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FETISHISM AND PORNOGRAPHY: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PORNOGRAPHIC EYE/I

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It is common for feminist critiques of pornography to argue that its oppressive and sadistic character stems from its objectification of women by and for men. This position is problematic on a number of grounds. It assumes an equivalence between oppression and objectivity *per se*, and defines the latter as passivity. It takes pornography to be formally and sensuously homogeneous, a static, visual regime of representation varying only in the sexual and violent explicitness of its contents. And it takes for granted the psycho-analytics of perverse pleasure and desire into which pornography has insinuated itself in such a massive way: in its concern with the objectification of women it has generally taken the obverse process of male sexual subjectification as unproblematic. In this respect Geraldine Finn's (1985) analysis of the "pornographic eye/I" opens up a critical area to which it makes an important contribution.* At the same time, we would argue, her analysis remains uncritical in its assumption of the radical separation of subjects and objects. Her analysis does not distinguish fully enough between the voyeuristic and fetishistic, and the political implications of this vis-a-vis the internally contradictory and unstable mode of representation that pornography embodies. Her call for the unspecified de-sexualisation of representation stands in danger of implicitly reproducing the essentialist, binarist system of sexual different — 'either/or-ism' — in which patriarchal power consists.

The modern moment of patriarchal power is pornographic in the broadest sense: an obsessive representation of the body of woman as sexualised difference, structured by and for male looking. Pornography is a regime of sexualised representations that circulates in terms of being both explicit and illicit (cf. Coward, 1982; Stern, 1982). It inhabits both the centre and the peripheries of the eye of power which is now the generalised sign of a regime of visualised representation: sight, view, perspective, etc. are now the chief metaphors of understanding and meaning. More specifically, the sensuous economy of desire and pleasure is now based upon a popular imaginary whose character is heavily photographic — cinema, television, still photography. Photography has now become a crucial instrument in the specification — particularly anatomisation — of the sexual; it conjoins the scientific textbook and the pornography magazine in an imaginary regime of streamlined, flattened, two-dimensional evidence (Mort, 1980). For this reason, it is not unusual

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that the struggles against pornography, from Right and Left, sexists and feminists, has been concerned foremost with photographic representation. Photography is now the quintessential method of representational production: its appeal to a 'natural' realism and fidelity, its effect of present absence, and, at least in the case of still photos, its capacity to freeze movement and flux for closer scrutiny endow it with a revelatory force (cf. Ellis, 1982). From the outset, the camera has been associated intimately with the eye of power (Sontag, 1977).

It is a revelatory force, however, that often threatens to overwhelm and supplant its object. Photographic realism is a cultural rather than natural code, but one that is able nonetheless to further the mystification of power and ideology as 'natural' in a seemingly effortless way. The photo effect of present absence, particularly strong in the case of still photography, generates an association with death and enervation (Coward, 1982). And the ability of still photography to freeze the mobile constructs something that otherwise was not as such. The capacity for close scrutiny that still photography promises is often an empty one: we seldom gaze at a photo for longer than a few seconds; we are more likely to glance at it in a transient and casual, rather than fixed and intensified, way. Moreover, a still photograph is rarely presented for our look without the accompaniment of words (a caption, a story) and other photographs (a sequence of related images, an imaginary textuality) which help to anchor meaning and manage the look's alienation (Burgin, 1982a, 1982). Looking at photography is not unproblematic or undifferentiated, and in this respect it is not altogether clear that there is just a single "pornographic eye" or that it translates unproblematically into a "pornographic I".

Feminist critique has argued that pornographic objectification reproduces male domination (if not in fact inciting male hatred of and violence toward women) through the operationalisation of three codes of photographic representation: fragmentation, submission, and availability (Coward, 1982). The code of fragmentation refers to the way close-up photography is used to 'reduce' the models' bodies — and by extension the body and person of women in general — to sexualised fragments, genitals, buttocks and breasts in particular, a practice that is seen to be 'de-humanising'. Submission refers to the way female models are positioned to connote their submission to male desire and pleasure. Women are posed in prone or suppine positions on beds, couches, or the ground; when not returning the look directly to the reader, they avert their eyes coyly; and the written captions that accompany the photo sequences dwell obsessively on the model's desire to submit pleasurably to phallic power. This is compounded by the 'death' aspect of the photo effect, particularly in displays of women's bodies 'draped' over furniture or lying limp and lifeless on the ground. Availability refers to the way in which the models are portrayed as permanently and highly sexualised, as having no other character than their sexualised desire: the way in which they return the viewer's look in an inviting and/or alluring way, the body posed in a way that signifies a simulated if not parodic ever-readiness for sex.

The operation of these codes is not exclusive to pornography in the formal sense. They are at work in other forms of popular imaginary representation, such as advertising, whose function is the sexual fantasisation of commodity desire. In this

respect, it is more a case of their having become intensified in certain ways in popular pornography. Nor is their operation necessarily unproblematic. The critique of fragmentation implies, obversely, a naturalistic equation of the 'whole' person with the 'whole' body which is an equally ideological and powerful assumption. It relies upon a humanism that generally occludes recognition of its own historical and political conditions of possibility, and ultimately rests upon the dominant ideology of the body as the objective labour-power of the subjective will that inhabits it and controls the alienation of its capacities. As elements of a larger ideology, moreover, these codes cannot be assumed to function in a necessarily coherent and integrated way. Submission and availability, for example, may operate in such a way that the latter no longer complements but begins to overwhelm the former. Sexual availability may be signified in a way that connotes active sexual initiation, and threatens to overcome the objectified passivity implicit in the code of submission. The three codes, finally, are not exhaustive of the textual organisation of porno, nor are they fully determinant of how the photographs are read. This is also dependent on the sexualised subjectification of the reader, and the way looking is a differentiated activity whose effect is produced in the plays and counter-plays of power-in-ideology.

In his analysis of pleasurable looking — scopophilia/the scopic drive — Freud (1962) provides a way to analyze these contradictions in terms of the functions of the look as both objectification and identification (subjectification). The former consists in the submission of another as the object of a controlling and inquisitive gaze, the condition of which is the generation and maintenance of a separation between the looking subject and the object looked at. It is this function of looking that liberal and radical feminist critiques have largely concerned themselves with, equating objectification *per se* with oppression, degradation and de-humanisation. Identification, on the other hand, cuts across and threatens to reduce the separation of viewing subject and the object viewed. It is a process whereby aspects of the other are appropriated by the looking subject as conditions for the latter's modelling of the self. In this regard, the other becomes the mirror of self-desire, the instrument of the socialisation (through misrecognition) of the self under the sign of self perfection. Although the two processes — which in more generalised terms apply to our relationship to any form of representation, and the way meaning and sense are thereby produced — cut across one another, they also complement one another: some degree of each is necessary for the other to function. As such, their relationship in any particular instance may be unstable and mobile: the look may oscillate freely between them without achieving any permanent resolution.

Both functions, in psycho-analytic terms, are fundamentally sexual, objectification resulting in pleasure from the fantasized control of the other, identification in narcissism and auto-erotic pleasure. In this respect, they overlap with the *distinction* between voyeurism and fetishism, a distinction that has been the basis for theoretical elaboration of the question of male looking and female exhibitionism in recent textual critiques of pornography. These have been greatly influenced by Mulvey's (1975) re-working of Freud in her theorisation of the look in classical Hollywood cinema. Both modes are organised in terms of the threat to male dominance posed by female difference; both are concerned to manage that

threat, but do so in quite different ways. Voyeurism organises the male look at the sexualised female image in a separated, sadistic way: woman is punished for her sexualised difference. It does this through narrative; it is a mode of looking that seeks narrative development and change in which woman's sexuality is given a certain range to disturb and disrupt, and then contained by returning her to a subservient role for closure. Fetishism, on the other hand, seeks to manage sexualised difference by collapsing the distance between viewer and viewed, by short-circuiting narrative development in an obsessive cycle of repetitious representations, by replacing distanced curiosity with immediate fascination, and by displacing woman' sexuality onto some fetish object (through metonymy or metaphor). Where voyeurism seeks to punish, fetishism seeks to disavow.

Mulvey's theorisation has been criticised on the grounds that it is asymmetrical: while voyeurism is seen to accentuate a sadistic objectification of woman, it remains unclear whether fetishism accentuates identification and narcissism, and how it relates, in turn, to the question of sexual and gender domination. This stems from an uncritical acceptance of the sexual/gender separation of male/looking as active and female/exhibiting as passive. Rodowick, for example, attempts to complement the separation by proposing that fetishism not only accentuates identification, but also masochistic desire, thus raising the question of how male looking could "signify both the exercise of power and submission to power" (1982: 7). This does not deny that male looking entails the reproduction of sexual and gender domination, but it does raise the possibility that this is achieved in a complex way riven with tensions and cross-currents that interrupt objectification, and collapse it into self-desire. The implication of this is that the textual organisation of the imaginary representation is not unidimensional in the way it structures the reading, but allows an oscillation between modes of looking, and complicates the separation and functioning of both.

The theorisation of "fetishistic scopophilia" is particularly pertinent to the critiques of pornography whose textual composition is heavily invested with fetishistic elements. This is especially so for 'softcore' pornography where the typical photographic text is organised in terms of a highly repetitious sequence of about six or seven poses of the same woman, or two women together, in a sexualised display. These fetishistic investments have recently become intensified as the photography has become more genitally explicit, as compared to the topless or nude pin-up of the 1950s and early 1960s. This increasing explicitness also involves an emphasis on the representation of sexual pleasure on the part of the models, as in the scenarios of masturbation, lesbianism, and heterosexual congress in which male as well as female models are present. This latter is increasingly common, not only in 'hardcore' pornography where the male is seen as explicitly phallic and penetrating, but also in 'softcore' where the representations are more literally simulated.

As Ellis (1980) has noted, these changes signify textually the growing importance of female sexual pleasure as a predominant fetish in addition to the object-fetishes that circulate more directly around the woman's sexualised body zones (underwear, shoes, etc.). More importantly, they signify the importance of the woman's face as the signifer of this pleasure, a face that combines the look with

object-fetishism (make-up, glossy lip-stick). The critique of pornographic fragmentation has generally overlooked this development with its emphasis upon close-up genital display, but it is the case that the pornographic woman is dually fragmented in her fetishised display, to both the genitals and the face — whether the latter is that of the look returned to the viewer in an inviting way (usually found in single model displays), or the averted look of pleasure (more common in couple or group displays). This mode of representation is not that of a pure object, but of the subject-object of the ideology of value: the willful subject who rationally objectifies her/his capacities (body) as labour-power, the subject whose self-objectification is the moment of its subjectivity, the object whose objectivity is never shown or seen entirely as the product of another.

Pornography dwells on its object's will and desire, and their activation in the service of absent pleasure. The willfulness of the fetishised look is the imaginary dimension of pornography's obsession with the complicity of the woman in the display of her sexualisation. It is complemented by the written captions or stories — written either in the anonymous third person, or the first person of the woman — that address themselves directly to the photography, and reassure the reader of the model's self-sexualisation in the service of her own pleasure and desire. Like bureaucracy, pornography entails a system of power that concerns itself endlessly with fostering, inducing, and encouraging the will, consent and participation of those on whom it is exercised. This obsession with the subjectivity of its object means, obversely, a silence about the objectivity of its subject: the will of the male, as viewer and model, is taken-for-granted as the universal desire to subject the woman to the power of phallic pleasure.

In a fundamental sense, then, pornography is about the objectification of its subject — phallic power. But this "phallic economy" (Baudrillard, 1976) operates under profoundly contradictory conditions where sexual difference is both necessary for and threatening to the reproduction of power. As in the political economy generally, phallic power grows in inverse proportion to its effectiveness. In psychoanalytic theory the fetish represents the male subject's disavowal of the contradiction between his knowledge of woman as lack of the phallus and his belief that this isn't the case (in defence of the threat of castration that difference presents) (cf. Freud, 1961). The fetish manages this contradiction, not by the direct repression of knowledge or belief, but by endowing belief with the security of a substitute signifier, and submitting the real thus to desire. For this reason, as Baudrillard (1976) stresses, the fetish operates preferably on the site — the woman's sexualised body — where the very threat of difference (phallic lack and the danger of castration that this poses) is inscribed. Disavowal differs from direct repression in that knowledge and belief remain to some extent co-present for the subject: on the one hand this enables difference to persist as the basis of power, on the other it assists in mitigating the threat that difference also poses. Yet, it is profoundly unstable in its effects: by endowing the woman with a substitute phallus, by the very practice of disavowing rather than directly repressing difference, the pornographic object, the fetishised figure of woman, is incorporated into, made into an extension of the looking subject.

It is in this respect that porno's heavily fetishistic investments signify its

narcissistic character. The look of desire returned to the viewer in an alluring way or of pleasure averted in an indifferent, aloof manner, the model's slim, erect, phallic body, the shininess of the bodies, props, and paper on which the images are printed, all signify a certain specular fascination which, as in the original myth of Narcissus, conflates representation with the real and another with the self. It is also in its narcissistic effect, however, that pornography becomes a 'tactile' medium, extending outside the exclusively fixed, visual mode of representation to which the objectivist critique normally consigns it. To be sure, the fetishistic character of pornography is initially striking in a specular way, but that specularity is, homologously, its tactility. The shine of pornography is at once its smoothness to the touch: self-touching, phallic self-celebration. Hence two common features of pornographic representations: women touch themselves and each other, particularly in a gesture of stroking or carress, whereas men do not; and, in the case of hardcore, close-ups dwell upon phallic *partial* penetration in which the woman's body appears as an extension or outgrowth of the phallus. The fetish no longer simply endows the woman's body with a substitute phallus, but rather transforms it into an extension of the phallus (Baudrillard, 1976). Pornography's objectification of women becomes, in this respect, its objectification of the phallus, the very moment of male sexual subjectification.

Pornography operates not on the basis of radically objectifying women, but on the ideology of doing so. It offers a promise that is thwarted not only because, as representation, it is an illusion in contradistinction to the real — "perpetuat(ing) an ideal of masculinity which cannot be realised in practice — i.e. with real women in the real world" (Finn, 1985:88) — but also because, as real representation, it is internally contradictory, incapable of realising its ideology within itself. Pornography's "ideal of masculinity" is a phallic economy whose power requires an objectivity of difference it cannot, at the same time, bear. Economy, phallic or political, that is governed by the law of value seeks to submit the particular, the ambivalent to the general, the equivalent. The effect of this, however, is to disrupt the separation of subjects and objects that it sets in motion. Objects, once produced, break away and circulate independently of the subjects that produced them. This is fetishism's other side: the capacity of objects to become detached from their conditions of production, to act as if they were subjects, and to reverse the process of objectification back upon those who supposedly control it and derive their power from it. Any fetishism of objects requires a fetishism for subjects, and vice versa.

Critiques of pornography that take objectification as the exercise of linear power generally overlook this inversion and its implications. But within it lies the punitive, sadistic character of porno. Male looking seeks to realise a pure, imaginary objectification of the female, but this is thwarted and contradicted. On the one hand the unstable separation of objectification and identification detaches the woman as actively, willfully self-sexualising. Her pleasure and desire are circulated in a way that passes from simulation to parody, from mock-up to mockery: her exaggerated posture and excessive speech inform the viewer not only that she is there to be looked at, but also that she knows she's a real illusion. For the viewer this makes her fascinating and contemptible. On the other, the fetishistic composition of the representation manages the gap between knowledge and belief but at the cost of

disavowing difference and accentuating a narcissistic identification with the look's object: the fetishised woman becomes woman as fetish, woman as phallus, woman as the object in which the subject's subjectivity consists.

What are the political implications of this? If pornography's viciousness is instated contradictorily within its representational form, and not simply in its radical contrast to a real that exists outside and negates it, then intervention cannot consist simply in the 'de-sexualisation' of representation if, by this, we mean an empiricist project to remove genital explicitness etc. Such a politics is insufficiently radical to the extent that it remains within the exclusivist separation of representation and the real, objects and subjects, and confines itself to an 'either/or-ism' in which patriarchal power consists. What is pornographic about pornography is its complicity with the management of the instabilities of phallic economy, viz. its *fetishistic* character. A radical intervention in porno must address itself to opening up those instabilities, to de-fetishising sexual representation, and confronting men with the phallic economy of their pleasure and desire. When Finn states that porno tells us a lot about men's sexuality she assumes a privileged position of objective detachment which must then be made practical. For its viewers, pornography says nothing at all about their sexuality: its silence in this respect, its ability to take that sexuality for granted, is the very privilege that must be shattered. To liberate ourselves from the "austere monarchy of sex", sex must be made, quite literally, insignificant, removed from the 'semiocracy' that fetishism is all about; and to do that it must first be made to signify everything it can.

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