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# Objectification & Pornography

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*Obvious trigger warnings. Further this is gonna be an abstract conversation on concepts. If you're one of those rare folks who feels the war against patriarchy can't ever afford side conversations for the sake of curiosity/clarity that aren't rhetorically perfected weapons pointed towards teh enemy or if you figure there's nothing new under the sun to be heard from cis-ish male-bodied people I totes understand and sympathize and I hope you will take my disagreement for what it is. I abhor speaking to a choir and try not to write until I'm assured I can at least contribute something at least moderately original and challenging, but c'est la vie.*

No one would disagree that porn is a major site of importance in modern patriarchy. And there are usually three broad categories of critique leveled against it: 1) That the means of its production are exploitative. 2) That it pushes narratives and perspectives reinforcing of patriarchy. 3) That the very act of getting off to or sexualizing visual stimuli mentally reduces other people to objects.

It's this last critique, rarely addressed head-on or in good faith, that's the most fundamental. The first two, while undoubtedly significant, are ultimately just matters of detail. There are folks who produce porn through egalitarian collectives just as there are now

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literally millions of exhibitionists who freely share images/video of themselves in open forums, repositories and networking sites. So too is there queer porn. Indeed even the most cursory overviews would reveal the last decade has seen the exponential spread into the mainstream of increasingly complicated and diffuse presentations of gender and desire. At this point the conventional for-profit “Porn Industry” is basically a tiny antiquated sideshow dwarfed by a hundred million digital cameras and sketchpads. (In this piece I’ll stick with a more Dworkin-esque definition of porn as inclusive of things termed ‘erotica’ because any distinction between the two either begs the question or is wildly arbitrary not to mention usually classist. Plus it would be more than a little haughty to completely ignore *how the term is actually used*.)

To be clear however just because porn is a wide category growing more diverse daily doesn’t mean there isn’t a lot of freaking evil shit out there. Recognizing complexity shouldn’t mean throwing up our hands and failing to critically engage, nor should it temper the intensity of our rage. Rapists are being made. And porn is a medium used to champion this in a variety of ways. Sometimes deliberately and explicitly, but at the very least huge swathes of what’s produced today still effectively contributes to, buffers, and insulates rape culture. This is no small issue and pretty much every other conversation on porn pales before it. Yet having our priorities in line shouldn’t equate disregarding those complexities. True ‘radicalism’ means exploring concepts down to the roots rather than settling for totalizing banners, no matter how generally adequate they seem. Individuals engage with things in a variety of ways with a variety of effects; done right analytical nuance and strategic dexterity doesn’t have to lead to equivocation or lost momentum. In fact, for those of us outside institutional power such precision and nimbleness is arguably our greatest natural asset.

What I find attractive about the notion that pornography is inately objectifying is not its obvious intuitive resonance but the promise of an inarguable underlying reality leading to clear-cut

prescriptions. Yet there are actually quite a variety of arguments leveled in practice, working from significantly differing fundamentals. One can argue, for example, that sexual objectification derives from any *divorce* between desire regarding another's physical body and desire regarding their mental existence, while alternatively one can argue that objectification stems from any desire regarding another's physical body fullstop. Those are obviously very different approaches and frankly I find the latter far more secure. Most of us would surely find the former more pleasant or at least lenient in prescription but it reeks of unjustifiable arbitrariness. It's not at all clear what would constitute such a divorce, nor what degree we should recoil from.

The fact is our minds change focus all the time. Does spending a minute or two reveling in some aspect of physical sensuality or desire mean hardening our neural pathways to perceive the existence of a partner more exclusively those material terms? Obviously there is a risk present, but how innately or concretely can we speak of it? If we spend a masturbation session primarily remembering a partner's body/touch rather than anything specifically related to their character will that necessarily have any lasting effect upon us? What if it's a child trying to imagine what sex would be like? Or a sickly person? Or a deformed person? It's hard to avoid the conclusion that the danger in focusing on the physical nature of sexual pleasure and desire is entirely dependent on things like the awareness, vigilance, and plasticity of a given mind — a conclusion that would lead to wildly variant prescriptions and significantly problematize any uniform social policy or campaign. If we can ever temporarily shift the focus of our desires/pleasure towards physical attributes/actions of a person and avoid generating any tendency to think of them as objects then the same would be true when it comes to pornography of one another.

One response is to turn the focus explicitly on whether a physical desire initially arises in response to personal associations or narratives predicated on the other's existence as an agent. (eg 'I

*only became in any way physically attracted to them after I got to know them.*’) This might still allow forms of pornography to slip by when tied to a substantive narrative (the already large field of romance novels / pornographic comics offering many noteworthy candidates) yet at least allows us to critique the characterizations, etc presented. Unfortunately at the end of the day it’s not clear what could justify holding the original prompts of a given physical desire in such significance. The argument seems to be saying implicitly that what matters is what perspective or desire is ultimately *prior* or *more fundamental* in someone’s head than a momentary perspective/desire. And surely this is a matter of choice for anyone with even the most basic vigilance or agency in the construction of their own thoughts. We frequently choose to dabble in limited perspectives and focuses in ways that avoid overwriting our more core and motivating perspectives. Certainly corruption is a danger, and the social context of patriarchy can contribute significantly, but that’s no more innate a threat with one versus the other. Momentary desire for physical aspects of a partner can lead to ingraining objectifying patterns of thought just as easily as focus on those feelings more abstractly. There’s no straightforward reason to disallow taking such a risk in the one set of cases but not the other.

So what are we left with? Well, as previously mentioned, the other major approach is to reject sexual desire of physical things (at least in any way relating to people) wholesale.

I should note that at its greatest extreme this can even mean rejecting *all* sexual desire (arguing that surrendering one’s mind to desires arising from one’s own body counts in some sense as objectification of *oneself*). Frankly, I’ve always found anti-sexual positions kinda cool. I have a lot of admiration for people who bite bullets and in my mind the audacity of the proposition speaks positively of it. Plus I spent my teenage and young adult years seriously debating whether to go on chemical libido suppressants just to get by, so suffice to say I have an appreciation of how sexual de-

perspectives on consent and queered notions of gender/sexuality as well as broadly countering patriarchal narratives through direct interaction and omnipresent diversity. They've also served as vectors for the standard horribly fucked up shit, but in many cases the payloads have been subverted or partially neutralized as play made less potent by the surrounding free-wheeling context. Folks can no longer avoid recognizing the complexity of desire and identity in society and with less and less uniform social pressure a particular fetishization coming from a fucked up place no longer feels the obligation to form a totalizing counter-narrative and push it fascistically. Porn as a whole has taken the form of a conversation.

That doesn't make it anything close to a utopia yet. We still live under patriarchy and a diffuse post-modern fascism is still fascism. But it does make pornography a hugely dynamic and vital theater of conflict. And it does mean that the agency of the various speakers is creeping to the fore in undeniable ways among even those realms of kink that its hard at the outset to see any excusable mind-set for. We can exploit this. And indeed a good many folks have rolled up their sleeves to get their hands dirty. So it's sad to see a tiny remainder of otherwise brilliant feminists filled with right and glorious rage still bashing their heads together with sweeping practically deontological 70s-era frameworks. (Incidentally calling ourselves "sex-positive" is in most cases just incredibly underhanded and douchey and not making things any better.) This isn't about some whiney liberal appeal to 'free speech' or chucking core principles out to win over bros. As I've picked apart there simply isn't any root principle that pornography falls afoul of inherently; getting off to imagery relating to other people isn't magically objectifying because people both differ and have agency in their self-construction. Socialization is anything but uniform and it certainly doesn't create mechanistic people with mechanistic perspectives. Treating people like it does is itself objectifying.

sire can subjugate and reduce one's own mind. But the same holds true of practically anything. The fact that one can get lost compulsively surfing Wikipedia for the dopamine fix of new information, while worth consideration, obviously shouldn't speak to its proper utility. Sexual desire and sensuality interface socially, pharmaceutically, and psychologically in a host of ways, providing a vast array of tools that can be extraordinarily useful. Chucking it out would be akin to chucking any other field of technology. Sadly, to get started on anything even approximating an appropriate overview would require its own blog post so let's skip that for now and just press on under the working assumption that sex is acceptable in certain forms.

What we can still at least conclude is that sexual titillation by compassion, mathematical aptitude, or say pine trees clearly wouldn't involve preferences directed at anyone else's body. There are still valid concerns to be had about the performative aspect of mental actions ('*dance monkey dance*' is obviously objectifying in any form), but I think we've clearly achieved enough distance from concerns about objectification to stop and take a look back. Does this resemble what hardline opponents of pornography within feminism are actually saying?

In almost every case, no. (The exceptions, insofar as they're honest about it, are really cool. But again as above I will avoid exploring that direction in depth here for space.) Instead it's almost universally conceded that the biological prompts of sexual desire are just too strong overall. We get turned on by certain forms of touch and smell for example without conscious choice. There are a wealth of hardwired physiological circuits capable of triggering chemical responses. Some, possibly even all, can be fiddled with or cut but the effort required can be functionally unfeasible and there are a multitude of them. That's not, obviously, to throw up our hands in surrender (some of us are transhumanists after all). But it does generally seem to prescribe a certain pragmatism towards sexual desire that allows us to embrace the positives while staying alert to

the negatives. It's okay, in short, to do things like turn one's focus to a lover's body or fantasize about a fictional character or imagine what a certain experience would be like.

So what then is such a *fundamental* problem with pornography?

In practice it seems to be centered around an objection to the *visual* (as opposed to tactile or aromatic) component of the sensation. While most feminists left the Porn Wars with a nuanced perspective on porn as a medium capable of conducting good as well as bad (with effects dependent on a vast array of context both social and individual), the horrified lot that wrote us off as heinous apostates didn't seem to do so just because they were wedded to rhetorical trenches or sumsuch; there was a notable tone of alienation and disgust at the very notion of visual desire. It was declared obviously suspicious because it was '*unnatural*.' Anecdotal evidence can only go so far but time and again I've found an exceptionally strong correlation between my stridently anti-porn friends (of different genders) and '*just not really getting the whole visual attraction thing*'.

Which makes a lot of sense. A straightforward experience-gap would explain in a sympathetic light why so many discussions on pornography within feminism, even when approached in good faith by both sides, so often grind up against a wall of mutual incomprehension. Well no freaking duh. If there was an entire avenue of physiological desire other people experienced that you didn't (or didn't experience with anything approaching the same intensity) and intersected with patriarchy the way porn does you'd be overwhelmingly inclined to write it off as a construct of patriarchy too. I mean good god! It's a neat hypothesis at least in regard to some anti-porn feminists because experience-gaps don't speak to intelligence, and over the decades I've encountered more than a few brilliant people with incomprehensibly absolutist stances on pornography. Sending pictures to your partner? Objectification. A pubescent kid drawing boobs? Objectification. An incredibly popular porn site consisting of user-submitted videos of the faces they make during masturbation and orgasm? Objec-

tification. (Because getting off solely to indications of someone else's pleasure is clearly... wait, what?) The line drawn is always between visual and tactile sensation. Dildos and even fleshlights no matter how evocative are almost always given a pass by the same people who assume any reasonable person would be grossed by the notion of getting off to imagery.

There may not be hope of persuading everyone stuck in such a trap. At this point the paranoia and war-effort frame of mind probably runs too deep for some and that's perfectly understandable. But it's at least another opportunity to drive home the so easily forgotten reality that people's physical and neurological experiences can be quite different; our own are not necessarily a good baseline by which to judge others. Is it really so weird to consider that just as most brains are built with certain circuits tailored to recognizing and responding to faces there might also be circuits that automatically recognize and respond to other bodily details? Are we really so scared of the "*but that's just the way biology is babe*" bros that we can't allow ourselves any explorations in empathy?

At the end of the day the only question that matters is **What Is The Mechanism?** Because statistical correlation isn't enough. There's unbelievable diversity to how people think, what frames of mind they inherit or choose in approaching a given thing in a given context, and we're not going to win by going around voting up or down on aggregates. I'm not saying, for example, that the societal and cultural effects of pornographic saturation aren't significant or something that we should in any way shirk from attacking. But things are rarely cut and dry. Nor would it necessarily be better if they were. Complexity allows us a lot of directions from which to attack things, just as, in conjunction with our agency and proper vigilance, it allows us room to maneuver. Porn is just a medium and even *Mein Kampf* can be read for diverse reasons without corruption. Over the last decade various mainstream cultural ecosystems of porn (from imagefap to deviantart) have acted as virulent contagion vectors for a number of incredibly positive