

## REVIEWS

### *PORNOGRAPHY: THE POETRY OF OPPRESSION*

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Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.

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In the recently published anthology of her writings, *Made from this Earth*, Susan Griffin writes:

It took me years to understand that a poem is not simply a description of a state of feeling, or an idea. The poem does not happen after the fact. The poem is an event which is at the same time a record of an event . . . . The words one writes find feelings in oneself, and these feelings find words of their own, which in turn locate other feelings. In this way, slowly, step by step, a knowledge buried in the body comes to consciousness.

This is a healing process.<sup>1</sup>

Like a poem, pornography is, for Griffin, "an event which is at the same time a record of an event." Pornography and poetry: these are the text and the subtext of Susan Griffin's book, *Pornography and Silence*, which is itself an experiment in poetry: an event that is the record of an event. Reading this book is, if the reader consents to the demands of the text, to the author's intention (and not all readers will want to), both a penetration and a transcendence of what Griffin calls the pornographic mind. For Griffin, poetry is an invitation to feeling, to eros, to life; pornography is the dead-ening of feeling, and its violence is perpetrated against the self, the body, and against all "Others" in western culture who have come to represent feeling, vulnerability, the body: women, children, Jews, blacks.

All death in pornography is really only the death of the heart. Over and over again, that part of our beings which can feel both in body and mind is ritually murdered. We make a mistake, therefore, when we believe that pornography is simply fantasy, simply a record of sadistic events. For pornography exceeds the boundaries of both fantasy and record and becomes itself an act. Pornography is sadism.<sup>2</sup>

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Griffin argues that "pornography is an expression not of human erotic feeling and desire, and not of a love of the life of the body, but of a fear of bodily knowledge, and a desire to silence eros."<sup>3</sup>

Pornography is the subject of the book (ostensibly), but poetry is the mode of analysis, and Griffin's treatment of this highly volatile political issue is at best problematic for anyone concerned with doing something about the proliferation and effects of pornography. In choosing a poetic method of analysis, Griffin opts for poetic interpretations of pornography which circle around but ultimately avoid fundamental problems of analysis: what is pornography? what are the structures of pornography? where does it fit into capitalism, patriarchy? what is its history? what can be done? For those of us excited by the intellectual rigour and depth of developing socialist feminist theory, it is disappointing that Griffin situates her discussion within the nature/culture dualism: pornography is "culture's revenge against nature."

Understanding the processes of writing and reading *Pornography and Silence* is central, in my view, to a sympathetic response to the book. Griffin never clearly articulates a critical tension concerning her approach to pornography, a tension revealed in a retrospective comment on the process of *Pornography and Silence*: "as I wrote about the pornographer's mind I discovered that pornography itself was not so much an art form as it was an ideology."<sup>4</sup> This statement is as startling — even shocking — to the feminist reader as it is revealing. Shocking because the stories we have heard from women who have lived through the various experiences of pornography are so devastating, appalling, painful, that it is difficult to see how a feminist could *begin* with the idea that pornography is an art form. And yet, in the Prologue to *Pornography and Silence*, Griffin borrows a phrase from another feminist poet, Judy Grahn, to describe — define? — pornography as "the poetry of oppression."<sup>5</sup> For *whom* is it poetry?

It is one thing to approach pornography as a poet, as Griffin does; it is quite another to say pornography is poetry. The approach and the subject become conflated through Griffin's interest in the intersection of feeling, idea, and act, in image and symbol, pornographic and otherwise. The book is, at one level, a poetic meditation on images in general. It is an inquiry into the psychological impact of images on the human psyche. More specifically it asks, what is the emotional effect — the feeling-effect — of pornographic images? And how does the process of seeing, absorbing, interpreting, and remembering these images lead from contemplation to concrete (sadistic) act? In writing about the destructiveness of the symbolic system of our "pornographic culture," Griffin counters that destructiveness with a vision of eros — an experiment in poetic images — which leads the *engaged* reader (the consenting reader) through a healing labyrinth of myths, symbols, quotations, and representative lives. Against a pornography of poetry she is creating a poetry of eros.

Although *Pornography and Silence* is not really about pornography in its social science dimensions and does not address the problems of strategy within the women's movement, I would argue that Griffin perceives the poetic process in which she engages the reader as political. In an untitled essay in *Made from this Earth* on poetry as a way of knowledge, she comments extensively on her poetic

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principles and (unintentionally) illuminates her method in *Pornography and Silence*. Whereas many artists claim exemption from considerations of ideology and politics, Griffin states unequivocally that: "A poem cannot be apolitical. All human utterance can be understood as political theory."<sup>6</sup>

When I say that no poem is apolitical, I am not implying that poetry *ought* to be political, but that it *is* political. Political theory cannot possibly teach a poet to be political, because poetry precedes formal political theory in the imagination, and because poetry is closer to the original form of all thinking. For this reason, poetry teaches political theory imagination.<sup>7</sup>

For Griffin, poetry, feeling, and the political are inextricably linked, and she cites Audre Lorde, a black feminist poet, who has written: "The white fathers told us 'I think therefore I am' and the black mothers in each of [us] — the poets — whisper in our ears 'I feel therefore I can be free.'" <sup>8</sup>

The belief that the word — speech, poetry, political theory — is political is, I think, the poetic corollary of the radical feminist tenet that the personal is political. If Griffin's intention in *Pornography and Silence* were to be fully realized, then the interaction between the reader and her text should be, I would argue, a private experience of consciousness raising. "Like human intimacy," writes Griffin, "poetry can overturn our ideas of who we are, so that when we begin to speak the language of poetry, we feel the same risk one feels in closeness. But with poetry one risks closeness to oneself."<sup>9</sup> The importance of poetry in the process of discovering and naming the world from the perspective of women has been affirmed repeatedly by feminist poets. Audre Lorde writes:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.<sup>10</sup>

The kind of knowledge that Griffin invites the reader to discover and share with her is rooted in an understanding of the relationship between images and feelings. She takes the reader on a journey through the pornographic mind, and as we explore the psychological states of denial of feeling, repression, projection, and the tragic split between body and mind, we begin to comprehend the illness and madness of the sadist who is unable to distinguish between delusion/illusion and reality.

But Griffin risks channelling our (justified) rage towards these "pornographers" — a pantheon which includes Hitler, Hugh Hefner, the Marquis de Sade — into a paralysis of compassion and forgiveness. This is a consequence of

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her theoretical framework. Pornography is synonymous with western culture, is a correlative of the philosophical split between mind and body and the philosophical valorization of intellect at the expense of feeling. Within our culture, everyone is a victim: both the (male) pornographer/sadist, who suffers, whether he knows it or not, from the denial of his feelings/nature and from his punishment of self, which is ritually realized in pornography; and all women, including those who appear to consent to pornographic practices, in their own lives or in the pornography industry.

This emphasis on victimization, with its disregard for structures of power and lack of an analysis that distinguishes between forms of power and levels of victimization, is established in the Prologue to *Pornography and Silence*. Here Griffin introduces six victims of the pornographic culture who represent different positions within the culture, and to whom she returns meditatively throughout the book: Franz Marc, a German painter, who came to reject his sensual paintings, and in a search for pure spirit, enlisted in the German army and was killed in World War I; Kate Chopin, an American writer who died in 1904, silenced by a storm of protest against *The Awakening*, a novel exploring a woman's coming to erotic consciousness; the Marquis de Sade, pornographer; Marilyn Monroe, sex symbol and actress; Lawrence Singleton, an American who raped a young woman and cut off her arms; and Anne Frank, who believed in the essential goodness of people and died in a concentration camp. These women and men represent in varying ways the denial of the body and nature, the death of feeling, and the destructive power of our pornographic culture. Yet however much we condemn the culture which "allowed" the Marquis de Sade and Lawrence Singleton, however much we recognize that they were sick, we cannot lose sight of the fact that they were responsible for injuring real women. Similarly, Griffin's discussion of Hitler's pornographic mind is disconcerting in view of the horrifying consequences of his power. Although Griffin is aware of the differences between, say, Anne Frank and Hitler, one possible implication of her approach is that none of us is individually responsible since we are all victims of the pornographic culture.

This impasse reflects the inadequacy of Griffin's theoretical framework. "Nature" is the victim of "culture". "Culture" seems to refer to all (male) creations/distortions of intellect-without-feeling. "Pornographic culture" seems to have grown to include anti-semitism, racism and homophobia. Although Griffin correctly points out that the iconography of pornography has anti-semitic and racist dimensions and that the iconography of anti-semitism and racism has pornographic dimensions, yet to assimilate anti-semitism and racism to pornography, as she verges on suggesting, is to give the concept of pornography an analytic and political force that it simply does not sustain. And not to distinguish in a theoretically precise and careful way between women and men in her analysis of pornography is to retreat to a humanist position where all men and women are equally damaged.

It is both a strength and a misfortune that members of dominated groups understand the psychology of the dominating groups better than the latter themselves. But understanding the psychological origins of acts of violence and

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sadism that injure real women and children and "Others" is not sufficient; that understanding must also translate into political activity which challenges and refuses the collective tolerance of pornographic acts. To return to Audre Lorde: "experience has taught us that the action in the now is also always necessary."

The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am, and the black mother in each of us — the poet — whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand, the implementation of that freedom. However, experience has taught us that the action in the now is also always necessary. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours?<sup>11</sup>

The problem with Griffin's book is that pornography is not a poem. Going beyond the pornographic imagination to a culture of wholeness — to eros — must be a poetic concern, but dealing with issues of power and violence concerning the being and the sexuality of women, children — and men — is a matter of analysis, strategy, and action. *Pornography and Silence* might be seen as an experiment in political poetry, or in poetic consciousness raising, but it is an experiment in which I hear echoes of the idealist Romantic belief in the power of inner contemplation to change the external world. It does not point the way to change through collective action.

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### Notes

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1. Susan Griffin, *Made from this Earth: An Anthology of Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 248.
2. Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p.83.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
4. Griffin, "The Way of All Ideology," in *Made from this Earth*, p. 163. Originally published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 7, no. 3 (spring 1982), 641-60.
5. *Pornography and Silence*, p. 2.
6. *Made from this Earth*, p. 241.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
8. *Ibid.*, p.244. Quoted from Audre Lorde, "Poems are Not Luxuries," *Chrysalis*, No. 3.

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9. *Ibid.*, pp.242-43.
  10. Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), p. 126.
  11. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-27.
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## THE ANTI-SOCIAL FAMILY

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Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, London: Verso Editions/NLB, 1982.

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The authors of *The Anti-Social Family* have already made significant contributions to feminist theorisations of sexual relations, the social construction of gender and gender hierarchies, and women's oppression (McIntosh, 1968; 1978; 1981; Barrett and McIntosh, 1980; Barrett, 1980;1982). This new book throws down a challenging gauntlet to social theorists, feminists and socialists. It is an important and exciting work which promises to provoke rigorous debate.

In *Women's Oppression Today* (1980), Barrett synthesized existing debates about the oppression of women in capitalist society. Based on an analysis of two central concepts — ideology of gender and the sexual division of labour — that book summarizes and critiques current knowledge and theories about the two and their power to construct the situation of women. In this new co-authored piece, Barrett and McIntosh continue a theme begun in *Women's Oppression Today* by focusing directly on "the family". Like the former book, one strength of this work is that it recapitulates existing debates on "the family". For this contribution alone the book is very important. But its value goes far beyond its synthesis.

The motivation for the book is the political battle currently raging over the social institution called "the family". The authors note that powerful right-wing conservative "pro-family" forces in Europe and North America are rallying around a position which calls for the compulsory institutionalization of the heterosexual couple in which the power of the breadwinner husband/father is assured and the economically dependent wife/mother is responsible for performing, unpaid, a whole range of necessary social services. To date, they point out, socialists and feminists have not been systematic in their opposition to these right wing mobilizations. Indeed, at present, not only is there no socialist and feminist consensus on issues related to family, sexuality, and child