



PORNUTOPIA

Nancy Bauer

CRITIQUES OF PORNOGRAPHY, though now by and large relegated to academic journals, have not changed since the 1980s, when they routinely made front-page news. The average antiporn argument still turns on the idea that there is a vast underground pornosphere, the horrifying details of which are not public knowledge. A locus classicus of this genre is the 1986 report of the Meese Commission on Pornography, which contains a bullet list of the titles of what it says are 2,325 distinct pornographic magazines. Here is a sampling from the Gs:

- 901. Girls Who Crave Big Cocks
- 902. Girls Who Eat Cum
- 903. Girls Who Eat Dark Meat
- 904. Girls Who Eat Girls
- 905. Girls Who Eat Hot Cum

This goes on for some fifty pages.

The members of the Meese Commission then give us a taste of the contents of the materials they have catalogued. Here, for example, is the first part of a plot summary for the book *Tying Up Rebecca*:

Chapter One introduces 13-year-old gymnast Becky Mingus and her middle-aged coach Vern Lawless—who hasn't had sex in seven years. In the locker room a 15-year-old cheerleader named Patty begins to masturbate, but mistakenly sticks her fingers in Becky's vagina. Patty then goes into the boys' locker room, discards her towel, rubs her breasts, and exposes her genitals. A boy forces Patty to her knees; Patty tongues his anus; he shoves her face in the drain; Becky masturbates; the boy performs cunnilingus; Patty performs fellatio; the boy has vaginal intercourse with Patty.

Chapter Two. At home, Vern's wife wants to make their marriage better, and has bought a skimpy bra and crotchless panties from a girl in the lingerie store who had submitted to Vern's wife's uncontrollable sucking on her breasts and fingering her vagina. Lawless is aroused and masturbates when he sees his wife lying on the rug in the lingerie, but he loses his erection when he spots a picture of Becky. Vern explains his problem, and his wife says she understands and goes to the bathroom to masturbate.

Chapter Three. Becky's father, Henry, sits at home remembering a teenage encounter with a girl and masturbates. He accidentally ejaculates on Becky's face just as she comes in the room. Her face dripping with semen, Becky sees her father's erection and runs to her room crying. The next day, Louise decides to tell Henry, Becky's father, about Vern's lust for Becky. They go to a room upstairs that is equipped with leather clothing, ropes, chains, metal sheaths. Henry unbuttons her blouse, pulls up her skirt, pulls down her panties. His erect penis splits his pants. He performs cunnilingus and anilingus. She performs fellatio.

Tying Up Rebecca is the only novel the report discusses in detail. One imagines that the commissioners' agenda in letting it stand as *the* example of pornographic writing was to license their condemning in the strongest terms the eroticization of, at least, adultery, pederasty, incest, and rape. But of course the plot summary itself *reenacts* this eroticization. The commissioner-author forgoes the possibility of arid description and resorts instead to conventional pornographic lingo ("tongues his anus," "uncontrollable sucking on her breasts," "dripping with semen"). And the sense that the summary was written in pornographic breathless haste is reinforced by the writer's sloppiness: the ambiguity about the recipient of the Chapter One boy's oral favors; the failure to identify "Louise" as Vern's wife; the unintuitive uses of the concepts of "mistake" and "accident."

I suppose it's conceivable that the members of the Meese Commission were too busy crusading to see that to describe a piece of porn is to produce a piece of porn—that in this subgenre of writing, at least, intentions count for nothing. There are people who enjoy accusing Andrea Dworkin, the iconic antiporn feminist, of being asleep at the same wheel. But, as implausibly extreme as her views were, Dworkin was no Meese Commissioner. She understood that readers of her 1981 book *Pornography*, which is basically one graphic *Tying Up Rebecca*-ish

plot summary after the next, are at least as likely to hold their genitalia as they are their noses. Dworkin's strategy was to persuade us that the sensibilities of contemporary men—*all* men, not just habitual users of porn—are founded on pornography's eroticization of the subordination and abuse of women. Her goal in documenting instances of porn was to get us to experience the discomfort of becoming aroused by what she hoped she had convinced us is fundamentally soul-crushing, and not just for women.

What Dworkin demanded of us was a species of deep self-hatred, the kind you might live with if you weighed 300 pounds and were desperate to lose weight but just couldn't stop yourself from succumbing to the temptation to eat a pint of Ben & Jerry's. Dworkin hoped to elicit in ordinary prurient adults the kind of self-loathing our present culture hopes to elicit in pederasts. In other words, Dworkin was asking us, we who cannot just throw off our pornographic investments, to inhabit a state of shame. This demand differs from that of the moralistic Meesian, who in his bad-faith posturing would have us pretend that pornography and decent people by definition have nothing to do with each other, that only certain fringy folks get aroused by anything other than the touch of another human being (preferably, one's spouse), and that everyone but the real sickos has the wherewithal simply to swear off smut. Dworkin wanted all of us to recognize and despise the sickos within ourselves.

THIS DESIDERATUM, THAT WE HATE OURSELVES for having sexual feelings, is itself soul-crushing. And the idea that porn is the root determinant of men's sexuality, and that men's sexuality is itself invariably and dangerously misogynistic, was hyperbolic and empirically untestable. Which may be why the culture so resoundingly rejected it.

And yet there is a nub of truth in Dworkin's understanding of how porn works. The objectification of other people is arousing. Not always, not under every circumstance, not for every person in every situation. But everyone is sometimes sexually aroused by the objectification of a person or people whose humanity is, at that moment, beside the point. This experience is not unique to porn consumers: every normal adult is familiar with that twinge of desire that a stranger, real or depicted, can instantly evoke.

My fellow feminist philosophers have produced an enormous literature on what's wrong with sexual objectification. Their abiding faith

in reason's ability to quash desire has resulted in a certain consensus on how to condemn these urges. The standard tactic is to define objectification as "treating a person like an object." You give an analysis of what an "object" is (something that can be owned and therefore used or transformed or destroyed), and sometimes what "treating" comes to (not just conceiving of a person as a thing, but reducing her to that status). Then you argue that people are not like objects in certain important ways (because people are autonomous, for example) and that to treat people in these ways is to violate their humanity.

There's nothing particularly controversial in this analysis. That's precisely the problem with it. No one argues that people are the same as things and so can always be treated in the same way. We don't need a philosopher's help to grasp that to the extent that pornography objectifies people, and to the extent that this objectification is dehumanizing, it's morally problematic.

No philosophical analysis of pornographic objectification will enlighten us unless it proceeds not from the outside, from the external standpoint of academic moralism, but from the inside, from a description of pornography's powers to arouse. Such a description reveals that, within the pornographic *mise-en-scène*, there is no space for the concept of objectification. The world as pornography depicts it is a utopia in which the conflict between reason and sexual desire is eliminated, in which to use another person solely as a means to satisfy one's own desire is the ultimate way to respect that person's humanity and even humanity in general.

In the real world, the unbridled expression of sexual desire is fundamentally incompatible with civilization, and in every culture there are harsh punishments for those whose lust gets the better of them. Most of us, the lucky ones, can discipline ourselves, more or less, not to act on our sexual urges when we don't think we should. We sublimate, harnessing our sexual vitality in the service of advancing civility and civilization.

In pornographic representation, civilization, though it sometimes gamely tries to assert itself, always ultimately surrenders to lust. But sexual desire is shown to be a gentlemanly victor: rather than destroy civilization, it repatriates it. Civilization pledges to uphold the laws of the pornutopia, in which the ordinary perils of sexual communion simply don't exist. Everyone has sex whenever the urge strikes, and civilization

hums along as usual: people go to work and school, the mail gets delivered, commerce thrives. The good citizens of the porn world, inexorably ravenous, are also perfectly sexually compatible with one another. Everyone is desired by everyone he or she desires. Serendipitously, as it always turns out, to gratify yourself sexually by imposing your desires on another person is automatically to gratify that person as well.

Here, we see Kant turned on his head. Rather than encouraging us to live as though in a kingdom in which our common capacity for rationality enjoins us to regard all people, ourselves included, as ends-in-themselves, the porn world encourages us to treat ourselves and others as pure means. And what's supposed to license this vision is the idea that desire, not reason, is fundamentally the same from person to person, as though our personal idiosyncrasies were merely generic and reason could have no role to play in a true, and truly moral, sexual utopia.

In the pornutopia, autonomy takes the form of exploring and acting on your sexual desires when and in whatever way you like; to respect your own and other people's humanity, all you have to do is indulge your own sexual spontaneity. No one in the pornutopia has a reason to lose interest in or fear or get bored by sex; no one suffers in a way that can't be cured by it; no one is homeless or dispossessed or morally or spiritually abused or lost. When Daddy fucks Becky, she doesn't experience it as rape. She comes.

TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE PORN WARS RAGED at their height, the triumph of pornography is everywhere evident. Its imagery is just a couple of clicks away for anyone with an internet connection or a cable-TV remote.

According to the old battle lines, the pornographization of everyday life constitutes a victory for the proponents of free speech and a defeat for conservative moralists and radical feminists. But we are past the point, if we ever were there, at which a bipolar politics of pornography, for or against, could be of use to us. It does not help us understand the massive proliferation of porn since the mid-'80s if we insist on analyzing it in terms of free speech protections or advancements in artistic expression or, on the other side, as incitements to violence against women or a sign of moral lassitude.

We lack the words to articulate the role of pornography in our lives. What we need now is not a new politics of porn but, rather, a candid *phenomenology* of it, an honest reckoning with its powers to produce intense pleasure and to color our ordinary sense of what the world is and ought to be like. Such a reckoning will have to involve a refocusing of our attention, from the male consumers who took center stage in the porn wars to the women for whom the pornutopia provides a new standard both of beauty and of sexual fulfillment.

I have in front of me as I write a back-cover advertisement for the September 11, 2006, issue of the *New Yorker*. Actually, there are two identical back covers, twinned with a two-page front cover. The topmost front cover features a tightrope walker holding a long balancing rod, his head almost bumping into the Y in *Yorker*, against a white background; the second front cover positions the same man, in an identical position, over lower Manhattan, directly above the empty footprints of the Twin Towers. We are to recognize here the spirit of Philippe Petit, the tightrope artist who in 1974 changed the tide of negative public opinion against the expensive and aesthetically questionable World Trade Center, then still under construction, when he surreptitiously strung his wire between the buildings and, as thousands of early-morning commuters stared up in astonishment, literally danced his way across.

While the “Soaring Spirit” on the white page looks as though he is dancing on air, on cover two he seems to be in helpless free fall, not a single other soul in sight, the concrete and steel survivors of lower Manhattan standing not as monuments to human achievement but as stolid witnesses of our self-delusion. The front covers ask us to reflect on the powers and limitations of the human spirit in the making and losing of civilization. A solitary man, apparently a thoughtful man of focus and courage and *joie de vivre*, is attempting to maintain his balance in a life-or-death situation, one in which it is no longer clear whether a genuine civilization will be there to cradle him if he should fall.

On each of the back covers, two women are suspended against a black background. The one on the right is dressed in a very shiny red latex bodysuit covering everything but her face. Two little devil’s horns spring from her head. She is heavily made-up—wet crimson lips, kohl eye shadow, penciled parentheses for eyebrows. Her mouth is open, as though in the middle of a word, maybe a roar. Facing us, she cocks one of her hips ever so slightly toward her counterpart. This woman is

dressed in an impossibly tight full-length white Lycra gown, its armpits cut down to her waist, ending in a puddle of fabric. Her nipples are erect. Arching her back, she stands sideways, her rear end just a couple of inches from the devil woman's out-thrust hip, her head resting on the devil woman's shoulder, her pelvis pushing forward, and her two-foot feathery wings clasped to the devil woman's chest. The angel woman, ethereally made-up, has long, blond, wavy hair, the ends of which fall exactly at the devil woman's pubis. The devil woman's sinuous red "tail" wraps around the angel woman, so that its pointy tip aims directly at the C in the big Campari logo at the bottom of the ad. One of the angel's hands holds a bottle of Campari; the other, a rocks glass. Her eyes are shut, her lips are slightly parted, as she surrenders, not obviously without fear, to the grip of ecstasy.

The back covers ask us to pledge our allegiance to what they represent to be a much more desirable and robust world than the precarious one of the front covers. Here, there is no room even for the idea of a human spirit, no question about whether there are any souls to be found—let alone to be saved. Two female sexual archetypes feed on the pleasures of instant sexual reciprocity, pleasures that, our own helpless consumption suggests, stand to multiply magically and endlessly. We are asked to take even more pleasure in being savvy enough to get the joke—to entertain the idea, just for the fun of it, that there could possibly be an important difference between the angelic and devilish. The choice between heaven and hell turns out, in this fantasy civilization, to be a product not of any kind of reasoned struggle, moral or otherwise, but a matter of mere preference—blonde or brunette? submissive or dominant? straight or on the rocks? It doesn't matter. Everyone lives more and more happily ever after.

New Yorker front covers as a rule include a half-inch gutter running down the left margin. In this issue, the gutters of both front covers, like the backgrounds of both back covers, are black, which means that, when you lay the open magazine down to save your place, the back cover appears to creep onto the front. How is it that we manage not to see what is going on in the juxtaposition of these images, that we are able to ignore the clash between civilization and the pornutopia, as these two visions of the world compete for space in a magazine that prides itself on its sophistication and encourages us to congratulate ourselves for our own?

CONTEMPORARY PORNOGRAPHY IS noteworthy for cataloguing the incredibly huge range of things that get our blood flowing. The Meese Commission's interminable list of fetish magazines hardly makes a start on the project. Look on the internet and you will find websites devoted to people who are sexually excited by the sound of balloons popping (and those who find these people disgusting because *they* think that what's sexy about balloons is blowing them up to just *before* the popping point); instructions on how to make love with a dolphin (including an exhortation to go back to the sea the next day to reassure the dolphin that you still respect her, or him); advice on how to tie your leg up so that other people will think it's amputated and stare at you, or how to find a doctor who will actually amputate a limb or digit for you (possibilities which some amputee-obsessed people find sexy and others experience as lifesaving in roughly the way, they say, that transgendered people experience coming out).*

Part of the process of becoming civilized—of becoming a genuinely human being—is learning to keep the finer details of your sexual longing to yourself and your consenting intimates. Freud occasionally voiced the view that we are inclined to move too far in that direction: we overestimate the extent to which civilization is incompatible with sexual expression. (I am thinking here of what he says in *Civilization and Its Discontents* about the persecution of homosexuals.) Freud didn't have a T1 connection and so could not possibly have imagined just how polymorphously perverse we human beings are, but I don't think that the vast array of pornography on the web would have fazed him. It might even have pleased him, for pornography allows us to explore and even come to grips with our sexual desire in all its quirks and moral instability. It enables the discovery that the twists and turns of one's erotic longing are not *sui generis*, that no one is a true sexual freak. Insofar as it substitutes for the psychoanalyst's couch, it can increase our real-world sexual self-awareness.

* Carl Elliott, a philosopher at the University of Minnesota who a few years ago in an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* brought wide attention to the phenomenon of voluntary amputation, has raised the question of whether perversions are contagious: whether you can catch one simply from becoming aware of it. It may well be the case that certain sexual preferences are largely a function of learning what's out there. But this does not change the fact that there's a whole lot out there.

That ought to be a good thing. The Meese Commission incriminated itself when it found no room in its 1,960-page report even to wonder about what the wide diversity of interests represented in the thousands of one-off fetish magazines it rooted out in urban convenience stores and sex parlors might say about the nature of human sexuality. But it is not clear what will happen to pornography's power to enlighten us about ourselves, what the cost of it might come to be, as the everyday world gets more and more pornographized and as we accustom ourselves to the mindless enjoyment of all the twinges of arousal that ordinary culture increasingly represents as our birthright.

MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS AGO, Simone de Beauvoir observed in *The Second Sex* that, for women, the line between full personhood and complete self-objectification is whisper thin. A genuinely human being, Beauvoir argued, is one who experiences herself as both a subject and an object—and at the same time. A subject, she said, is a being who has the wherewithal to express her sense of what matters in the world, to dare to have a say in it. But part of being a subject, Beauvoir thought, is allowing yourself to be the object of other people's judgment, rational or irrational: to risk being ridiculed or condemned or ignored or, worse, to find yourself convinced that the harsh judgments of others are true—or, maybe worst of all, to be confused about these judgments, to discover that, after all, you don't know who you are.

For Beauvoir herself, the path to humanity took the form of writing about her own experience as that of a representative human being. She was daring to test whether, to invoke Emerson's famous formulation, what she knew in her own heart was true for all people. But the second half of her groundbreaking book is all about how difficult true self-expression is for women. The world sets things up so that we are wildly tempted to expose ourselves to public judgment, yes. But the vehicle of this exposure is not supposed to be self-expression. It's supposed to be self-objectification.

Women are rewarded—we are *still* rewarded—for suppressing our own nascent desires and intuitions and turning ourselves into objects that please the sensibilities of men. It's because it threatens the man-pleasing enterprise that feminism long ago hit a wall as a political movement. The very idea that we are now in some sort of postfeminist era hints at our extraordinary "separate but equal" schizophrenia: we be-

lieve that we have achieved full social parity with men, and we take this supposed achievement to license a hyperbolic reinvestment in feminine narcissism. Everywhere we turn we find images daring women of all sexual temperaments to revel in and express their fuckability, as though a woman's transforming herself into the ultimate object of desire should or could satisfy her need for other people to attend to the depth and breadth of her true self, even her true sexual self.

"Look—but don't touch." That's the incoherent rule that used to govern displays of feminine self-objectification. It enjoined women to take their pleasure in arousing desire in men and then withholding the satisfaction of this desire. Some pleasure. Some rule. But the new rule, having emerged from the pornographic subterranean and now ubiquitously shoved in our faces—"Don't just look—touch!"—has proved to be even more bizarre. It makes sense in the pornutopia, where everyone arouses everyone else's desire, and physical contact between and among human beings inevitably leads to orgasm all the way around.

Its oddness in the real world emerges in my female students' explanation for spending their weekend evenings giving unreciprocated blow jobs to drunken frat boys: they tell me they enjoy the sense of power it gives them. You doll yourself up and get some guy helplessly aroused, at which point you *could* just walk away. But you don't. Instead, you take pleasure in arousing the would-be fellatee's desire—and then *not* withholding the satisfaction of it. The source of the first phase of this pleasure is easy to identify, since it is identical to the pleasure afforded women under the old order of female narcissism. It's the pleasure of reveling in someone else's discomfort and frustration—in a word, of sadism. Women who play by the rules—that is, women who wish to survive in a man's world, rather than undertake the daunting work of attempting to transform it—have always been tempted to substitute the pleasures of sadism for the pleasures (and pains) of Beauvoirian subjectivity. But we still have the question of what pleasure there could be, as a young woman affects to walk away from her prey, in turning around and allaying the discomfort and frustration she worked so hard to produce.

I don't want to condescend to my students, and I don't want to speak for them. But I wish I could understand, at least, why they have so little interest in being serviced in return. An astonishingly large number of girls, as they have reverted to calling themselves, have told me that they feel more comfortable confronting a strange man's exposed hard-on

than exposing their own, always shaven, vulvas. (We now live in a world where no part of a woman's body is too private to be subject to public standards of beauty.) Here, we are beyond the point of self-objectification. You forgo your own pleasure, be it sadistic or orgasmic, for the sake of another person's; you perhaps experience discomfort and frustration as you carry out this sacrifice; and then you find yourself not just pretending to enjoy, but actually reveling in your own self-effacement.

My students' experience in their sexual interactions with men confirms the logic of the pornutopia: to please someone else sexually is to please yourself, and there's no reason to wonder whether what's making you happy is something that you really desire, or whether you're really fulfilled at all. One wonders: could the pleasure of providing some guy with an unreciprocated blow job be the pleasure of masochism? Of martyrdom, even? Or if it is an internalization of the logic of the pornutopia, what precisely has driven it, and what sustains it in the face of the realities of real-world sexuality? I find that when I ask my students what sense they can make of their experience, they, like all of us, are at a loss for words. +