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AGAINST CENSORSHIP

By Sara Diamond

"In using explicit sex to demonstrate explicit sexism, the anti-porn movement locates itself within the discursive framework of pornography itself. Where pornography is posed as an embodiment of sexism pornography itself comes to represent a body of evidence. Attacking, or even getting rid of the evidence, even assuming this evidence to be male power, does not deal with the way that power is articulated not just between a class of men and a class of women, but through and across a variety of social practices."

(Leslie Stern, "The Body as Evidence", SCREEN, Vol. 23, #5, Nov.-Dec., 1982)

The problem of pornography too easily becomes reduced to a chicken and egg relationship. Some feminists argue that the elimination of sexism would certainly forever abolish pornography and that likewise, the censorship of pornography would make a vast dent in sexism. Which came first; the structure of sexual and social practices around sexuality and the imaging of sexual practices within a specific set of codes becomes irrelevent. But this is a crucial issue. As Marxists and feminists concerned with sexual representation and with sexist practices we must develop a strategy that seeks to change the production and reproduction of sexism at its root. As Stern proposes, we must be clear about the ways that ideology is produced and read, and not make the idealist error of fighting at all costs to remove the image of sexism and leave its structure in tact.

I would argue as well, that even were pornography somehow made invisible tomorrow by the existing bourgeois/patriarchal state, that sexism would flourish and that equally "harmful" and sexist images would continue to pervade our culture. The transformation of sexual structures will not mean that all sexual imagery disappears, nor that images which some might consider pornographic will disappear. In fact, the production of new ideological messages about sexuality, including visual representations, has been and will continue to be an important part in the ongoing struggle for power waged by movements for social/sexual change against the existing structure of sexuality and its enforcers. Thus, images of sexuality within the culture are not monolithic, either in their context, their content or in the consciousness of the reader; attempts to define correct and incorrect forms of representation of sexuality and of sexuality crash into a dead end of subjectivity. We can certainly analyse images, but judging their morality (whether socialist, feminist etc.) is another matter. We must consider the strategy of censorship within an analysis of the bourgeois/patriarchal state as a regulatory force for a particular sexual vision, one which

corresponds to the maintenance of male, capitalist power.

Social classes and one might add genders, sustain their rule over other social classes through a consolidated system of beliefs that are generated through lived experience within a stratified society. We experience relationships of power practically, their interpretation becomes common sense. The class that rules the economy and state structure has greater access to the apparati of cultural production and dissemination. Its ideas are reinforced by the ease of propagation and by the reality that is affirmed daily.

But that reality is filled with inconsistency and specificity. On the plane of bourgeois ideology, REAL women and images of liberated female mountaineers hauling their samsonite luggage up Mount Everest battle simultaneously for allegiance. Neither the experience within class and patriarchal society, nor the ideologies of the ruling class are monolithic. Oppressed people appropriate and redefine ideological expression in their own terms. Expressions are specific to their production and context. Consciousness within social groups and within individuals is uneven and often contradictory. While most men express elements of sexism because of the experienced dominance of men over women, men are not inherently or naturally mysoginist or violent, and many men experience real grief and depletion because of the emotional and sexual bankruptcy of patriarchal rule, Women, as people oppressed by sexism react in different ways to this oppression, based in part on their class location, their sexual orientation, etc. Women resist powerlessness in many ways, few women define or perceive themselves as victims, whether or not they perceive sexism.

Our perceptions of cultural products are formed by our own location within historically bound ideas and within society. The meaning of an image of sexuality is read differently by a white ruling class male, a Black lesbian, a white working class woman, etc. As Terry Eagleton states of literature, "Literary value is a phenomenom which is produced in the appropriation of the text." Rather than remove the image, the task must surely be to transform the location of the reader and the consciousness with which she or he reads the image.

The image itself is not a linear representation of reality, it neither shows reality as it truly is, not does it simply reflect dominant values. Rather, an image is produced under specific circumstances:

"There is a common-sense view that visual representations like film and photography show what is really happening, that they show reality just as it is. But the visual meanings in photography are produced in just the same ways as meaning in linguistic statement. Their meanings arise from the various elements that are combined, how the picture is framed, what lighting is given, what is connotated by dress and expression,

the way the elements are articulated together."
(Rosalind Coward, "Sexual Violence and Sexuality", FEMINIST REVIEW, #11,
Summer,1982. pg. 11)

Pornography is a commodity, entailing specific economic relations of production and distribution. As a language of images, porn draws on a set of stereotypes which themselves limit the extent to which it represents reality. For example, while nakedness is without intrinsic meaning, the consistent association of the female nude with ownership and a code of placement: frontal display, submissive facial expression, all assume a male viewer who will experience both ownership and desire when confronted with the image. As a genre, pornography, like advertising entails a strong element of fantasy, an abstraction of unmet needs restated in a variety of forms. It expresses a deeply socialized male fear of real women, with all the concomittent emotional needs, demands for equal power, etc.

In this sense, pornography is about the current organization of sexuality within this society, with the inequities of power between men and women, between heterosexuality and homosexuality. As a visual representation of what sexuality is fantasized, by an industry, to be,it triggers and releases desire in ways that reinforce existing power. However, there is a vast gulf between pleasure at regressive, boring and unequal fantasy and a direct reenactment of the fantasy in the real world. The power of pornography is two-fold: in its fantasy quality (in this it is not unlike other media) and in its reference to sexuality, a hallowed, taboo and highly regulated area in our society.

Pornography has received "special attention" from feminism for a number of reasons. It is the only existing, widely available information on apparent male attitudes towards sexuality that exists. It deals with sexuality, a realm that we as women are taught to fear, to avoid and to experience in very specific ways. If men are taught that sex is about conquest, then we are taught that sex, at its best is about love, committment and giving and at its worst, about loss of power. If men's sexuality is channelled and encouraged, then ours is supressed and discouraged. Pornography appears to embody all that is wrong between men and women within its explicit imagery. It makes us uncomfortable because it excludes us and misrepresents us, it doesn't give our sexuality a chance. And just as men are taught that sex is a "naughty" area, so are we.

But is pornography any more insidious than other sexist media images? Is not the ironclad monopoly of the mass media and advertising more destructive, more of a restatement of sexist, capitalist values, then pornography, with its slightly elicit character? Are we not simply again reifying sexuality, giving its imagery more power and de facto accepting as less oppressive dominant imagery by concentrating our fire on pornography?

An important element of feminism's struggle for power, must be a struggle to take control over the definition of our sexuality as women. The feminist movement has concentrated on fighting for reproductive rights so that women can have choices about whether or not they have sex and children. The lesbian movement has fought for women to be able to choose who they will have sexual and emotional relationships with. But, in general, feminism has not spoken directly to the issue of sexuality. We have not spoken of our desires and our needs as sexual beings. I believe that the demand for censorship of existing sexual imagery is a reactionary demand, one that, if fulfilled, will make it impossible for women to discuss, represent and redefine their desire.

The anti-porn movement speaks of women as victims of male sexuality. It equates pornography with violence, a false equation. It equates male sexuality with destructiveness. This is not a materialist concept. There is nothing intrinsic about either male or female sexuality. Even in this society, with its enforced division of labour and seperate socialization processes there is massive transgression of the norm. Some women do respond to visual imagery with desire: the gaze that views the pornographic image is not necessarily a male gaze, it can be a feminine gaze, searching for clues of submerged desire, it can be a lesbian gaze, it can be a homosexual gaze, and within each of these types, there exists a capacity for more than one type of pleasure or response.

Every set of criteria that have been evolved to define pornography break down.For example, the recent Fraser Commission proposes controlling images of genital, anal, and oral intercourse. It describes the touching of breasts, and genitals as "lewd", and therefore to be restricted. This reiterates notions of sexual contact of the most mundane sort as being "dirty", unmentionable and certainly unrepresentable within the public sphere. This restriction of sexual representation simply continues a long tradition which mystifies sex. It also continues a seperation between the private, "feminine" world of home and bedroom, a seperation which feminists have sought to make public and politicize in terms of other issues.

Other definitions are equally fraught. The McKinnon/Dworkin Minneapolis by-law uses criteria such as "body parts exhibited". "penetrated by objects", "postures of sexual submission" as criteria. These are ambiguous, if one believes that there is nothing inherently wrong with finding visual imagery erotic, and that women, as well as men might associate memories of pleasure with, for example, an image of a penis or a breast, then "objectification" as a principle becomes a problem. As well, penetration could mean masturbation and postures of sexual submission are subjective, read through the viewer's concept of power. And what if a woman does feel pleasure at an image of a man lying naked at her feet, should there be legal sanctions

against such a fantasy?

Amongst feminists, let alone a broader community, there is wide divergence on what is erotic(defined as okay to get off on) and what is pornographic(nasty). Many feminist submissions to the Fraser Commission used terms such as equality, loving exchange, consent, to define criteria for erotica, material that would somehow be miraculously exempted from the censor's gaze. But these definitions are themselves a problem. It is one thing to set goals for a future, feminist society, and to attempt to represent these goals in propagandistic terms in a variety of media, but it is dangerous to create yet another set of criteria to which female sexuality must submit. We do not read and experience images of sexuality in the same ways. Our sexuality is not the same , simply because we are women, nor are our fantasies. What is necessary is to fight for a braoder social space in which to fight for new definitions and representations of ourselves as sexual subjects, not to create restrictions through censorship or through correct ideas of sex.

To-day's debate takes place within a concrete conjunture in Canadian politics. In our current economic and social crisis the organized right is on the rise. Right- wing governments rule on both a provincial and federal level. New censoship laws are coming into effect, strengthening the role of provincial censorboards and restructuring the powers of Canada Customs and the Criminal Code. Feminist or socialist demands for censorship rebound within this context. The recent Fraser Commission dismissed the briefs of "Marxist feminists" who were critical of the nature of the state and of reinforcing its powers to define sexuality. Instead, it embraced an ideology that sees the Canadian state as defending the rights of minorities and the disenfranchised amongst its subjects, a kind of liberal and benevolent dad of a state, committed to the equality of all.

If pornography, with its depictions of male power over women, is ideological, then the pro-censorship position is equally so, for it accepts a version of the bourgois state as at best a paternalistic, protective and positive force, willing to legislate an unrepressive and nonexploitative form of sexuality, and at worst, a neutral structure that can be mainipulated to become a means of positive political change in defining sexual practices.

Legislative demands do not always reinforce illusions in the state. However, my belief is that every demand must be assessed in terms of its ability to weaken state structures and control versus its ability to strengthen that control. Demands for censorship both reinforce an illusion in the nature of the state and immediately strengthen its control over the terrain of sexual practices. Who are we asking to determine which images

are permissible: customs officials, judges, censor boards, police, and the institutions responsive to pressures from these forces of repression to make decisions, in our name, as to what representations are acceptable, what sex is good and what sex is bad. No thanks.

? should we allow them

Let us look briefly at the record of the Canadian state and some of its institutions on this issue of regulating sexuality. The Canadian state continues to persecute lesbians and homosexuals, that is non-dominant forms of sexuality. Why is it that we have the most regressive legislation on maternity rights of any first world country, how much access to abortion is there, why was birth control only legalized in 1966, why is there no sex education within the schools, why is there no sex education on television, why is it that the ratio of censor boards and customs cracking down on sexually explicit art , feminist and gay and lesbian imagery is disproportionately high in relation to the number of porn tapes and magazines seized and fined? Do we simply need to redefine the law or is there in fact a systematic vision of what forms of sexuality are permissible that the state legislates and controls? Try to get sexual orientation into provincial human rights legislation or the charter and then ask yourself the question again.

How can we argue for strengthening existing structures of repression in relation to sexuality? We live in a patriarchal-capitalist society, with a state structure that exists to maintain the rule of a patriarcal capitalist class. In the practical sense of Canadian past practice, we see a history of repressive legislation and practices.

And what does censorship mean within the context of the current wave of right-wing governments? Coming from British Columbia, the idea of calling on Bill Bennett's government to set up a video censorship process, enforce existing obscenity legislation and so on seems ludicrous. This is a government whose supporters enthusiastically campaign to ban books in various school districts, who hound and harrass teachers who provide sex education for their students. This is a government that systematically destroys services to battered women, to abused and sexually abused children; that removes clauses covering sexual harrassment and homosexuality from human rights legislation; that cuts all equal opportunity programmes in education for women , the list is endless. They are not our allies, and one does not need a sophisticated Marxist critique to take notice of this fact.

Censorship as a strategy places us in the same arena as extreme right-wing forces who have been able to dominate the anti-porn terrain in England and the United States. The organized right has a coherent programme in relation to sexuality, one that reinforces the nuclear family, restricts the rights of women and children and would abolish the sexual rights of minorities. To believe that we can make an objective alliance on the single issue of pornography and hope to continue to fight for a

progressive programme on other sexual issues is a misapprehension of the existing balance of power.

What is needed instead is a struggle for sexual freedom, a struggle that is tied to a fight for equality on the economic and social fronts. This struggle would include:

1) Economic independence for women and youth to undermine the basis of sexual exploitation. Until women can earn decent wages and have access to all areas of employment and until options exist for youth, women and young people will be forced into prostition and the porn industry to make a living. They will be forced to stay in oppressive, violent or abusive family situations. This fight must be linked to the struggle for full employment for all Canadians.

2) Childcare, and healthcare must be defended and established to allow women full and equal participation within society.

3) Resources must be devoted to services for battered women and abused and sexually abused children to ameliorate the systematic victimization of women and children by violent men. State funding for rape relief centres must be augmented.

4) The availability of safe birth control and abortion on demand is essential.

5) All sanctions against sexual choice must be ended. The right to be lesbian or homosexual must be enshrined at all levels of Canadian law.

6) Young people must no longer be penalized for exploring their sexuality.

7) Existing legislation against sexual abuse and violence must be strengthened.

8) Social resources must be devoted to producing materials that provide an alternative to existing sexual imagery, and to the dissemination of these materials. This includes sex education resources for school curriculum and for community sex education for adults and young people. Such material must be made available on television. FTNT.

I want to dwell briefly on the importance of creating new images of sexuality that redefine sexual experience through the eyes of the oppressed, through women, lesbians, gay men and that offer alternatives to heterosexual men in terms of attitudes towards sexuality in general and to women.

Sexuality needs to be integrated into the vast array of art, documentary, film, video and other forms that delve into all aspects of our lives. This requires work that touches on sexual experience as an aspect of our lives and work that deals

exclusively with sexuality as a terrain of pleasure and conflict. While the fight for material demands around our sexual lives is essential, the of representation cannot be left untouched. A critique of pornography can take place within the language of sexuality, for it is here that ruptures from the dominant ideology can be articulated and a new, multi-patterned hegemony, one controlled by women as sexual subjects and men who are critical of the dominant sexual culture can evolve.

It is a mistake to leave the terrain to the pornographers, to throw up our hands in despair and leave sexuality and its public di ɜplay and debate forbidden and taboo. We need to make a vital intervention into existing sexual practices, one that forces open the assumptions and interpretations of existing imagery as well as the practices of sexuality.

The danger of censorship, as has been effectively demonstrated by the Ontario Censor Board,
. by the raids on the Body Politic, by the action of the Manitoba School trustees, by the banning of Confused, Sexual Views by the Vancouver Art Gallery...is that this discourse will be blocked. Yet, it is precisely this process that is necessary to create the thinking human beings essential to make fundamental changes within this society.

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The appropriation, redefinition + creation of 'alternative' images will only be effective as part of a broader social movement for control + power in relation to sexuality. But it is a critical ~~[illegible]~~ weapon in our arsenals. Every social movements needs to restate and struggle through its own representation in ideological terms. Cultural production tied to movements of resistance has played an important role in building the workers movement internationally + anti-imperialist resistance. It already exists as an important element of feminist organizing, on issues including sexuality + as cult. expression by gays + lesbians. Certainly, the dominant culture will try to absorb these expressions of resistance, but that capacity to absorb is part of the contested terrain + refers directly to the struggle: how willing is capitalism to transform the relations of reproduction + end the suppression of alternative sexualities? There are limits to the absorption.

While I have argued for an opening in our social space + in our strategies for a range of images that explore sexuality, I believe that some are more needed than others. I cannot emphasize enough that much of the work being done in this area is by + for sexual minorities, by those who are excluded by assumption from the commercially constructed male gaze. Issues such as challenging that male voyeur to examine + confront his sexual colonization of excluding the viewer; of creating ambiguity + reversals in power relations; of deconstructing ~~[illegible]~~ porn + mass media images to uncover their construction. That is, their ideological natures are already aspects of critical artists' work. What is being argued for here is more production, mass dissemination +

a link to a social movement that does not have as its starting point an anti-sexual stance. If sexuality is a social construct, if it is not a natural, intrinsic force, then we must continue + accelerate playing a role in its deconstruction (as it exists) + its reconstruction (as we wish it to be).

It is my sense that new sexual images are not fundamentally different from other forms of critical discourse. If Pornography restates men's control over + distance from women + sexual experience itself, then surely other discourses (including the academic) do as well. As feminists have fought to introduce subjectivity into all discourse, so must we with sexuality + within its languages, including the visual. I would contend that there are many elements of men's sexuality, including the feminine, that are EXPERIENCED in everyday life but not reinforced by the dominant visual regime. Some of these elements are even felt while watching imagery. Part of the work of cultural reconstruction is to open up + challenge these perceptions.

[redacted] While the viewer of sexual images may well be designated as the male archetype, [redacted] it is not always the case that she is. The argument for [redacted] critiquing + creating imagery is an argument for recognizing + constructing a female sexual subject, one who perceives with all her senses, including sight. For ∴, the right to dismiss objectification, not only of self but of others, [redacted] without guilt is very important. For we are not simply victims of others' sexuality, as portrayed, we are sexual subjects, [redacted] as well.

For ♀ to acknowledge pleasure from imagery + to find images that give us knowledge + a sense of truth about ourselves is an important part of the struggle for power. And it is through this process in part, of creating images primarily for + by ♀, that the dominant coding can be broken.

While we are quickly socialized into gender categories, we are capable of resistance at many levels, from cultural transgression to political organization. As an artist, I am interested in working to develop a language that restates + strengthens aspects of that resistance, with all of its confusion + struggle. ~~without images it is hard to know that we exist + are associate forces~~

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