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Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong: an Analysis of Anti-pornography Politics

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This essay is a revision of an essay based on remarks that were originally submitted as testimony to hearings on pornography held by the National Organization for Women (NOW) in San Francisco, California, on 26 March 1986. Shortly after the hearings, I sent a written version to NOW for inclusion in a collection of bound photocopies of statements on pornography which were made available from the national NOW office. I have kept revisions for this 1992 publication as minimal as possible, but I have made changes to render the piece more intelligible to a contemporary audience and to readers who may be unfamiliar with many details of US politics. I have also added references; some are more recent than the text and consequently induce unavoidable but vertiginous moments of anachronism.

Much has occurred since 1986 and it is impossible to update and recontextualize the article completely without major surgery. So I leave it as something out of time, a period piece unfortunately more prophetic than I knew.

I 'The Empress Has No Clothes'

The targeting of pornography as a focus of feminist rage and political effort has been a dangerous, costly and tragic mistake. Feminists should be aware of the potentially disastrous consequences of this misguided crusade. It is important for feminists to realize that the arguments against pornography are incredibly flimsy, and that there is little intellectual justification for a feminist anti-porn position.

Anti-pornography politics surfaced as a volatile flashpoint in the women's movement in the United States in the late 1970s.¹ Although criticisms of pornography had previously occurred in feminist writing, pornography did not become a major focus of feminist agitation until after the emergence of a group in the San Francisco Bay area in 1976 called Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM). In 1978, WAVPM held a 'Feminist Perspectives on Pornography Conference' in San

Francisco. This gathering quickly sparked the formation of New York City's Women Against Pornography (WAP), and marked the eruption of pornography as a popular feminist issue.²

By 1978 feminists had already spent a decade identifying and criticizing the ideologies that justified male supremacy and that permeated virtually all of western literature, high art, popular media, religion and education. Ideas of male dominance were deeply embedded in children's reading material, in medicine and psychiatry, and in all the academic disciplines. Similar attitudes were endemic to advertising, television, movies and fiction. Feminists denounced cultural expressions of male supremacy and began to produce new art, fiction, children's literature, film and academic work with different values. Feminists demanded changes in medical and psychological practice and in popular media such as advertising, television and film.³

In all of these areas, feminists attempted to reform existing practice and to agitate for non-sexist attitudes. In no case did feminists call for the abolition of the area or domain in question. There were never groups called Women Against Film, Women Against Television, or Women Against the Novel, even though most film, television and fiction were demonstrably sexist. When pornography became an issue, it was treated in an entirely unique fashion. Instead of criticizing the sexist content of sexually explicit media, and calling for the production of non-sexist, pro-feminist, or woman-oriented sexual materials, feminists concerned with porn simply demanded that it be eliminated altogether.⁴ Unlike any other category of media or representation, pornography was treated as beyond feminist salvage. The singularity of this position and its underlying premises have too often been overlooked.

Advocates of the anti-porn position commonly declared it to be self-evident and undebatable.⁵ They insisted that opposition to pornography was essential to feminism and that by definition a feminist could not dispute the anti-porn position. Those of us who did disagree were dismissed as feminists or smeared with accusations of promoting violence against women.⁶

With little debate, anti-porn ideas became a coercive dogma and a premature orthodoxy. Ungrounded and often outlandish assertions became unquestioned assumptions. Important distinctions, such as those between sex and violence, image and act, harmless fantasy and criminal assault, the sexually explicit and the explicitly violent, were hopelessly blurred. The words 'violence' and 'pornography' began to be used interchangeably, as though they were synonymous. Pornography was often simply equated

with violence. This muddled terminology and its conceptual confusions became widespread in the feminist media. Even women who had reservations about the anti-porn position or its consequences often expressed these within the terms set by the language of anti-porn proponents.⁷

It is well known to students of rhetoric that people may become convinced of a false premise or an illogical conclusion if it is merely asserted loudly enough, often enough, or with sufficient conviction. This has occurred in the porn 'debates'. A common tactic of demagogues is to use inflammatory images to drive people into fear and hate beyond the reach of rational discussion. This has occurred in the porn 'debates'. When any discourse is polarized, those not directly involved in the conflict tend to assume that the truth of the matter lies in the middle between the extremes of opinion expressed. This is a dangerous tendency that has often resulted in giving more credibility to the messages of hate-mongering groups than they deserve.⁸ This too has occurred in the porn 'debates'.

Many feminists have accepted the notions that pornography is an especially odious expression of male supremacy, that pornography is violent, or that pornography is synonymous with violent media. They disagree merely about what should be done about it. For example, there are many feminists who think of porn as disgusting sexist propaganda, but who nevertheless are concerned about defending the First Amendment and who are cautious about invoking censorship. I certainly agree that concerns over censorship and freedom of expression are valid and vital. However, my purpose here is not to argue that pornography is anti-woman speech which unfortunately deserves constitutional protection. My goal is to challenge the assumptions that pornography is, *per se*, particularly sexist, especially violent or implicated in violence, or intrinsically antithetical to the interests of women.

The 'pornography problem' is a false problem, at least as it is generally posed. There are legitimate feminist concerns with regard to sexually explicit media and the conditions under which it is produced. However, these are not the concerns that have dominated the feminist anti-porn politics. Instead, pornography has become an easy, convenient, pliant and overdetermined scapegoat for problems for which it is not responsible. To support this contention I will examine the fundamental propositions and structure of anti-porn argument.

II Premises, Presuppositions and Definitions

The Conflation of Pornography and Violence

One of the most basic claims of the anti-porn position is that pornography is violent and promotes violence against women.⁹ Two assertions are implicit or explicit to this claim. One is that pornography is characteristically violent and/or sexist in what it depicts, and the other is that pornography is more violent and/or sexist in content than other media. Both of these propositions are false.

Very little pornography actually depicts violent acts. Pornography does depict some form of sexual activity, and these sexual activities vary widely. The most common behaviour featured in porn is ordinary heterosexual intercourse (although it is a convention of porn movies that male orgasm must be visible to the viewer, so ejaculation in porn films generally takes place outside the body). Nudity, genital close-ups and oral sex are also prevalent. Anal sex is far less common, but some magazines and films specialize in depicting it. While some films and magazines attempt to have 'something for everyone', a lot of porn is fairly specialized and many porn shops group their material according to the primary activity it contains. Thus, there are often separate sections featuring oral sex, anal sex or gay male sex.

There is also 'lesbian' material designed to appeal to heterosexual men rather than to lesbians. Until the last decade there was very little porn produced by or actually intended for lesbian viewers. This has been changing with the advent of some small circulation, low-budget sex magazines produced by and for lesbians. Ironically, this nascent lesbian porn is endangered by both right-wing and feminist anti-porn activity.¹⁰

There are several sub-genres of porn designed to cater to minority sexual populations. The most successful example of this is gay male porn. There are many specialized shops serving the gay male market. Much male homosexual pornography is produced by and for gay men, and its quality is relatively high. Transsexual porn is more rare and found in fewer shops. It is designed to appeal to transsexuals and those who find them erotic. Many of the models seem to be transsexuals who are working in the sex industry either because discrimination against them makes employment elsewhere difficult, or in order to raise money for sex change treatment.

Another specialized subgenre is SM porn. SM materials have been used as the primary 'evidence' for the alleged violence of porn as a whole. SM materials are only a small percentage of commercial porn and they are hardly representative. They appeal primarily to a distinct minority and they are not as readily available as other materials. For example, in San Francisco only two of the dozen or so adult theatres of the late 1970s and early 1980s regularly showed bondage or SM movies. These two theatres, however, have always been prominently featured in local anti-porn invective.¹¹

Many of the local porn shops have small sections of bondage material, but only a couple have extensive collections and are therefore favoured by connoisseurs. Mainstream porn magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* rarely contain bondage or SM photographs. When they do, however, these again are emphasized in anti-porn arguments. Some bondage photos in the December 1984 *Penthouse* are a case in point. They have often been used as examples in slide shows and displays by anti-porn activists, who invariably neglect to mention that the occurrence of such spreads in *Penthouse* is exceedingly unusual and quite unrepresentative.¹²

SM materials are aimed at an audience that understands a set of conventions for interpreting them. Sadoomasochism is not a form of violence, but is rather a type of ritual and contractual sex play whose aficionados go to great lengths in order to do it and to ensure the safety and enjoyment of one another. SM fantasy does involve images of coercion and sexual activities that may appear violent to outsiders. SM erotic materials can be shocking to those unfamiliar with the highly negotiated nature of most SM encounters. This is compounded by the unfortunate fact that most commercial SM porn is produced by people who are not practising sadoomasochists and whose understanding of SM is not unlike that of the anti-porn feminists. Thus commercial SM porn often reflects the prejudices of its producers rather than common SM practice.¹³

Torn out of context, SM material is upsetting to unprepared audiences and this shock value has been mercilessly exploited in anti-porn presentations. SM porn is itself misrepresented, its relationship to SM activity is distorted, and it is treated as though it is representative of porn as a whole.

Pioneered by WAVPM and adopted by WAP, slide shows have been a basic organizing tool of anti-porn groups. Slides of images are used to persuade audiences of the alleged violence of pornography. The anti-porn movie *Not a Love Story* follows a format similar to the slide shows and utilizes many of the same

techniques.¹⁴ The slide shows and the movie always display a completely unrepresentative sample of pornography in order to 'demonstrate' its ostensible violence. SM imagery occupies a much greater space in the slide shows and in *Not a Love Story* than it does in actual adult bookstores or theatres.

In addition to SM materials, the presentations utilize images from porn that are violent or distasteful, but that are again unrepresentative. An example of this is the notorious *Hustler* cover showing a woman being fed into a meat grinder. This image is upsetting and distasteful, but it is not even legally obscene. It is also unusual. *Hustler* is a magazine that strives to be in bad taste. It is as different from other comparable mass-circulation sex magazines as the *National Lampoon* is from *Esquire* or *Harpers*.

Arguing from bad examples is effective but irresponsible. It is the classic method for promulgating negative stereotypes and is one of the favoured rhetorical tactics for selling various forms of racism, bigotry, hatred and xenophobia. It is always possible to find bad examples – of, for example, women, gay people, transsexuals, blacks, Jews, Italians, Irish, immigrants, the poor – and to use them to construct malicious descriptions to attack or delegitimize an entire group of people or an area of activity.

For example, in the 1950s, homosexuals were commonly perceived as a criminal population, not just in the sense that homosexual activity was illegal but also in the sense that homosexuals were thought to be disproportionately prone to engage in criminal behaviour in addition to (criminal) homosexual acts. This stereotype has been revived by Paul Cameron, one of the United States' most virulent anti-gay ideologues, whose Institute for the Scientific Investigation of Sexuality (ISIS) publishes vitriolic anti-gay pamphlets.¹⁵

One of his most extraordinary pamphlets is *Murder, Violence, and Homosexuality*, in which Cameron argues that homosexuality is linked to a disposition for serial violent crime. He claims that 'You are 15 times more apt to be killed by a gay than a heterosexual during a sexual murder spree' (emphasis Cameron's) and that 'most victims of sex murderers died at the hands of gays'. Cameron employs a great deal of imaginative licence and creative interpretation to make his case. He also uses the undeniable existence of homosexual murderers to jump to the absurd, malicious and unsustainable conclusion that there is an 'association between brutal murder and homosexual habits'.¹⁶

A great deal of anti-porn analysis is argued in a similar format. It jumps from examples of undeniably loathsome porn to unwarranted assertions about pornography as a whole. It is politically reprehensible and intellectually embarrassing to target pornography on the basis of inflammatory examples and manipulative rhetoric.

Is pornography any more violent than other mass media? While there are no reliable comparative studies on this point, I would argue that there are fewer images or descriptions of violence in pornography, taken as a whole, than in mainstream movies, television or fiction. Our media are all extremely violent, and it is also true that their depictions of violence against women are often both sexualized and gender specific. An evening in front of the television is likely to result in viewing multiple fatal automobile accidents, shootings, fistfights, rapes and situations in which women are threatened by a variety of creepy villains. Prostitutes and sex workers are invariably victims of violence in police and detective shows where they are killed off with relentless abandon. There are dozens of slasher movies characterized by hideous and graphic violence, disproportionately directed at women.

While much of this media is sexualized, very little is sexually explicit and consequently all of it would be completely unaffected by any new legal measures against pornography. If the problem is violence, why single out sexually explicit media? What is the justification for creating social movements and legal tools aimed at media that are sexually explicit rather than at media that are explicitly violent?

In addition, in their efforts to condemn pornography, anti-porn presentations such as the slide shows and *Not A Love Story* often include non-sexually explicit images such as record album covers and high fashion ads. The justification for including non-pornographic images in anti-porn presentations is not always clear. Sometimes it is implied or stated that these images display a 'pomographic' attitude toward women. While it is true that some of the conventional imagery of porn has become more common in the mass media, it is absurd to blame pornography for the sexism or violence of advertising and other forms of popular media.

There is an implicit theory of causality in anti-porn analysis in which a wildly exaggerated role is attributed to pornography in the creation, maintenance and representation of women's subordination. Gender inequality and contemptuous attitudes toward women are endemic to this society and are consequently reflected

in virtually all our media, including advertising and pornography. They do not originate in pornography and migrate from there into the rest of popular culture. It is important to recall that rape, violence against women, oppression and exploitation of women, and the attitudes that encouraged and justified these activities, have been present throughout most of human history and predate the emergence of commercial erotica by several millennia.

The inclusion of non-pornographic imagery in the anti-porn slide shows is also justified simply by redefining them as pornography or pornographic. This raises the issue of the inconsistent ways in which pornography is defined throughout the anti-porn discourse.

Definitions: What is Pornography?

The issue of definition – what is pornography and who defines it – haunts the entire discussion and is rarely addressed. This is especially interesting since the definitions of pornography employed within anti-porn rhetoric are circular, vague, arbitrary and inconsistent.

It is difficult to arrive at a precise definition of pornography but at least the complexities can be better situated. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1973), pornography is 'Written, graphic, or other forms of communication intended to excite lascivious feelings'. The term 'pornography' was adopted in the middle of the nineteenth century to categorize rediscovered sexually explicit artifacts from the Graeco-Roman world.¹⁷ In the late nineteenth century, sexually frank books and graphic art were rare, expensive and accessible primarily to wealthy and educated men. Although the term 'pornography' was originally used to refer to all kinds of explicitly sexual writing and art, it has increasingly been associated with the phenomenon of inexpensive commercial erotica. Particularly since World War Two, the term has acquired connotations of the 'cheap stuff': mass-market, commercial materials distinct from more expensive, artistic or sophisticated 'erotica'.

According to the same dictionary, erotica is 'Literature or art concerning or intended to arouse sexual desire'. Erotica has had the connotations of being softer, classier, better produced, less blatant, and often less bluntly explicit than pornography.

Neither erotica nor pornography is illegal *per se*. 'Obscenity' is the category of legally restricted sexual speech or imagery. It is important to note that pornography has not until recently been

a legal category in the United States. For over a century, sexually explicit materials were illegal only if they were found to be obscene. Although the criteria for obscenity have shifted over time, they have had specific legal parameters. 'Pornographic' was a term of judgement but not of law.

This has now begun to shift and a new category of illegal sexual material that is 'pornographic' but not necessarily 'obscene' is evolving. For example, 'child pornography' is now a well-established legal category in the United States, and the criteria for conviction are broader and less stringent than in obscenity cases. The anti-porn ordinance authored by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin and passed in Indianapolis, Indiana, was an attempt, among other things, to create a new legal category of 'pornography' distinct from 'obscenity'. This new category of 'pornography' would have codified a feminist anti-porn description into law.

Both right-wingers and anti-porn feminists have at times favoured this 'pornography' strategy as a means to circumvent those court decisions on obscenity which have resulted in greater legal protection for some types of sexually explicit material. However, since the Indianapolis ordinance was declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court, subsequent efforts to make pornography a cause of civil action have relied on traditional legal categories of obscenity rather than on the so-called 'feminist' definition.¹⁸

Within feminism, the debates on pornography have hinged on the definition of pornography. More crucially, the definition of pornography has often functioned as a substitute for argument or proof in anti-porn analysis. Feminists have approached other media with the intention of changing them for the better rather than striving to eliminate them altogether. What distinguishes pornography from other media is the level of sexual explicitness, not the quantity of violence in its imagery or the quality of its political consciousness. Why, then, has pornography alone been considered beyond feminist redemption, and its eradication posited as a condition for female freedom? This breathtaking leap of logic has been accomplished simply by redefining pornography so that it is sexist and violent *by definition*.

For example, in *Take Back the Night* the following definitions are found: 'Pornography, then, is verbal or pictorial material which represents or describes sexual behaviour that is degrading or abusive to one or more of the participants in such a way as to endorse the degradation ... it is material that explicitly represents

or describes degrading and abusive sexual behaviour so as to endorse and/or recommend the behaviour as described ... What is wrong with pornography, then, is its degrading and dehumanizing portrayal of women (and not its sexual content). Pornography, *by its very nature*, requires that women be subordinate to men and mere instruments for the fulfilment of male fantasies [my emphasis].¹⁹ This is argument by tautology. If pornography is defined simply as that which is inherently degrading to women, then by definition it cannot be reformed and must be extirpated. This tactic completely finesses the necessity of providing some demonstration that what is generally thought of as pornography is accurately denoted by such a definition.

A similar definition is at the heart of MacKinnon and Dworkin's so called 'civil rights anti-pornography ordinance'.²⁰ Catharine MacKinnon has argued that her proposed civil rights ordinance does not hinge on the prevalence of violent imagery within pornography. She has stated that the way a legal definition works is that whatever it would define as pornography would be pornography, so that her ordinance would simply cover whatever fits its definition.²¹ This is true, but again the reasoning is circular. It begs the question of why such an ordinance *should* cover pornography, however defined, whether such a definition has any relation to pornography in the usual sense, and why any feminist-supported law should single out sexually explicit materials in the first place.

Moreover, the various definitions of porn employed in anti-porn discourse are not consistently applied. When the targets of anti-porn agitation are identified they are the things more commonly associated with the term 'pornography', i.e. X-rated videos and films, *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, the magazines sold in adult bookstores, lesbian sex magazines, gay male one-handed reading – in short, smut in the more usual sense. If pornography is that which is violent and/or intrinsically degrading to women in one sentence, it cannot be sexually explicit popular media in the next, unless an argument is made that sexually explicit popular media is indeed distinctively violent and/or intrinsically and differentially degrading to women.

Furthermore, the category of 'pornography' seems conveniently expandable. As mentioned above, ads and other media images that are sexually suggestive or particularly sexist are routinely included and called pornographic. Sometimes even sex toys are incorporated into the category. For example, in one of the opening sequences of *Not a Love Story*, as the narrator is describing the

ostensible growth and size of the porn industry, the image on the screen shows the crafting of leather wristbands and collars. Whatever one thinks of such items, they are articles of dress and display, not media. In a non-feminist context, the Meese Commission on Pornography has discussed laws prohibiting the sale of sex toys such as vibrators and dildos.²²

Since few feminists would support the suppression of all sexually explicit media, many anti-porn statements include a disclaimer that not all sexually explicit material is pornography. The residual category is 'erotica'. A distinction is made between 'pornography' (the objectionable stuff against which feminists ought to fight) and 'erotica' (the remaining sexual stuff of which feminists could approve). However, the problems with this approach become apparent as soon as anyone tries to define just exactly what separates erotica from pornography. Early in this debate, Ellen Willis noted with her customary dry wit that most attempts to define erotica and pornography amount to a statement of 'what I like is erotica, and what you like is pornographic'.²³

For example, the cover of the November, 1978 *Ms.* magazine inquires, 'Erotica and Pornography: Do You Know the Difference?' Inside, Gloria Steinem purports to detail the 'clear and present difference.' Erotica, she tells us, 'is rooted in eros or passionate love, and thus in the idea of positive choice, free will, the yearning for a particular person,' whereas in pornography 'the subject is not love at all, but domination and violence against women.'²⁴

In July of 1979 WAVPM's *Newspage* grappled the issue. Acknowledging that 'the question of the differences between erotica and pornography cannot be totally resolved', *Newspage* published a list of distinctions. Among other things, erotica is characterized by this list: personal, emotional, has lightness, refreshing, rejuvenating, creative, natural, fulfilling, circular, and 'just there'. Pornography's list includes: defined by penis, for male titillation, having power imbalance, producing violence, suggesting violence, unreal, elements of fear, mindlessness, heavy, contorted bodies, voyeuristic, linear, and 'something you buy and sell'. Admittedly these lists were summaries of a discussion and not intended as a coherent final statement. But no one has ever been able to come up with a more definitive delineation. These lists are revealing of the arbitrary quality of the distinction. Indeed, one of the few points upon which both Andrea Dworkin and I agree is that the distinction between pornography and erotica is not a useful one for these discussions.²⁵

Some anti-porn groups have also exempted sex education materials from condemnation. However, Dworkin has been quoted as wondering 'whether some of the films made specifically for educational purposes contained material as offensive as that found in commercial porn'.²⁶ In fact, many of the sex education movies are made by heterosexual men whose attitudes toward women are similar to the heterosexual men who dominate the production of commercial porn. This does not mean they all promote violence; it does mean that few of them are paragons of feminist consciousness. To me, these similarities suggest that we should encourage more women to enter both fields as producers, writers and directors. To some anti-porn activists, however, these similarities will be an excuse to include sex education films in their general condemnation of pornography and to subject them to whatever legal penalties and liabilities result from anti-porn campaigns.

Most of the prominent spokespeople for the anti-porn position have also stated publicly that the lesbian sex magazines, such as *On Our Backs*, *Bad Attitude* and *Outrageous Women*, fit their definitions of pornography (indeed, I have heard some of them describe these magazines as 'heterosexual'). Since many of these anti-porn individuals support the passage of legislation to make pornography a cause of civil action, one may infer that they would support bringing civil suits against these magazines.

Despite constant assertions about how porn is 'big business', most of the really interesting porn and all of these lesbian publications are small, low-budget affairs. While *Playboy* and *Penthouse* could survive repeated lawsuits, legal action would put the lesbian sex magazines out of business. Who is going to decide what is 'pornographic', what forms lesbian sexuality must take, and what a lesbian may be able to choose to read? If 'erotica' cannot be agreed upon, if sex education films fit the definitions of 'pornography', and if indigenous lesbian sex magazines are 'heterosexual pornography', what sexual imagery is sufficiently 'non-pornographic' to be acceptable to feminists and exempt from legal harassment?

III The 'Harm' of Porn: Allegations, Assertions and Creative Causality

The Research

Supporters of anti-porn politics have argued that recent research in experimental psychology proves that pornography causes

violence against women. The research does nothing of the sort.²⁷ There are many methodological cautions associated with the kind of research on which the anti-porn position is based. Those studies of pornography show *at most* some changes in attitudes in artificial settings which may or may not have implications for behaviour in real-life situations. The classic experiments, such as those of Edward Donnerstein, used materials that were both sexually explicit and violent, but which were not at all representative of most commercial pornography. At most, the conclusions of such studies pertain only to such materials and cannot be applied to pornography as a whole.²⁸

Virtually all the recent studies have exonerated non-violent porn, with the exception of those conducted by Dolf Zillman and Jennings Bryant. However, among the negative effects attributed to porn by Zillman and Bryant are less belief in marriage, greater dissatisfaction with one's present sex life, and greater tolerance for homosexuality and sexual variety.²⁹ If these are legitimate reasons for condemnation, then feminism and feminist literature are also culpable.

In studies in which subjects appeared more willing to express hostile behaviour after exposure to violent sexual materials, they were asked to decide whether to shock or not to shock a 'victim' after viewing the materials. They were given no other option. For example, they could not choose to be alone, do nothing, or masturbate. In real-life situations, pornography is most frequently used for masturbation or as a prelude to sexual activity with a partner. It would be revealing to compare how many experimental subjects would choose to shock someone if they were allowed masturbation as an alternative.

Finally, none of the published studies thus far have compared levels of aggression after viewing violent sexual material with those after viewing violent non-sexual material. However, Donnerstein is reported to be working on a new study in which it has been found that images of women being beaten but which contain *no* sexual content elicit higher levels of aggression in experimental subjects than images of sexual violence. Donnerstein has publicly cautioned against over-interpretation of his earlier findings, spoken against censorship, and has stated that it is probably violence in media rather than sex which has a negative impact.³⁰

The available data are, at the present time, inconclusive, and certainly do not constitute anything resembling proof of broad assertions about the alleged responsibility of pornography in

causing violence against women.³¹ There is substantial evidence that violence in media is a problem. While there would still be serious First Amendment problems to consider in any attempts legally to control violent media, there is more justification for feminist concern in that area. Currently in the United States there are no legal prohibitions on violence in media, while there are many legal constraints on representations of sex in media. What possible justification can there be for seeking more restrictions on the sexually explicit, while leaving the vast quantities of media violence unmolested?

Is Porn a 'Documentary of Abuse'?

Catharine MacKinnon has argued that pornography is a literal photographic record of women being abused. She has listed various images found in porn, such as women being bound, tortured, humiliated, battered, urinated upon, forced to eat excrement, killed, or 'merely taken and used'. She has then concluded that a woman had to have had these things done to her in order for the pornography to have been made; thus for each such image some woman had been bound, tortured, humiliated, battered, urinated upon, forced to eat excrement, murdered, or 'merely taken and used'.³² Or as Andrea Dworkin puts it, 'Real women are tied up, stretched, hanged, fucked, gang-banged, whipped, beaten, and begging for more. In the photographs and films, real women are used ...'³³ In this view, pornography is a photographic record of horrible abuse perpetrated upon the models and actors who appear in it. Several points may be made about this theory of pornographic harm.

The items on such lists are not all equivalent nor are they equally prevalent. I would guess that the 'merely taken and used' is in reference to ordinary, non-kinky sexual activities, while the items bound, tortured, humiliated, urinated upon and forced to eat excrement may refer to kinky porn. Porn featuring the eating of excrement is extraordinarily rare. Images of bondage, pain, humiliation and urination are found in porn but, again, are absent from the majority of pornography. I have heard references to porn showing women mutilated or murdered but have never seen any except some rare drawings – *not* photographs – in European materials not available in the United States. I hate to belabour the point, but there are more women battered and

murdered on prime-time television and Hollywood films than in pornographic materials.

Perhaps more significantly, in this model of porn there is no concept of the role of artifice in the production of images. We do not assume that the occupants of the vehicles routinely destroyed in police chases on television are actually burning along with their cars, or that actors in fight scenes are actually being beaten to a pulp, or that western movies result in actual fatalities to cowboys and native Americans. It is ludicrous to assume that the level of coercion in an image is a reliable guide to the treatment of the actors involved. Yet this is precisely what is being asserted with regard to pornographic images.

In their characterizations of pornography as a documentary of abuse, both Dworkin and MacKinnon appear to think that certain sexual activities are so inherently distasteful that no one would do them willingly, and therefore the models are 'victims' who must have been forced to participate against their will. Since SM often involves an appearance of coercion, it is especially easy to presume that the people doing it are victims. However, as I noted above, this is a false stereotype and does not reflect social and sexual reality. Sadomasochism is part of the erotic repertoire, and many people are not only willing but eager participants in SM activity.³⁴

However, sadomasochism is not the only behaviour subjected to condescending and insulting judgements. For example, MacKinnon has also described porn in which someone was 'raped in the throat where a penis cannot go'.³⁵ There are plenty of gay men, and even a good number of heterosexual women, who enjoy cock-sucking. There are even lesbians who relish going down on dildos. Obviously, oral penetration is not an activity for everyone, but it is presumptuous to assume that it is physically impossible or necessarily coercive in all circumstances. Embedded in the idea of porn as a documentary of abuse is a very narrow conception of human sexuality, one lacking even elementary notions of sexual diversity.

The notion of harm embodied in the MacKinnon/Dworkin approach is based on a fundamental confusion between the content of an image and the conditions of its production. The fact that an image does not appeal to a viewer does not mean that the actors or models experienced revulsion while making it. The fact that an image depicts coercion does not mean that the actors or models were forced into making it.

One can infer nothing from the content of an image about the conditions of its production. Any discussion of greater protections

for actors and models should focus on whether or not they have been coerced and on the conditions under which their work is performed *regardless of the nature of the image involved*. Any standards considered for the health, safety or cleanliness of working conditions in the sex industry should conform to those pertaining to similar occupations such as fashion modelling, film making, stage acting, or professional dancing. The content of the image produced, whether or not it is sexual, and whether or not it is violent or distasteful to a viewer, is irrelevant.

While anti-porn activists often claim to want to protect women in (and from) the sex industry, much of their analysis is based on condescension and contempt towards sex workers. The notion that pornography is a documentary of sexual abuse assumes that the women who work in the sex industry (as strippers, porn models or prostitutes) are invariably forced to do so and that such women are merely victims of 'pornographers'. This is a malignant stereotype and one that is especially inappropriate for feminists to reinforce.

There are, of course, incidents of abuse and exploitation in the sex industry, as there are in all work situations. I am not claiming that no one has ever been coerced into appearing in a porn movie or that in such cases the perpetrators should not be prosecuted. I am saying that such coercion is not the industry norm. Furthermore, I am not promoting a simple 'free choice' model of employment, in which structural forces and limited choices have no influence on what decisions individuals make about how to earn a living. But those who choose sex work do so for complex reasons, and their choices should be accorded the respect granted to those who work in less stigmatized occupations.

Indeed, the degree to which sex workers are exposed to more exploitation and hazardous working conditions is a function of the stigma, illegality or marginal legality of sex work. People in stigmatized or illegal occupations find it difficult to obtain the protections, privileges and opportunities available for other jobs. Prostitutes, porn models and erotic dancers have less recourse to police, courts, medical treatment, legal redress or sympathy when they are subjected to criminal, violent or unscrupulous behaviour. It is more difficult for them to unionize or mobilize for protection as workers.

We need to support women wherever they work. We need to realize that more stigma and more legal regulation of the sex industry will merely increase the vulnerability of the women in it. Feminists who want to support sex workers should strive to

decriminalize and legitimize sex work. Sex workers relieved of the threat of scandal or incarceration are in a better position to gain more control over their work and working conditions.³⁶

Contempt towards sex workers, especially prostitutes, is one of the most disturbing aspects of the anti-porn invective. Throughout her book, *Pornography*, Dworkin uses the stigma of prostitution to convey her opprobrium and make her argument against pornography. She says, 'Contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word's root meaning: the graphic depiction of *vile whores*, or in our language, *sluts, cows* (as in: *sexual cattle, sexual chattel, cunts*.'³⁷ This is a degrading and insulting description of prostitutes. Feminists should be working to remove stigma from prostitution, not exploiting it for rhetorical gain.

Is Porn at the Core of Women's Subordination?

Porn is often described as 'at the centre' or 'at the core' of women's subordination. Andrea Dworkin makes the following statement in *Right-Wing Women*:

At the heart of the female condition is pornography: *it is the ideology that is the source of all the rest*; it truly defines what women are in this system – and how women are treated issues from what women are. Pornography is not a metaphor for what women are; it is what women are in theory and in practice.³⁸

This rather extraordinary statement is accompanied by several diagrams in which pornography is first placed literally 'at the centre' of women's condition, then diagrammed as the underlying ideology of women's condition, and finally depicted as the surface phenomenon with prostitution the underlying system.³⁹ These are breathtaking claims, and they are made with little supporting evidence and not a single citation.

Since the 1960s, feminist theorists and academics have explored a multitude of explanations for female subordination and the oppression of women. There are hundreds of articles, essays and books debating the merits of various factors in the creation and maintenance of female subordination. These have included, for example, private property, the formation of state societies, the sexual division of labour, the emergence of economic classes, religion, educational arrangements, cultural structures, family and kinship systems, psychological factors, and control over

reproduction, among others. I cannot think of a single attempt prior to the porn debates to derive women's subordination from either pornography or prostitution. There is no credible historical, anthropological or sociological argument for such a position.

It would be difficult to argue that pornography or prostitution had played such critical roles in women's subordination since women are quite dramatically oppressed in societies that have neither (for example, sedentary horticulturalists in Melanesia and South America). Furthermore, pornography and prostitution as they now exist in the west are modern phenomena. The institutional structures of prostitution in, for example, ancient Greece, were entirely different from those that obtain today.

Pornography in the contemporary sense did not exist before the late nineteenth century. Other cultures have certainly produced visual art and crafts depicting genitalia and sexual activity (e.g. the ancient Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Moche Indians from pre-Columbian coastal Peru). But there is no systematic correlation between low status for women and cultures in which sexually explicit visual imagery exists, or high status for women and societies in which it does not. Moreover, such images are not pornography unless porn is to be defined as all sexually explicit imagery, in which case anti-porn ideology would posit the impossibility of any acceptable explicit depictions of sex, and few feminists would support it.

Pornography could be thought of as being at the heart of women's condition if it is conceptualized as a trans-historical category existing throughout human history and culture. In *Pornography*, Dworkin states that the word 'pornography' comes from Greek words meaning 'writing about whores'. She goes on to discuss the place of the 'whores' in Greek society and concludes that, 'The word pornography does not have any other meaning than the one cited here, the graphic depiction of the lowest whores.' From this discussion, and similar accounts by others, it has often been inferred that the term 'pornography' was used by the Greeks and that it refers to categories of Greek experience.⁴⁰

However, the term 'pornography' was not used by the ancient Greeks, did not refer to their painted vases, and should not be treated as evidence that the Greeks felt about porn the way Dworkin does. The term was coined *from Greek roots* in the nineteenth century, when many of the sex terms still in use (such as homosexuality) were assembled from Greek and Latin root words. It embodies not the prejudices of the Greeks, but those of the Victorians.⁴¹

There is one further sense in which it might be argued that pornography is 'the ideology that is the source of all the rest' of women's oppression, and that is if pornography is conceived of as the quintessence of all ideologies of female inferiority. What, then, are we to make of all the religious and moral and philosophical versions of male superiority? Is the Koran pornography? The Bible? Psychiatry? And what has any of this to do with modern, contemporary commercial porn? What has it to do with adult bookstores or *Playboy*?

IV Why Has Opposition to Pornography Been So Acceptable in Feminism?

One may wonder why such sloppy definitions, unsupported assertions and outlandish claims have gained so much credibility within the feminist movement. There are several explanations.

1. Pornography is already highly stigmatized in this society. This stigma certainly pre-dates feminist attention to the subject. Most people in this society are already uncomfortable with pornography and a little afraid of being contaminated with its aura of disrepute. For well over a century the safest and most respectable attitude towards sexually explicit media has been one of condemnation. This stigma of pornography also makes it easier for people to accept false statements about it. One could assemble all the most grotesque slasher films or offensive paperback fiction and try to incite feminist frenzy against movies houses or bookstores, but few feminists would take such a campaign seriously.

2. It is often easy for women to accept hyperbolic descriptions of pornography because most women who do not work in the sex industry are unfamiliar with pornographic materials and their conventions of meaning and interpretation. Traditionally, pornography has been male territory. 'Respectable' women did not get much opportunity to go into porn shops and theatres or to view pornography.

Men's behaviour around porn – often embarrassed, furtive, and uncomfortable – has done little to change this situation or to reassure women about what might be going on in those male enclaves. Many women are angry and resentful about men's privileged access to sexually explicit material. All of this is changing, as the women who work in the sex industry are becoming more outspoken and as the industry itself evolves. The video revolution has enabled women to rent movies and view

them in the comfort of their own homes. More women are becoming comfortable in adult theatres and bookstores.

3. Most pornography is sexist. Traditionally, it has been aimed at a male audience and at the values of mainstream men. Consequently, the women in most commercial porn really are there to represent what the average male consumer wants to think about when he is masturbating. Most pornography does misrepresent women's sexuality and does not encourage men to learn the arts of seduction or to think of their sex partners as independent people with their own needs.

However, this sexism is no more intrinsic to pornography than it is to fiction. It is already changing as more women have become involved with the production of porn. Furthermore, the porn industry is beginning to recognize women as potential consumers and to design products intended to appeal to a female audience.

4. Commercial porn does not pretty-up sex the way Hollywood movies do. Most porn is poorly produced, badly acted, too brightly lit, and shot on too low a budget. It looks cheap. In spite of all the tripe about porn being a multi-billion dollar megalith, most porn movies are shot on budgets that would barely dent the cosmetic allowance for a major Hollywood film. The actors are not always well trained, and few have the impeccably good looks of major film stars. Many people come to porn expecting it to have the visual appearance of big screen romance, and it quite regularly fails to meet such expectations.

5. In this society we do not often get to view people who are nude or engaging in fornication or other sex acts. Most people consequently feel that sex looks kind of silly, and are afraid they must look ridiculous when they do it. Anti-porn ideology manipulates such feelings and reinforces the message that unadorned sex is ugly, undignified and shameful.

6. Due to the stigma historically associated with sexually explicit materials, we already use the words 'obscene' and 'pornographic' to express many kinds of intense revulsion. For example, war may be 'obscene' and Reagan's policies 'pornographic'. However, neither is customarily found in adult bookstores. Since the terms are commonly used to convey profound and extreme disapproval, it is all too easy to utilize them to invoke anxiety, disgust and revulsion.

7. There are legitimate feminist concerns with regard to sexually explicit materials. Although pornography should not be singled out, it should not be immune from feminist criticism. Porn is certainly not uniformly pleasing, well produced, artistically

edifying or politically advanced. There is plenty of room for improvement and for porn that is well made, creative, more diverse, more attuned to women's fantasies, and more infused with feminist awareness. This will only happen as more women and more feminists become involved in the production of sexually explicit material. A feminist politics on pornography should be aimed at making it easier – not more difficult – for this to occur.

As I mentioned above, the women who work in the sex industry are more vulnerable to harassment, violence and exploitation because they are denied many of the protections readily available to others. A feminist politics on the sex industry should demand immediate decriminalization of prostitution and pornography, equal protection under the law for sex workers, and an end to the punitive stigma inflicted upon people in the industry.

V Costs and Dangers of Anti-porn Politics

The focus on pornography trivializes real violence and ignores its gravity. Experiences of being raped, assaulted, battered or harassed are dramatic, devastating and qualitatively different from the ordinary insults of everyday oppression. Violence should never be conflated with experiences that are merely upsetting, unpleasant, irritating, distasteful, or even enraging.

Anti-porn activity distracts attention and drains activism from more fundamental issues for women. Porn is a sexier topic than the more intractable problems of unequal pay, job discrimination, sexual violence and harassment, the unequal burdens of child-care and housework, increasing right-wing infringements on hard-won feminist gains, and several millennia of unrelenting male privilege vis-a-vis the labour, love, personal service and possession of women. Anti-porn campaigns are pitifully misdirected and ineffective. They cannot solve the problems they purport to address.

If anti-porn politics were only a trivial diversion from more important concerns they would not deserve so much critical attention. This is unfortunately not the case. There are real costs to these campaigns that will be paid by whole new classes of victims. The scapegoating of pornography will create new problems, new forms of legal and social abuse, and new modes of persecution. A responsible and progressive political movement has no business pursuing strategies that will result in witch-hunts.

Anti-porn politics scapegoat innocent but despised behaviours, media and individuals for problems for which they are not

responsible. Anti-porn politics are intended to result in increased stigma and increased legal persecution of pornography, prostitution and perversion. But these are neither abstractions nor monsters. The consequences of more criminalization of sexually explicit materials and of increased stigmatization of sexual variation are very real. They mean police abuse and bureaucratic harassment for women and men who have done nothing wrong but express unfashionable desires, create illicit imagery or engage in disreputable occupations.

It is a terrible thing to bring down the police, public hatred and bureaucratic intervention upon innocent communities or individuals. It is inappropriate and shameful for feminism to collude in establishing policies, attitudes and law that will deprive innocent women and men of their liberty, livelihoods and peace of mind. Feminists are under the same obligations as everyone else to remember that just because something seems strange or frightening does not mean it is dangerous or a menace to public safety.

Anti-porn feminists are playing into the hands of the right wing and its reactionary agenda. There may not be a direct conspiracy, but there is certainly a convergence of aims and intentions. At best, anti-porn feminists seem naive about the political context in which they are operating. The right has already adopted feminist anti-porn rhetoric, concepts and language, conveniently stripped of its already marginal progressive content.

The women's movement lacks the political capacity to enact any legislative programme on pornography at this time. The right is suffering no such limitation. The right is more powerfully entrenched in the political structure of the United States than it has been in decades. It wields the formidable power of the federal bureaucracy and has enormous influence on legislative activity at all levels of government. We can expect a wave of conservative legislation on pornography to pass at the local, state and federal levels in the next few years. It is especially likely that laws loosely modelled on the concepts of the MacKinnon/Dworkin ordinance but wedded to traditional obscenity standards will become common.⁴² Moreover, everything we have seen so far will have been a prelude to the legislative avalanche we can expect once the Meese Commission on pornography reports.⁴³

These are times of great danger. We are in a period in which the social attitudes and legal regulation of sexuality are undergoing massive transformation. The laws, policies and beliefs that are

established in this era will haunt feminism, women, sex workers, lesbians, gay men and other sexual minorities for decades.

VI Feminism and Sexual Politics

It is tragic that the feminist movement has already fed the gathering sexual storm. The anti-porn ideology in all its manifestations has damaged the women's movement as a progressive voice in sexual politics. It has far too often paralysed feminist response to right-wing encroachments. It is critical that the women's movement mobilize to oppose any further depredations on sexual freedoms.

Instead of fighting porn, feminism should oppose censorship, support the decriminalization of prostitution, call for the abolition of all obscenity laws, support the rights of sex workers, support women in management positions in the sex industry, support the availability of sexually explicit materials, support sex education for the young, affirm the rights of sexual minorities and affirm the legitimacy of human sexual diversity. Such a direction would begin to redress the mistakes of the past. It would restore feminism to a position of leadership and credibility in matters of sexual policy. And it would revive feminism as a progressive, visionary force in the domain of sexuality.

in this country – is for the most part already illegal in the United Kingdom. The extreme language and lurid descriptions of ‘violent, degrading porn’ which are used to arouse outrage and generate support for further anti-porn legislation are completely inappropriate when applied to the kind of sexual material currently available here. (In truth, *most* pornography in Europe and the English-speaking world is far less violent than mainstream media.) Campaign Against Pornography speakers have been heard to justify the ‘Off the Shelf’ campaign by claiming you can find snuff films on the top shelf at W.H. Smith; in fact, no actual snuff film has ever been known to exist. (See ‘Snuff: Believing the Worst’, in this volume.) Indeed, pornographic videos are generally illegal, depiction of erect organs or penetration with objects has been deemed to be in violation of the Obscene Publications Acts, and the two major news chains – W.H. Smith and John Menzies – will not carry sexually oriented magazines that show people together. This makes it virtually impossible to show mutuality between people or to portray men sexually in the same way that women are portrayed; ironically, anti-porn campaigners criticize porn, rather than censorship, for creating this imbalance.

17. CPC distinguish between ‘pornography’, which they say degrades women, and ‘erotica’, which they say does not degrade women. Unlike Campaign Against Pornography, CPC speakers, when pressed, say they believe the Obscene Publications Acts should be eliminated and replaced with legislation similar to that which Dworkin and MacKinnon have proposed in the US. CPC is somewhat less likely than CAP to insist that all sexually explicit imagery is degrading to women, but it’s hard to pin them down on what ‘erotica’ looks like.
18. See *Hard Core*, by Linda Williams (Pandora Press, London, 1990) for a fascinating examination of pornographic film from a feminist perspective.
19. For the text of the Minneapolis hearings, see *Pornography and Sexual Violence: Evidence of the Links*, Everywoman Limited, London, 1988.

1 Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong

1. There is a discussion of the early roots of anti-pornography analysis in feminism in Echols, Alice, *Daring To Be Bad*:

Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, pp. 288–91, 360–64n.

2. Lederer, Laura, *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, William Morrow, New York, 1980, pp. 15–16, 23.
3. Emblematic anthologies from this period of feminism include such classics as Gornick, Vivien and Moran, Barbara K., *Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, Basic Books, New York, 1971; Baker Miller, Jean, *Psychoanalysis and Women*, Penguin, Baltimore, 1973; Mitchell, Juliet and Oakley, Ann, *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1976; Koedt, Anne; Levine, Ellen; Rapone, Anita, *Radical Feminism*, Quadrangle, New York, 1973; Morgan, Robin, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Vintage, New York, 1970.
4. For example, see Russell, Diana E.H. and Lederer, Laura, ‘Questions We Are Asked Most Often’, in Lederer, 1980, op. cit., pp. 23–9.
5. I have attended many educational presentations by WAVPM and WAP, and in none of them was any questioning of their basic assumptions permitted. Questions were restricted to inquiries about implementing their programme, and those who tried to raise other issues were ignored or dismissed. For similar experiences, see two accounts of WAP’s slide show and tour in Webster, Paula, ‘Pornography and Pleasure’, *Sex Issue, Heresies*, 12, 1981, pp. 48–51 and D’Emilio, John, ‘Women Against Pornography’, *Christopher Street*, May 1980, pp. 19–26.
6. The rhetorical attacks have heated up in the interim. Now feminists who reject anti-porn dogma are called ‘Uncle Toms,’ accused of supporting male supremacy, and described as attacking feminism.

In this regard exemplary texts are Jeffreys, Sheila, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution*, The Women’s Press, London, 1990, pp. 260–86; and Leidholdt, Dorchen and Raymond, Janice G., *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*, Pergamon, New York, 1990. In *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day For Women’s Equality*, Organizing Against Pornography, Minneapolis, 1988, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin state ‘There is no viable propornography feminism. Our legitimate differences centre on *how* to fight pornography’ [p.83, their emphasis].

See also MacKinnon, Catharine A., *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987, p. 146: ‘A critique of pornography is to feminism what its

defence is to male supremacy.' I disagree. In MacKinnon's work and that of other anti-porn feminists, the critique of pornography has been substituted for a critique of male supremacy.

7. Such terminological confusions continue to bedevil feminist discourse. The more updated version is to use pornography as a synonym for the subordination of women itself, and to equate opposition to pornography with opposition to male supremacy.
8. Willis, Ellen, *Beginning To See the Light*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1981, pp. 145-46. As Willis wryly puts it, 'the feminist bias is that women are equal to men and the male chauvinist bias is that women are inferior. The unbiased view is that the truth lies somewhere in between.' I often rephrase her comment as follows: the view of gay activism is that homosexuals deserve equality and respect. The view of neo-fascist homophobes is that homosexuals are diseased and should be incarcerated, punished, or exterminated. What, pray tell, is the position in the middle?
9. In addition to the Lederer collection, other major anti-porn texts include Dworkin, Andrea, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Perigee, New York, 1981; Dworkin, Andrea, *Right-Wing Women*, Perigee, New York, 1983; Griffin, Susan, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*, Harper Colophon, New York, 1981; Dworkin, Andrea and MacKinnon, Catharine A., *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality*, Organizing Against Pornography, Minneapolis, 1988; MacKinnon, Catharine A., *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989; MacKinnon, Catharine A., *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987; Brownmiller, Susan, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, Bantam, New York, 1976; Barry, Kathleen, *Female Sexual Slavery*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1979.
10. San Francisco's *On Our Backs*, Boston's *Bad Attitude and Outrageous Women*, Britain's *Quim* and Australia's *Wicked Women* are a few of these lesbian oriented sexual publications. All have encountered governmental or community censorship.
11. Russell and Lederer, op. cit., p. 24. The Kearny and the North Beach were the two theatres that catered to the bondage crowd. When asked 'what kinds of images are you talking

about when you say you are opposed to "violence in pornography and media"?' the response was, 'We are talking about films like the ones shown in the Kearny Cinema in San Francisco'.

12. Dworkin is referring to this spread when she complains that 'Penthouse hangs Asian women from trees'. Dworkin, Andrea and MacKinnon, Catharine A., *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality*, p. 63.
13. There was a movement in the early 1980s to produce commercial SM erotica made by and for SM practitioners, which resulted in successful and now classic films such as *Story of K.*, The Film Company, 1980, and *Journey Into Pain*, Loving SM Productions, 1983. Ironically, none of these films are currently available due to the increasingly harsh legal climate for sexual materials in the United States.
14. For the slide shows, see Webster, op. cit., and D'Emilio, op. cit. *Not A Love Story: A Film About Pornography* purports to be a documentary of pornography. It was directed by Bonnie Sherr Klein and produced by Dorothy Todd Henaut, Studio D., National Film Board of Canada, 1981.
15. See for instance 'The Psychology of Homosexuality', ISIS, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1984; 'AIDS, the Blood Supply, and Homosexuality (What Homosexuals Do In Public Is Offensive, What they Do in Private is Deadly)', ISIS, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985; 'What Homosexuals Do (Its More than Merely Disgusting)', ISIS, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985; 'Criminality, Social Disruption, and Homosexuality (Homosexuality is a Crime against Humanity)', ISIS, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985; 'Homosexuality and the AIDS threat to the Nation's Blood Supply', ISIS, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985; 'Child Molestation and Homosexuality (Homosexuality is a Crime against Humanity)', ISIS, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985.
16. 'Murder, Violence, and Homosexuality (What Homosexuals Do in Public is Offensive, What they Do in Private is Deadly!)', ISIS, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985. In the same pamphlet, Cameron claims that the Nazis 'started out as a gay rights party'.
17. Kendrick, Walter, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, Viking, New York, 1987.
18. As I prepare this manuscript for publication, there is proposed Federal legislation along these lines. See note 42, below.
19. Longino, Helen E., 'Pornography, Oppression, and Freedom: A Closer Look', Lederer, op. cit., pp. 40-54, especially 42-46.

20. Dworkin, Andrea and MacKinnon, Catharine A., *Pornography and Civil Rights*, op. cit., p. 36. See also MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, op. cit., p. 148.
 21. Hearings on Pornography, National Organization for Women, San Francisco, CA, 26 March 1986.
 22. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, *Final Report*, US Department of Justice, July 1986; Vance, Carole, 'Negotiating Sex and Gender in the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography' in Faye Ginsburg and Anna L. Tsing, *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1990, or in Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh, *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, Virago, London, 1992. Some states have now banned dildos and artificial vaginas, and in a 1985 decision the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that penis-shaped vibrators and inflatable dolls were 'obscene'.
 23. Willis, Ellen, untitled columns, *Village Voice*, 15 October 1979, p. 8, and 12 November 1979, p. 8. These two splendid pieces were reprinted as 'Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography', in *Beginning to See the Light: Pieces of a Decade*, op. cit.
 24. Steinem, Gloria, 'Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Danger', *Ms*, November, 1978, pp. 53-4, 75, 78.
 25. Dworkin, *Pornography*, op. cit., preface. Indeed, she could not have said it better: 'erotica is simply high-class pornography: better produced, better conceived, better executed, better packaged, designed for a better class of consumer'.
 26. Stein, Rob, 'Medical School Sex Film Wars,' *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 January 1986, pp. AA-55.
 27. McCormack, Thelma, 'Appendix I: Making Sense of the Research on Pornography', in Varda Burstyn, *Women Against Censorship*, Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, 1985; and Henry, Alice, 'Porn Is Subordination?', *Off Our Backs*, November 1984, pp. 20, 24. Prior to this article, Alice Henry had often expressed support of anti-porn politics in the pages of *Off Our Backs*, but in this incisive essay even she expressed scepticism of the claims about empirical research (as well as the wisdom of new anti-porn legislation). [Editors' note: See also King, Alison, 'Mystery & Imagination: The Case of Pornography Effects Studies', this volume.]
 28. Donnerstein, Edward, 'Aggressive Erotica and Violence Against Women', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1990, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 269-77; and Malamuth Neal M., and Donnerstein, Edward, *Pornography and Sexual Aggression*, Academic Press, New York, 1984.
 29. Zillman, Dolf and Bryant, Jennings, 'Effects of Massive Exposure to Pornography', in Malamuth and Donnerstein, op. cit., pp. 115-38; 'X-Rated Flicks Cool People to Real-Life Sex', *San Francisco Examiner*, 23 April 1986, p. A7.
 30. Donnerstein, Edward I. and Linz, Daniel G., 'The Question of Pornography: It is not Sex, but Violence, that is an Obscenity in Our Society', *Psychology Today*, December 1986, pp. 56-9; Goldman, Daniel, 'Researchers Dispute Pornography Report on Link to Violence', *New York Times*, 17 May 1986, pp. 1, 7; Donnerstein, Dr Edward, 'Interview,' *Penthouse*, September 1985, pp. 165-68, 180-81.
- This entire section is the most out of date, and would have required complete revision to fix. I elected to leave it alone; however, there has been a deluge of material on this point in the years since the piece was written. Most germane is Edward Donnerstein, Daniel Linz, and Steven Penrod, *The Question of Pornography: Research Findings and Policy Implications*, The Free Press, New York, 1987, particularly Chapter 6, 'Is it the Sex or Is it the Violence?' The book also contains a critique of the misuse of the research data by the Meese Commission. Two of the female members of the Meese Commission, Dr Judith Becker and Ellen Levine, included harsh criticisms of the conclusions of the Commission and the process by which these conclusions were reached. In their dissenting report, they noted that 'it is essential to state that the social science research has not been designed to evaluate the relationship between exposure to pornography and the commission of sexual crimes; therefore efforts to tease the current data into proof of a causal link between these acts simply cannot be accepted. Furthermore, social science does not speak to harm, on which this Commission report focuses.' (*Final Report*, op. cit., p. 204).
31. For a completely different perspective from that of the anti-pornography movement on the relationship between violence and women's subordination, see Baron, Larry, 'Pornography and Gender Equality: An Empirical Analysis', *Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 27, no. 3, August 1990, pp. 363-80.
 32. Hearings on Pornography, op. cit.
 33. Dworkin, *Pornography*, op. cit., p. 201.

34. Samois, *Coming To Power*, Alyson, Boston, 1987; Weinberg, Thomas and Kamel, G. W. Levi, *S and M: Studies in Sado-masochism*, Prometheus, Buffalo, 1983; Mains, Geoff, *Urban Aboriginals*, Gay Sunshine, San Francisco, 1984; Stoller, Robert, *Pain and Passion: A Psychoanalyst Explores the World of S&M*, Plenum, New York, 1991; Thompson, Mark, *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, Alyson, Boston, 1991; Grumley, Michael and Gallucci, Ed, *Hard Corps: Studies in Leather and Sado-masochism*, Dutton, New York, 1977; Rosen, Michael, *Sexual Magic: The S/M Photographs*, Shaynew Press, San Francisco, 1986; and Rosen, Michael, *Sexual Portraits: Photographs of Radical Sexuality*, Shaynew Press, San Francisco, 1990.
35. Hearings on Pornography, op. cit.
36. Delacoste, Frederique and Alexander, Priscilla, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, Cleis Press, San Francisco, 1987; Jaget, Claude, *Prostitutes: Our Life*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol, 1980; Pheterson, Gail, *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, Seal Press, Seattle, 1989; James, Jennifer, et al., *The Politics of Prostitution*, Social Research Associates, Seattle, 1977.
37. Dworkin, *Pornography*, op. cit., p. 200, my emphasis.
38. Dworkin, *Right Wing Women*, op. cit., p. 223, my emphasis.
39. Dworkin, *ibid.*, pp. 222, 228, 229.
40. Dworkin, *Pornography*, op. cit., pp. 199-200. This dubious history and phony etymology appears repeatedly throughout the anti-porn literature where it is often used as a key argument against pornography. In *Pornography and Civil Rights*, op. cit., p. 74, MacKinnon and Dworkin state that 'We can trace pornography without any difficulty back as far as ancient Greece in the west. Pornography is a Greek word ... It refers to writing, etching, or drawing of women who, in real life, were kept in female sexual slavery in ancient Greece. Pornography has always, as far back as we can go, had to do with exploiting, debasing, and violating women in forced sex.' In the Ms article cited above, Gloria Steinem employs it as the basis of her erotica/pornography distinction.
41. Actually, as Kendrick points out (op. cit., p. 11) the term did exist in ancient Greece. But it appears so rarely in the surviving Greek texts that it could not have been indicative of a significant category of ancient experience, let alone one that so closely approximates the opinions of sexual materials held by Dworkin or nineteenth-century scholars (John J. Winkler, personal communication, 1986).
42. This has indeed been the case. When I submitted the earlier version of this essay in 1986, I enclosed California Assembly

Bill No. 3645, in which the diffusion of anti-porn ideas into legal initiatives was already apparent. AB 3645 did not pass. But as this essay goes to press, Senate Bill 1521, the Pornography Victims Compensation Act, is poised to become federal law. It makes pornography a cause of civil action, as was proposed in the MacKinnon/Dworkin ordinance, and allows 'victims' to sue not their perpetrators but the makers and distributors of any obscene material that may have influenced their perpetrators. In contrast to the original MacKinnon/Dworkin approach, this bill is based on a traditional legal definition of obscenity rather than the so-called 'feminist' definition in the Indianapolis ordinance.

If this bill becomes law, when some lunatic who has read porn or seen a pornographic film decides to go on a rampage, the producers and distributors of his reading material may be held accountable for his behaviour and sued in federal court. The bill establishes third-party liability, but only for the producers and distributors of sexual media. The same kind of liability has been ruled unconstitutional in the case of non-obscene media. But since obscenity is not constitutionally protected speech, SB 1521 may be upheld in the courts.

And what will happen if the same lunatic, after reading his Bible, goes out and murders a bunch of prostitutes (not an altogether unusual occurrence)? The churches and religious publishers will not be held accountable when murderers claim biblical authority.

43. This has also come to pass. The Meese Commission released its *Final Report* in July of 1986. The report included a long wish list of new obscenity legislation and suggested procedures to increase enforcement of existing law at the local, state and federal levels. Much of the anti-porn agenda articulated in the report has become law, policy and common practice. The US Department of Justice duly created an obscenity enforcement unit, increased obscenity prosecutions, began to bring forfeiture proceedings against those convicted of obscenity offences, and started a national computerized data bank on producers, distributors and consumers of sexually explicit material (ACLU Arts Censorship Project, *Above the Law: The Justice Department's War Against the First Amendment*, American Civil Liberties Union, Medford, New York, 1991).

The obscenity unit was recently renamed the 'Child Exploitation and Obscenity Unit'. The irony of this new title is that there has been no commercial child pornography

available in the United States since the late 1970s. In its efforts to entrap suspected paedophiles, the federal government has become the largest (and only) distributor of child pornography in the United States. For a longer discussion of the right-wing war on porn and of the collaboration of anti-porn feminists, see my afterword to a reprint of 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in Kauffman, Linda S., *American Feminist Thought, 1982-1992*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, forthcoming.

4 Changing Perceptions in the Feminist Debate

1. The word 'working' here is used in deference to the popular assumption that only people who have interesting or high-status jobs are 'professionals', but of course all jobs done for money are 'professional' work, and these are the kinds of job we are referring to. Many women work very hard in jobs that don't pay – such as housewives – and we are not happy with a convention that perceives such women as 'not working' merely because they are not being paid.
2. Perhaps this is most obvious in the way that women are desexualized at precisely the age at which they are considered to be worthless as mothers and nurturers, despite the fact there is no evidence whatsoever that women are less sexual at that age.
3. This is the underlying assumption in defence arguments in rape trials. The very idea that men are 'provoked' to rape women who wear miniskirts or allow themselves to be alone with men suggests that males are out of control to begin with and that it is the obligation of women not to stir them to sexual thoughts. This is why even women who have been beaten bloody by their assailants can be accused of 'asking for' rape – their failure to suppress all possibility of sexual thoughts is, in effect, a social crime deserving brutal punishment.

5 Mystery and Imagination

- Abel, G.G. et al., 'The Components of Rapists' Sexual Arousal', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 34, 1977.
- Abel, G.G. et al., 'Differentiating Sexual Aggressiveness With Penile Measures', *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 5, 1978.
- Abel, G.G. et al., 'Measurement of Sexual Arousal in Several Paraphiliacs: The Effect of Stimulus Modality, Instructional Set and

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Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures

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