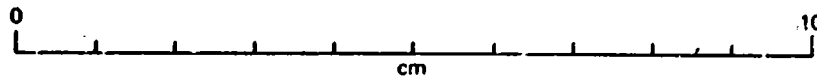
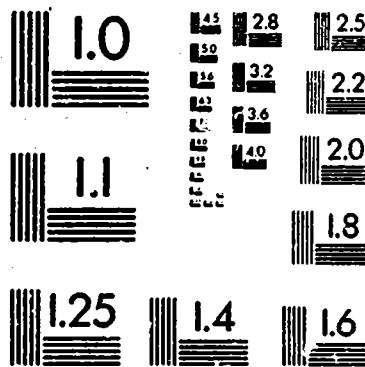


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**THE FEMALE VOYEUR AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A PORNOGRAPHY FOR WOMEN:
REDEFINING THE GAZE OF DESIRE**

by

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SUMMARY

Psychoanalytic film theory, which informs most film theory, defines the gaze as premised upon an unequal relationship between men and women: the active viewing subject is inevitably male while the passive object is always female. Pornography is perceived as extending this misogyny because the pleasure offered by sexually explicit images is believed to be accessible only to men, the holders of the active and controlling gaze. Women are, accordingly, objectified and degraded by male voyeurism. However, no essential basis exists for the 'gendered' positioning of participants in the viewing mechanism so that alternative interpretations of viewing pleasure can be considered. If viewing is perceived as a dynamic negotiation of positions between participants, rather than based upon stable gender subjectivities and power relations, then the sexual gaze can be possessed by men and women and sexual identity need not rely upon an opposition of men/women, active/passive.

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THE FEMALE VOYEUR AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A PORNOGRAPHY FOR WOMEN: REDEFINING THE GAZE OF DESIRE

INTRODUCTION:

The recent frenzied debate that accompanied the release in South Africa of Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999) highlights the emotional character of responses to sexuality and nudity in film (Atkinson, 2000; Roodt, 2000; Grant 2000; de Waal: 2000). What is particularly interesting about the South African media hype and reaction to *Romance* is that it is practically impossible to find a theatre at which the film is being screened – categorised as an 'art film' it is not available on the main film circuit. The commentaries and reviews have, therefore, served less to guide the film-going public than as a forum for intense deliberation about the validity of Breillat's claims to feminism. The film's extensive displays of female nudity and use of the traditional tools of pornography (spread shots and erections) seem to cast its genre and its meaning in serious doubt. Breillat, in an interview, stated that she wished to make a film that liberated women from the shame and prudery that surrounds women's sexuality (Grant, 2000: 4). The result is *Romance* which, despite considerable explicit nudity and sex, ironically replaces any suggestion of eroticism with a philosophical intellectualism. In fact, Breillat is at pains to assert that her intention is not to arouse, but to make one think. By implication the two outcomes are mutually exclusive; the one defining the porn film and the other the 'art' film. The suggestion is that hers is a feminist statement and is quite distinct from, and incompatible with, pornography. The general response of reviewers has been that Breillat has straddled the divide between pornography and non-pornography in her exposé of women's sexuality and that her techniques are not necessarily the most convincing or effective means of making her point about women's participation in heterosexual sex. These concerns have links with the controversial matter of women's sexual pleasure as consumers of a non-mainstream, 'non-art', genre, like pornography, that aims

primarily at sexual arousal and makes little attempt to analyse or theorise the sexuality and sex that it presents to the eye.

There is a tendency to perceive pornography as a genre aimed at men. There have, however, been some fundamental changes in the nature of porn since its origin as the early stag films aimed at male frequenters of brothels. In *Hard Core* (1999), Linda Williams undertakes an analysis of the development and character of pornography in western society and concludes that its current use is not consistent with its 'dirty' reputation. Because the principal form of distribution of this genre is now video, an element of privacy has been introduced to its use and, with this, there has been a corresponding change in the profile of its consumers. Women, who were previously stigmatised for associating with this form of entertainment or who had to endure male sexual advances occasioned by their attendance of public screenings, have been given access to sexually explicit material in their own homes. According to Williams, many porn films are aimed at, and used by, women and couples in the context of relationships (1999: 232). The greater accessibility and availability of pornographic materials is not, however, indicative of a new-found respectability for the genre. Religious and social groups still advocate the banning of pornography on the grounds that sexually explicit materials contribute to social and moral decay and detract from more desirable, 'wholesome', family values. Pornography has certainly not evolved into something that is somehow pure and moral and, caught between the private and the public, its use remains contentious.

Feminists, too, are divided in their attitude towards pornography with some (represented most publicly by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon), being outspoken in their condemnation on the grounds that the explicit depiction of women engaged in sex is physically and mentally

abusive of women. The objection stems from their contention that pornography endorses and promotes sexual behaviour that is degrading and harmful to women and children in the broader social context. There is also the suggestion that the porn industry is fraught with acts of violence, both on and off screen, against female porn stars. There are allegations that women are forced to participate in sexual activities and that the kidnapping or drugging of young girls is a common practice in the 'recruitment' of female participants. An extreme form of violence in pornography would be that found in the 'snuff movies', exemplified by the renowned film *Snuff* (1976), in which the actress is believed to have been literally killed during orgasm. There is, however, no substantiation of these sensational claims with most research suggesting that the 'common sense' causal link between pornography and violence is unfounded in reality (MacKinnon, 1990: 82-86; Williams, 1999: 186-194; Segal, 1993: 9-19). Moreover, surveys and research conducted by, among others, Wendy McElroy, reveal that porn stars proclaim themselves to be content with their choice of profession, and are highly organised groups of professional women rather than the down-trodden victims that they are commonly believed to be. Arguing accordingly, that pornography is not implicated in social violence against women, feminists such as Linda Williams, Wendy McElroy and Catharine Lumby do not regard pornography as inherently and unalterably misogynist. Rather, they contend that it can, and should, be utilised by women in their appropriation of the media and the realisation of their full sexual potential.

The conflict highlights the dilemma that confronts feminism in its bid to maintain a public profile politically representative of all women – in spite of differences in race, class, culture and sexual preference. The problem with the adoption of a singular 'women's' position and identity is that it implies that the experience of all women at the hands of men is uniform and is characterised by oppression. That some women are not offended by sexually explicit images and

may even derive pleasure from them, is perhaps, as some feminists might argue, suggestive of 'brainwashing' by patriarchal mechanisms and discourses. The occurrence thereof is also, however, indicative of the fallibility of theories that postulate uniform experiences and sensibilities across gender. It is here that I wish to address my inquiry. My aim is to explore alternative ways of accounting for those instances of women's pleasure which do not conform to notions of the 'politically correct'. It seems rather simplistic to dismiss these expressions of sexual pleasure as merely collaborative in the patriarchal order or as freakish. It is my contention that women have been theorised, collectively, into a position of sexual impotence and passivity that is perpetuated by demands for the censorship of pornography.

Granting women legitimate access to visual sexual pleasure inevitably calls into question the continued appropriateness of descriptions of behaviours and genders in terms of geographic and temporal constants. It also requires the careful scrutiny of 'common-sense' assumptions and the theories that have underpinned our understanding of the viewing mechanism and sexual interactions of men and women. The relinquishing of past theories is not, however, easily achieved. Few theorists speak with the same authority as Freud does on issues of gender identity and, it would appear that in spite of innumerable suggestions of alternative gender/identity constructions by, for instance, Benjamin (1988) or Butler (1993), and of social production by Foucault (1990), there is usually a return to psychoanalysis as the starting point of discussion. Although the heterosexual paradigm is regarded with circumspection by some feminists, it is still this sexual practice that dominates popular explanations of the gaze and, more particularly, the gaze of desire. Alternative considerations of sexual pleasure and the pleasure of the look perhaps need, as a starting point, to cast in doubt the naturalness and inevitability of gender relations based upon a male-female binary of dominance and submission. Indeed, the very centrality of gender as

a determining factor in relations defined by the look is open to re-theorisation and presents the possibility of interpreting gender as a mere participant variable, among others such as class or race. Such a formulation undermines many of the misogynist charges against depictions of heterosexual intercourse but also further complicates the status of feminism which is, itself, generally perceived to be reliant upon a binary of men and women.

In addressing the issue of women's enjoyment of visual, and particularly filmic, images I have chosen pornography as my subject – in spite of its lack of respectability as discourse or literary text. Indeed, the dismissive attitude held by Breillat, as mentioned earlier, reflects a general perception of pornography as 'non-literature'; as inferior and unworthy of academic consideration. Nevertheless, while the genre may very well be littered with examples of poor acting and shoddy production, these do not define pornography any more than other inferior texts define other genres. Pornography is not, by definition, 'bad' film. When dealing with material that is so intimately bound with socially defined identities, values and emotions there is always the danger of conflating one's disapproval of the subject matter – sex – with the legitimacy of the films as text. My approach to pornographic film is informed by an understanding that film, like the written text, constitutes one of many social discourses that inform and reflect social meaning. The visual text is more 'fixed' in its interpretative possibilities because it presents images too. Yet, while film is characterised by its presentation of a further, visual, dimension that is not found in written texts, it should not be regarded as being confined to a singular meaning and significance. Nor can it be assumed that pornography defines a limited identity and experience for all its viewers. It is, furthermore, my contention that pornographic film lends itself to a study of gender-related power because in it women are perceived as doubly victimised – porn could be seen, therefore, as an exaggerated version of the gender relations constructed and reinforced in other

films and in other media forms. While pornography may or may not be desirable to the individual, it cannot be dismissed as simplistic or uncomplicated and it is, I believe, deserving of further investigation.

My insights and observations on pornography are largely influenced by a post-structural vision of power and sexuality as social constructs, rather than as inevitable or biological constants. I have, further, relied upon Foucault's account of social discourses and texts as constitutive of power relations and sexually-defined subjectivities in society. Accordingly, I approach film and film theory as discourses that contribute to the construction of women's social and sexual subjection; I perceive these as conditions which can, therefore, be revised and reconstructed in alternative ways. To this end, I have attempted to re-examine film theories on the mechanism of the gaze in mainstream film. I have taken this as a point of entry into a discussion of the sexual gaze in pornography, particularly as it applies to the pornographic film *Bad Wives* (1998). In exploring pornography and women's sexual desires it has been my intention to describe a means of according women sexual empowerment and pleasure in sexually explicit discourse. In terms of delineating alternative social constructs for women, this paper has a feminist theoretical orientation, and it does explore feminist positions vis-a-vis pornography, but it does not adhere to a singular notion of feminist thought.

Chapter 1 sets out to question the validity of the psychoanalytic premise that the gaze is unalterably masculine. The convention of according the voyeur and the fetishist a male identity premised on sexual difference and corresponding inequality is, I argue, not founded upon an abiding or natural relation with masculinity. Like Linda Williams, I agree that these constitute mere viewing norms that are also available to women. Similarly, I believe that one must explore

the potential for conceiving of the gaze in terms other than dominance and submission, although these do not necessarily present a 'feminine' alternative to the 'masculine' gaze.

Chapter 2 explores pornography as exploitation of women. The feminist objections to pornography centre upon the perception that difference, particularly sexual difference, naturally translates into inequality. I argue that difference is a phenomenon that extends beyond gender and that the eroticisation of power is not necessarily attributable to heterosexuality, nor is it harmful in a context of mutual agreement. In accepting that discourse is productive of social behaviours, I acknowledge that pornography is not unproblematic, but that it cannot be perceived as a monolithic entity that prompts a uniform response from its viewers of either gender. As such, the embrace or rejection thereof is a private issue, subject to a personal decision.

Chapter 3 examines the sexual gaze of power and instances of mutual recognition in pornography in order to suggest that women and men are addressed equally thereby. It is my contention that the pornographic gaze is different to that operative in the feature film because the intended effect of the respective films differs. The transformation of the porn film into a private viewing experience has altered its relation to the viewer(s), encouraging viewer engagement in masturbation or sexual intercourse and aimed at maximising pleasure through the creation of changing, inconstant, viewing positions and identificatory relations with characters.

In conclusion, I wish to suggest that the state of flux and change in society demands a feminist approach that recognises the inappropriateness of defining pornography, and the consumption thereof, in terms of constants. It is my intention in this paper to assist in matching women's sexual urges and desires with the trends and circumstances that influence their lives in the present.

CHAPTER 1: LOOKING AS PLEASURE

For Freud, it is sight that first introduces girls into a conception of themselves as 'other' and distinct from boys – based upon a momentary registering of the significance of the different appearances of the male and female genitals. This difference is articulated in terms of a presence or an absence: the boy is defined by his presence whilst the girl is defined by her sexual absence. The division between the seeing boy and the seeing girl derives not only from the physical, however, but extends also to their contrasting manners of processing the fact of the dissimilarity of their respective genitals – to their variable modes of viewing. Freud proposes that female children arrive at an instant realisation of their 'inadequacy' and 'deficiency' when held up to comparison with the male genitals. By contrast, the male child disavows the awful truth of what he has seen: the striking obviousness of female castration demonstrated by the secrecy or absence of her genitals. His perception of his own state of 'presence' is juxtaposed against 'his alternative state of absence which is threatening because it is a lesser state. At an early age, therefore, the female is implicated in a number of instances that cast her as different and distinct from her male counterpart (Freud, 1983: 158).

The significance of vision in the establishment of this sexual difference is further elaborated by Lacan. His conception of phallic power uses physical appearance as the foundation for both sexual and symbolic differentiation and the associated sexual hierarchy in society (Butler, 1993: 71-91). Heath, in his article 'Difference', describes the implications of Lacan's notion of phallic power:

Lacan instates the visible as the condition of symbolic functioning, with the phallus the standard of the visibility required: seeing is from the male organ....the phallus is said to symbolise the penis which, strikingly visible, is the condition of the symbol.... (1978:54)

The privilege aligned with the visible is derived from its association with that which is phallic and powerful. The power is that of the positively signified and signifiable and which is, by definition, masculine because it is represented by the penis.¹ As such, the look belongs to the man whose penis/phallus is visible and the image is that of the woman whose phallus is absent and whose nothingness, paradoxically, constitutes a spectacle (Heath, 1978: 89). The fate of the female and the feminine is to constitute always the negatively symbolic.

Ironically, women conceived in this negative manner fulfil a constitutive role in patriarchal society because phallic power and sexual identity, in psychoanalytic terms, rely upon notions of difference – of a contrast between a subject and its complementary object. If the male is conceived in terms of all that is powerful and positive, then the female must serve him by occupying the condition of the negative and inferior. The woman fails to fulfil the requirements of a sexuality defined in male terms; her difference from him is translated into a lack of symbolic value precisely so that his can be affirmed as valuable within that domain. And, while the woman is posited in relation to symbolic impotence and absence, she is accorded an association with other qualities which are not esteemed in the patriarchal domain: emotion, disorder, passivity and abjection.²

Men and women, therefore, are inscribed differently into the symbolic by virtue of the images

1

Lacan specifically denies the association of the phallus with any particular body part, suggesting that it is a 'privileged signifier', however, it is convention to conflate the penis and the phallus because of the latter's obvious alignment with visual, sexual, presence. The designation of the female genitals is actually a signification of something that is not there, so it is clearly unsuitable as a symbol of phallic power and presence. (Butler, 1993: 77-79)

2

Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), discusses the psychoanalytic conception of women as 'abject'. She interprets the existence of women in patriarchal society as a function of their association, throughout their lives, with the loss of bodily fluids/wastes. Women are, accordingly, not perceived as central in the symbolic order, but rather as outside the order as waste and negation.

that they present to the eye and also in terms of the sensations they derive from looking. It is their relation to the visible and the symbolic which assigns men enjoyment in sight and seeing. The woman's gaze, however, is inevitably a reinforcement of her negative relation to men. When she looks it is a re-enactment of the initial perception of her genital difference from men. Looking, in these terms, relies upon an understanding of men and women as distinct and possessed of unalterable qualities which designate their place in the viewing equation. Consequently, theories of pleasurable viewing are necessarily explorations of male viewing practices and reflect a patriarchal monopoly over seeing and its associated pleasures. Women are considered only as recipients of this male gaze and cannot, in psychoanalytical terms, be cast in any other role.

Psychoanalysis lends itself very conveniently to an exploration of cinematic pleasure which, in mainstream film, also seems to rely upon visual symbols based upon sexual division and physical difference.³ The parallels between the production of meaning and mediation in these films and other systems of male mastery within the symbolic are apparent when consideration is given to the means by which men and women are, generally, inscribed unequally into the filmic relation. Women are included as passive and impotent whilst men are accorded a dynamic and active function (MacKinnon, 1990: 28-32). The experience in mainstream film is such that the spectator (constructed as male) is embraced by the film, making him one with the (male) filmic subject (the controller of the gaze), whose perspectives and experiences he shares. As in the mirror stage

3

I refer to mainstream, Hollywood, films as being those films motivated by profit and aimed, therefore, at the broader populace. While there are no clear delineations of what constitutes a 'mainstream' film as opposed to an 'art' film, it is apparent that popular films of adventure, romance and science-fiction etc. aim at pleasing their market rather than disrupting or challenging its assumptions. Further, while occasionally a European or British film makes international box-office success, these do not always present the same notions of masculinity or femininity that the typical film-viewer has come to associate with the Hollywood hero or heroine typified by Bruce Willis or Julia Roberts respectively.

described by Lacan, where the child's first viewing pleasure is derived from observing its own body reflected in the mirror, so the male viewer experiences an autoerotic pleasure whilst observing 'himself' observing and controlling a (female) 'object of the gaze' within the film. His reflected image serves as a denial of castration or the separation characterised by entry into the symbolic (Heath, 1978; Mulvey, 1975: 9-10). Although the origin of scopophilia⁴ is autoerotic, derived from looking at one's own body, this pleasure is later found in transposing the gaze onto *other* bodies. What is essential in this utilisation of others as sources of visual pleasure is the simultaneous relegation of the other person to the status of 'object' with the reaffirmation of the subject's own completeness. This location of the eye, and sight, as the centre of pleasure is derived from its ability to create a distance between itself and that which it surveys – it maintains a distance that emphasises the objectification of its object. The pleasure is sexual in nature in that sight extends and displaces the pleasure of touch. (Heath, 1978: 85; Mulvey, 1975: 8-9).

The misogynist character of film is derived from its reliance upon a sexual hierarchy. In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey suggests that the woman's presence in the patriarchal symbolic is one *always* conditioned by her lack of independent signifying potential:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by the symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (1975: 7)

Women in film do not signify 'feminine' because they signify 'not-masculine' instead. Christine Gledhill further points out that film narrative must consciously reflect masculinity and aim to

4

Freud defines scopophilia as pleasure derived from the act of looking. He identifies it as a sexual instinct. (Mulvey, 1975: 8-9).

please a masculine spectator:

Since in this argument narrative organization is patriarchal, the spectator constructed by the text is masculine. Pleasure is largely organized to flatter or console the patriarchal ego and its Unconscious. (1988: 65)

What is implied by Gledhill is that in order to maintain pleasurable viewing for the (male) spectator, it is necessary for films to reinscribe women as docile and submissive – the appropriate complement to the active, aggressive and commanding male representative of the phallus. However, pleasure is complicated by the dual role that can be inhabited by women who, lacking in a penis/phallus, can represent simultaneously female powerlessness and the threat of castration. While the male viewer is able to derive pleasure from the objectification of the woman through his gaze, there remains always the possibility of disruption and ‘unpleasure’ in the realisation of her capacity to inflict powerlessness upon him. Accordingly, the conditions of pleasurable viewing for a male spectator depend, contradictorily, on separation that is denied: ‘...that separation – termed castration by Lacan – is veiled and refused as far as possible’ (MacKinnon, 1990: 43).

In terms of the above, mainstream film must strive to find the appropriate balance so as to optimise male viewing pleasure. This has implications for the manner in which women, as the objects that feature in film and also as the viewers of film, must be constructed so as to uphold this patriarchal ‘comfort zone’. It is apparent, however, that male and female identities in film are not as simplistically caricatured as this suggests and have to reflect the socio-political attitudes prevalent in society. The changing character of women on screen is, consequently, not necessarily indicative of women’s liberation from this negative relation to men, although this may initially appear to be the case. *G.I. Jane* (1997), for instance, presents an intelligent and physically commanding woman as its protagonist. Jordan is the first woman to undergo training for the

SEALS and, contrary to expectations and manipulations by politicians and resentful male trainees, she succeeds. While it is very clear that Jordan does not set herself up as a feminist, the tendency is to read the film as progressive and as a triumph for women's equality in the male arena. What is questionable, however, is Jordan's success as a *woman*, since she relinquishes all semblance of femininity and even claims for herself a symbolic penis/phallus when she shouts, 'Suck my dick!' Contemporary screen heroines may not seem overtly powerless, but their empowerment is largely conditional. Modern portrayals could be seen simply to mirror the revised perceptions of what is accepted and unthreatening in the patriarchal world. The more frequent displays of homosexuality on the screen simply indicate that viewers are not as easily shocked as they were when, for instance *Maurice* (1987), with its homosexual kiss, was first screened, but it is hardly acceptable for the leading man to be gay. Rather, it is in supporting, or comic, roles that gays feature – as in Rupert Everett's roles in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) and *The Next Best Thing* (2000). Thus, while there is a greater tolerance of deviance from the patriarchal norm, there is certainly not a move away from the male-female binary as the standard of normality. Film theorists also make very little effort to accommodate and examine the viewing position of homosexuals. The assumption is that gays and lesbians must also fall into positions aligning them with either male or female (dominant or submissive) identities and experience the same pleasures or suffering that these positions are supposed to offer heterosexual men and women respectively.

Voyeuristic and fetishistic variations on scopophilic pleasure are available to heterosexual men in their observation of women. Each casts women in a different type of negative relation to men. Within voyeurism the sighted subject seeks to establish himself as the 'mastering presence', possessed of power precisely because he is hidden from sight and therefore possesses superior knowledge of the object. The basis of that knowledge is that the object of the gaze does not

possess the phallus, is defined as the lack and as inferiority, and is, therefore, not a threat to masculinity. Through voyeurism, the male subject is able to exert control over a woman who appears to possess qualities which are different to those which 'flatter and console the patriarchal ego' (Gledhill, 1988: 65). In other words, if a woman does not adhere to the traditional notions of feminine weakness and abjection she can be reduced to that status by becoming the object of the male's voyeuristic gaze, which, according to Mulvey,

...has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt...asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness.
(1975: 14)

The pleasure here is derived from denying the object the possibility of ever assuming the identity of a controlling subject. The woman's strength must be configured as a transgression that warrants neutralisation.

Fetishistic pleasure, by contrast, stems from the very denial of the castration that has produced pleasure in the voyeuristic instance. The woman can be stripped of her threatening potential by fetishising attributes (real or imaged/created) which distract from her sexual genitalia and the obviousness of her difference. Thus, she is held to be intact and complete. By extension, then, the feminine is not represented at all, but rather the fantasy version thereof that reassures the male subject that castration cannot occur (Heath, 1978: 88-89).

In accordance with the psychoanalytic allocation of visual pleasure in terms of the presence or absence of the phallus/penis, the possibilities for female inclusion into the viewing process can reside only in women's possession and embrace of the position of the 'object-to-be-looked-at'.

If the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa's head is not far off; thus, she must not look, is absorbed herself on the side of the seen, seeing herself seeing herself, Lacan's femininity. (Heath, 1978: 92)

This reinscribes women into the position of the negative and the abject whereby their role in the play of pleasure is dependent upon their control and manipulation by men. In those instances in mainstream film where women refuse the position of spectacle in order to become the possessor of the gaze they are punished. For instance, in *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Disclosure* (1994) – films popularly perceived as progressive in their portrayal of women – women are presented as taking possession of the active place in their refusal of a passive sexuality defined in relation to men. *Thelma and Louise*'s violent rebellion casts them in opposition to patriarchal law so that they have to be confined or killed. Meredith, in *Disclosure*, also poses a threat that needs to be neutralised: her overt sexuality renders men vulnerable to manipulation and they require assistance in order to transcend her cunning and deception. In the film it is the 'good' women, who conform to the requirements of patriarchally defined 'femininity' and who stand in contrast to the vamp, who ultimately expose and 'dethrone' her. The sexual woman, therefore, stands in threatening opposition to conventionally delineated male *and* female sexualities. What these films demonstrate is how dangerous 'out of control' women can be to society as we know it. They do not simply usurp the domain of the male, they also throw into question the stability of the entire system of representation which aligns the male and the masculine with the controlling gaze and the female and feminine with the passivity associated with being the spectacle.

The woman who rises out of the traditional, feminine, position must, of necessity, be perceived as an aberration or freak of nature. Linda Williams (1984) speculates that the seeing woman is punished because her position is closely aligned with that of the horror film monster which

threatens the security of the patriarchal world. Perhaps the monstrous woman is epitomised by Alex in *Fatal Attraction* (1985) whose demand that *she* determine the terms of her relationship with Dan casts her as psychopathic and dangerous. Her desires are presented to the viewer as unreasonable. Like the *Jurassic Park* (1993) dinosaurs, which are all female, Alex has to be killed in order to restore security and safety in Dan's world. The parallel between monster and woman lies in that they are both *different* from the male, as opposed to being simply quantitatively inferior. They pose the possibility of an alternative sexuality and potency. Considering the viability of this alternative state is to call into question the inevitability of male superiority and supremacy – in film and in society, in the actor and in the movie viewer. Thus women have to be denied the opportunity of assuming an enduring position as a controlling *female* spectator on screen and in the theatre. The absence of dominant female characters is not, therefore, a consequence of the inability of women to adopt that stance or, as some have assumed, because that position does not exist, but simply because such a possibility is considered untenable within patriarchy.

Mulvey describes the conventional filmic function of the woman as having little or nothing to do with the furtherance of narrative and the active and unfolding story. She promotes the suggestion that women in narrative 'provoke' responses and motivate action on the part of the male subject and that, as such, 'In herself the woman has not the slightest importance' (Boetticher quoted in Mulvey, 1975: 11). Because the woman is deemed incapable of harnessing the active and controlling gaze, she has to be the object in relation to the male, dynamic, subject in the film diegesis and also the male-defined spectator in the film theatre. Her double subjection is a result of the theorised identification processes which resemble those experienced in the mirror stage. The spectator undergoes a narcissistic identification with the idealised image of the heroic male character, whose perfection serves as an 'ego ideal'. The alignment of the viewer with his

perceived likeness means that the latter's enjoyment of the female object (as an object) is echoed in the viewer's enjoyment in watching the film (Mulvey, 1975: 10). Casting a woman as the controlling subject would disrupt the ego ideal as it would necessitate the re-casting of the man in the position of the imperfect, the object. For Mulvey, then, the only plausible viewing pleasure available to women seems to lie in either a transvestite identification with the male subject or a masochistic embrace of passivity and objectification, because there is no possibility within this psychoanalytic delineation for a position which could accommodate women differently and afford them controlling power. Hence she argues that voyeurism (and its notions of a controlling gaze) in mainstream film is oppressive to women and must be challenged because it installs women in positions of subjection (Heath, 1978: 92). The numerous instances of television heroines – from the original competent, dependable, women in *Cagney and Lacey* in the 1980s to the more intellectual Sam in the recent British series *Silent Witness* – would suggest that a different viewing dynamic, which will be discussed later, is operative in television. Perhaps women feature more prominently because the selection of viewing material also has to take account of the more direct relation between women as viewers and as consumers of the advertised products displayed during television programmes. While the theorised voyeuristic gaze may not be appropriate to account for the viewing experience of female viewers of these televised programmes, it is apparent that there is some acknowledgement of a woman's active gaze in some viewing domains.

That film is associated with voyeurism is derived from the obvious location of the spectator in the fringes of darkness that characterise the movie theatre. In the cinema there is an essential distance that must be maintained between the image on the screen and the spectator. The spectator's role is clearly one of an 'eavesdropper' watching and listening to the activities which occur and with which he has no direct link, '...that distance activating desire...' (MacKinnon, 1990:

43). The parallels between cinematic viewing and voyeuristically determined pleasure are apparent:

The voyeur, according to Metz, must maintain a distance between himself and the image – the cinéphile *needs* the gap which represents for him the very distance between desire and its object. In this sense, voyeurism is theorised as a type of meta-desire.... The cinema is characterised by an illusory sensory plenitude...and yet is haunted by the absence of these very objects which are there to be seen. Absence is an absolute and irrecoverable distance. (Doane, 1982: 78)

As Metz points out, if all desire ‘...depends on the infinite pursuit of its absent object, voyeuristic desire...is the only desire whose principle of distance symbolically and spatially evokes this fundamental rent’ (quoted in Doane, 1982: 79). Film captures this tantalising play between what is present and what is desirable in its very unattainability. The positioning of the spectator is vital, since proximity determines the possession or loss of the image of desire.

Mulvey conceives of gendered spectator positioning that denies women visual pleasure, except as a form of perversion. Yet women *do* derive pleasure from looking at things. Like men, women derive pleasure from looking upon a range of images and objects, whether these be in daily life or in filmic or photographic reproductions. To account for all these experiences as evidence of women’s acceptance of their exclusion from the viewing apparatus is unattractive and unrealistic. However, other attempts, by the likes of Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman, to address viewing practices as gender-specific, encounter similar difficulties in accommodating women’s pleasure as empowered and ‘feminine’ (as opposed to transvestite or masochistic) and seem to further entrench misogynist principles as fundamental to film.

Doane also utilises the thesis on proximity and distance to explain the impossibility of a female

spectator deriving pleasure through voyeurism (and, therefore, film viewing founded on these principles) on the grounds that the woman is too closely aligned with the image. Whereas the male child must, and does, enter into the symbolic through which his experience and mastery of the world is mediated, the female remains primary and incapable of distancing herself either from her body or the physical world. She is, as Irigaray asserts (Doane, 1982: 80), more comfortable with, and capable of, touch than she is with the sense of sight and with visual manipulation. This implies that women are incapable of mastering or assuming the voyeuristic gaze of control and objectification as they would be unable to maintain the requisite distance between themselves and the image. Further, the possibility of a fetishistic gaze held by women is denied by Doane, because, she suggests, women are too intuitively aligned with the body and the flesh to be able to deny that which is presented. Unlike their male counterparts, women cannot determine a gap between that which is visible and that which is 'knowable' and which delineates the possibilities of denial. Women undergo an over-identification with the image. Thus, it would seem, these theorists reinforce the notion that voyeurism is the sole prerogative of the male viewer and will always cast women in positions of subjection. The development of 'women's' films (which purport to address the viewer as 'female') by women directors such as Lizzie Borden and Yvonne Rainer in the 70s and the 80s was an endeavour to balance this gender bias in cinema.⁵ These films claimed to utilise 'feminine' viewing practices which, for instance, disrupt the narrative and undermine viewers' associations with central male characters on the screen or their use of 'male' and 'patriarchal' techniques of meaning production. Rainer described her film, *Film about a Woman Who* (1974), as feminist and '...based on contradiction and "poetic ambiguity"...a play on "incongruous juxtapositions of modes of address"...' (De Lauretis, 1989: 122). The aim in these films has been

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See Cynthia Lucia's 'Redefining Female Sexuality in the Cinema' and Teresa de Lauretis's chapter, 'Rethinking Women's Cinema' in *Technologies of Gender*.

the depiction of other, alternative, ways of seeing which obviate the need for the voyeuristic or the fetishistic gaze, but they also alienate the average viewer (male and female) who has been raised on the patriarchally structured modes of viewing that they undermine.

Other feminists, like Claire Johnston, deny the possibility or, indeed, the desirability of eliminating voyeurism and its associated pleasures: '...voyeuristic pleasure itself cannot be eliminated from the cinema; indeed, it is vital for the cinema's survival...' (quoted in Heath, 1978: 92). Johnston, therefore, implies that voyeurism is intrinsic to film viewing and that the associated positions of subject and object, active and passive, are unavoidably inscribed into the viewing process. This is not, however, to suggest that she considers viewing pleasure as the sole privilege of the male viewer or that the viewing position is necessarily designated as masculine. Rather, the adoption of a perspective such as that held by Johnston forces a reconsideration of the manner by which places and positions in the viewing process are accepted as being allocated on the basis of sexual difference.

To some extent Kaja Silverman undertakes to overthrow the conventions of male-bias in film theory. She argues that the positions adopted by theorists like Mulvey and Doane re-articulate pleasure as being defined by a binary that re-entrenches the notions of male mastery and female passivity. It is this binary that she wishes to recast in her assessment of the pleasure associated with the passive positioning of the 'victim' (Silverman, 1980: 3). Silverman challenges the assumption that the position of activity and mastery is necessarily the more desirable or is that with which the viewing subject more readily identifies. Rather, she suggests that the position of the exhibit can be experienced as pleasurable, which is why women adopt this position voluntarily. She states:

Voluntary exhibitionism does not call into question the passivity of the female subject. Rather, it jeopardizes the illusion of masculine activity. It poses a much more profound castration threat than Freud was willing to acknowledge,...and by revealing the fatal attractiveness of the feminine/masochistic position, it quite literally cuts off the masculine sadistic position. (1980: 6)

Paradoxically, Silverman theorises an active adoption and selection of passivity and abjection by women. Thus, women are not *relegated* to that position because masochism is *chosen* as a legitimate form of 'feminine' pleasure. As such, women are empowered and self-determining. Silverman, therefore, reinvests the traditional feminine/passive component of the binary with a new force and potentially liberating value. She suggests that discourse has, through time, written the passive as denial and as undesirable in the interests of maintaining the myth of male adequacy and controlling supremacy. Accordingly, she argues that to deny these conventional designations is to reinvent the connotations attached to the components of the viewing equation. While Silverman clearly endeavours to rid women of the stigma attached to their social positioning and that accorded them in the cinema, it is equally clear that she disregards the possibility of women adopting a dynamic and productive role in the action and in the narrative of film. The essential characters of men and women are left intact. She, effectively, endorses a psychoanalytic account of the viewing process, accepting that it is to passivity that women are naturally inclined, and that negativity associated therewith is derived from social perceptions rather than any intrinsically negative value that it might hold. This is enlightening for its suggestiveness of how society encodes values into positions and roles, but it falls short of the logical next step of questioning the basis of the allocation of male and female to positions. What is to stop, for instance, a woman from usurping the active role in film if that is what she wishes for? Would she stand as an example of an atypical woman? Silverman's theory cannot conceive of such a woman or of the possibility of her having a *legitimate* access to that role.

In 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' (1981: 12) Mulvey describes what she perceives as the only possibilities available to women in mainstream film. She suggests that women have to become 'masculinised' when they assume a viewing position designated (as it always is) as male. In the process thereof, Mulvey suggests,

...the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer... that the spell of fascination is broken. On the other hand she may not. She may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides. (1981: 12)

This scenario, she continues, is such that although the woman is capable of deriving viewing pleasure through her spectatorial activities, she is nevertheless denied the opportunity of establishing and maintaining a stable sexual identity, caught as she is between the extremes of female passivity and male activity. Her's is, therefore, no more than a transsexual identification and one that is, moreover, only temporary. It is fleeting because it is not rightfully hers to claim and it is not, it is argued, her 'natural' position or perspective.

There is no essential basis for this sexualisation of subject positions and the associated degrees of access to pleasure, yet it seems to have become almost impossible to conceive of alternative formulations that do not rely upon a binary of active/passive or male/female. Doane provides a useful description of the manner by which women in general, and feminists in particular, have come to accept as unalterable the limitations into which they have been written:

The entire elaboration of femininity as a closeness, a nearness, as present-to-itself is not the definition of an essence but the delineation of a *place* culturally assigned to the woman....It is quite tempting to foreclose entirely the possibility of female spectatorship...given the history of cinema which relies so heavily on voyeurism, fetishism, and identification with an ego ideal conceivable only in masculine terms....Femininity is produced very precisely as a position within the network of power relations. (1982: 87)

Heath also suggests the limitations of any consideration of an essential differentiation. Rather, he argues, it is social positioning which places men and women in opposition:

Men and women may be differentiated on the basis of biological sex but that differentiation is always a position in representation, a specification of the individual as subject in meaning...; the individual is a sexed being in representation, always represented in his or her sexuality. (1978: 109)

The recognition that meaning and the allocation of symbolic values in society relies upon convention and cultural assignment means that there is no reason to perceive the look as anything other than as *conventionally* male and masculine.

Similarly, one must reevaluate the hierarchical character attributed to the dynamics of looking. If there are no essential qualities which reserve the position of the subject for men and the complementary object position for women, then there is no need to accept as inevitable the unequal positioning of the participants in the look, who might conceivably be of the same gender or status. In an interesting discussion of Foucaultian theory applied to Sappho's poetry (and lesbian writing in general), Ellen Greene (1996) considers the conception of a woman's gaze in terms of 'mutual recognition'.⁶ In mutual recognition there is a shared participation in the activity which negates the phallic organisation of pleasure about a hierarchy of 'doer' and 'done to' or of the active versus the passive. The possibility of subject-subject engagement provides a means by which to explain interactions in terms other than those of heterosexuality and patriarchy. Divorcing the gaze from any notion of constant inequality also liberates women from being always

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Greene borrows the term from Jessica Benjamin, whose text *The Bonds of Love* (1988) informs much of her argument.

and inevitably cast (unfavourably) in association with men: female identity can cease to exist as a function of its difference from male identity and vice versa. By extension, then, women can be considered as legitimate holders of the gaze of pleasure just as they can be the recipients of a gaze that does not condemn them to a state of abjection. Sheila Jeffreys (1996) offers a similar account of the gaze of desire that acknowledges the recipient, of the same or different sex, as equal but she describes it by the unfortunate term 'homosexual desire' and sets it up as opposite to 'heterosexual desire'. The terms are regrettable because they carry a history of connotative meanings which detract from the potential of Jeffreys' theory to accommodate equality within difference – homosexuality implying, as it does, sexual similarity. While she does acknowledge that male-female interactions can be based upon 'homosexual' desire and that same-sex couples can experience 'heterosexual' desire based upon inequality and difference, the terms perpetuate the negativity that feminists have associated with heterosexuality, which is the sexual reality for vast numbers of women who do not feel victimised.

The postulation of 'mutual recognition' and of a woman's right to hold the gaze renders theories like Laura Mulvey's outdated because of their unquestioning adherence to patriarchally constructed social arrangements of dominance and submission. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that there can ever be a single model of looking that could adequately describe all visual interactions between people. Instead, I would like to suggest that each instance is accompanied by a simultaneous inscription of the participants into positions based upon a multitude of factors that define their relationship to one another. The dynamics of the gaze could be conceived in terms akin to Foucault's technologies of power, but with allowance also for the possibility of equality. Accordingly, it should be possible to theorise the adoption of a position of dominance, submission or equality relative to another person, the arrangement of which can alter in accordance with

circumstances and situations. Wendy Hollway (1996) suggests, similarly, that a concept such as 'mutual recognition' allows sex or gender to become *inclusive* in recognition, rather than the *exclusive* determining factor in a visual exchange. Thus it is possible to conceive of identifications and recognitions of difference or likeness across or within sexes. The implications for film are that the viewing position is no longer defined in masculine or feminine terms and the biological sex of the viewer is no longer perceived as the sole determinant of the dynamics of viewing pleasure.

CHAPTER 2: LOOKING AT SEX - THE PORNOGRAPHIC GAZE

There is a tendency to perceive 'feminists' as under an obligation to adopt an anti-pornography stance in their bid to protect the interests and physical well-being of women, who, together with children, are generally perceived as the 'victims' of the production and consumption of pornography. It is the issue of choice which underlies much of the conflict among feminist groups about the relation of women to pornography. For feminists who advocate censorship of pornographic materials it is believed that all women, even if they do not perceive it themselves, are denied free choice. Women, as the mental and physical victims of men and heterosexuality, are considered incapable of transcending their subordination so as to exercise a balanced and rational evaluation of their circumstances. Thus, while women may argue that they can choose for themselves, some feminist groups have adopted a watchdog role intent upon protecting women from further legalised exploitation. The alternative position, whereby women are granted individual perspectives and opinions, provides a more liberal approach to pornography because women are afforded the opportunity to use and enjoy it, but it denies feminists a collective stance on the issue since some may be offended, while others are not. A postmodern rejection of universal experience and identity leaves feminists in an awkward position, unless an approach similar to Wendy McElroy's 'Individual Feminism' is adopted (1995: 125). McElroy recommends allowing individuals self-expression and 'self-ownership' within the private domain while the public arena deals only with public issues. Clearly there are difficulties in defining what separates the public and the private and there is still the issue of whether women can ever escape the impact of heterosexual patriarchy upon their desires, but perhaps this is the only viable course available because it avoids the extremes and the dogmatism of other approaches. Before the adoption of any approach, however, it is necessary to ascertain what pornography is and who is able to access

'the pleasures' that it provides, since it is clear that if pornography *is* definitively abusive, then it should not be tolerated in a sexually equal society.

Gloria Steinem, in her condemnation thereof, argues a character for pornography which she believes makes it readily recognisable and, therefore, easy to distinguish from erotica:

...erotic: a mutually pleasurable, sexual expression between people who have enough power to be there by positive choice....It is truly sensuous....

...pornographic: its message is violence, dominance, and conquest. It is sex being used to reinforce some inequality, or to create one, or to tell us that pain and humiliation (ours or someone else's) are really the same as pleasure. (1991: 53)

Helen Longino's definition, derived from that of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (New York), also rejects pornography as 'morally objectionable':

I define pornography as verbal or pictorial explicit representations of sexual behavior that...have as a distinguishing characteristic "the degrading and demeaning portrayal of the role and status of the human female...as a mere sexual object to be exploited and manipulated sexually." (1991: 85) [Italics in original.]

It is apparent that those theorists intent upon arguing for the prohibition of pornographic materials have a greater investment in delineating the range of images and behaviours that could be classed as pornography and, hence, as objectionable. What have been labelled 'libertarian' perspectives tend to be more open and deny the accuracy or appropriateness of explicit classificatory labels.

What is degrading and offensive is clearly subjective, as is made apparent by the rather arbitrary separation of 'erotica' from 'pornography' and the latter's association with misogyny. Pornography is often distinguished from erotica on the basis of the levels of explicitness that characterise each: erotica's greater reliance upon suggestion and its couching of sex in romance

and relationships tends to render it more euphemistic and, therefore, acceptable to anti-pornography feminists. Pornography, though, is also perceived as serving an exclusively prurient function whilst erotica is credited, sometimes, with fulfilling an educational purpose. In spite of intensive targeting of pornography for its reinforcement or eroticisation of women's subordination, comparatively little is made of the impact of erotica upon women's lives. Alison Assiter makes a very convincing argument for a perception of erotica as 'a porn for women' (1988: 101). Typified by the romance novel, erotica serves to excite women because erotic imaginings are 'close enough to the experience of many a woman for her not to rule them out as beyond the bounds of possibility,' while women in 'hard core' porn are not easily imitated by the average woman (1988: 107-108). The outcome of each of these modes of portrayal, according to Assiter, is the objectification of women, with erotica encouraging women to objectify *themselves*. While I do not agree with Assiter's perception of porn or erotica as necessarily implicated in the objectification of women, I do concur with her argument that the difference between the two 'genres' is hardly legitimate since their portrayals of sex and of the female body constitute mere variations upon a theme to which one's response is dictated by taste. Further, if anything, the division reinforces the rather tired notions of female sensitivity and sexual delicacy and perpetuates the idea that there are essential differences between men and women that legitimate their different treatment. Most particularly, the division suggests that women require benevolent protection from harsh, sexual, realities and, ultimately, it places women on the level of children incapable of making rational and informed choices.

In the course of this discussion, I shall not make distinctions between pornography and erotica, but shall use the terms interchangeably to refer to images of explicit sex, whatever the gender, or arrangement, of the participants. I do wish to stress, however, that certain limitations need to be

imposed upon what falls under the category of 'pornography', since I do not believe that any depictions of acts that are an infringement upon the rights of others should be accepted under the guise of sexual liberty – this includes instances of child-sex, bestiality, rape, snuff movies etc. where the element of choice is not present to all the participants and which I *would* classify as legally obscene and morally unacceptable.

Objections to pornography have been raised because it is perceived, in itself, as an act of violence against women: 'Pornography *is* violence against women' (Kate Millett quoted in Crabbe, 1988: 45). Moreover, the content of pornography is seen as an explicit articulation of women's violation and degradation at the hands of men. While other media also reflect patriarchal notions and misogynist values, it is pornography which renders sexual difference, and therefore social inequality, most visible through its graphic depiction of sexual intercourse: possession of the penis casts men in a position to 'penetrate' and 'colonise' the body of the woman. Intercourse itself is described in terms which articulate it as a violence against, and a violation of, women. Through this reasoning, some feminist groups argue, any portrayal of sex must be degrading to women by virtue of its reinscription of women into positions of subordination relative to men:

The oppression of women occurs through sexual subordination....[women's] inequality is achieved through sex. Sex as desired by the class that dominates women is held by that class to be elemental, urgent, necessary....In the subordination of women, inequality itself is sexualized: made into the experience of sexual pleasure, essential to sexual desire. Pornography is the material means of sexualizing inequality; and that is why pornography is a central practice in the subordination of women. (Dworkin. 1991: 57)

Dworkin sees pornography as a tool of socialisation which inscribes men and women into a patriarchally-delimited inequality based upon sexual difference. For her, pornography's misogynist status is derived from its close alliance with heterosexuality and male sexual gratification. The

depiction of the sex becomes synonymous with the practice of that form of sexuality. Zita reiterates this idea in her definition of the 'pornographic apparatus':

...the social practice and products (textual, institutional, behavioral and ideational) which impose certain codes on the bodies of women, those which themselves are the result of economic, ideological, and other conditions that make this social practice and its issuance possible....The workings of the pornographic apparatus, as with any ideological system, render these acts natural and legitimate....In the case of pornography specifically, the subject becomes a carrier of the dominant patriarchal values and identity formations. The erotization of domination and submission...*becomes sex*, that which is desired and gives pleasure. (1987: 29)

Zita's argument is that the conventions of heterosexuality are not only reflected in pornography, but are also established thereby, so that, '...the pornographic construction of "male" requires domination and the ability to penetrate, usually excited through the use of force. The pornographic construction of "female" requires submission and provision of sites for penetration, whether orifices or the skin itself' (Zita, 1987: 30). Because these socialised heterosexual desires and pleasures are presented as 'natural' or instinctive, they prevent women (and men) from recognising their potential to adopt alternative sexualities. Consequently, women are theorised as being forced into 'heterosex'. What Linda Williams calls the 'slogan' of the anti-pornography campaigners – 'Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice' (1999: 16) – encapsulates the perceived association between heterosexual pornography and the perpetration of violence against women. The term 'rape' does not imply only those acts of violation that are conventionally perceived as a crime, rather it casts all heterosexual intercourse as criminal invasions of women's bodies.

Certainly, penetration (and penetrative sex) is accorded much significance in patriarchal society where it is used in the language of dominance and masculinity and to signify male power and

mastery.⁷ However, it is equally apparent that it does not always possess a singular meaning or bear meaning within itself (Jackson, 1996: 35). To conceive of heterosexuality in this way would suggest that it is somehow 'unnatural' or masochistic for women to profess to enjoying penetrative/heterosexual sex and that in an ideal world, women would either be homosexual or asexual.⁸ Accordingly, for Dworkin the only possibilities for sexuality available to women beyond some form of abuse or violation, lie in lesbianism or masturbation, both of which preclude the presence of dominant and dominating men.

Of course, in spite of Dworkin's exclusive targeting of heterosexuality, these alternative sexual identities and positionings are themselves circumscribed by the politics of sexuality and power relations within patriarchy. Dworkin equates political power plays in sex with biological/gender difference but she fails to acknowledge the infinite other differences upon which relations of dominance and submission can be grounded and eroticised. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that similarity is synonymous with equality. Notions that lesbianism, and the depiction thereof, might constitute a form of 'equal' (non-exploitative) sexuality are highly contentious given the frequent embrace of sado-masochism in lesbian sex and the butch-femme role divisions that so often characterise lesbian relations and pornography intended specifically for this market (as

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Heterosexual males commonly use violent language and/or sexual terms to describe many 'masculine' activities associated with sports. In his article 'Violent Love: Hunting, Heterosexuality, and the Erotics of Men's Predation' (1998), Brian Luke undertakes an extensive analysis of the (sexual) pleasure that men derive from violence. The equation of sex and violence would seem to give credence to the allegations by feminists that some heterosexuality is/can be a violence against women.

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The identification of penetration as heterosexual and misogynist problematizes the use of penetration in the context of lesbian sex by means of dildos. It could be argued that these instances of penetration serve merely as examples of heterosexualised lesbianism, where the roles of male and female are both filled by women. However, perhaps it is just as feasible that some women enjoy penetrative sex as much, or more, than they do clitoral stimulation. See Smyth (1990: 157) for a discussion of dildos as fetish and as reaffirmation of women's sexual sufficiency.

opposed to that used as stimulus for male heterosexual fantasy).⁹ In fact, it is still difference that is eroticised, whether it is based upon an imitation of heterosexual, male-female, interaction in so-called 'role-plays', or not:

But the difference does not seem benign. It is not difference in the form simply of variety that is in question here, but the difference of power that is enlisted to create the excitement of heterosexual desire. (Jeffreys, 1996: 79)

What is apparent where difference is fostered/created within same-sex relations is that power-plays, and even violence, reflective of heterosexual relationships do occur. In his/her discussion of the significance of difference, Bornstein, a transsexual, comments upon the eroticism of power beyond the conventions of heterosexuality: '...sado-masochism is a consensual way to play with power and gender' (Quoted in Jeffreys, 1996: 86). In fact, Bornstein suggests, gender is largely unimportant in the eroticisation of power in S/M, although there are suggestions (Ziv, 1994 and Williams, 1989) that depictions of masochism in heterosexual porn are generally of female submissives and male dominants. This latter view contradicts the stereotype of the leather-clad dominatrix and the sexually submissive male that traditionally features in popular conceptions of S/M. Nevertheless, it is clear that the exclusive alignment of sexual domination and erotics of power with the practice of heterosexuality is an oversimplification, as is the belief that only heterosexual males utilise and enjoy pornography – even that which is intended for the heterosexual market.¹⁰ For Dworkin, whose concern is with women's rights, the inequalities practised and promoted in other 'sexualities' are conveniently ignored because they cloud the

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See examples of Della Grace's work, intended for a lesbian market, which depict very clear 'top'-'bottom' divisions with dominant women asserting control (through dog collars and chains) over kneeling submissives.

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See Lewis (1994: 86-87) regarding lesbian use of heterosexual images.

simplicity of her case against men. For this reason, she examines only the collusion between pornography and heterosexuality for evidence of how women are constructed in the patriarchal paradigm.

This perception of media forms as collaborative in the formulation and maintenance of power relations in society is also the basis of Foucault's (1990) suggestion that the discourses¹¹ of sexuality script, regulate and define conceptions of sexual desire and pleasure. Ironically, the divergent opinions of the 'redeemability' and rehabilitation of pornography are derived from a common acknowledgement of this role of social ideology and power politics in defining the norms, values and conduct of society. While some may see pornography as too bound up in the mechanisms of patriarchal sexuality to exist as a separate entity, others argue that there remains, always, the possibility of transformation of discourse, precisely because discourse is not static and complete. Linda Williams states: '...pornography is insistently phallic *in this particular way, at this particular time...*' (1999: 117), thereby implying that a non-phallic alternative can be achieved in a different context. Cameron discusses Kappeler and Jeffreys' assessment of power and pleasure on much the same basis:

Kappeler and Jeffreys would claim that the conjunction of power and sexual pleasure is not a necessary or natural relation, but rather one contingent on (and reproductive of) our current male-dominated social arrangements; because men and women are socially unequal, this inequality is also built into desire. (1990: 795)

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In their introduction to *Bad Attitudes on Trial* (1997), Brenda Crossman and Shannon Bell provide the following, very useful, definition of discourse: 'A discourse combines and is a combination of social practices, forms of subjectivity, and power relations. Discourse is a way of constituting knowledge and identity.' (46) As such, all forms of media – including pornography – would constitute obvious types of discourse.

In her discussion of heterosexual eroticism, Stevi Jackson (1996) proposes that while there is some form of sexual division between men and women there will always be some degree of hierarchisation, but that this is not exercised uniformly across genders. It is not possible, therefore, to accord heterosexual intercourse any uniform symbolic significance aligning it with the exploitation of women. Clearly it does not mean this for all women. Nevertheless, much pornography *is* misogynist in character and does *not* serve the interests of women. This is not surprising given that it is a genre (and related industry) which has been owned, run and consumed, in the main, by men. That pornography is a device used by and for male sexual gratification in the heterosexual context is not in dispute. What is open to question, however, is whether this is necessarily the only and unalterable character available to pornography and visual depictions of sex.

For many (like Dworkin and Zita), a more tolerant conception of pornography is not possible because of the way in which theories have described the very nature of the mechanisms of looking and the corresponding derivation of sexual pleasure. The retention of a masculine identity for the voyeur and the continued association of this term with the sexual gaze precludes the possibility of a female gaze of desire. This perspective is succinctly summarised in Straayer's comment:

The sexual gaze as elaborated in much feminist film theory is a male prerogative, a unidirectional gaze from male onto female, pursuing a downward slant in relation to power. (1994: 344)

For these feminists the position of dominance can only be occupied by men. Accordingly, male-female interactions take on a predictable format that is repeated and echoed in all depictions and representations of the sexual relations between these two sexes. The equation is fixed and unalterable. The simplicity of this formulation is advantageous for anti-pornography groups

because it justifies the banning of pornographic material on the grounds of meeting progressive social and political ideals aimed at 'gender equality'. Paradoxically, however, it reinscribes male control and women's relative impotence in accordance with outmoded essentialist principles.

The viewing individual must assume a position and an identity relative to the material presented for scrutiny. However, subjectivities and identities cannot realistically be perceived as complete and fulfilled at any stage. They are, like Foucault's society, exposed to constant forces and devices which influence their positioning and power in respect to others. Heath's description of the 'spectating individual' reflects this state of mutability:

The spectating individual is always an individual subject, 'subject' designating not an achieved unity, once and for all, but a construction and a process, a heterogeneity, an intersection of histories – social and individual... Every individual is the site of a singularity, the fact of his or her individual history. (1978: 107)

Just as the individual exerting the gaze is not, here, considered to be permanently and essentially designated a viewing identity, so too is the gaze itself not defined as possessed of some abiding and enduring form or character. Linda Williams, in *Hard Core* (1999), also argues that there is nothing natural about the sexual or pleasurable gaze, whether in the cinema or elsewhere. Rather, the manner in which we have come to view the body and regard the particular arrangement of humans – male and female – for viewing is based upon what we have come to expect through our socialisation into the mechanisms of film. Since its very inception, according to Williams, the cinematic gaze has been invested with particular meanings which are based upon the assertion of distinct genders. It is also her contention that the 'masculine' viewing practices of fetishism and voyeurism are not the only means available with which to access the visual image, but rather that these are viewing 'perversions' that have become normalised and ingrained in our processes of

viewing so that we anticipate and expect them:

With the invention of cinema...fetishism and voyeurism gained new importance and normality through their link to the positivist quest for the truth of visible phenomena....Cinema implanted these perversions more firmly, normalizing them in technological and social "ways of seeing." As a result, viewers gradually came to expect that seeing human bodies in motion in the better way afforded by cinema would include these perverse pleasures as a matter of course. (Williams, 1999: 46)

Williams has, in this discussion, adopted and adapted Foucault's explanation of power as *productive* force as a means of explaining the coincidence of certain ways of seeing with the pleasures that these are seen to produce. By the same logic, those theories that have claimed to simply describe the viewing position (and the absence of viewing pleasure) for women have contributed to women's inscription and confinement in the viewing mechanism: 'Considered in this light, cinema and psychoanalysis are both historically determined – and determining – mechanisms of power and pleasure.' (Williams, 1999: 46).

Cameron, sharing a similar conception of the productive character of discourse, advocates the creation of cultural discourses reflective of women's sexuality and desires:

...social meanings, however powerful, are not static, monolithic, and unchanging....The point is to acknowledge that desire is constructed by the cultural discourse available and then try to intervene positively in this process by offering alternative discourses that go beyond existing limitations on women's sexuality – beyond sexism, passivity, culturally prescribed masochism, etc. (Cameron, 1990: 792-793)

The difficulty remains, however, in identifying what constitutes 'women's sexuality', and its associated discourse, without falling into the trap of essentialism. In acknowledging the viability of a female gaze of desire capable of deriving pleasure from pornography, one is faced with the onerous task of describing a sexual gaze that transcends conventions of a male-female binary.

Challenging the status of the gaze as patriarchal and misogynist necessitates a re-examination of the ownership of the gaze and an expansion of the possibilities of looking to include more than just fetishism and voyeurism as sources of visual pleasure, since these rely so heavily upon the conception of gender difference and contrast.

The pornographic presentation of male/female nudity and sexual activity constructs a temporary, yet complex, relationship between the viewer, as the holder of the gaze, and the actors/recipients of that gaze. The interaction is complicated by the viewer's simultaneous perception of the actors as 'performers', and the need to interpret the activity as genuine and the emotions/pleasures presented as real and spontaneous. The common assumption is that the actors enjoy engaging in the sexual activities presented but the existence of a porn star system, much like that of Hollywood, makes apparent the artificiality of these films and the sex they sell. In order to access the joys to be found in pornography the viewer needs to engage in a degree of self-delusion. The viewer is not a participant – he/she is reliant on action performed by proxy – but *jouissance* and closure are immediate because masturbatory fantasy extends the visually presented possibilities into physical reality. The appeal of pornography lies in this contradictory state of coexistent proximity and distance that characterises it as a medium. Koch expresses this as: 'Looking, as a form of sexual curiosity that probes an undiscovered sexuality, requires distance in order to mitigate the fear of the unknown...' (1993: 38) and, '...the camera becomes a device for creating distance and the medium of a harmless voyeurism' (1993: 47).

For men, pornography provides safe sexual engagement because, as Mulvey and Koch have argued, its use of voyeurism neutralises the element of the unknown, and the potential threat, posed by women. Pornography, it is suggested, emphasises the female body as different and

distinct from male bodies in order to demystify and render it available for male mastery.

Consequently, no part of the female body is left hidden, unknown or unknowable:

In many ways, pornography can be seen to reenact continually the boundary dividing visibility and invisibility. In each repeated attempt to 'show' the truth of female sexuality, pornography inevitably reinstates the impossibility of this project. In its endless quest for clarity, objectivity and disclosure, it endlessly reinvokes that alternative, anxious sense of the female body as dark, mysterious and formless. As it seeks to render the female body knowable and possessable, so it calls up the frightening possibility that it is beyond knowledge or absolute possession. (Nead, 1992: 99)

Accordingly, male-generated pornography can be understood as testimony of the constant and unending pursuit of exposure -- the presentation to the eye of that which is hidden. This accounts for the overwhelming emphasis in pornographic film and pin-ups on vaginal close-ups. The shaved vaginas are opened up for maximum scrutiny. What is ostensibly presented is the image of the woman exposed and, seemingly, powerless to conceal her arousal -- just as an erect penis reveals male sexual excitement through an apparently involuntary physiological reaction. Because the male's penis is so readily visible, it is suggested, men and male genitals pose very little interest to the voyeur. For this reason, it is presumed that women must always be considered the recipients of the sexual or voyeuristic gaze, and are, therefore, the natural subject material for pornography. It also makes the male voyeur the natural viewer of pornography since the motivation to look at porn is derived from male insecurity and castration anxiety. However, as Nead suggests, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of female sexuality is never fully achieved -- at best the voyeur has to content himself with a very superficial view of female sexuality.

If pornography serves as a discourse that reinforces male confidence in its supremacy and dominance, then it also has to conceal the fact that the female body can never be completely

has been. In spite of the repeated depictions of the naked female body, men have no means of rendering female sexual organs and female sexual pleasures fully subject to their control. Cherry Smyth suggests that this has influenced the portrayal of sexual pleasure in heterosexual pornography:

Heterosexual porn attempts, but never succeeds, to reveal the mystery of female pleasure which remains hidden. Heterosexual men, therefore, are constantly anxious about their inability to satisfy women, and are drawn back again and again to pornographic attempts to signify her pleasure, to make it visible. (1990: 156)

This is a point that Williams also makes repeatedly. Her understanding of pornography, like Smyth's, is that its intention is not to devalue the women depicted therein, but to illustrate that men can satisfy women sexually. It aims to render women accessible to men, who are otherwise overwhelmed by female mystery. Everything about conventional heterosexual porn serves to suggest the potency of masculinity, its mastery of sexuality and pleasure. Yet, in so doing, it implicitly transfers the issue of pleasure from one of female satisfaction to one of male satisfaction and reassurance of the male ability to 'perform':

The abundance of sperm once again becomes a sign of inadequacy, an inadequacy of representation. Still, the sight of an ejaculating penis seems to be pleasurable for the straight male viewer, because to him it is a sign of intactness, an assurance that the vagina, imagined as insatiable and dangerous, has once again yielded its victim, unscathed, to see the light of day....This convention therefore sacrifices the woman's pleasure, since the actress has to simulate orgasm after the penis is no longer inside her. (Koch, 1993:42)

Exposed, male sex organs indicate sexual arousal, and sperm provides proof of orgasm. Women's organs, being hidden, fail to replicate this simplistic relation between the visible and the reassuring – in spite of the wetness and inviting openness usually suggested by the woman's pose. The vagina, inadequate as an indicator of real sexual pleasure, has to be assisted by the often comical

soundtrack of moans of pleasure intended to confirm the occurrence of the woman's pleasure and orgasm. This formula in pornography echoes the widely acknowledged incidence of faked orgasms (also performed for the sake of the male ego) in the context of physical, real-life, sexual relations.

For the same reason, women are presented as insatiable in their demand for male sexual attentions – upon which they apparently depend for true satisfaction. Heterosexual pornography generally perpetuates the myth that penetration by the penis is the source of ultimate sexual pleasure such that other forms of stimulation are mere precursors to 'the real thing'. Accordingly, women who masturbate or engage in lesbian sexual activities are seen to do so in substitution of, or foreplay to, the pleasure that can only be achieved from men and the penis. However, the existence of abiding lesbianism is a clear indication that women are not dependent upon penetration by men for sexual satisfaction. Clitoral stimulation, which does not require male presence, does lead to orgasm and, unlike the vagina, the clitoris is not cast in any significant relation to the penis. Pornographic depictions of heterosexual do not, therefore, *need* to rely upon stereotypes of women's sexual experience as male-related and penetrative, although in terms of current theory, it is plain to see why they do.

It is apparent, then, that heterosexual pornography is implicated in linking women's sexual pleasure with the presence of men and the realisation of male sexual pleasure. Nevertheless, although women have different means of experiencing pleasure, which do not necessarily pander to male ego-needs or flatter male notions of sexual potency, this does not imply that all women's sexual pleasure and enjoyment of sexual images has to be achieved in the absence of men. On the contrary, any attempt (whether by men or by certain feminist groups) to delimit and prescribe what constitutes 'women's pleasure', must surely be seen as patronising. If feminists abandon their

unqualified suspicion of heterosexuality and pornography they will also free women to enjoy sexual pleasure, and sexually stimulating materials, that have previously been the sole prerogative of men in association with misogyny. Cherry Smyth argues this point in terms of the use of pornography in lesbian sexuality and the lesbian sexual gaze:

Just as it has been taboo for women to express an interest in sex and sexual satisfaction, so feminism has prescribed further taboos declaring 'politically correct' ways of having sex and seeking arousal. To watch, never mind admit to enjoying porn, is equal to treacherous collusion with the most sinister component of hetero-patriarchy. (1990: 152)

Similarly, Koch proposes a consideration of pornography that is free of these 'taboos' and moralising attitudes so as to make available both homosexual and heterosexual pleasures to men and to women:

The pleasure of looking, as an exploration of a strange sex as well as one's own, is certainly a pleasure common to both sexes. (Koch, 1993: 42)

Just as male heterosexual readers respond to the pornographic pinups showing wet, 'aroused', vaginas because they suggest that the reader is an object of desire, so too can the erect penis, signifying male arousal, serve as the stimulus to women's pleasurable viewing. In spite of assertions that pornography and the pornographic gaze define male sexual interests, heterosexual women *do* derive pleasure from looking at naked male bodies and, more covertly, frequently also female bodies.¹² Perhaps there is a need to reassess what it is that serves as sexual stimulus to men

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A 1987 survey by *Time* magazine concluded that, at that time, 40% of X-rated video rentals in the USA were by women (Lacombe, 1994: 176). Linda Williams also refers to the results of a 1987 survey that found that half of the women surveyed regularly watched pornographic films and 85% had seen at least one such film (1999: 231). Unfortunately, statistics were not available on the ratio of male to female readers, in South Africa, of magazines like *Hustler*. The editorial staff (of which a large number are women, including the editor), however, claim that while women represent a smaller percentage of buyers, (continued...)

and women. What is acknowledged as sexually attractive and stimulating is bound to change if sexual/gender identity in the heterosexual context is no longer defined, as it is in psychoanalysis, in relation to the object of desire. Moreover, the pleasurable sexual sensation derived from looking at bodies requires expression in terms other than those that cast it exclusively in terms of violence and objectification experienced between opposites. Redefining the sexual gaze as Koch's 'exploration' removes this association with hostile colonisation and renders pornography as the representation of a pleasurable visual experience, irrespective of the gender of the viewer or the 'object' of the look.

'Individual feminism' provides a means by which to accommodate the co-existence of feminist values with the sexual diversity of its followers. It exonerates heterosexual women from charges of complicity with the patriarchal regime without suggesting that heterosexuality or pornography are unproblematic in their influence in society. Wendy McElroy considers the relationship between pornography and feminism as wholly compatible:

Pornography is one of the windows through which women glimpse the sexual possibilities that are open to them. It is nothing more or less than freedom of speech applied to the sexual realm. Feminism is freedom of speech applied to women's sexual rights. (1995: 128)

That the types of sexual choices made by some women will not appeal to all other women is to be expected. McElroy readily accepts that the choices of each woman do have implications for other women too, but it is only where coercion features that intervention should be permitted.

With regard to the women who perform in pornography, there is very little to substantiate claims

12(...continued)

they frequently read the magazines with their partners. Information was offered that it is women who commission more 'undercover parties' (hosted by Hustler) and purchase more sex toys offered through the publication – ostensibly because these constitute less public displays of their interest.

made that women are forced to act in these films, with the possible exception of Linda Lovelace, whose case of abuse has been documented as an exception rather than as the rule. Further, contrary to the arguments made, for instance, in the very emotional article 'Pornography: towards a non-sexist policy' by Diana Russell (1997), there is no significant relation between instances of violence against women or children and the availability of pornography (Williams: 1999: 184-228; Lacombe: 1994: 63-8; McElroy: 1995). There appears, therefore, to be little need for feminists to intervene in the public arena on behalf of all women.

CHAPTER 3: PORNOGRAPHY FOR WOMEN

Making pornography available to women does not require a vast upheaval of the porn industry or the 're-creation' of pornographic discourse. Rather, I would suggest, along with the recognition that pornography (and not only 'erotica') also has a female market there is bound to be a change in the focus and the emphasis of porn films. The greatest change required, however, is interpretative. It is perhaps more crucial that the conventions which dictate how male-female interactions are read or perceived, are revised and expanded beyond the confines of the outdated notion of a stable subject-object relation.

Conceptions of what women's pornography is, tend to presume that women are less preoccupied with exposure and explicitness than men are. Linda Williams praises Candida Royalle, and her company, Femme Productions, for producing pornography that she feels is more reflective of women's tastes because it combines excitement with an element of 'safety'. In reaction to (male) criticisms of Royalle's work for compromising on hard-core, Williams defends the more 'arty' character of these films as defining a new, feminine, form of pornography (1999: 246-248 & 269). Similarly, Grace Lau, a woman photographer of women's 'erotica', criticises conventional male pornography on the grounds that it is 'tacky and tedious' (1993: 195). Her own images might easily be called 'arty' due to their subtle and suggestive character. She hints at male sexuality concealed behind netting, wet sheets, skimpy clothing and masks, instead of presenting explicit genital images as is often the format of male heterosexual porn. Lau proposes that men and women have different expectations and desires when it comes to the presentation of sexual images. She generalises her own to represent 'women's' sexual tastes:

Personally, I prefer images that conceal, rather than those that reveal all. Most men, however, need to be re-educated to appreciate images that stir the imagination, rather than those which assault the senses. (Lau, 1993: 195)

It is apparent that women have been largely ignored as consumers of pornographic images and perhaps they are, consequently, relatively 'naive' in their responses to such material. There is, however, a danger in suggesting that women are always more aroused by the less explicit, more subtle, images associated with 'erotica', which is what can be inferred from Lau's comment. She attributes the perceived difference between the male and the female viewer to the conventions which have maintained pornography exclusively for use by men. Men have developed certain expectations of sexual images and their placing in relation thereto; women, on the other hand, are just beginning to negotiate their way through pornography and have no preconceptions:

During my recent work, I have learnt that many women are able to enjoy being both exhibitionists and voyeurs; they also enjoy looking at images of both men and women. They have a more fluid imagination, having been denied previous blueprints, cutouts or stereotypes of sexuality. (Lau, 1993: 200)

Certainly, women's sexual identities have not been challenged or compromised, as men's have, by their engagement, in pornography, in homosexuality, sodomy and other less orthodox sexual practices – women are generally not regarded as any less 'female' as a consequence of these activities, while men may become emasculated or 'feminised' by their involvement in much the same sexual conduct. But, the acceptability of such sexual behaviour in association with women is a 'blueprint' or 'cutout' for women's sexuality – one from which women derive the benefit of a greater diversity of sexually stimulating material. Because women are not conventionally considered the 'target market' for pornography does not mean that they are entirely free of preconceived notions of sexual behaviour and the consumption of explicit images thereof. It has been argued that pornography helps to construct sexual norms and behaviours and there is little

to gain by endeavouring to ignore this fact. Women are unlikely to have access to a new pornography that is entirely free of the influence of other, existing, pornography but they can become empowered as members of the audience addressed.

Lau takes for granted a degree of flexibility in the dynamics of viewing. She accords women the option of assuming, variously, the position of the spectator or that of the object/exhibit. By extension, men must also be capable of integrating themselves into alternative modes of seeing and positioning and this necessitates revised interpretations of the significance of the gaze. Her notion of a 'fluidity' underscores the need to move away from conceptions of constant, gender-defined, positions or gender-specific pornographic styles. Any consideration of a sexual gaze must take account of the dynamic nature of inter-personal relations and the instability of social discourse. Pornography can no longer be regarded as possessing a singular meaning which is accessed differently by its male and its female consumers:

...it needs to be accepted that pornography is not 'just' consumed, but is used, worked on, elaborated, remembered, fantasised about by its subjects. To stop the analysis at the artefact...is to truncate the consumption process radically, and thereby to leave unconsidered the human making involved in completing the act of pornographic consumption. (Wicke, 1993: 70)

As Wicke argues, the role and presence of viewers cannot be explained simply in terms of their reception of images (of male dominance and female submission). Rather, there exists an active engagement which must be taken into account in any consideration of pornographic materials and film. The constitution of the porn film is about its onanistic function and, as such, it differs from the manner in which mainstream film constructs the spectator into a relatively passive position. What may apply in an analysis of mainstream film is not necessarily applicable to the pornographic film in which the events presented are intended to stimulate a series of multiple pleasures rather

than promote identification with a single character or subject position. Pornography does not exist as a monolithic entity with a singular format or character, any more than does any other art or media form. It would probably be more accurate to conceive of *pornographies* of varying styles and contents and aimed at different segments of the adult market, united only in their common depiction of sexual images.

The convention of generalising viewer identity and position from one viewing situation to all others is not always appropriate. Kaplan, in a discussion of MTV music video clips, suggests that the spectator position in television viewing is not the same as that found in mainstream films. She suggests that the nature of televised programming is discontinuous and subject to interruption so that it is not intended to provide a singular viewing position and, concomitantly, cannot be regarded as defining a singular gender identity:

...what is true for MTV is true also for other television programmes: namely, that instead of a more or less monolithic (and largely male) gaze as was found in the Hollywood film, there is a wide range of gazes with different gender implications. In other words, the apparatus itself, in its modes of functioning, is not gender specific *per se*; but across its segments...we can find a variety of 'gazes' that indicate an address to a certain kind of male or female Imaginary. If the address in some videos is not exactly genderless, people of both genders are often able to undertake multiple identifications. (Kaplan, 1988: 136)

This account of television viewing is useful in application to pornography – television is, after all, subsequent to the introduction of the home video, the most common means of screening film pornography. The parallels are apparent in those pornographic films which are comprised simply of a collection of decontextualised episodes of sexual intercourse, such as occurs in *Cum Freaks*¹³,

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Where possible I have indicated the release dates for films. In the case of some of the pornographic films, there is no date supplied either in publications or in the video.

Private Performance and also in the 'amateur' video footage of private sex orgies. These compilations seem to address a particular sexually-oriented, if not gendered, audience in that they invariably repeat a specific sexual style, varying only the setting and the actors: the formula remains the same and the action is predictable. But, while the action is internally consistent (within the film) and addresses 'a certain kind of male or female Imaginary', it is not necessarily typical across all films, which would also address various kinds of 'Imaginary' of different gender and sexual predilections.

Even the more complex pornographic 'feature' films fall somewhere between the character and style of general television programmes and that of the conventional mainstream film. The pornographic feature film usually, but not always, has some form of continuous narrative which locates the protagonist(s) in situations or settings which stimulate or catalyse sexual engagement. In *Bad Girls* it is a prison setting which introduces lesbian activity and justifies a prison break because of sexual frustration; in *Never Say Never* 'Barbara Bond' has various encounters with sexual 'perverts'. That the narrative is a feature of these films is not to suggest that it is central or particularly significant – as is evidenced by the obvious lack of convincing sets (in *Bad Girls*, the 'girls' break through the prison wall in order to lay their hands on each other) and the frequent use of improbable scenarios unchecked by the responsibilities of daily life. I believe that the function of the narrative is largely to create a context to assist the spectator to engage in his/her fantasy-participation in the action. The 'story' is required because much erotic pleasure is derived from the knowledge that one is transgressing and is engaging in forbidden acts (this is the appeal of pornography itself, which is taboo and also depicts people engaged in what is frequently 'deviant' or illicit sex). It is necessary, therefore, for sex acts to be portrayed as occurring in the world inhabited by the average spectator (at the mall, in the office, at a party etc.) because these

are contexts into which projection is possible for these viewers. These are also environments which are, in reality, regulated by strict codes of conduct which preclude the possibility of obvious sexual activity, hence the frequent descriptions of the characters as 'bad' and rebellious. Thus, sexual arousal is derived from observing other people (actors) transgressing in ways that the viewer dares not. This is not to suggest that all pornography depends on the creation of real-life settings. Clearly this is not so. Vast numbers of pornographic films also use mainstream fantasy or adventure films as the basis for their narrative, albeit in a humorous fashion as Peter Lehman (1996) notes in 'Revelations about Pornography' where he mentions *On Golden Blonde*. Similarly, in various editions of *Hustler* magazine the following videos, among others, were advertised for sale: *The Temple of Poon*, *Screwballs*, *The XXX Files*.

Lehman points out that the video format allows the repeated viewing of specific, favoured, scenes because the viewer has access to rewind and fast forward facilities and this '...reeks havoc with narrative structure since it is quite literally possible for the spectator to totally elide it...or to restructure it' (1996: 5). He also argues that a coherent narrative is of secondary importance because the viewers of pornography are not engaged in identification with a fictional world on screen, but have as their central focus their own bodies – in the act of masturbation (1996: 6). The narrative serves, primarily, to string together a series of sexual acts which are, usually, unrelated and act as discrete units exploring different sexual tastes in partners, toys, fetishes and contexts. This tendency is underscored by the practice of awarding, as is the case in *Bad Wives* (1998), an award for 'Best Sex Scene' by AVN¹⁴, which implies that the scenes can be separated and

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AVN is *Adult Video News*, a magazine publication that reviews and assesses films circulated in the pornographic video market.

evaluated independently. This is in spite of the fact that *Bad Wives* has a distinct 'storyline' in its presentation of two housewives who, bored and frustrated, undertake a journey of sexual discovery and empowerment. In attempting to meet the sexual tastes of a range of spectators, each with their own 'portfolio' of sexual interests in oral sex, anal sex, domination, heterosexuality, homosexuality or otherwise, porn films cannot rely upon a single viewer position or sexual approach for an entire film.

While a case can be made for the ability of pornography to meet the sexual interests and the onanistic needs of a variety of tastes, it is perhaps less easy to argue that these include the interests of women. It seems reasonable to assume that it is women in these films who constitute the spectacle, the object to be looked at, since a quick perusal of the cover of some videos reveals that the women are listed as 'starring' whilst the male actors follow under '*also* starring' or 'with' which is indicative of the latter's secondary status as objects. The female stars of these films are also invariably attractive, sleek and sexy in contrast to their (usually) more ordinary male counterparts. A logical explanation of this is that male viewers need to identify with the conventional man who is, nevertheless, capable of attracting and satisfying the sexual urges of beautiful women – Gary Day observes that '...pornography is not about desiring but about being desired' (1988: 93). Yet it seems that this simplistic allocation of the male to the position of viewer and the female to the position of the object, is inadequate to do justice to a film like *Bad Wives* or other pornographic movies (of which it is very typical) where the women featured in the film do not conform to any easy categorisation as 'passive' or 'submissive'. This film does, I believe, variously address the sexual fantasies and needs of men *and* women through what is ordinary format for this genre – the awards and commendations it has received have been issued in the context of the mainstream pornography industry.

Films like *Bad Wives* and *Bad Girls* are not examples of 'women's pornography'. In fact, they are very typical of the films evaluated and rated in sexually explicit magazines like *Hustler*, in terms of male sexuality: 'fully erect', 'half erect' etc..¹⁵ However, women do *not* always respond to heterosexual pornography (ostensibly 'pornography for men') with disgust or with a sense of alienation. If women are voluntary consumers of these images then one must assume that they can, and do, access sexual pleasure from the images and activities depicted therein, including the manner in which women are portrayed in relation to men:

If one strictly defines pornographic cinema as a medium oriented solely toward the depiction of male sexuality, then one still has to explain why women are not necessarily turned off by such depictions... If we imagine that the strict schism between male/female, phallus/vulva is actually a relationship, whereby each sex incorporates repressed elements of the other, then we might have an explanation of why women can discover at least a portion of themselves in 'Pornutopia'. Viewing a penis would then also imply a degree of pleasure for women, and would thus not only mean subjugation by phallic power or identification with the oppressor. (Koch, 1993: 45)

Koch offers one possible account of women's appreciation of 'misogynist' images. Her explanation revises the masculine character of phallic power in the penis so that the woman's gaze is no longer necessarily masochistic and predictable. Koch suggests that the woman's gaze at pornographic film is largely ambivalent because she can derive both pleasure and pain at the images. She can experience sexual pleasure at what she sees of male *and* female bodies, of the active and the passive positioning of men and women, respectively. Gary Day offers a similar account of trans-sexual identification and desire in the male voyeur of lesbian interaction:

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While I believe that the images in these magazines (*Hustler*, *Playboy* and *Genesis* etc.) appeal to both men and women and that the latter do purchase and read them, I would argue that the type of humour and advertising language used recognizes men as the primary readership. There are some items directed specifically at women, but these are comparatively few when comments such as, 'Come on guys, do your dicks a favour...' are relatively common.

...not only is the male identifying with male behaviour as expressed through a female body, but, in wanting to be desired, he is also, by extension, identifying with each woman's desire to be desired, i.e. as a woman is by a man; the voyeur identifies with both male and female aspects of the picture. What is happening here is that the sexual difference on which pornography insists is losing its clarity. (1988: 94-95)

Koch and Day allow for male and female pleasure in the sexual image because sexual categories are transcended. Like Judith Butler (1993), Koch conceives of phallic power as potentially possessed by women. But, while Koch seems to suggest that female pleasure is possible by virtue of a certain repressed bisexuality in both men and women, Butler argues the possibility of divorcing the phallus from any essential association with men and/or the penis, so that a lesbian/woman's phallus, and its potential for sexual power and pleasure, becomes feasible.

Butler's recasting of the penis and the location of the phallus makes an important contribution to women's sexual power and sexual liberation. Because the penis is no longer inevitably associated with the phallus and female subjection, it is not always a symbol of male dominance and power; it can exist as the source of a woman's pleasure that is not masochistic in character. The woman who possesses the phallus can assert herself as a subject that casts a commanding look upon a male or a female object. Thus it is possible to conceive of both women and men as equally capable of assuming the position of the dominant viewer in relation to sexually explicit material. Pornography can, therefore, be considered to meet the voyeuristic needs of women and men, provided that it presents appropriate objects to meet the gazes of desire of its viewers. Certainly this explanation of the sexual gaze seems better able to accommodate a diversity of sexual tastes and preferences since it allows for heterosexual and homosexual formulations and grants women and gay men access to sexual dominance. However, it is problematic to base women's sexual empowerment upon a simple inversion of the patriarchal norm. Installing women as members of

the 'class that dominates' (Dworkin, 1991: 57) is merely to integrate men into the class that is subordinated. The terms of the relationship remain those that Dworkin and Zita criticise as fundamentally exploitative. Nevertheless, it is apparent that some women and men do enjoy participation in relations of dominance and subordination. Whatever the origin of this form of sexual pleasure – whether socialisation or the consequence of productive discourses as described by Foucault – it remains a source of sexual arousal to some people. I do not wish to suggest this is an ideal formulation of female sexuality and sexual pleasure, because, once again, women's identity and positioning is defined in relation to men and, clearly not all women, at all times, stand as sexual opposites to men.

In *Bad Wives*, sexual power is eroticised extensively. Voyeurism, as a primary source of sexual stimulation and power in the film, functions on a number of levels. The first, most obvious, instance thereof lies in the omniscient positioning of the viewer of the film so that he/she is privy to views of intimate, private activities and settings, included among which are sexual encounters between the married couples in their respective bedrooms. The spectator is also established as a Peeping Tom who watches a principal female character fondling herself erotically in the privacy of a shower. In each of these instances the voyeuristic gaze falls upon the female body as object, which is precisely what the film establishes as the condition of these wives who live in a state of subjection and objectification at the hands of their husbands. However, just as a secretary and the central female character, Tracy-Jo, resist the demeaning slaps on the bum by the latter's husband, so too the conventions of the interplay between object and subject of the gaze become shuffled as the two central female characters engage in active, obvious, voyeurism of their own. In the film title 'bad' implies rebellion and defiance of the normal order; Tracy-Jo and Elizabeth are 'bad' wives because they refuse the passivity of their object status. Similarly, the film viewer's gender

in these instances does not adhere to a stable construct. In terms of convention, it is a male viewer who looks upon the female character, but Tracy-Jo is also established as a 'woman's woman' in that while she is sexually attractive, she is also concerned with, and frustrated by, the tedium of her conventional, monogamous, heterosexual lifestyle. Tracy-Jo's visual perspective is also employed and presented: the object of the film viewer's gaze (Tracy-Jo) becomes the controlling subject of another exploratory gaze (which falls upon other characters in the film) that is presented to the viewer and it is between these positions that the viewer oscillates.

A number of instances of sexual pleasure from looking and being looked at are explored in the film, the first of which is the opening sequence wherein a secretary and her boss engage in sex on the boardroom table. They are watched, unawares, through a panel of glass by a male colleague who is passing and who, in turn, is watched by the viewer of the film. This Peeping Tom is something of a curiosity to the film viewer because he displays no signs of arousal and does not stay for very long. Later, Elizabeth, the wife of the male participant, watches similar activity. In this instance the voyeurism again does not lead to pleasure, but instead, occasions hurt and disappointment. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the sequence is believed to be of prurient interest to at least some viewers of the film which is why it is incorporated. The three viewing perspectives of this scene – those of the male colleague, Elizabeth and the film viewer – each generate different responses and suggest how variable viewer reactions can be. But, it also suggests that it is not gender that influences access to voyeuristic pleasure, but rather personal circumstance and individual taste, because in different contexts exhibitionism and voyeurism generate sexual pleasure for the subject and the object of the gaze. This idea of pleasurable and voluntary sexual display is echoed in Tracy-Jo's fantasy of having sex on the check-out counter at the shop where her compulsive shoplifting takes place. She is subjected to the gazes of the other customers, but

is primarily observed by the female cashier who, through her gaze, becomes aroused and masturbates, thereby reflecting the *female* fulfilment of the film's ideal viewer and the intended masturbatory effect of the film itself upon the male/female viewer. This format is repeated in a slightly altered form throughout the film so that, for instance, the viewers of the film observe the two principal female characters, Tracy-Jo and Elizabeth, observing the box-boy and the cashier engaged in sexual activity into which both women, independently, project themselves in their private fantasies.

The latter, fantasy, scenes take place in the coolroom of the store. There are carcasses hanging around the characters engaged in sexual activity. At times there is a clear alignment of the women with the 'flesh' of the meat hanging down near them (an ironic play on the label 'meat shot'¹⁶) from the perspective of the camera. However, it also becomes clear that the perspective held by the camera is not constant and, at times, also represents that of the women when the object of the gaze is the male body, symbolically located next to a side of meat. In these instances it is apparent that the faceless torso is observed as an object of desire – his muscular chest and arms are central. This parallels the depiction of the secretary in the opening sequence, where her body (in relation to the man's penis) is the primary focus. Lesbian activity also takes place in the coolroom, but it is obviously of secondary value to the women wanting the sexual attentions of the box-boy, Roy. Throughout the film, Roy is established as powerful and possessed of superior (verging on supernatural) sexual powers and, simultaneously, as a lowly shop assistant and sex object for the two women and the cashier. His dual role as object and subject is never problematic. He is cast

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A 'meat shot' is defined by Linda Williams as '...close-up of penetration that shows that hard-core sexual activity is taking place....' (1999: 72)

very much as the female characters in the film are. Much attention is paid to his physique, which is muscular and tanned and is scrutinised by the female characters and the film viewer. I would suggest that in these sequences there is no definitive gender positioning for the viewer, who is addressed as male and female, and whose positioning relative to the characters changes, even within a scene.

In *Bad Wives*, as in most porn films, the depiction of phallic power and pleasure as unisexual is somewhat undermined by the frequent representations of orgasm through male ejaculation (primarily onto the face or mouth of female characters). Linda Williams regards the 'money shot'¹⁷ as a rendition of orgasm in 'entirely phallic terms' (1999: 119). Wendy McElroy contends, however, that the significance of the money shot is open to interpretation and is not always to be equated with female degradation, female subordination or an exclusive, male, phallic pleasure. Rather, she proposes that the display of women smearing and tasting sperm is indicative also of women sharing in men's orgasms; of their approval of their partner's pleasure in a visual way that is not possible when ejaculation is inside the body (1995: 136). McElroy's observation is very appealing because it disturbs the tendency to limit and confine our interpretations of significant events and actions. However, the money shot has become a stereotype of sexual satisfaction and orgasm and there has been little endeavour, in pornography, to elaborate the terms of its representation. In *Bad Wives*, even in scenes where it is the women's sexual perspectives which dominate, the climax is rendered in male terms. For a female viewer this is very frustrating and it also reinforces arguments that female bodies feature in pornography merely as receptacles of male bodily fluids. The woman's orgasm is ignored, forgotten or rendered as an inevitable adjunct to

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Williams defines the 'money shot' as the focus upon 'penile ejaculation' (1999: 8).

the male climax and ejaculate. This would certainly seem to suggest that the pornography industry really has a greater investment in satisfying male needs, is singularly lacking in imagination, or is unable to express women's orgasms. What is interesting in *Dad Wives* is that the utopia of male sexual performance is explicitly shattered by a disgusted Tracy-Jo, who screams angrily at her husband after sex, "I didn't cum....I never cum." This statement draws the focus of the viewer, and Tracy-Jo's husband, to *her* sexual pleasure and calls into question the extent of the sexual satisfaction experienced by women in previous and subsequent sex scenes. Immediately after this scene in the film, Tracy-Jo's husband attempts to satisfy her needs. Because he has already climaxed, his desire is not presented as significant in this instance and his pleasure is of secondary importance. The rendition of Tracy-Jo's arousal and pleasure in this ensuing activity is done by focussing, primarily, on her face and also through a series of long shots instead of the usual predominance of 'meat shots' and the penetrating penis. The scene is very effective and is far less predictable than others in the film. Certainly, the style thereof suggests that Cherry Smyth's advocacy of less explicitness might well be more effective in suggesting a non-penile pleasure:

Perhaps what we desire from porn must remain an unfulfilled fantasy, as the orgasm made visible is rendered problematic and paradoxical. For me, the sustained looking without touching and then...seemingly involuntary interaction is much more erotic. (1990: 156)

I would be loath to imply that pornography of a less explicit nature is more appropriate for meeting a woman's sexual gaze or suggesting female sexual pleasure. I feel that it is a matter of taste and personal preference as to whether or not one responds to the scenarios depicted, but the less explicit rendition of the orgasm and the point of penetration does seem to bring a little balance into the issue of sexual power. Where the penis is not presented as penetrating or 'occupying' the vagina there is no need to consider the male and female relation as one premised upon an unequal

difference or mastery and control because the symbols of that relationship (the genitals) will be absent. This is not, I feel, because phallic power resides in the penis, but simply because we associate it with the penis and expect to find it there after a long tradition has inscribed it as masculine.

Linda Williams, in a discussion of Femme's *Urban Heat* (1984), suggests that a greater sense of 'sustained and shared live performance' is achieved through less explicit depictions than are conventionally found in porn films where '...the more important hard-core imperatives of providing visual evidence of "meat" and "money" have intervened, interrupting whatever mood, rhythm, or momentum the performers have established with their bodies...' (1999: 251). The obsessive display of what Williams calls 'organ pleasure' is largely for the benefit of the male consumer. She advocates a 'spatial-temporal integrity' (1999: 252) which renders the sexual activity in real time, shot in long takes, as being more appropriate for generating a sense of bodily performance instead of organ performance. The latter description would provide a good account of the scene mentioned above, of Tracy-Jo's orgasm. This de-emphasis of the sex organs is further characterised in Femme's films by a repeated presentation of the penis as, initially, limp, which Williams praises for being more realistic in foreplay. She also sees women's desires, and pornography, as requiring foundation upon the reality of their daily lives. As a result, female sexuality has to be examined in a 'safe space' where self-exploration can take place without guilt and fear and where women's roles as mothers and wives are not ignored or negated but become part of their inscription as sexual beings (1999: 258-264).

In *Bad Wives* the women most certainly are presented as participants in a real world: Tracy Jo is a mother and a housewife seized with a sense of her life being wasted; Elizabeth's cheating

husband does not satisfy her emotional needs and she displays dysfunctional tendencies, primarily by secretly eating soap whenever she is rejected. Nevertheless, it is not in their ordinary lives that their fantasies play out. The sexual activities are, instead, illicit and extramarital rather than scenarios acted out together with their husbands in the context of marriage. In *Bad Wives*, then, the sexual dreams and activities of the women would conform more to Linda Williams's notion of 'male' pornography because she seems to advocate different domains and characteristics for gender-specific pornographies. For men, sex is available in any conceivable location and is not anchored in reality: ugly men do 'arouse' beautiful women. I feel that this is simply a double standard that, once again, denies women access to sexual fantasy and the escapism of believing that the erect penis indicates that they are desired by, and desirable to, beautiful men. Unlike Williams, who believes that women still need to cultivate a sense of their own sexuality, I would suggest that the majority of women (certainly those who would be inclined to consume pornography) are not victims of sexual repression in the private realm who require careful coaxing into the world of pornography. Today's women have had an extensive sexual education through popular women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and are encouraged to embrace their sexuality from a very young age – whether we agree with the sexual identity that is being presented is irrelevant. Like men, women are sexual subjects who fantasise about having sex in places and in ways that they would not ordinarily experience it. Pornography presents the risky and the daring precisely because it is about fantasy and escape from the limitations of reality. If anything, pornography as a genre provides women with a safe exploration of sex so there is no need for it to limit its depictions to safe, domestic, scenarios. It is not *about* safe sexual engagement, it *is* safe sexual engagement.

The general uneasiness about meat shots that clouds descriptions of 'women's' pornography

is, I feel, unnecessary. There is not an inevitable correlation between women's abuse or subordination and sexual explicitness. The women in *Bad Wives* are used as sexual objects and inevitably present their bodies for scrutiny, but they do so as only a *part* of their sexual character and sexual experience. They also produce their own sexual pleasure and cast sexual looks upon other bodies, most notably that of the box-boy. The sexual encounters are heterosexual and involve penetrative intercourse – clearly the film is intended for heterosexuals – but it does not align power and control with the masculine and the penis. Penetration is not always 'possession' or mastery, and it is also rendered a consequence of women's efforts and desires, so that power and control are dependent upon situation and context, rather than being permanently resident in the characters. Indeed, whereas some scenes rely upon a distinct voyeuristic power-play of subject and object, other scenes depend for their sexual impact upon a sense of mutual appreciation between participants. This mutual recognition does not play down or disguise the gender difference of the participants in order to avoid suggestions of inequality. Rather, what is suggested is that appreciation of what is different can be derived from a sense of complementarity: the erect penis can function as a turn-on for women because it signifies men as distinct. Intercourse in these terms is not an act performed upon women by men, but is achieved through equal activity and engagement.

In the penultimate sequence of the film, Tracy Jo and Elizabeth, independently, seek out Roy, who adopts an evil persona. His supernatural powers render him capable of 'filling the holes' in their lives and of fully satisfying their sexual needs. This frees the women to do 'whatever they want to do' and what ensues is a threesome. The cinematography in this episode is extraordinary in its slippage of perspectives and camera angles. The effect thereof is that the three bodies are depicted as entirely entangled and united. There is no suggestion of dominance or

disproportionate pleasure even though there is frequent focus upon the penetrating penis and the conclusion is heralded by Roy's ejaculation outside of both women's bodies. The build-up to the scene shows Roy encouraging Tracy-Jo to stop doing the obvious, to be unpredictable. The scene, while predictable in its own way, does suggest that there are ways of having heterosexual sex that are not typical but which require greater creativity. There is a marked difference between this threesome encounter and that staged in the boardroom by Elizabeth's husband and two secretaries. It is not a difference in sex, since both depict penetration and oral stimulation. What is different is the manner in which the characters are presented and behave in each instance. The boardroom scene seems to address a male fantasy-stereotype of the sexy, wanton woman, since both women are wearing stilettos and lacy underwear and they take turns performing fellatio on the man, who is presented as a business executive. The lighting is stark and camera angles highlight the genitals. In the later scene there is less fetishisation of the women. They are equal to Roy in, firstly, their simplicity of dress and, later, their nudity. The setting is equally free of clutter and is merely a bed in an otherwise empty room in which there are no decorations or bedding to give identity or character. The lighting is dappled, like that reflected off a mirror ball, and the effect thereof contributes to the sense that knowledge of the exact relation of sameness or difference between the participants is not necessary to appreciate the pleasure that they share.

Thus, within the same film a multitude of different positions is assumed by the participants in the action and by the viewer thereof. The film *Bad Wives* concludes by presenting the women as both sexually and socially empowered. The collective experiences as men and as women appear to have stripped away the pretensions of each and have rendered the men equal to the women so that a gender-based hierarchy no longer applies. There is the suggestion that at least one woman may invert the sexual hierarchy as Tracy-Jo slaps her husband's bum as he walks past. I am sure

there will be those that disagree, but I find this display unproblematic since it implies that the norm can be revised within heterosexuality and that the arrangement of women and men in relation to one another is not constant or universal.

CONCLUSION:

In a discussion of the uneasy relationship in South Africa between the constitutional rights of individuals and the publication of sexually explicit materials, Pippa Green refers to the following remarks by Brenda Lasersohn -- presented in legal defence of *Hustler* during a court hearing on the banning of an issue:

...the countries where women suffer the most abuse are those where their social status is lowest, not where sexually explicit material is most available. After all, in South Africa, when our morals were protected with perfect probity by the censors, we had one of the highest rape rates in the world. (1994: 35)

The simplicity of this argument is very appealing for those who favour an anti-censorship stance. However, the presence of pornography gives rise to far more complex issues and worries than those related to Christian-based notions of morality. The concern for feminist groups lies in the relation between pornography and the way in which the social status of women is *further* affected thereby -- whether pornography influences how men perceive and, therefore, treat women or, indeed, if the consumption of pornography serves as a barometer of these attitudes. Research findings have been used in support of arguments both for and against a negative social impact by pornography so there is no scientific objectivity to which one can turn. Instead, much of the debate hinges upon emotional, or subjective, criteria: whether one perceives pornography as degrading to, or demeaning of, women and whether one considers the sexual pleasures offered by pornography as accessible exclusively to men.

The negative implications of pornography are, in fact, supposed to be far more insidious and more difficult to detect than social violence. Pornography is seen, by some, as presenting

inequality in a manner that is taken for granted in sexuality and sex acts. Accordingly, heterosexual intercourse is believed to reinforce the primacy of sexual difference and the conquering power of the penis over the vagina. It has been my contention in this paper that the perception of pornography as a monolithic entity aimed at men, and as reinforcing of patriarchal ideals, is faulty. I have argued for a change of focus in the manner in which pornography is addressed since there is still a tendency to see, to interpret, and to reject, pornography in terms of an out-dated stereotype. Examples of early pornography may well prove unattractive to women because they privilege male, heterosexual, pleasure and sexual satisfaction, but to continue to generalise these tendencies and trends as the defining norm is to oversimplify the character and effect of pornography in contemporary society. The variety of film styles, sexual forms and practices in pornographic film reflects a multiplicity of subjects and subject positions within the genre that suggests the inadequacy of film theories founded exclusively upon gender-based difference. Contemporary pornography addresses a far wider range of spectators, which includes women, and it embraces sexual activities that do not fall strictly within the realm of heterosexuality or the conventions of male-dominated sexual practice.

There have been suggestions that even those women who willingly participate in pornographic films, or who profess to enjoy watching pornography, are not free from the degradation that pornography imposes upon women. In terms of this thinking, these women have simply embraced their roles as victims or have succumbed to the conditioning of the patriarchal paradigm. The possibility exists that some readers will regard this paper as equally guilty of complicity – a betrayal of the principles of the feminist movement because it advocates the reassessment of women's potential for pleasure relative to pornography. It is very difficult to counter an assertion of this nature because, I believe, it is impossible to access an 'original' state of the 'non-

patriarchal' human condition. However, if all thought and social behaviour is the product of innumerable productive technologies, then no spokesperson can claim to articulate the definitive truth. All views must represent mere interpretative responses to the contexts in which the speakers find themselves. This paper does not, therefore, purport to present a more 'correct' version of the state of women's sexual pleasure. Rather, I seek to suggest that the manner in which some feminist groups have endeavoured to manipulate and dictate women's responses to sexually explicit material is counterproductive. The battle for women's social equality is limited and contained by the reliance upon 'universal truths' about gender relations and sexual or phallic power. I have endeavoured to show how the adoption of alternative interpretative positions may free feminists to consider women as sexually *and* socially empowered. Moreover, I have attempted to show that the sexual gaze is not always and inevitably premised upon a relationship of inequality or, indeed, difference.

It is apparent that the social circumstances that surround the lives of many, although admittedly, not all, women have changed over time and that new imperatives define the terms and conditions of sexuality. In contemporary, westernised, society (particularly in impoverished African states) governments actively discourage men and women from introducing more children into an over-populated, resource-strained, world. This trend and the economic empowerment of women has further freed the modern woman from a need to define herself in relation to a man or men. Sexuality is, accordingly, divorced from its previous biological and reproductive function and so there is an expansion of the possibilities and opportunities for exploring alternative benefits and forms of sexual pleasure. This development has manifested in the burgeoning range of pornographic materials available on the market. It is inevitable that perceptions of sex and pornography will continue to evolve, but the reliance upon research conducted in the 1980s means

that there is no current data available to indicate how, for instance, a modern phenomenon such as AIDS has impacted upon the consumption of pornography. In South Africa the issue of women's rights and sexuality in the face of AIDS has been complicated by the emergence of abhorrent ideas bred out of ignorance – such as that which advocates intercourse with a virgin in order to make a man immune to AIDS. In this country, then, AIDS has seen not only a worsening of the conditions of many women's lives but also an increase in child-related sex crimes. The added emphasis, in AIDS-prevention campaigns on abstinence, means that sex is likely, once more, to become a 'dirty word' and the position of pornography in this AIDS-conscious world is still to be negotiated.

The increasing use of condoms in pornographic films suggests that there *is* an acknowledgement by the porn industry that the threat of AIDS has already had a bearing upon the way in which sex is recorded and presented. Moreover, the escapist/fantasy role of pornography is likely to ensure the survival of porn in an environment where sexual release, for men and women, requires more and more reliance upon masturbation and non-penetrative pleasure. It is most likely that this development also will have implications for the subject positions that become available to men and women and the manner in which they perceive sexually explicit images. The rapid pace of change in the social and sexual context would certainly seem to indicate that it would be inappropriate to adhere obstinately to theories that were devised to explain sexuality in a different setting. For feminists hoping to ensure the continued relevance of a 'feminist' position relative to women's lives and conditions, it would be more productive to regard existing theories and explanations as developmental stages, rather than the endpoint, of a theoretical process that is, and should be, constantly evolving.

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