Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong
An Analysis of Anti-Pornography Politics

GAYLE RUBIN

... Many feminists have accepted the notions that pornography is an especially odious expression of male supremacy, that pornography is violent, or that pornography is synonymous with violent media. They disagree merely about what should be done about it. For example, there are many feminists who think of porn as disgusting sexist propaganda, but who nevertheless are concerned about defending the First Amendment and who are cautious about invoking censorship. I certainly agree that concerns over censorship and freedom of expression are valid and vital. However, my purpose here is not to argue that pornography is anti-woman speech which unfortunately deserves constitutional protection. My goal is to challenge the assumptions that pornography is, per se, particularly sexist, especially violent or implicated in violence, or intrinsically antithetical to the interests of women.

The "pornography problem" is a false problem, at least as it is generally posed. There are legitimate feminist concerns with regard to sexually explicit media and the conditions under which it is produced. However, these are not the concerns that have dominated the feminist anti-porn politics. Instead, pornography has become an easy, convenient, pliant and overdetermined scapegoat for problems for which it is not responsible. To support


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this contention I will examine the fundamental propositions and structure of the anti-porn argument.

PREMISES, PRESUPPOSITIONS
AND DEFINITIONS

The Conflation of Pornography and Violence

One of the most basic claims of the anti-porn position is that pornography is violent and promotes violence against women. Two assertions are implicit or explicit to this claim. One is that pornography is characteristically violent and/or sexist in what it depicts, and the other is that pornography is more violent and/or sexist in content than other media. Both of these propositions are false.

Very little pornography actually depicts violent acts. Pornography does depict some form of sexual activity, and these sexual activities vary widely. The most common behaviour featured in porn is ordinary heterosexual intercourse (although it is a convention of porn movies that male orgasm must be visible to the viewer, so ejaculation in porn films generally takes place outside the body). Nudity, genital close-ups and oral sex are also prevalent. Anal sex is far less common, but some magazines and films specialize in depicting it. While some films and magazines attempt to have "something for everyone," a lot of porn is fairly specialized and many porn shops group their material according to the primary activity it contains. Thus, there are often separate sections featuring oral sex, anal sex or gay male sex.

There is also "lesbian" material designed to appeal to heterosexual men rather than to lesbians. Until the last decade there was very little porn produced by or actually intended for lesbian viewers. This has been changing with the advent of some small circulation, low-budget sex magazines produced by and for lesbians. Ironically, this nascent lesbian porn is endangered by both right-wing and feminist anti-porn activity.

There are several sub-genres of porn designed to cater to minority sexual populations. The most successful example of this is gay male porn. There are many specialized shops serving the gay male market. Much male homosexual pornography is produced by and for gay men, and its quality is relatively high. Transsexual porn is more rare and found in fewer shops. It is designed to appeal to transsexuals and those who find them erotic. Many of the models seem to be transsexuals who are working in the sex industry either because discrimination against them makes employment elsewhere difficult, or in order to raise money for sex change treatment.

Another specialized subgenre is SM [sadomasochistic] porn. SM materials have been used as the primary "evidence" for the alleged violence of porn as a whole. SM materials are only a small percentage of commercial porn and they are hardly representative. They appeal primarily to a distinct minority and they are not as readily available as other materials. For example, in San Francisco only two of the dozen or so adult theatres of the late
1970s and early 1980s regularly showed bondage or SM movies. These two theatres, however, have always been prominently featured in local anti-porn invective.⁴

Many of the local porn shops have small sections of bondage material, but only a couple have extensive collections and are therefore favoured by connoisseurs. Mainstream porn magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* rarely contain bondage or SM photographs. When they do, however, these again are emphasized in anti-porn arguments. Some bondage photos in the December 1984 *Penthouse* are a case in point. They have often been used as examples in slide shows and displays by anti-porn activists, who invariably neglect to mention that the occurrence of such spreads in *Penthouse* is exceedingly unusual and quite unrepresentative.⁵

SM materials are aimed at an audience that understands a set of conventions for interpreting them. Sadomasochism is not a form of violence, but is rather a type of ritual and contractual sex play whose aficionados go to great lengths in order to do it and to ensure the safety and enjoyment of one another. SM fantasy does involve images of coercion and sexual activities that may appear violent to outsiders. SM erotic materials can be shocking to those unfamiliar with the highly negotiated nature of most SM encounters. This is compounded by the unfortunate fact that most commercial SM porn is produced by people who are not practising sadomasochists and whose understanding of SM is not unlike that of the anti-porn feminists. Thus commercial SM porn often reflects the prejudices of its producers rather than common SM practice.⁶

Torn out of context, SM material is upsetting to unprepared audiences and this shock value has been mercilessly exploited in anti-porn presentations. SM porn is itself misrepresented, its relationship to SM activity is distorted, and it is treated as though it is representative of porn as a whole.

Pioneered by WAVPM [Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media] and adopted by WAP [Women Against Pornography], slide shows have been a basic organizing tool of anti-porn groups. Slides of images are used to persuade audiences of the alleged violence of pornography. The anti-porn movie *Not a Love Story* follows a format similar to the slide shows and utilizes many of the same techniques.⁷ The slide shows and the movie always display a completely unrepresentative sample of pornography in order to “demonstrate” its ostensible violence. SM imagery occupies a much greater space in the slide shows and in *Not a Love Story* than it does in actual adult bookstores or theatres.

In addition to SM materials, the presentations utilize images from porn that are violent or distasteful, but that are again unrepresentative. An example of this is the notorious *Hustler* cover showing a woman being fed into a meat grinder. This image is upsetting and distasteful, but it is not even legally obscene. It is also unusual, *Hustler* is a magazine that strives to be in bad taste. It is as different from other comparable mass-circulation sex magazines as the *National Lampoon* is from *Esquire* or *Harpers.*

Arguing from bad examples is effective but irresponsible. It is the classic method for promulgating negative stereotypes and is one of the favoured rhetorical tactics for selling various forms of racism, bigotry, hatred and
xenophobia. It is always possible to find bad examples—of, for example, women, gay people, transsexuals, blacks, Jews, Italians, Irish, immigrants, the poor—and to use them to construct malicious descriptions to attack or delegitimize an entire group of people or an area of activity. . . .

A great deal of anti-porn analysis is argued in a similar format. It jumps from examples of undeniably loathsome porn to unwarranted assertions about pornography as a whole. It is politically reprehensible and intellectually embarrassing to target pornography on the basis of inflammatory examples and manipulative rhetoric.

Is pornography any more violent than other mass media? While there are no reliable comparative studies on this point, I would argue that there are fewer images or descriptions of violence in pornography, taken as a whole, than in mainstream movies, television or fiction. Our media are all extremely violent, and it is also true that their depictions of violence against women are often both sexualized and gender specific. An evening in front of the television is likely to result in viewing multiple fatal automobile accidents, shootings, fistfights, rapes and situations in which women are threatened by a variety of creepy villains. Prostitutes and sex workers are invariably victims of violence in police and detective shows where they are killed off with relentless abandon. There are dozens of slasher movies characterized by hideous and graphic violence, disproportionately directed at women.

While much of this media is sexualized, very little is sexually explicit and consequently all of it would be completely unaffected by any new legal measures against pornography. If the problem is violence, why single out sexually explicit media? What is the justification for creating social movements and legal tools aimed at media that are sexually explicit rather than at media that are explicitly violent? . . .

Is Porn a “Documentary of Abuse”?

Catharine MacKinnon has argued that pornography is a literal photographic record of women being abused. She has listed various images found in porn, such as women being bound, tortured, humiliated, battered, urinated upon, forced to eat excrement, killed, or “merely taken and used.” She has then concluded that a woman had to have had these things done to her in order for the pornography to have been made; thus for each such image some woman had been bound, tortured, humiliated, battered, urinated upon, forced to eat excrement, murdered, or “merely taken and used.” If as Andrea Dworkin puts it, “Real women are tied up, stretched, hanged, fucked, gang-banged, whipped, beaten, and begging for more. In the photographs and films, real women are used . . .” In this view, pornography is a photographic record of horrible abuse perpetrated upon the models and actors who appear in it. Several points may be made about this theory of pornographic harm.

The items on such lists are not all equivalent nor are they equally prevalent. I would guess that the “merely taken and used” is in reference to ordinary, non-kinky sexual activities, while the items bound, tortured, humiliated, urinated upon and forced to eat excrement may refer to kinky porn.
Porn featuring the eating of excrement is extraordinarily rare. Images of bondage, pain, humiliation and urination are found in porn but, again, are absent from the majority of pornography. I have heard references to porn showing women mutilated or murdered but have never seen any except some rare drawings—not photographs—in European materials not available in the United States. I hate to belabour the point, but there are more women battered and murdered on prime-time television and Hollywood films than in pornographic materials.

Perhaps more significantly, in this model of porn there is no concept of the role of artifice in the production of images. We do not assume that the occupants of the vehicles routinely destroyed in police chases on television are actually burning along with their cars, or that actors in fight scenes are actually being beaten to a pulp, or that western movies result in actual fatalities to cowboys and native Americans. It is ludicrous to assume that the level of coercion in an image is a reliable guide to the treatment of the actors involved. Yet this is precisely what is being asserted with regard to pornographic images.

In their characterizations of pornography as a documentary of abuse, both Dworkin and MacKinnon appear to think that certain sexual activities are so inherently distasteful that no one would do them willingly, and therefore the models are “victims” who must have been forced to participate against their will. Since SM often involves an appearance of coercion, it is especially easy to presume that the people doing it are victims. However, as I noted above, this is a false stereotype and does not reflect social and sexual reality. Sadomasochism is part of the erotic repertoire, and many people are not only willing but eager participants in SM activity.

However, sadomasochism is not the only behaviour subjected to condescending and insulting judgements. For example, MacKinnon has also described porn in which someone was “raped in the throat where a penis cannot go.” There are plenty of gay men, and even a good number of heterosexual women, who enjoy cock-sucking. There are even lesbians who relish going down on dildos. Obviously, oral penetration is not an activity for everyone, but it is presumptuous to assume that it is physically impossible or necessarily coercive in all circumstances. Embedded in the idea of porn as a documentary of abuse is a very narrow conception of human sexuality, one lacking even elementary notions of sexual diversity.

The notion of harm embodied in the MacKinnon/Dworkin approach is based on a fundamental confusion between the content of an image and the conditions of its production. The fact that an image does not appeal to a viewer does not mean that the actors or models experienced revulsion while making it. The fact that an image depicts coercion does not mean that the actors or models were forced into making it.

One can infer nothing from the content of an image about the conditions of its production. Any discussion of greater protections for actors and models should focus on whether or not they have been coerced and on the conditions under which their work is performed regardless of the nature of the image involved. Any standards considered for the health, safety or cleanliness of working conditions in the sex industry should conform to those pertaining to similar occupations such as fashion modelling, film making, stage
acting, or professional dancing. The content of the image produced, whether or not it is sexual, and whether or not it is violent or distasteful to a viewer, is irrelevant.

While anti-porn activists often claim to want to protect women in (and from) the sex industry, much of their analysis is based on condescension and contempt towards sex workers. The notion that pornography is a documentary of sexual abuse assumes that the women who work in the sex industry (as strippers, porn models or prostitutes) are invariably forced to do so and that such women are merely victims of “pornographers.” This is a malignant stereotype and one that is especially inappropriate for feminists to reinforce.

There are, of course, incidents of abuse and exploitation in the sex industry, as there are in all work situations. I am not claiming that no one has ever been coerced into appearing in a porn movie or that in such cases the perpetrators should not be prosecuted. I am saying that such coercion is not the industry norm. Furthermore, I am not promoting a simple “free choice” model of employment, in which structural forces and limited choices have no influence on what decisions individuals make about how to earn a living. But those who choose sex work do so for complex reasons, and their choices should be accorded the respect granted to those who work in less stigmatized occupations.

Indeed, the degree to which sex workers are exposed to more exploitation and hazardous working conditions is a function of the stigma, illegality or marginal legality of sex work. People in stigmatized or illegal occupations find it difficult to obtain the protections, privileges and opportunities available for other jobs. Prostitutes, porn models and erotic dancers have less recourse to police, courts, medical treatment, legal redress or sympathy when they are subjected to criminal, violent or unscrupulous behavior. It is more difficult for them to organize or mobilize for protection as workers.

We need to support women wherever they work. We need to realize that more stigma and more legal regulation of the sex industry will merely increase the vulnerability of the women in it. Feminists who want to support sex workers should strive to decriminalize and legitimize sex work. Sex workers relieved of the threat of scandal or incarceration are in a better position to gain more control over their work and working conditions.12

Contempt towards sex workers, especially prostitutes, is one of the most disturbing aspects of the anti-porn invective. Throughout her book, Pornography, Dworkin uses the stigma of prostitution to convey her opprobrium and make her argument against pornography. She says, “Contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word’s root meaning: the graphic depiction of vile whores, or in our language, sluts, cows (as in: sexual cattle, sexual chattel), cunts [italics added].”13 This is a degrading and insulting description of prostitutes. Feminists should be working to remove stigma from prostitution, not exploiting it for rhetorical gain.

Is Porn at the Core of Women’s Subordination?

Porn is often described as “at the centre” or “at the core” of women’s subordination. Andrea Dworkin makes the following statement in Right-Wing Women:
At the heart of the female condition is pornography: *it is the ideology that is the source of all the rest* [italics added]; it truly defines what women are in this system—and how women are treated issues from what women are. Pornography is not a metaphor for what women are; it is what women are in theory and in practice.\(^{14}\)

This rather extraordinary statement is accompanied by several diagrams in which pornography is first placed literally "at the centre" of women’s condition, then diagrammed as the underlying ideology of women’s condition, and finally depicted as the surface phenomenon with prostitution the underlying system.\(^{15}\) These are breathtaking claims, and they are made with little supporting evidence and not a single citation.

Since the 1960s, feminist theorists and academics have explored a multitude of explanations for female subordination and the oppression of women. There are hundreds of articles, essays and books debating the merits of various factors in the creation and maintenance of female subordination. These have included, for example, private property, the formation of state societies, the sexual division of labour, the emergence of economic classes, religion, educational arrangements, cultural structures, family and kinship systems, psychological factors and control over reproduction, among others. I cannot think of a single attempt prior to the porn debates to derive women’s subordination from either pornography or prostitution. There is no credible historical, anthropological or sociological argument for such a position.

It would be difficult to argue that pornography or prostitution had played such critical roles in women’s subordination since women are quite dramatically oppressed in societies that have neither (for example, sedentary horticulturalists in Melanesia and South America). Furthermore, pornography and prostitution as they now exist in the West are modern phenomena. The institutional structures of prostitution in, for example, ancient Greece, were entirely different from those that obtain today.

Pornography in the contemporary sense did not exist before the late nineteenth century. Other cultures have certainly produced visual art and crafts depicting genitalia and sexual activity (e.g., the ancient Greeks, the Egyptians and the Moche Indians from pre-Columbian coastal Peru). But there is no systematic correlation between low status for women and cultures in which sexually explicit visual imagery exists, or high status for women and societies in which it does not. Moreover, such images are not pornography unless porn is to be defined as all sexually explicit imagery, in which case anti-porn ideology would posit the impossibility of any acceptable explicit depictions of sex, and few feminists would support it.

Pornography could be thought of as being at the heart of women’s condition if it is conceptualized as a trans-historical category existing throughout human history and culture. In *Pornography*, Dworkin states that the word "pornography" comes from Greek words meaning "writing about whores." She goes on to discuss the place of the "whores" in Greek society and concludes that, "The word pornography does not have any other meaning than the one cited here, the graphic depiction of the lowest
whores.” From this discussion, and similar accounts by others, it has often been inferred that the term “pornography” was used by the Greeks and that it refers to categories of Greek experience.16

However, the term “pornography” was not used by the ancient Greeks, did not refer to their painted vases, and should not be treated as evidence that the Greeks felt about porn the way Dworkin does. The term was coined from Greek roots in the nineteenth century, when many of the sex terms still in use (such as homosexuality) were assembled from Greek and Latin root words. It embodies not the prejudices of the Greeks, but those of the Victorians.17

There is one further sense in which it might be argued that pornography is “the ideology that is the source of all the rest” of women’s oppression, and that is if pornography is conceived of as the quintessence of all ideologies of female inferiority. What, then, are we to make of all the religious and moral and philosophical versions of male superiority? Is the Koran pornography? The Bible? Psychiatry? And what has any of this to do with modern, contemporary commercial porn? What has it to do with adult bookstores or Playboy?...

COSTS AND DANGERS OF ANTI-PORN POLITICS

The focus on pornography trivializes real violence and ignores its gravity. Experiences of being raped, assaulted, battered or harassed are dramatic, devastating and qualitatively different from the ordinary insults of everyday oppression. Violence should never be conflated with experiences that are merely upsetting, unpleasant, irritating, distasteful or even enraged.

Anti-porn activity distracts attention and drains activism from more fundamental issues for women. Porn is a sexier topic than the more intractable problems of unequall pay, job discrimination, sexual violence and harassment, the unequal burdens of child-care and housework, increasing right-wing infringements on hard-won feminist gains and several millennia of unrelenting male privilege vis-à-vis the labour, love, personal service and possession of women. Anti-porn campaigns are pitifully misdirected and ineffective. They cannot solve the problems they purport to address...

NOTES

1. This essay is a revision of an essay based on remarks that were originally submitted as testimony to hearings on pornography held by the National Organization for Women (NOW) in San Francisco, California, on March 26, 1986. Shortly after the hearings, I sent a written version to NOW for inclusion in a collection of bound photocopies of statements on pornography which were made available from the national NOW office. I have kept revisions for this 1992 publication as minimal as possible, but I have made changes to render the piece more intelligible to a contemporary audience and to readers who may be unfamiliar with many details of U.S. politics. I have also added references; some are more recent than the text and consequently induce unavoidable but vertiginous moments of anachronism.