

## MANAGING THE DIFFERENCE

Geraldine Finn

I was both pleased and puzzled by "Fetishism and Pornography", a commentary on "The Pornographic Eye/I" by Graham Knight and Berkeley Kaite: pleased because it seemed to me that we agreed on what is fundamental to pornography (its "viciousness ... instated contradictorily within its representational form"); puzzled, because it seemed to them that we didn't. For they frame their description of the processes, affects and effects of fetishistic looking, which I think complements, develops and parallels my own analysis of male sexual subjectification, between two statements of difference, of opposition to and separation from both my analysis and my agenda (my gender, I wonder?)

They announce the difference in their opening paragraph, repeat it in much the same terms in the closing paragraph, and hint at it from time to time in the main body of their text by opposing their analysis to feminist critiques of porn which they claim do not sufficiently take into account "the way looking is a differentiated activity whose effect is produced in the plays and counter-plays of power-in-ideology". What they reject in fact, is the *conclusion* I draw in "The Pornographic Eye/I" from what seem to be a set of shared beliefs about pornography and its viciousness. They argue, in their first paragraph, for example, that my call for:

the unspecified de-sexualisation of representation stands in danger of implicitly reproducing the essentialist, binarist system of sexual different (sic) — 'either/orism' — in which patriarchal power consists.

They repeat the same charge almost verbatim in their closing paragraph, though they never explain how or why my conclusion stands in this particular

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danger. They do, however, imply that the perceived danger is immanent in my analysis as well, which also according to them:

remains uncritical in its assumption of the radical separation of subjects and objects ... does not distinguish fully enough between the voyeuristic and fetishistic, and the political implications of this vis-à-vis the internally contradictory and unstable mode of representation that pornography embodies.

These charges puzzle me first of all because they just don't stick; and secondly, because, given that, they obviously signal other differences between us that remain concealed and unspoken and are perhaps more fundamentally divisive than the ones Knight and Kaite attempt to name. In the first place, for example, I never actually make that call for the "unspecified de-sexualisation of representation" which these writers hold against me as implicitly reproducing the dualisms and oppositions "in which patriarchal power consists". What I suggest is the following:

We should aim at the *desexualisation* of pleasure, bodies, persons, relations, needs and not at sexual specificity.

We must refuse the sexual codification of our identity, our pleasures, our frustrations and our freedoms; stop looking at and appraising each other like commodities, 'objects' of 'desire'; and start presenting ourselves to the world and others in all our ambivalence and ambiguity.

Admittedly, this project of "desexualisation" as it stands is very vague and needs to be clarified and developed and "made practical" in the light of the analysis of sexuality, representation, masculinity and femininity, identity, desire, objectification, subjectification and spectatorship which produced it. And this is no small task; it calls for practice as well as theory — a creative praxis of systematic and relentless deconstruction. I do, however, clarify one practical consequence of my analysis and conclusion in the paper (and this is perhaps the real bone of contention between us). I argue that: "We will not fight pornography by censoring it, therefore, nor by flooding the market with alternative sexual imagery as is often argued by those who oppose present pornography".<sup>1</sup> I say this because my preceding analysis of pornography has demonstrated that what is pernicious about porn is not *what* it shows but *that* it shows: the fact/act of showing and looking itself. More precisely, I argue that what is wrong with pornography is its construction of sexual identity, sexual pleasure and sexual power through *spectatorship*; i.e. the form rather than the content of its representations. (A process which is not of course specific to pornography as my paper makes clear).

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It seems to me that Knight and Kaite admit as much when they introduce their own alternative "radical intervention in porno" with the reminder that:

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.

It would seem to follow from this, that it is precisely this *representational form* which must be repudiated if we want to develop alternatives to the sexuality depicted in and reproduced by pornography; that it is this very relationship between looking/representation and being, between *spectatorship and sexuality* which must be disrupted in sexist society, since that relationship is one of the principal modes of production of the masculine/feminine difference and the order of dominance constituted by it. If we want to undermine that order of dominance we must attack its representational form. As I argue:

Objectification and abstraction, emotional detachment, isolation and estrangement from the Other belong to the *voyeur-subject* of sexuality itself i.e. to the 'ontological condition of viewing' and not to the world-viewed. Tinkering with the latter does nothing to challenge the sexual régime articulated through the former ... its form, its logic, its mode of production of truth, knowledge, pleasure, need, people, practices and sexuality ...

It is hard for me to see how this call for the "desexualisation" of pleasure, persons, bodies etc., either presumes or risks the reproduction of the dangerous dichotomies attributed to it by Knight and Kaite: the separation of representation and the real, of objects and subjects, of masculine and feminine. Indeed, it is precisely because I recognise the constitutive relationship between (and correspondingly ambivalent identity of) real sex and represented sex, real masculinity and represented masculinity, real subjects and object and represented subjects and objects, that I repudiate the production of sexual imagery as any kind of means for liberating ourselves from the "austere monarchy" of pornographic/patriarchal sex. For, that denotes for me a 'sex' which is organised around and constructed through spectatorship: through the 'sighting' of an other precisely as Other i.e. as one who is neither particular nor specific nor *present to or with* me in a shared world; but *re-presented* by or *for* me as an anonymous and separate substitutable any/body, frozen in a time and space which is not mine, from which I am screened, and with which I have no other relationship than that of "voyeur". It is the *specular* (sexual) self that constructs the world and others as its (sexual) object, which must

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therefore be questioned and repudiated. And this can only be done through questioning and repudiating (sexual) spectatorship, sexual representation, itself.

Knight and Kaite are not prepared to go so far in their "radical intervention in porno", though they do not actually come right out and say so. What they do propose as an alternative to my strategy of "desexualisation" suggests as much, however: that there is still a place for pornography, for sexual spectatorship (for voyeurism and fetishism, therefore) in their particular politics:

To liberate ourselves from the "austere monarchy of sex", sex must be made quite literally insignificant, removed from the 'semicracy' that fetishism is all about; and to do that it must first be made to signify everything it can.

Frankly, I don't know what this means in terms of practice though I suspect it is a rather subtle expression of the call for more sexual imagery. On the one hand, it seems to call for deconstruction: for the deconstruction of the significance of sexual difference, of the difference different sex organs make, of gender, in other words; for the systematic dis-closure of sexual imagery, identity, pleasure and desire as socially constructed and political realities; for "confronting men with the phallic economy of their pleasure and desire" as these writers suggest; for what, in short, I have called elsewhere a "sex-critical" political practice — which I would therefore also endorse<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, it sounds like a call for more sexual imagery; for more and more varied representations of 'sex' (whatever this means) "to signify everything it can" (whatever that means); and this is a strategy which I must oppose. We cannot decree at will what 'sex' will mean in sexist society, or what social meanings will accrue to representations of male and female bodies, whether or not they are designated "sexual". For, in sexist society, representations of men and women (and male and female) have over-determined social meanings (male-active-dominant, female-passive-submissive etc.) which accrue to them regardless of the intentions of those who create or look at them. Besides, as "The Pornographic Eye/I" and this analysis of fetishism demonstrate, in sexist society the very act of representation reproduces actual male power positions.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the spectator-subject position of sexuality is not confined to men; women can assume it too, just as men can assume the position of 'feminized' object. But this does not mean that the structural relationship between spectator and 'object' and the social reality which produces it as both plausible and desirable cease to be sexist. A simple reversal of roles does nothing to undermine the fundamental social division between men and women (male and female) and the order of dominance and subordination between them, which the desire to represent/to look both assumes and

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reproduces. The privilege of the phallus, of patriarchy, is based on and in turn relies on the privilege of *sight* over the other senses: the sight of the penis, in particular, the reality of which must be forever veiled, concealed (con-cealed, hidden behind the cunt, the absence of penis which must therefore be constantly displayed); never presented as flesh, but only ever *re-presented* as phallus, if the privilege and power of those who possess it is to be maintained or realized in practice. Assuming the phallus may give power to some individuals who are not thus possessed (of the penis, that is) but it does absolutely nothing to undermine the hegemony of those who are of patriarchy: it merely adds another veil of "neutrality" to its authority by masking the *gender-specificity* of both its form and content.

I suspect that what Knight and Kaite really object to in my analysis and in my call for "desexualisation" is precisely this differentiation I insist on making between male and female social being and, therefore, between male and female sexuality; my insistence on the gender-specificity of phallic power and the sexual economy organized under its 'law'<sup>4</sup>. In "The Pornographic Eye/I", I, a woman, presume to describe and deconstruct the sexuality of men. I look at men looking at women (or other men or objects suitably 'feminized' for the showing) and designate this "looking" as specific to and constitutive of masculine identity, sexuality and power as *distinct from, though not unconnected with*, feminine sexuality, identity and powerlessness. In a sense, I assume the phallus, to which I am not entitled by virtue of my 'sex' (my genitals, that is), in order to unveil it (expose the man, the penis, beneath) and the mechanisms of division, denial, domination/and desire which constitute its power (men's power over women and women's corresponding powerlessness). Furthermore, I use it to disclose and affirm those very differences (between male and female, man and woman) which it has been the traditional function of the phallus to deny. (Man includes woman, remember: is the norm of Humanity, Rationality, Freedom and now Sex). Female difference and the threat it poses to male dominance has been traditionally managed by excluding and containing it at one and the same time within a system of polar oppositions which purports to be both natural and neutral: masculine/feminine, subject/object, self/other, mind/matter, culture/nature etc. The truth is, of course, that such categories are neither 'natural' nor 'neutral': they are socially constructed and they are hierarchical. For one pole and whatever is included under its category is always sanctioned by the polarity itself to dominate the other: thus masculine dominates feminine, subject object, mind matter, culture nature ... and so forth. "Indeed, why differentiate if not to form a hierarchy?"<sup>5</sup>

I think Knight and Kaite are made anxious by my assertion and affirmation of the sexual specificity of men in particular. Men are not used to being distinguished as a particular class of subjects, least of all 'sighted' and discussed by and from the standpoint of Man's traditional excluded Other, the

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sex which is usually silenced by sex itself. Perhaps because they are two speaking as one, they are uncomfortable with my refusal to *homogenize* sexuality and collapse men and women into one undifferentiated sexual subject (the undifferentiated subject of their own intervention?). They deal with their discomfort in very traditional ways, however: polarizing both the differences between us — forcing us into an either/or situation — and the differences I insist on affirming between male and female (sexual) subjectivity (“her analysis remains uncritical in its assumption of the radical separation between subjects and objects”). They polarize the difference between us by casting me as the Other, as the untruth to their Truth — the preserver and reproducer of patriarchal binarist essentialist sexual differences — who must, therefore, be refused, punished, disavowed, excluded, absorbed. Because they don’t agree with me, they actually exclude me from their discourse by placing me, politically and ideologically, beyond the pornographic pale:

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.

According to this, there are only two experiences of pornographic sexuality available: that of pornography’s viewers who are in a position to know about pornographic sex but apparently too mystified by it to know that they know; and that of an ‘objective’ and detached observer who, it is implied, doesn’t really know what she is talking about. Not only do Knight and Kaite falsify pornographic experience by reducing it to two mutually exclusive options here, they actually reproduce it by representing my specific difference from them in terms of the same “phallic economy” of subjects and objects and ‘either/or-ism’ they detect and deplore in pornography itself. By polarizing our differences like this, they continue to deny an opening for the other in their discourse of sex (for me, that is), and thus the possibility of effective *heterosexual* intercourse: between me/woman and the viewers/men, between me and my call for “desexualisation” and them and their desire to make ‘sex’ signify everything it can.

The polarity is false because I do not assume a “a privileged position of objective detachment” when I draw conclusions about men’s sexuality from pornography. I draw on my own experience as a woman in a sexist society which is saturated with sexual imagery: imagery which positions me as viewer, *vis-à-vis* the eroticised bodies of others, usually other women, whether I like it or want it or not. And it is from the contradictions and ambivalences of that position of enforced and en-gendered spectatorship that I speak of a sexuality

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which is not-mine but thrust upon me from all directions in our society of the spectacle. For, pornographic looking, as Knight and Kaite's own analysis of fetishism shows, is essentially *homocentric* and *homosexual*: a closed circuit of self-reference and self-desire designed precisely to manage "the threat to *male* dominance posed by *female* difference". If I succumb to pornography's seductions (to scopophilia) I thereby collude in my own *disavowal* as a woman, my own objectification, oppression, division, denial and domination, inasmuch as I am female; and at the same time confirm the privilege and power which possession of the (unsighted) penis confers on men. Pornography may offer men a choice, or at least a possibility of choice, between "objectification and identification (subjectification)", between the designated masculine subject position and the designated feminine object position. But whichever they chose they, men, remain in the privileged phallic and essentially *homosexual* position:

objectification resulting in pleasure from the fantasized control of the other, identification in narcissism and auto-erotic pleasure.

There is still no room in this oscillation for the other as other, for me as *woman*. As viewer of pornography I can identify with either the spectator or the 'object' viewed. If I identify with the object or person viewed (the appropriate feminized object of desire) I subordinate myself to the rule of the *man*-made artifact, arranged and produced to serve *his* desire, to be both idol and idolizer for *him*. If I identify with the male spectator-owner for whom the image has been arranged I also align myself with *his* desire and therefore *his* subjectivity. There is no place for women as *women* (as opposed to women as not-men) in this dynamic and therefore no possibility of real sexual relations: of relations between the sexes that is, between men and women who are not merely images of Man.

It is also false to claim that pornography says "nothing at all about their sexuality" to its viewers. In the first place, there is no exclusive and discrete group of pornography's "viewers" as such: we are all 'subjected' to it and we all learn from it. Secondly, because pornography does re-present 'truths' of male and female sexuality to us; for many of us it is the chief instrument of our sexual education (particularly if you use 'pornography' in its broadest sense, as I do, to include practically all representations of men and women as differentially sexed). It tells us that women desire to be desired by men and will go to great lengths to manipulate their bodies to call forth that desire; that women's sexual pleasure is in being the site/sight for men's sexual pleasure; which is, in turn, in looking at women's objectified and seamless bodies, manipulated and displayed for them, for their pleasure and penetration... and so forth. (Gay and lesbian pornography complicates the picture a bit, but

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still relies on and reproduces the same fundamental structures and meanings of so-called *heterosexuality* and desire; a heterosexuality which reveals itself, after all, as just “a mediated form of homosexuality”).<sup>6</sup>

However, pornography has nothing to say about the history, social construction, politics and lived reality of the sexualities it re-presents as ‘natural’, ‘necessary’ and ‘neutral’. And I agree with Knight and Kaite on this point, that “its silence in this respect, its ability to take that sexuality for granted, is the very privilege that must be shattered”. Deconstruction goes part of the way to shattering that silence and the privilege it confers, and if this is what Knight and Kaite mean by making ‘sex’ signify everything it can, then our conclusions are not as different as they seem to think. For that would surely have the effect of “desexualising” both the representation and the reality of specific differences.

Or would it? It really depends on what they mean by ‘sex’ and whether they plan to retain it as a privileged category or not (along with sexual identities, sexual pleasures, sexual desires etc.). Since I believe that sex cannot be separated from gender, that it:

has become a pertinent fact, hence a perceived category, because of gender ... in the sense that the hierarchical division of humanity into two transforms an anatomical difference (which is in itself devoid of social implications) into a relevant distinction for social practice.<sup>7</sup>

And since gender itself is created by oppression, I cannot condone the preservation of ‘sex’ (or any of the realities qualified as ‘sexual’: pleasures, desires, identities) as a privileged category for thought or action in any intervention in porn which purports to be radical. Hence my call for “desexualisation”. Since Knight and Kaite explicitly distance themselves from this call with their own project of making sex “signify everything it can” I fear that they may be actually advocating its antithesis: the *sexualisation* of everything. Though this is still ambiguous. If it means dis-closing the phallus as a penis (or prick), “the male sexuality behind the supposedly neutral position of authority”<sup>8</sup> in all its manifestations, then I am all in favour. If it means re-presenting the penis as a phallus, I’m not. The distinction is subtle but absolutely central to feminism. The first exposes and subverts the *homosexual* power of the phallus by unveiling its assumption as presumption,<sup>9</sup> the latter assumes that power to use it in traditional ways: to manage the threat of (female) difference, to conceal the gap between knowledge and belief (between patriarchal ideology and ideas and lived sexual experience), to ‘suture’ the lack of *heterosexual* relation between men and women, and to obscure the systematic oppression of women upon which all this phallic activity is built.

I hope, therefore, that Knight and Kaite will clarify and “make practical”



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their proposed political agenda: to remove sex "from the 'semicracy' that fetishism is all about", to make sex "signify everything it can", so that I can understand what exactly it is that they are proposing. More importantly, perhaps, I hope they will also clarify and likewise make practical the position from which they speak. For, though they speak with one voice, they are not one but two: two different sexes too. And since the threat of female difference is so central to their analysis of pornography I cannot help wondering how they managed that difference in the production of this text itself, which has, after all, only one sexually undifferentiated voice. Whose voice is it and what did they do with their differences, the different sites/sights they occupy in the political economy of sex and gender? Since they are silent on this it is tempting to surmise that they denied the difference, projected it upon the Other — me — and repudiated it there by polarising it into an opposition: either my gender(ed)/ agenda or theirs.

Pointe Gatineau

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Editors' note: See *CJPST*, Vol. 10, n° 1:2 (Winter/Spring 1985) and, Vol. 10 n° 3 (Fall/1986).

### Notes

1. More recently I have argued that some form of social control may be an appropriate way of fighting pornography. See Finn 1986.
2. See Finn 1986, especially 1986a.
3. See Gidal 1984: 27.
4. "This problem of dealing with difference without constituting an opposition may just be what feminism is all about" (Gallop 1982: 93).
5. Reynaud 1980: 10.
6. Gallop 1982 : 84.
7. Delphy 1984: 144. See Finn 1985, 1986a, 1986b for a development of this argument.
8. Gallop 1982 : 122.
9. Gallop 1982: 192.

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