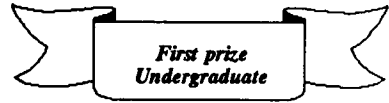


Pornography: A Feminist- Existentialist Analysis

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IN THIS PAPER I WILL EXAMINE PORNOGRAPHIC representation and gender from a feminist-existentialist position. My first outline for this topic attempted to support censorship of pornography through existentialist philosophy. I planned to take specific examples of pornography in film and video and use them to discuss an existentialist's views on the issues of freedom and responsibility. I wanted to point out just what should be cut out of pornography to make it acceptable to feminists. Catharine MacKinnon's *Feminism Unmodified* showed me that an analysis of the Theatres Act of Ontario could reveal the inadequacy of a censorship law written by, interpreted by, and enforced by men. However, further reading led me to the conclusion that these legal issues are secondary and can only be approached after the central one of visual representation is thoroughly explored. I intend to refer to pornography in the visual media while discussing the following aspects of representation and existentialism: perception, responsibility and freedom.

First let me define some terms. I derive the meaning of representation from two feminist writers: Annette Kuhn and Geraldine Finn. In *Women's Pictures, Feminism and Cinema*, Kuhn defines "signification and representation ... as processes of meaning production" (11). She says that the sex-gender system, through which women are dominated by men, is supported by this process. Both Kuhn and Finn see objectification of the image content, whether person or thing, as inherent in any visual representation. I use representation to refer to an image which is tailor-made for the patriarchal male gaze, that is, a stereotyped image of women. For

example, in *Patriarchy and Pleasure: The Pornographic Eyell*, Finn uses the phrase "woman as the object of his petrifying gaze" (83). I believe she means that the woman represented visually is frozen in one stance and only one aspect of her humanity is made visible—the angle most supportive of the male viewer's patriarchal biases. A stereotype does not allow room for growth or dialogue, that is, for normal human development, movement and life.

By existentialism, I am referring to that contemporary European philosophy which sees each individual as constantly striving to realize or disclose herself. "Existence precedes essence": we become what we choose to be and this is our essence. We are "being" or "what is" at birth. As we disclose ourselves to the world, as we develop and make life choices, we are existing. In this sense, representation does not acknowledge the existence of the person represented. Rather, it objectifies or freezes her into a rigid mould which is transferred to real women by the power of representation as a process of meaning production.

By phenomenology, I mean an existentialist analysis of the world, particularly of perception. I will be referring here to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of the primacy of perception. He claims that all levels of our experience, such as imagination, culture and language, are based on perception, which is more than a collection of sensations. Merleau-Ponty defines perception simply: "To perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body" (1964, 226). He tells us that we can trust our bodies to reveal the truth about what we per-

ceive. Doubt is not a sign of error in ourselves, but an indication that there is something to doubt. He encourages us to accept our intuition as the only way to truth.

To seek the essence of perception is to declare that perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to truth.... The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible. (1962, xvi-xvii)

We are bonded to the world because we are part of it. Our physical connection to the world and to each other is deeply rooted in our beings; it is undeniable. This approach presumes an acceptance of nature and mortality as essential components of existence.

In "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty speaks of inspiration as a literal exchange of energy between body and world: "There really is inspiration and expiration of Being" (1964, 167). He writes this in the context of the painter Paul Klee's description of his own tangible experience of trees as other subjects:

In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me ... I was there, listening ... I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 167)

I interpret Klee's words as a rejection of the dualistic, sexual ideology which we inherited from natural philosophy of the seventeenth century. The father of modern science, Francis Bacon, saw nature as feminine, ripe for mastery by male scientists who "storm her strongholds" through experimentation.

His central metaphor—science as power, a force virile enough to penetrate and subdue nature—has provided an image that permeates the rhetoric of modern science (Fox-Keller, 48).

Although Klee simply reverses the sexual direction of Bacon's imagery, his words celebrate the feminine principle by turning away from the scientific dichotomy to a holistic internalization of nature, life and death.

As humans, we are undeniably part of the physical world: we are susceptible to disease, aging and death. Finn says that this openness to "penetration" leaves men feeling vulnerable; they try to circumvent their vulnerability through the aloofness of representation.

The desire to view, which is incited in the subject—Man from all directions in our "society of the spectacle" not only by pornography and publicity, but also by science for which "objective observation" is absolutely constitutive—is really a desire for the condition of viewing i.e. for the "ontological status of separation," of Sovereignty. For the viewer is essentially external to the world—viewed and therefore uneffected by it. (Finn 1985, 88)

By creating an image of another person we objectify that person. The essence of a subject cannot exist in a picture; an image cannot transcend itself. To deny the autonomous subjectivity of another person through objectification is to deny the intimacy of our connection to that other subject. If we are not connected to other subjects, we are less likely to suffer as they suffer.

In *Pornography and Silence*, Susan Griffin tells us that the pornographer is afraid of his emotions because he fears his own mortality:

He is brutal to all that might be emotionally sensitive in himself. He destroys the emotional part of himself, in himself or in a projected image of himself. For he is terrified of what he denies. (87)

Griffin and Klee are referring to what Finn calls the divided male subject, "the cornerstone of patriarchal power" (1985, 88). Finn traces this divided self back to Greek mythology and Plato. Through reli-

gion, science, technology and philosophy, man learned to separate mind from body, feelings from actions, intellect from nature. Woman becomes synonymous with nature, body, emotions, birth and death.

[This] has enabled men, the knowers, to falsely abstract themselves from nature, as if they were not themselves historical, material, organic and social beings. This abstraction of men from the rest of nature, and from women, is the root at one and the same time of both their power, for they can be ruthless with others with whom they feel no identification, and of their alienation from the world, each other and themselves. (1985, 88)

Pornography is a tangible example of this alienation: the male observer-knower watches the female object-feeler without revealing any part of himself to the world, to the Other. He does not perceive the situation in its entirety, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, but chooses bits and pieces. He is the consumer; the woman is the consumed item. Thus the pornographer is in a position of power. By scrutinizing the other at a distance, by refusing genuine interaction, he creates a hierarchy in which he is the dominant subject. As a subject who has been reduced to object status through the representation process, the woman imaged is subordinate. This relationship between the viewer and the viewed is a reflection of the gender hierarchy in society and supports its perpetuation. Just as any man owns any woman by purchasing her in pornographic magazines or videotapes, the male breadwinner also owns his wife's sexuality and the male employer owns his secretary.

It is the power of patriarchy, men's will inscribed on women's bodies which excites the pornographer and at the same time refers him to his penis, the biological alibi of his difference and of his membership in the sex class which rules, as well as the symbolic instrument of his domination. (Finn 1985, 88)

Finn contends that erotica is not the solution (1986a). For example, imagine two sexual images of a woman. In one she is alone, masturbating; in the other she is performing fellatio. Civil libertarians might suggest that the masturbation scene

serves as an erotic alternative to pornography because the woman is not represented as servile. Instead she is seen as an autonomous individual pleasuring herself. In fact, the image of the woman alone is no less pornographic or more autonomous than the image of the woman performing fellatio. They are both pornographic because in them woman is objectified by our gaze; that is, she is rendered an object, a thing, useful only as an indicator of the power invested in the subject looking at her. The pornographer gains a sense of security from the constant reminder of the physical and gendered differences between himself and the object viewed, the woman. The pornographer depends on the signs and images which delineate himself from the subordinate other for his claim to omnipotence. Through his body, which Merleau-Ponty calls "an intertwining of vision and movement," the pornographer senses the power dynamic which occurs each time he gains sexual excitement from looking at an image of woman. Merleau-Ponty writes:

For the imaginary is much nearer to, and much farther away from, the actual; nearer because it is in my body as a diagram of the actual, with all its pulp and carnal obverse [*son envers charnel*] exposed to view for the first time ... and the imaginary is much farther away from the actual because the painting is an analogue only according to the body. (1964, 164-165)

Sartre writes in *The Psychology of Imagination*: "The imaginary thus represents at each moment the implicit meaning of the real" (Molina, 86). The body is the connector between reality and imagination. What we feel as real is real whether or not our intellects accept it.

For you can only objectify the living by taking away its life: by killing it either in fact or fantasy. And the latter is just as violent as the former. For fantasy "is precisely what reality can be confused with. It is through fantasy that our conviction of the worth of reality is established..." it teaches us how to see the world (Finn 1985, 89).

Pornographers insist that the fantasy of pornography has only a positive effect on the body. They claim that the sexual drive, eros, which is natural to everyone, has been repressed by society, and this

repression has led to millions of sexually unfulfilled, unhappy people. They say that pornography's role is to stimulate the healthy release of a natural drive. In fact, the pornographic fantasy usually depicts debased women who are humiliated and often beaten. Pornographers gain their erotic satisfaction at the expense of women whom they refuse to see as other subjects. Susan Griffin writes: "In his mind, he [the pornographer] has substituted the actuality of desire with a fantasy of violence" (106).

At the same time, civil libertarians believe that pornographic representation does not affect the rest of the viewer's life. Pornography supporters attempt to erect a steel wall between fantasy and reality. Griffin exposes the contradiction inherent in their position through her discussion of advertising.

Both the social scientist and the pornographer collaborate on the assumption that pornographic imagery does in fact affect behaviour. (105)

Griffin reminds us of the subliminal images of breasts and penises used in television advertisements for alcohol and cigarettes. The proven ability of these techniques to attract consumers belies the pornographer's assertion that fantasy is separate from reality. Fantasy and reality are clearly connected through our bodies.

I would like to address two closely linked tenets of both representation and existentialism: freedom and responsibility. According to existentialist philosophy, freedom implies responsibility. When we choose to exist, that is, to strive to achieve our essence, we are free. Through self-disclosure we become free of being, of what is. Thus, freedom is inherent in existence. By choosing to exist, we are able to accept the freedom of the Other. The two, existence and freedom, are inextricably intertwined.

Pornographers have appropriated freedom for themselves without accepting the responsibility inherent in that freedom. In existentialist terms, a person who has not accepted his place in nature and nature's place in himself has not begun to exist, that is, to strive for disclosure of his essence. Such a person is not himself free and therefore is not capable of recognizing the freedom of other people's

consciousness. In feminist terms, a person who has not accepted her or his own mortality cannot recognize the subjectivity and freedom of the Other who is the source of mortality, the mother. This desire to control mortality is generalized to all women in pornography. Simone de Beauvoir defines freedom thus:

A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied. And it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future: the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. (91)

The freedom of speech upon which pornographers insist is really a freedom to oppress. In fact, pornography is not a reaction to sexual repression, or a radical fringe in an abominably prudish society, as pornographers like to claim. It is really a conservative element itself, because it bolsters the status quo—patriarchy. In *Pornography and Silence*, Susan Griffin accuses pornographers of practising censorship of truth and reality through their denial of emotions and mortality.

Just as the sadomasochist tells us he seeks feelings, when indeed he is afraid of feeling, so also the pornographer, who says he would bring sexuality into consciousness, and who says that he deserves the freedom to speak of sexuality, in fact wishes to suppress and silence sexual knowledge. This is the message of the brutality of pornography: the pornographer is a censor. (88)

MacKinnon argues that the pornographer's claim to freedom of speech is really a claim to freedom of action and oppression.

As a social process and as a form of "speech," pornography amounts to terrorism and promotes not freedom but silence. Rather it promotes freedom for men and enslavement and silence for women. (129-130)

In *Women Against Censorship*, Varda Burstyn does not challenge this enslavement in her proposals. Rather, she puts the responsibility for deal-

ing with the pain of pornography on the shoulders of the victims themselves—women. She suggests women use personal confrontation and lobbying to make change within their communities.

This approach may take longer and require more effort, but it avoids the dangers of state determination and control, and encourages neighbourhood accountability. (160)

Her theory expects much of women and little of men. In a patriarchal society there is no motivation for men to give credence to women's demands on an individual basis or otherwise. Burstyn directs those women who have been physically and emotionally damaged by male pornographers to the courts where they will be examined and judged by male standards. Again, there is little support for women in this suggestion. It does not challenge patriarchy. None of Burstyn's proposals get to the root of the problem, which is that pornography is a tool of patriarchy. Although state control of pornography would also be enforced and interpreted by men, it has the potential to shield a large number of women from the trauma of rape and court appearance.

In "Sexual Representation and Social Control," Finn explains the realistic benefits to women of state control over pornography.

It offers the possibility of some respite from the daily grind of total and relentless sexual assault by images, prescriptions, promises, threats and expectations of gender-appropriate "sexual" behaviour, as well as some social recognition that: (i) pornography and sexual imagery in general is political and problematic, a necessarily contested terrain in a sexist society; (ii) that pornography is a social issue and not a personal one, and therefore requires social as well as personal solutions; (iii) that producers of sexual imagery in a sexist society which relies on sex to be sexist, must be prepared to be held accountable for their actions; (iv) that the state be required to use its present powers to serve at least some of women's perceived interests in this arena. (26)

In "The Politics of Sex," Finn analyzes the dangers to which Burstyn refers: "state determina-

tion and control." There will be feminist victims of censorship; this reality is part of the ambiguity of life.

There is no course of action in the struggle against patriarchy that is not a compromise and a gamble and that does not entail significant cost to ourselves.... But that is what revolutionary struggle is all about: acting in conditions of uncertainty and risk, thrusting the spade under the roots of our own lives never knowing quite what it will strike. (12)

Finn employs a phenomenological approach to the problem of pornography, reflecting Merleau-Ponty's observation that: "contradiction appears as the very condition of consciousness" (1962, 203). Censorship of pornography is a compromise, the lesser of several evils. In my opinion, Finn's approach is a holistic, existentialist one. She includes state control of representation in an overall strategy of working from within and without the patriarchal system. Women's attempts to change institutions should proceed from without through lobbying, alongside work from within the same institutions. In this way she includes Burstyn's neighbourhood accountability with pornography laws. More importantly, she explains the "genesis of meaning" of patriarchy and puts it into the context of our everyday lives (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xix). This understanding allows informed decision-making on strategy priorities. It is difficult to achieve because it demands a broad knowledge.

Reflection even on a doctrine will be complete only if it succeeds in linking up with the doctrine's history and the extraneous explanations of it, and in putting back the causes and meaning of the doctrine in an existential structure ... we must seek an understanding from all these angles simultaneously, everything has meaning, and we shall find this same structure of being underlying all relationships. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xix)

Merleau-Ponty's holistic approach is also reflected in Iris Murdoch's philosophy. In *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts*, she writes: "It is a task to come to see the world as it is" (91). Her description of love as selfless attention to detail parallels Merleau-Ponty's approach to perception. If

we look at another person or life situation without any concern for our own reactions to that person or problem, the truth about the individual or experience will be evident. It will reveal itself to us without further effort. The effort is in the looking. To Murdoch, this is love.

The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really looking. The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair. (91)

Murdoch sees people as basically self-centred. It is this natural need to attend to our own desires and fears which makes the task of "really looking" so difficult. She writes:

I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of "see" which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. (37)

The self interferes with this effort to see morally. Our own personal concerns, such as the fear of mortality or the pain of rejection, must be put aside in order to pay close attention to the reality at hand. If we apply Murdoch's definition of love to pornography, we see that sexuality and women's bodies are revealed explicitly in pornography, but there is little attention applied to particular realities. Although close-ups of erogenous body parts abound, each individual woman is negated. There is no individual reality in the detail we are offered in pornography; it is "unspecific," that is, generalized to all women as objects. I believe this is what Stanley Cavell meant when he defined pornography as combining "the absolutely explicit with the completely unspecific" (55).

However, Murdoch believes that some art forms can teach one how to see morally. She recommends that we "give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care" (84), and she offers the example of the beauty of a soaring bird distracting an angry person from her hurt pride.

Murdoch claims representation can do the same for us:

good art, not fantasy art, affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. (85)

Murdoch believes that fantasy art is self-consoling and narcissistic. It reflects the needs, desires and concerns of the artist, rather than providing a true vision of the represented person or thing. Murdoch tells us that in good art:

We are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated; ... Most of all it exhibits to us the connection, in human beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion. The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice. (87)

We can find neither pity nor justice in pornography.

No doubt pornography supporters would offer the adage "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." They would claim that pornography reflects the true relations between men and women with justice. Perhaps they would even suggest that pornography is a meditation on eros which results in an escape from selfish care through orgasm. It is here that pornography's failure becomes clear. The viewer of pornography does not allow himself "access to truth" through perception because the truth hurts. Concern for one's own power and vulnerability is central to the use of pornography. Pornography does not distract the viewer from himself or herself; it keeps his or her attention on the self and on his or her own sexuality. Pornography does not allow for selfless attention. Therefore, it cannot promote love, the highest of virtues. If the producers of pornography were open to life, the world and reality in the open-pore sense that Merleau-Ponty and Murdoch describe, they could not conceive of attempting to create a separate reality in fantasy. The reality they had so personally and physically experienced, that is, the true, complicated, ambiguous reality of life, would be so self-evident that its denial would be impossible, even undesirable.

In a way, explicit choice seems now less important: less decisive (since much of the "decision" lies elsewhere) and less obviously something to be "cultivated." If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at. (Murdoch 40)

Connection to others, nature, our bodies, and ourselves facilitates this close attention so essential to "seeing morally." The pornographer's choice to impose patriarchal control on this life connection, rather than open himself to it, is the basis of his ideology. Pornographic representation is the result.

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