WE OBJECTS OBJECT: PORNOGRAPHY AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Eileen Manion

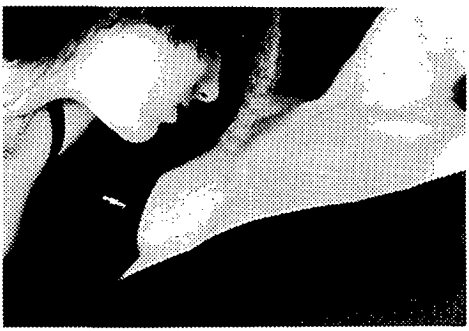

Photo: George Tysh

"A woman has a product and she should use it."
Chuck Traynor to Linda Lovelace, quoted in *Ordeal*
"All struggle for dignity and self-determination is rooted in the struggle for actual control over one's own body, especially control over access to one's body."
Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*

Since the mid-seventies in the United States and the late seventies here in Canada, feminists have been discussing pornography as a problem for women, a danger to women, not just a symptom of misogyny, but also one of its causes. Large numbers of women report that they both fear assault triggered by pornography, and experience pornography itself as violent assault. As Susan Griffin put it: "Pornography is sadism."[2] Its very existence humiliates us.

More and more forcefully women have been demanding that something be done about pornography. Strategies differ. Feminists with civil libertarian backgrounds advocate open discussion, demonstrations, education, consumer boycotts. The more impatient prefer the consciousness raising of direct action, as in the bombing of Vancouver's Red Hot Video. Others look to the state to enforce existing obscenity laws or to frame new legislation which would suppress pornography, not because it is sexual, but because it is hate literature and incites violence. As Susan Brownmiller declared: "Pornography is the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda."[3]

Though anti-pornography tactics vary, feminists generally agree that pornography is a bad thing, that it does harm to women, and that if we have trouble defining it,[4] we still recognize it when we see it. This is not unreasonable

since the pornography most feminists attack does not disguise itself. However, when we look critically at other cultural products — advertisements, mainstream movies and television programs — they often resemble pornography.

One problem with the feminist consciousness raising that has taken place around pornography is that it intends to generate fear and anxiety, or to bring to the surface fears women already experience.[5] In our society, every young girl's developing sexuality is hedged with awareness of frightening possibilities: violent assault and unplanned pregnancy. As adolescents, we learn both to fear men and to mistrust our own amorphous desires, which may betray us. Feminist discussions of pornography address these fears and emphasize pornography's danger to women, epitomized in Robin Morgan's slogan: "Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice."[6] Gloria Steinem makes the same point in her essay, "Erotica vs. Pornography." Following a brief discussion of the feminist movement's having raised issues such as rape, wife battering and enforced prostitution to public consciousness, she says: "Such instances of real antiwomen warfare led us directly to the propaganda that teaches and legitimizes them — pornography."[7]

Pornography makes us nervous for a number of other complex reasons. Beyond the fear that it incites violence, it represents an analogue of what alcohol symbolized for nineteeth century feminists at a time when most respectable women did not drink. Not only was alcohol for them a lower class social evil contributing to domestic violence and public corruption (associated as drinking was with party politics), but it was also, for more powerful men of their own class, a glue, a mucilage bonding males in exclusive enclaves off-limits to "good" women. Nineteenth century feminists imagined that if they could remove the alcohol, these male bastions would open up and admit them. Similarly for feminists today, pornography represents a unifying force in male power groupings. Pornography is quintessential macho culture: one thinks of businessmen enjoying an evening at a strip club — the "good" women who aspire to be partners in the firm might well feel uncomfortable.

We are also uneasy about pornography for it seems to promote isolation of men from women, the substitution of fantasy for relationship. If socialization into macho values denies tenderness and compassion, pornography promises sexual gratification without the necessity of those "effeminate" feelings.[8] "Real men," we sometimes suspect, don't need women at all,[9] or they want only the compliant, pre-packaged woman of the skin magazine. Pornography, like advertising, appeals to a whole range of insecurities, evokes envy by suggesting somehow, somewhere, more pleasure is available.

In addition, feminists fear that pornography not only distorts the portrayal of female sexuality by depicting women as no more than objects-for-men, but that it also blocks exploration of women's "true" sexuality. Just when women were beginning to discuss what a sexuality emancipated from double standards and procreative teleology might mean for them, pornography turned up its volume and drowned out with a quadrophonic blast women's tentative whispers.

Violence against women exists and women must defend themselves against

it. Our other concerns about pornography are equally serious. However, focussing analysis of pornography on potential violence or other sources of anxiety makes it difficult to think clearly in the ensuing tense, over-charged atmosphere. I'm not arguing that our anxiety is unjustified. However, I do think there's a real danger that the climate of fear we are helping to create will strengthen repressive social forces and that some of our demands with regard to pornograhy will backfire and result in unanticipated losses for women. Thus as a feminist I'd like to take one step back from the feminist discussion of pornography and look at why we began to perceive pornography as a problem, what some of the contemporary rhetoric about pornography is saying, and how the contemporary anti-pornography consensus[10] fits into the history of feminist causes and demands. Since I am primarily concerned about pornography in relation to the women's movement, I will not deal with the separate though related questions of child pornography or gay male pornography.

Once upon a time there were norms of correct masculine and feminine behaviour. A number of factors — economic and social changes beyond the control of any one group — have ensured that these norms remain unchallenged in very few milieus within North America today. Feminism, needless to say, has been directly involved in overthrowing received ideas about both male and female propriety.[11] Parallel with these changes, pornography, presumably to create and sustain new markets, has extended the bounds of what can, without incurring prosecution, be shown and described. Pornography allegedly breaks taboos of acceptable representation, often in a context which claims to be funny, ironic, self-referential. Pornography provokes the shocked response, the censor in our heads who tells us the image is bad or dirty, and therefore pleasurable. Pornography claims to push back barriers in order to continue to titillate. Perhaps pornography even needs censorship so that it will have norms to violate.

However, an important element in the feminist analysis of pornography has been the argument that pornography does not, in fact, violate norms of male dominance and female submissiveness, but operates to sustain them. In this view, pornography only seems to have a radical, liberatory appeal to the unconscious. In reality, pornography gives us the same old world view we see everywhere else: men are subjects, women are objects, not even objects to be "known," but discrete items to be scanned, viewed, taken in, or exchanged, like bits of information.

But then, so what? Why did feminists become concerned about pornography if its values are just the same as those we see everywhere else in the culture? Why isolate pornography for special attention?

If we're not afflicted with historical amnesia or guilty self-denial, we must remember that in the sixties most of us assumed sexual openness and explicitness had something to do with human liberation: we were creating a joyous emancipatory festival which would liberate us from our fears, timidities, hang-ups, double standards. In the present climate, when so many of us see ourselves as the walking wounded of the sexual revolution, that view at best seems naive, at worst a male-conspiratorial rip-off.

Feminists often suggest that the seventies' proliferation of pornography, as well as its increased explicitness and violence, is a male chauvinist backlash to the women's movement. In pornography men take revenge on uppity women. Male consumers buy into the fantasy and keep "their" women off balance by bringing home pornography or by going out openly to view it. Religious fundamentalists blame the women's movement more directly for augmenting the availability and popularity of pornography. Didn't we urge women to be "liberated," independent of men and marriage? Many North Americans can't distinguish the idea of liberation promoted by Gloria Steinem from the one marketed by Helen Gurley Brown. Didn't feminists raise "new" issues related to sexuality to public consciousness? Didn't we say that "the personal is political"?[12] For many that translates into "the private is public" — so there we get pornography taking us at our word and making women's privates publically visible just about everywhere we turn. How can we object to that? might the jeremiahs ask, and how shall we respond to such a nightmarish perversion of our message?

For feminists, there is nothing liberated, liberating, or libertarian in the current availability of explicit sexual images catering to all specialized tastes. At best this wide open market constitutes "repressive tolerance;" at worst, sexist propaganda as nefarious as *Mein Kampf*. On the evilness of pornography, feminists and fundamentalists are at one. They differ, of course, on why it's so bad.

Feminists have isolated pornography as a problem as a result of two parallel trends within the women's movement. One is the focus on male violence, which I mentioned earlier, and the other is the attempt to develop a women's perspective that calls into question male "universal" values. Whether or not connections between pornography and rape can be demonstrated "scientifically" in laboratory experiments with bizarre methodologies and dubious theoretical assumptions, women assert that the degradation of women immediately visible to them in pornography is reason enough to believe that boys and men who regularly consume it must be corrupted. Beyond that, women question the way pornography depicts sexuality, claiming that it's not about sex at all, but only about dominance, or that it represents only male sexuality.

This concern with pornography can be correlated with escalating frustration over the resistance of "the system" to grant our just and reasonable demands. During the late sixties and early seventies, enormous amounts of investigations were done, information was collected, analyses were made; we discovered and demonstrated how empty was the egalitarian rhetoric of our society when it came to men and women's real life privileges and opportunities. Then by the late seventies, many things seemed to be getting worse instead of better. Increased divorce rates and the jump in single parent female-headed households, we realized, were liberating many women into poverty.[13]

However, just as nineteenth century feminists overestimated the potency that would accrue to them with the vote, we also may at first have exaggerated the power of legal change. Historically feminists often conflated legal rights with political power and assumed one devolved directly from the other.[14] Perhaps we

also assumed, in the early days of the contemporary movement, that cogent argument, along with tidying up of the law, would be enough, or almost enough, to affect change. Our early optimism has since given way to rage, and we have been forced to examine aspects of our culture which maintain male dominance at the irrational level and undercut our rational demands.

This search has led some feminists like Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein [15] to take a closer look at mothering and use psychoanalytic theory to explore misogyny and personal/cultural ambivalence toward women. It has led others to pornography, which, insofar as it blatently sneers at us, tediously insists we are nothing but cunts, bunnies, pussies, and chicks, seems like the grandiose revenge of the (male) infantile imagination. For, adopting the vision pornography presents of women, who would trust us with any authority if all we really want, no matter what our pretensions, is a good lay? But then who would trust the men we see in pornography either? Would we buy used cars from them or elect them to political office? No matter what their pretensions, all they want is a good lay. Suppose we as women really do look at pornography with our own eyes and not as we imagine men look at it. This may seem like a ridiculous, utopian wish, given the power relations of our culture. But then who can endow us with the legitimacy of our own perspective?

If we do look again at pornography, I think we'll see not only women's degradation, but also human pathos and pain. Paradoxically, feminist condemnation of pornography acccepts the brittle male fantasy — that the real-life, unreliable penis is magical, powerful, irresistible — and overlooks the fears and insecurities such fantasy is meant to dissolve.

I realize that I've strayed here from feminist orthodoxy and raised provocative questions which some may regard as frivolous. Nonetheless, in taking up pornography as a political issue, I think we have not taken account of historical parallels with various nineteenth century feminists' moral and political concerns. For a few moments, I would like to explore some of these and then return to contemporary feminism and pornography.

Nineteeth century feminism was not limited in scope to a unidimensional struggle for women's suffrage, as historians would have had us believe for many years. Women's demands for civil rights and expanded participation in the world outside the home were linked with a wide range of other issues, including concerns related to sexuality. Discussions of "voluntary motherhood" raised the possibility of women's sexual autonomy within marriage.[16] A few utopian communities and free love advocates went further, questioned the sanctity of marriage and championed women's right to a sexuality free of marriage's exclusivity. Nonetheless, most feminists foresaw a transformed institution of marriage, purged of both male supremacy and sexual ignorance.[17] However, on the darker side, women did recognize that sexuality could pose a threat, and their fears became organized around various campaigns dealing with prostitution, white slavery and "social purity."

Ellen Dubois and Linda Gordon have pointed out that for nineteenth century feminists the prostitute represented the "quintessential sexual terror,"[18] for she epitomized female victimization at the hands of lustful, exploitative men.

Reformers in both Britain and the United States focussed their energy both on rescuing prostitutes from their degraded life and on opposing state regulation of prostitution. Licensing prostitutes and coercing them into physical examinations, reformers argued, cynically attempted to protect men from venereal disease at the expense of the women's civil rights. Since the definition of prostitution even at the turn of the century was notoriously vague, [19] and could include non-commercial extramarital female sexual activity, the danger of infringement on any woman's civil rights was evident. However, many feminists also imaginatively identified with the actual prostitute and made her outrage their own.

In Britain, Josephine Butler led the feminist wing of the anti-Contagious Diseases Acts movement. The Contagious Diseases Acts, a series of laws passed between 1864 and 1869, provided for the "sanitary inspection" of alleged prostitutes near designated military depots in England and Ireland. Some doctors and politicians wanted to see the Acts extended to the civilian population. Similarly in nineteeth century America, feminists took part in struggles to oppose the passage of such regulatory legislation.[20] In Canada, a Purity Education Association existed in Toronto between 1906 and 1915, and a National Council for the Abolition of White Slavery was founded in 1912, but most of the activity around sexual concerns was connected with the Women's Christian Temperance Union.[21]

The prostitute, however, was not only a symbol for feminists of women's oppression; she was also a symbol for moralists of the social dislocation caused by industrialisation. When we look at the anti-Contagious Diseases Acts campaign in Britain or the anti-regulation campaigns in the United States, we see that moralists and feminists had concerns that both differed and overlapped. Feminists wanted to abolish prostitution by "saving" prostitutes and rechanneling men's sexual impulses into "acceptable" relationships. They rejected the view that the prostitute was a "fallen woman," a perpetual outcast, a potential polluter of men. Instead she was a victim of "male pollution . . . who had been invaded by men's bodies, men's laws, and by that 'steel penis,' the speculum."[22] Feminists deeply resented the sexual license men claimed for themselves and condemned in women. Both feminists and others in the purity movement advocated a "single standard of morality" for both men and women. In addition, feminists could use the assumed moral superiority and "passionlessness" of good women to argue that they should weild political power to clean up the corrupt public world.[23] However, this strategy undermined attempts to make positive claims for women's sexuality.

Enthusiasm for the temperance, social purity and other reform movements which aimed at moral improvement through legislative intervention was fueled partly by what we might see as feminist concerns, and partly by anxiety over urbanization, commercialization, industrialisation — all the "-izations" that threatened family and rural values with rampant, exploitative individualism.[24] Very often other anxieties were displaced onto sexual issues, which are guaranteed to provoke attention and indignation. However, as we'll see, women did not necessarily benefit from the resulting climate and/or reforms.

By emphasizing the Victorian notion of women's passionlessness and moral superiority women were able to challenge male sexual prerogatives within and outside the family and forge an argument in favor of their own political power. However, this led feminists to sacrifice for several decades an opportunity to define their sexuality on their own terms. (As we know, numerous "experts" rushed in to fill the vaccuum.) Even early birth control advocates ran up against the fear that contraception would leave women more vulnerable to male sexual exploitation. This restricted view of women's sexuality also made it impossible for many feminists to understand the complex reality of the prostitute herself. Consequently they could be shocked by prostitutes who refused to behave like proper victims and accept "rescue." They were also highly suspicious of working class culture and mores, and could take a repressive attitude toward sexual activity on the part of young working girls. One might even go so far as to argue that many ordinary women were put off by a view of female sexuality that did not correspond to their own experience.[25]

Consequently, although feminists succeeded in Britain in having the Contagious Diseases Acts repealed, and blocked in many instances the passage of regulationist legislation in America, they ultimately did not control the direction of the purity movements and their work ironically helped pave the way for legislation aimed at repressing prostitution, which, though it did not eliminate the "social evil," made the life of the prostitute herself lonelier, harder, and riskier.

As long as prostitution had been informally tolerated, prostitutes could live among or on the fringes of the casual laboring poor. They had a degree of autonomy, and were not usually exploited by pimps. However, in Britain the debate over prostitution was raised to a more impassioned level with the publication of W.T. Stead's infamous "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" series in 1885. Stead's documentation of the sale of "five pound virgins" to aristocratic rakes, along with other sensationalistic accounts of "white slave" traffic, led to the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885) which raised the age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen. However, it also gave the police increased jurisdiction over working class girls and women and enabled them to carry out raids on lodging house brothels. The closing of brothels failed to eliminate prostitution, but it did render prostitutes subject to arbitrary exercises of police power and it forced them to seek protection from pimps and other underworld men. In 1912 Sylvia Pankhurst remarked of the White Slavery Act: "It is a strange thing that the latest criminal Amendment Act, which was passed ostensibly to protect women, is being used exclusively to punish women."[26] It is also worth noting that the earlier 1885 Act prohibited "indecent acts" between male consenting adults, allowing for the prosecution of homosexuals.

Paradoxically, the purity movement, in its efforts to establish "civilized morality," a pre-Freudian notion of the passions under the total control of will and reason, helped to launch an airing of topics formerly untouchable. Ironically in its very desire to suppress passion and disruptive sexuality it contributed to a climate in which such issues could be researched and investigated. Nonetheless, this "openness" also meant behaviour must be more

carefully scrutinized. As I have noted, for women, especially young working class women, extramarital sexual activity often became not only unacceptable and immoral, but also criminal, and more likely to result in arrest and imprisonment.[27]

Thus in the United States, nineteenth century evangelical movements to rescue prostitutes gave way to Progressive Era social welfare efforts to "reform" them. During the post-bellum era, former abolitionists turned their attention to prostitution and brought to the crusade against "white slavery" all the energy and moral enthusiasm they'd developed in the fight for black emancipation. However, as in England, legislation passed to eliminate prostitution led to arbitrary police raids, pressuring prostitutes into dependence on pimps. Ironically the new reformatories instituted after the turn of the century to punish deviant female sexual behaviour created conditions whereby girls like Maimie Pinzer, whose life has become known through publication of her letters to Fanny Quincy Howe,[28] might be pushed into prostitution by the very justice/social welfare system designed to redeem them.

The ultimate result of the alliance of feminists and other social purity advocates was that the feminist dimension of the attack on prostitution was lost and only the attack on the prostitute herself survived. This can be seen at its most virulent after American entrance into World War 1. The federal government was so concerned with maintaining a "pure" army that it arrested and detained more than 15,000 suspected prostitutes. In addition, it's worth noting that the social purity campaigns against obscenity in literature, art, and popular culture led by Josiah Leeds and Anthony Comstock created the legislation (1873) under which the Sangers were later prosecuted for sending women birth control information. This legislation also made it difficult for feminists to write openly about topics like rape and incest.

We can see that nineteenth and turn of the century campaigns around sexual themes coagulated anxieties provoked by increased commercialization, commodification, and other types of social change, and ultimately, in order to allay fears, legitimated more government intervention, manipulation and control. Although we must be careful about drawing historical parallels in a facile way, one thing we can note is that public discussions of sexual issues are extremely volatile, encourage displacement, and provoke repression as well as permit enlightenment.

Twentieth century feminists certainly do not claim, as did so many of our nineteenth century sisters, that women are "passionless" or "sexless" and for that reason deserving of more power and authority. However, in the feminist discussion of pornography we find the assumption that men's sexuality is essentially different from women's and more pathological. In Susan Griffin's analysis, sexuality itself is natural and good but men have corrupted it with bad cultural constructions.[29] In Andrea Dworkin's view, pornography lies about female sexuality, representing woman as "a lewd, dissolute brazen thing, a whore always soliciting," but it tells the truth about male sexuality: "That men believe what pornography says about women . . . From the worst to the best of them, they do."[30] To take this point one step further, pornography portrays

women and their sexuality as essentially controllable by men (bondage pornography is the logical result); feminist discourse on pornography portrays men and their sexuality as essentially controllable by pornography. This mirroring of what is a distorted idea of our own sexuality ought to give us pause.

Although feminist writers on pornography do not presume women are sexless, they do imply that, left to our own devices, free of male coercive interference, women are reasonable, self-determining beings with a sexuality that is unproblematic, unpathological, gentle and good.[31] In feminist discourse on pornography all dangerous, disruptive aspects of sexuality are projected onto men or "male culture." Interestingly, this projection mirrors what Susan Griffin tells us pornography does with men's "good" feelings; pornography projects men's vulnerabilities onto women so that these feelings can be controlled. We reverse the process and project our unfeminine nastiness and aggression onto men. Insofar as such human nastiness surfaces in pornography, we'd like to suppress it. Lorenne Clark provides a good example of this attitude when she says: "We are not in any way opposed to the manufacture, sale, or distribution of materials which stress the positive aspects of human sexuality."[32] As feminists, can we really set ourselves up as cultural commisars, deciding what is and what is not "positive" enough about sex to be represented?

We may not precisely be passionless anymore, but some of these hidden assumptions about our sexuality are equally distorting. They accompany a notion of the self as an entity distinct from the body; for Andrea Dworkin: "All struggle for dignity and self-determination is rooted in the struggle for actual control over one's own body, especially control over access to one's own body."[33] But, we might ask here, are women embodied beings or are we owners of bodies who make rational decisions about others' rights of way? This is not a frivolous, hair-splitting question, if, after all, we don't like pornography because it markets women as salable objects or male public property accessible to anyone. If we posssess our bodies, surely we can sell them in a commodity culture. Only if, as feminists, we develop a very different view of the self, and argue from that, can self-sale be unthinkable.

Another point of continuity between nineteenth and twentieth century feminists revolves around the word "protection." One of the most important emphases on which feminists and others in the social purity movement agreed was the protection of the family, which seemed threatened by any wayward and/or commercialized sexuality. Given that the nineteenth century family was already an abstraction from the larger community, it's a measure of just how atomized our society has become that we hear little from modern feminists about protection of the family, though we do hear a good deal about protecting women and children from harm resulting directly or indirectly from pornography.

The attempt to demonstrate such harm empirically has been creating the reputations of large numbers of behavioural psychologists these days.[34] Concern shifts from what pornography might encourage men to do to women to what pornography encourages men to think about women and sexuality. All

such experiments isolate pornographic images of women and then postulate an extremely simplistic relationship between representation and actions or attitudes. They presume, as do many feminists who base their analyses on similar assumptions, that seeing certain kinds of images "conditions" men to degrade and despise women. Lorenne Clark makes this point when she says: "Pornography is a method of socialization."[35] Such use of the word "socialization" reduces it to the thinnest, most psychologically superficial behaviourist model. In this view sexuality — or more specifically male sexuality — is lifted entirely out of the fabric of family or other deep emotional relationships and is viewed as infinitely malleable. Ironically, this thin, contigent view of human relationships is just the portrait we get in pornography itself.

In addition, experiments dealing with pornography assume that pornographic images and narratives affect viewers/readers in a way that is entirely different from other types of narratives and images so that audiences will treat pornography much more like "information" than they will other types of popular culture, that they will bracket it in an entirely different way from say, westerns or science fiction.[36] Pornography in this view becomes a kind of "how to" manual: "It is a vivid depiction of how to deploy male sexuality in just the way that will achieve maximum effect in maintaining the *status quo*."[37]

Perhaps the underlying concern here is the fear of a kind of epidemic degeneration of interpretive skills. We live in a world which demands an ability to scan material for facts and arguments, which encourages the diffusion of attention or concentration, which relegates "interpretation," formerly at the cultural centre, at least in religion, to the relative periphery of literary criticism and psychoanalysis. Have most people's interpretive skills degenerated to such a degree that they can no longer distinguish, at the most basic level, literal from symbolic meaning? Or is this a peculiarly male foible in the realm of pornography?

If we ask that question, however, we might also ask ourselves how sophisticated feminist critiques of pornography have been? Is there room for improving our own interpretations? Does this matter if what we are engaged in is a struggle for power?

One thing that disturbs me about the feminist discussion of pornography is the way all pornography is lumped together and flattened out. Would we make the blanket statements we make about pornography if we were discussing any other popular genre? Some feminists do distinguish between violent and non-violent pornography, arguing that only the latter is dangerous, but more commonly we see the contention that all pornography is objectifying, degrading, and therefore violent. If a young man begins by subscribing to *Playboy*, he will end with a craving for snuff movies, much the way we were warned about the danger of marijuana's leading us inevitably to heroin addiction.

Certainly the portrayal of women in pornography is, by and large, insulting, irritating and worthy of critique. However, when we invoke more "protection" from the state, we must be careful how we do it. I think that the very word

"protection," given what it implies for women, should make us hesitate, for the historical record of "protective" legislation — whether in the realm of morals or the labour market — is certainly an ambiguous one. When we demand government protection from pornography, given the arbitrary, paternalistic, authoritarian modes such legislation and its enforcement always take, aren't we asking for more of what we don't like in other areas? Insisting on our need to be protected, we hold onto the role of victim or potential victim, the very position from which our efforts as feminists are designed to extricate us.[38] Our status as victims of male violence may seem to give us a kind of moral authority. And the detachment we claim from male sexual pathology may give us an argument for appropriating more power. But historically in the gender battles we have seen how limiting and undermining these tactics were, as well as how they often backfired in their ultimate effects. I think today we should jettison them in our current struggles.

Of course women do suffer real life acts of violence everyday. This is a fact which being fastidious about words like "protection" will not make go away. Certainly a good deal of our anger about pornography results from our fear that we may be victimized either by the man whose free-floating psychotic misogyny has been set off by pornography, or by the more ordinary male who sees rape as a minor peccadillo, for if sex is a commodity, isn't rape just petty theft?

Since our culture constitutes itself to such an extreme degree from images and spectacle, it's inevitable that political struggle will revolve around just such issues. For the image of woman as moronic sex object, we would like to substitute the image of woman as complex person, active subject — someone to be reckoned with and regarded seriously. It's quite obvious that in this struggle over images we can't stop with pornography; we also have the whole domain of advertising to contend with, not to mention a staggering proportion of our television, movies and books. After all, one could argue that many mainstream movies are more dangerous than pornographic ones. Insofar as they are better made, with more talented direction and acting, more sophisticated narration and filming, they ought to be more powerful, more compelling than the low budget drivel regularly turned out by the skinflick trade.

This is not to say that just because humiliating images pervade our culture we ought to forget about pornography as an issue, but we should be careful not to legitimize other sexist images by focussing exclusively on pornography. I don't think we can solve our "image problem" with better definitions of obscenity, inclusion of an acceptable definition of pornography in the criminal code, or more censorship. Instead of demanding more restrictions from the state, we should demand more resources — for women artists, filmmakers, publishers. "Better" censorship will not benefit women, but it will certainly benefit police forces and prosecutors who will see their already fat budgets swell.

A new approach to legislation on pornography has been proposed in Minneapolis by Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Their ordinance would permit civil litigation against pornographers by women who claimed that harm had occurred to them: that they had been coerced into making

pornography; that they had been forced to view it; or that they had been assaulted due to pornography. MacKinnon's purpose is to transfer the debate out of its current legislative *cul de sac* and raise in the courts the issue that pornography violates women's civil rights.

This approach has some attractive features, since it does shift emphasis from the idea that sexual explicitness *per se* is offensive to the notion that certain kinds of sexual representation are harmful because they promote inequality. Nonetheless, I still wonder whether we can or want to legislate only a certain kind of sexual representation — i.e., sex under conditions of mutuality, reciprocity, equality. Do we really want to say that our civil rights include the right to see only certain kinds of images?

Sexuality has shouldered an enormous weight of expectations in our culture,[39] expectations that sexual "fulfillment" will compensate for the sensual impoverishment of urban life, the emotional impoverishment of a culture that promotes thin sociability at the expense of long-term deep connection, the spiritual impoverishment resulting from the abstract quality of most work.[40] Pornography capitalizes on these expectations, inducing us to believe that sexual "fulfillment" is available but elusive, just like the gratification of a Salem, a Budweiser — it's there for sure, in the next, always the next act of consumption.

As women, we are more aware of the fraud here; we not only receive the illusory promise of fulfillment, we are the promise. The terrible irony of female sexuality is that women are expected to embody a oneness with the body, a physical self-confidence associated with ideal motherhood — this they are supposed to give to men. However, it's rare for women to develop a true confidence in their own desire and desirability since female sexual development is so permeated with fear, and everybody's identity is constantly undermined in this culture of envy.

Pornography confronts us not only with male power, but also with male resentment, resentment at what has seemingly been promised and then withheld. We, on the other hand, should know that this sensual pleasure does not belong to us, is not ours to give or deny for it is not a thing, not a product, but, where it exists, is activity, process, feeling, relationship. In sexuality we would like to preserve some privileged area, some space free from the commodification of so much of the rest of our lives. When sexuality seems like the last vestige of our romantic individuality, pornography insists that here too there's nothing but a kind of Eaton's catalogue of images — a restricted code reducing all "self-expression" to grotesque banality.

This paper is meant to be provocative. It may seem like a betrayal of the forces of good, an over-intellectualized sell-out to the pornocrats. However, I'm writing it because as a feminist I'm concerned about our directions, demands and alliances. We should keep in mind when forming political alliances on this issue that, no matter what we say, most people will become indignant about pornography, not because they see it as misogynistic, but because they see it as sexual, and for that reason it raises all kinds of anxieties about "proper" gender relations we call into question in other contexts.

As we saw with the first wave of feminism, sexual issues focussed all kinds of other fears. Today we have even more to be afraid of — acid rain, nuclear reactors, chemical wastes — to name but a few at random. To even the most optimistic, our world seems quite out of control. A re-ordering of gender relations, along with suppression of sexual explicitness, can take on powerful attraction. We see this in American right-wing anti-feminism.

A number of other things disturb me about feminist discourse on pornography. Often we catch an echo of the nineteenth century temperance movement's assumption that eliminating drink would abolish wife beating in modern feminists' notion that suppressing pornography would reduce rape and other forms of actual male violence. In addition, a contempt for "freedom of expression" creeps into many feminists' writings. "Civil libertarian" is becoming an insult, not yet quite equivalent to "fascist." Although we may be disillusioned with liberal political philosophy and agree that "freedom of expression" is at best an abstraction and at worst a cynical defense when we're talking about a multi-million dollar industry like pornography, it still seems to me dangerous to encourage government to get more involved in the business of defining what we are allowed to see or read. If we concern ourselves with pornography as an industry rather than as a purveyor of bad ideas, we might think in terms different from censorship: e.g., unionizing workers in the industry, preventing monopolies, investigating distribution networks, taxing profits more rigorously. We should never lose sight of the fact that the pornography industry could not exist without its women workers. Women who write about pornography must not identify with these women solely at an abstract level, as did many nineteenth century feminists with prostitutes. We know what kinds of pressures drive women into the sex trades; we know how exploited the women who work in the strip clubs, sex acts, and skin flicks are. In making demands on the state, we should be very wary of falling into the same trap as first wave feminists. Instead we need to find ways of supporting these women. Pushing pornography further into a shadow world where, like drugs, pornographic materials are illegal but clandestinely available will only make the lives of the women in the industry more risky, more endangered.[41]

In addition, I think we must be careful as women, who have never had the same "freedom of expression" as men, either because we were not allowed to speak in public forums, or because when we did speak our words carried no authority, were dismissed as hysterical ravings, we must be careful at this juncture, not to denigrate "freedom of expression," but to demand it, seize it, appropriate it, allow it to one another. Historically as women we have been silenced, and today we do not have the access or decision making power in relation to mainstream media we need. Pornography has become symbolic for us of the blatency of male supremacy, acted out, represented and enjoyed. It seems particularly insidious because it directs its appeal to the most vulnerable areas of the psyche. The proliferation of pornography is certainly part of a whole cultural order that undermines our sense of security and authority, but displacing too much anxiety onto it may not only waste some of our time and energy, but also may encourage the state to think it can throw us a censorship

sop and keep us happy, may even backfire in an unexpected wave of repression provoked by fears we've helped to generate.

Department of English
Dawson College

Notes

1. For American feminist discussions of pornography, see: Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975); Robin Morgan, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), pp. 163-169; Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: Avon, 1979); Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Perigree Books, 1979); Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980); Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge against Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Gloria Steinem, "Erotica vs. Pornography," in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), pp. 219-230. For some feminist discussions of pornography published in Canada, see: Myrna Kostash, "Power and Control, a Feminist View of Pornography," *This Magazine* 12:3, pp.5-7; Thelma McCormack, "Passionate Protests: Feminists and Censorship," *Canadian Forum* 59: 697, pp. 6-8; Lorenne Clark, "Pornography's Challenge to Liberal Ideology," *Canadian Forum* 59:697, pp. 9-12; Maude Barlow, "Pornography and Free Speech," *Common Ground* 2:3, pp. 28-30; Jillian Riddington, "Pornography: What Does the New Research Say?" *Status of Women News* 8:3, pp. 9-13; Micheline Carrier, *La pornographie: base idéologique de l'oppression des femmes* (Sillery, Québec: Apostrophe, 1983); Sara Diamond, "Of Cabbages and Kinks: Reality and Representation in Pornography," *Pink Ink* 1:5, pp. 18-23; *Canadian Woman Studies* 4:4 (issue on violence).
2. Griffin, p. 83.
3. Brownmiller, p. 394.
4. David Copp has a useful discussion of the problem of defining pornography in his introduction to *Pornography and Censorship*, ed. David Copp and Susan Wendell (New York: Prometheus Books, 1983), pp. 15-41.
5. Ellen Dubois and Linda Gordon make a similar point in their article, "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth Century Feminist Sexual Thought," *Feminist Studies* 9:1, p. 8. According to Dubois and Gordon, "The feminist movement has played an important role in organizing and even creating women's sense of sexual danger in the last one hundred and fifty years." For a discussion of nineteenth century feminists' organizational responses to this sense of danger from male violence, see Elizabeth Pleck, "Feminist Responses to 'Crimes against Women,' 1868-1896," *Signs* 8:3, pp. 451-470.
6. Morgan, p. 169.
7. Steinem, p. 221.
8. Susan Griffin makes this point: pornography "would have sexuality and punish feeling." *Pornography and Silence*, p. 178.
9. According to Kathleen Barry: "One of the effects of widespread pornography has been to introduce movies, books, or pictures as the erotic stimulant between two people, thereby reducing the need for people to relate to each other." *Female Sexual Slavery*, p. 213.

10. Not all feminists have jumped on the anti-pornography bandwagon. In 1979 Ellen Willis wrote a critique of Women against Pornography entitled, "Feminism, Moralism and Pornography," originally published in *The Village Voice* and reprinted in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 460-467. Deirdre English also published a similar critique, "The Politics of Porn," in *Mother Jones* 5:3, pp. 20-23, 43-49. Betty Friedan dismissed the anti-pornography marches in New York as "irrelevant" in *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit Books, 1981), p. 20. Here in Canada Thelma McCormack has been critical of feminists who advocate censorship of pornography. She makes the point that such advocacy "manipulates women's anxieties about rape and the safety of children while strengthening a system which creates these fears." "Passionate Protests: Feminists and Censorship," *Canadian Forum* 59:697, p. 8.

11. Barbara Ehrenreich in *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) argues that male rebellion against the "breadwinner role" preceded the women's movement. In this context she has an interesting discussion of *Playboy* which, in promoting a "new" consumerism for men emancipated from families, needed the nudes to demonstrate that these men were not effeminate. *Playboy* popularized the notion that "real men" did not need to be heads of households.

12. In *Public Man, Private Woman: Woman and Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981) Jean Bethke Elshtain has an interesting and critical discussion of this slogan.

13. Deirdre English discusses this in "The Fear that Feminism Will Free Men First," in *Powers of Desire*, pp. 477-483.

14. Elshtain, p. 236.

15. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

16. See Linda Gordon's discussion in *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974).

17. See William Leach, *True and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

18. Dubois and Gordon, p. 9.

19. Mark Connelly discusses the problem of defining prostitution and measuring its extent in *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 16.

20. See David Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973).

21. See James H. Gray, *Red Lights on the Prairies* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1971) and Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

22. Judith R. Walkowitz, "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Britain," in *Powers of Desire*, p. 442.

23. This argument is made by Judith R. Walkowitz with regard to Britain in her book *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 117, and in relation to the United States by Carl Degler in *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 258.

24. Connelly, p. 30.

25. Peter Gay argues that many Victorian women acknowledged and expected sexual pleasure in *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud, Volume One: Education of the Senses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

26. Quoted in Walkowitz: "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Britain," p. 443.

27. See Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

28. Ruth Rosen and Sue Davidson, eds., *The Maimie Papers* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1977).

29. Griffin, *passim.*

30. Dworkin, p. 167.

31. There has been some feminist exploration of the "darker" sides of female sexuality: see *Heresies* 12 (Sex Issue) and *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, published by Samois, a lesbian feminist S/M organization (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1981).

32. Lorenne Clark, "Pornography's Challenge to Liberal Ideology," *Canadian Forum* 59: 697, p. 10.

33. Dworkin, p. 203. Dworkin's view resurrects the "possessive individualism" to which many nineteenth century feminists saw themselves opposed in their attempt to fashion a more communitarian social vision. See Leach, p. 10.

34. See Michael J. Goldstein and Harold S. Kant, eds., *Pornography and Sexual Deviance: A Report of the Legal and Behavioral Institute, Beverly Hills California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Maurice Yaffé and Edward C. Nelson, eds., *The Influence of Pornography on Behaviour* (London: Academic Press, 1982); David Copp and Susan Wendell, eds., *Pornography and Censorship* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1983).

35. Lorenne Clark, "Liberalism and Pornography," in *Pornography and Censorship*, p. 53.

36. Susan Sontag makes this point in her essay, "The Pornographic Imagination," in *Perspectives on Pornography*, ed. Douglas A. Hughes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), pp. 131-169.

37. Clark, "Liberalism and Pornography," p. 53.

38. Elshtain, p. 225.

39. See Jessica Benjamin's essay, "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination," *Powers of Desire*, pp. 280-299.

40. Meg Luxton discusses the connection between the work lives and sexuality of her subjects in *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1980), pp. 55-65.

41. See Anne McLean, "Snuffing Out *Snuff*: Feminists React," *Canadian Dimensions* 12:8, pp. 20-23.