choose'. There are obviously powerful vested interests at work here.

As a start towards working out what those powerful interests are, I have argued that the reason why sex is central to women's oppression is because the penis is central both to sex and to the male monopolisation of 'human' status. Penis-possession symbolises from birth who is going to count as 'human' within the meanings and values of male supremacy, and sex in male supremacist terms signifies the activities, processes and pleasures of the penis. The penis must be absolutely unrestrained in what it is allowed to do because of its overwhelming significance in what 'being human' means according to the values of male supremacy. On this account, it's pretty obvious that sex can have no 'transformative aspects' or 'revolutionary implications'. As Foucault said (in one of the few assertions where I agree with him): 'Don't think that by saying yes to sex you are saying no to power'. (He then proceeded to muddle the implications of this, largely because he was so thoroughly confused about what 'power' means). This doesn't automatically mean that sex can never be a genuinely human interaction. But if feminism is right about sex being central to male domination, then we each have a responsibility to struggle with what sex means in our own lives. (For a feminist account by a man, I would recommend John Stoltenberg's book, *Refusing to be a Man*).

4. You refer to 'a woman who enjoys the pay she receives from dancing for a living' (although note that the song was written by a man, and hence can't really be quoted as a woman's point of view). You also say that you 'know women who like to work in the sex industry'. In the case of the woman dancing, you presumably mean 'erotic' dancing, that is, dancing intended to elicit male desire. Interestingly, you do not say the woman likes the dancing, or that she likes the male desire, simply that she likes the pay. As I read it, that's an indictment of the low rates of pay women get for work which doesn't elicit male desire, and of what men will pay for. In the case of women who like working in the sex industry, you don't say what it is that they like. It can hardly be the sex since the men are strangers and the women are there to be used as objects for the penis. Perhaps it's once again the pay they like, in which case my previous comments stand. But apart from these considerations, it's perfectly possible for women to embrace the meanings and values of male supremacy, not least because their survival sometimes depends on doing so. Domination is not only a matter of forcible coercion and restraint. Relations of ruling operate most efficiently to the extent that they are embraced, even by those most subordinated, as their own meaning and purpose, desire and pleasure. It is feminism which enables us to tell



the difference, to make judgements about whether something, be it an institution, a practice, a feeling or whatever, is complicit with domination or not.

5. You ask 'Can't erotica have some revolutionary implications if controlled entirely by feminist women?' The issue is not 'Who is or is not a feminist?' but 'What is feminism?'. Feminism is not just anything said by anyone who identifies as a feminist. It has a logic of its own which is not reducible to a matter of personal opinion. If the logic of feminism says that depictions of sexuality are oppressive because they are fetishistic, whether or not someone calls herself a 'feminist' is irrelevant. Feminism is not an attribute of individuals, but a moral and political framework of opposition to male domination, however that manifests itself and wherever it is to be found. And wherever else it is, it is also to be found deep in the psyches of all of us. Ask yourself: 'Why am I so interested in sex?' It's a question I asked myself for years, and I have come up with some VERY embarrassing answers (although none of them definitive).

6. You say 'it comes down to a choice of approach'. I would agree about that, although I would put it in terms of one's moral and political standpoint. What one cannot do, however, is hold two contradictory positions at one and the same time, without paying the price of incoherence. One cannot assert BOTH that sex is benign (good clean fun, free speech, personal preference, private desire, a human right, etc.) AND that it is instrumental in women's oppression. What tends to happen in the face of this contradiction is that the feminist standpoint is derided, trivialised, distorted or ignored. But that standpoint arose out of women's experiences interpreted in the light of a feminist consciousness. For that reason alone it deserves to be taken seriously, and its implications spelled out. The most immediate and obvious of those implications is the question of whether or not sex itself (never mind pornography/erotica) is retrievable for genuine human purposes. I don't have any general answer to that question, and I suspect that no general answer can be given because sex is a moral issue and we each of us have to decide moral issues for ourselves. I do know, however, that no informed decisions can be made unless the feminist position is taken into account. And it can't be taken into account if it isn't heard.

8.10.1997

[Another response to an email from Eric, dated 6.10.1997:]

Hello again Eric. I didn't mean that talking to you and Mike was boring. Sorry you read my comment that way. Of course, I know why pornography (and sexuality) is central to the feminist debate – I've already said so, i.e. because sex is central to women's oppression and pornography says clearly and shamelessly why. If talking to you was boring I wouldn't do it, would I? In fact, I'm enjoying myself. I dearly love talking about what I've worked out about feminism with those who are willing to listen. So if you want to hear more, read on:

I think you have misunderstood my point about logic because you have reached a conclusion which I certainly would not draw. I really was making a purely logical point about standpoints on pornography. I was simply saying that you can't assert both A and not-A about something at one and the same time. In the case of pornography, the feminist standpoint is that it is unequivocally not-good (i.e. morally wrong). So any standpoint which asserts in some way that it is good (e.g. fun, a human right, free speech, etc.), or equivocates on its moral status (e.g. some of it's all right), or places it beyond moral judgement (e.g. just pictures), is in contradiction to the feminist standpoint. From a feminist standpoint, pornography is irredeemable.

About the conclusion you drew from my point about logic: You quote someone to the effect that 'every American is immersed in white-supremacist ideology and therefore cannot be free of the very stuff of racism', and agree that this applies to 'sex and gender' too. As far as racism is concerned, I think this is far too absolutist a stance. (By the way, racism is not just a matter of 'white supremacy'. What about anti-semitism, or Japanese society's treatment of the Ainu and the Koreans, or the genocidal mayhem between the Hutu and Tutsi, or the 'ethnic cleansing' in Serbo-Croatia?) It must be possible to be free of racism because that is surely what the anti-racism struggle is all about, that people can free themselves from racist attitudes and behaviours and refrain from treating others as less worthy on the grounds of their skin colour or ethnic origin, and that they ought to do so. Isn't it? It's not a once and for all thing – 'I'm now racism-free!' It requires pretty constant vigilance, but it must be possible to do it, otherwise there's no point in struggling against racism.

As for 'sex and gender', the social problem identified by feminism is male supremacy, i.e. a social order structured around the principle that only men are 'human', not 'sex' (or not without further argument and clarification). It's certainly not 'gender', a term which seems to have been deliberately devised to avoid naming the

real enemy. And the same point as the one about racism applies to male supremacist meanings and values, i.e. it must be possible to refuse to be implicated, not once and for all but over and over again, else what are we all trying to do?

As for sex being 'a fundamental part of being human, and a >potentially< good thing', the most I can say is the evidence isn't all in yet. (I'm certainly not going to tell you how to run your sex life, and I'm sure you don't want me to). I simply don't know. The feminist position is that sex is not good for women. The political point of this is to counter the never-ending paeans of praise of sex which ideologically situate women in subjection to men. The case was originally made in relation to heterosexuality (see Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* for just one example). Lesbian sex was either not mentioned, or it was seen as revolutionary because it focused women's energy and love on women rather than men, although both Ti-Grace Atkinson and Valerie Solanas insisted that lesbian sex, too, was oppressive because it meant women treating women in the same way men treated women. (Although I disagreed with them in my book, *Reading Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality* (1991), these days I'm not sure they weren't right, given the ease with which sadomasochism and the sexual libertarianism have gained ground among lesbians). Gay male sex received little attention because they weren't doing it to women, although the feminist critique of objectification was relevant if gay men cared to listen, and there was some criticism of 'drag' as demeaning to women. But the feminist critique of sex did not mean that (hetero)sex was absolutely irredeemable, although the radical lesbian feminist argument certainly seemed to imply that. (See the 1981 pamphlet produced by Onlywomen Press in the UK, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism*, Adrienne Rich's famous paper, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', and the 'Heterosexuality' issue of the journal *Feminism and Psychology*, vol.2(3), 1992). The problem is that it's difficult to see how feminism could say anything positive about heterosexuality because the whole space of positive depictions is take up by the malestream. (See my debate with Wendy Hollway in vols. 4(2) and 5(4) of *Feminism and Psychology*). Nonetheless, I think it's significant that the feminist critique fairly quickly shifted its emphasis from heterosexuality in general to pornography, rape, sexual violence, incest, etc., i.e. to obvious forms of sexual domination. It's also significant that that critique was seen by feminism's enemies as a critique of 'sex' per se, thus reinforcing the feminist view that 'sex' in male supremacist terms is inextricable from violence and domination. I suspect that, were the feminist standpoint on sex to become widely

accepted, there would be a great deal less sex happening in the world than is currently the case. I think that would be a good thing because of the male supremacist tendency for sex to be imposed on women.

I'm not sure what you mean by saying that sex can be used 'to recontextualize the dynamics of power', although the phrase does indicate that you see sex as a relationship between people. If that is the case, then 'erotica'/pornography are fetishistic because looking at pictures is not a relationship between people, but a substitute for it (and, no, it doesn't make any difference if the depictions are produced by women). It seems to me that your defence of 'erotica' interprets sex as an attribute of isolated individuals, rather in the way that John Ralston Saul sees it in his book, *Voltaire's Bastards*, when he says: 'Sex is many things – a need, a desire, an emotion, a release' (p.489). There is no mention of relating to another human being here. This is a common view of sex in 'our' male supremacist society, that sex is a desire that arises from nowhere but each (male) individual's psyche (and of any female who wants to be taken for a sexual being like men). This desire has meaning and reality only as a property of the individual, who then looks around to find objects to satisfy it, whether those objects are pictures or women's bodies. The desire itself is placed beyond question, it just is. If the question of origins ever arises (which is rarely since the existence of male sexual desire is so self-evident), it is usually settled with a brief reference to 'hormones' or 'testosterone'. What is never addressed are the social origins of male sexual desire in the overwhelming importance of the penis in the meanings and values of male supremacy.

You say in response to my insistence that feminism is a moral and political framework that 'individuals are the ones that mold this framework, through a process of critique, dissent, debate, and dialogue'. You are perfectly right. My point about contrasting 'feminism as a moral and political framework' with 'feminism as an attribute of individuals' concerns the issue of how conflicts waged in the name of feminism are settled. That is, they are settled with reference to the meanings and values of feminism, not simply by referring to the fact that someone calls herself (or is called) a feminist. In fact, accepting something as 'feminism' simply because someone who calls herself a 'feminist' says it, is an evasion of your own responsibility to work it out for yourself. We've all got to make up our own minds, and take the risk that we might be wrong. You refer to the work of Valerie Solanas and bell hooks in this context. But the fact that their work is different is neither here nor there. Many different things can be said in the name of feminism and all can be right as long as they don't contradict each other or the basic tenets of feminism. What I

am saying is that the fact that something is called 'feminist' doesn't mean that it is. A great deal of what is called 'feminist' isn't, because it denies or ignores the existence of male domination.

Your own definition of feminism as the view that 'patriarchy sucks' is pretty accurate, although I prefer the terms 'male domination', 'male supremacy', 'the malestream', 'phallocratic reality', etc. rather than 'patriarchy' which literally means 'the rule of the father'. Men don't rule because they are fathers but because they are men. And the term 'patriarchy' has a long tradition within malestream discourse (I came across it again the other day in the work of Max Weber) to mean the rule of men over men, of fathers over sons and, by extension, of powerful men over the less powerful. In this usage, the rule of men over women once again drops out of the picture. Male domination names the problem more clearly and accurately (and more threateningly). But here too it must be remembered that what is at issue is NOT attributes of individuals, of what men (and women) 'are', but a systematic set of meanings and values which purvey in a multitude of ways the idea that only men are 'human'.

Well, I think I've said enough for the time being. All the best.

[July 2009: The last email from Eric, dated 13.10.97, was very short. He said that I had given him a lot to think about and that he appreciated the time I'd spent writing to him, and concluded by asking: 'Do you see Barney (the huge purple dinosaur who sings songs to children about love and hugs over public television in the US) as a form of fetishism among children?']

[Added November 2003: Oh dear, oh dear. Just one comment: the purple dinosaur is not eroticised.]