

are concerned less with a definition of pornography per se as with its social impact or the ideological tenor of its contents. Seen from their angle, pornography is not a thing in itself, but a minor aspect of a much larger question: it is "a symptom of decadence," or part of a generalized "violence against women," and so on. One of the most famous commentators to define pornography in this way was Justice William Douglas, a member of the United States Supreme Court, who surprised his audience and, incidentally, changed the entire framework of the debate with a single sweep of his judicial sleeve by declaring in court that if the prosecution maintained that the material placed before him was garbage, then "garbage" was also the primary characteristic of a great deal of what we hear during electoral campaigns, most of what is printed in daily newspapers, and much of what is usually shown on television and radio stations throughout the country. Obviously, his declaration caused a scandal, but there is much matter in it for debate.

So, Justice Douglas's statement brings us back full circle to our original point of departure: pornography is, first and foremost, not a thing but an argument. It is therefore time to proceed to the debates, where the subject is truly defined by its effects, its consequences, and its social implications. In formal terms, anything at all can be designated pornographic. Pornography itself is an empty vessel. It is sex that is so gratuitous as to be excessive. Better still, real pornography is always what is found in the bunker of the defeated dictator, or in the apartment of the serial killer.

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THE DEBATES (JAGUAR &
ANTEATER)
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C H A P T E R 2

THE DEBATES

There are only two states of mind in which life is worth living: the supreme joy of having a religion, and the supreme anguish of having lost one.

FERNANDO PESSOA

Erostratus: An Essay on the Destiny of Literary Works

Anyone who finds public debates frustrating will find no exception here. We can only marvel that pornography has survived and is still tolerated, given that it has been so universally condemned; indeed, it is really only talked about when it is being attacked. Its denunciations have been frequent, rigorous, and diverse. They have come from all quarters, and have been widely heard from some fairly impressive platforms. And yet all these criticisms seem to run into so many brick walls, for, despite all the negative things that have been said about pornography, in the end nothing much has been done about it, and the apparently unanimous denunciations have resulted in nothing but a few timid laws and vague restrictions.

General Remarks
The principal strength of a brick wall being silence, we look in vain for a public speech in defence of pornography. There have been those who have spoken out in the name of liberty, of course; those who have said they dislike pornography but hate censorship, or that they hope that by treating it as a necessary evil it will go away of its own accord. But no one dares to stand up and say that pornography has anything good to recommend it.

By saying that pornography is evil and that freedom of expression is

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RESRV
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THE DEBATES IN THE JAGUAR
AND THE ANTEATER
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good, the debates generally branched off on two different levels at the same time, and thus generated a misunderstanding that quickly became insoluble, and whose immediate effect has been to drown out — with cries of “Intolerance” and “Chauvinism,” if not with ridicule — the very denunciations of pornography that engendered the debate in the first place. In the week following the public outrage over the December 1984 issue of *Playboy*, for example, nervous Canadian customs officials seized copies of everything that showed pornographic promise, including *The Lover*, a novel by Marguerite Duras, *Women's Bodies*, an austere work of scholarship, and even *Debt and Desire*, by the German theologian A. Vergote.¹

Moreover, the denunciations have had even fewer results when defendants were successful in convincing judges that the work in question was not a work of pornography, but rather of erotica. Just as no one will lower themselves to defend pornography, so no one would dare to declare themselves opposed to erotica. Erotica is what permits us to distinguish between a Prix Goncourt winner and an issue of *Penthouse*, but it is also a remarkably fuzzy concept that creates its own wall of confusion and is, therefore, an ideal thing to hide behind in battle.

What these debates show most clearly is that pornography is always elsewhere. Pornography, as André Breton has said, is someone else's erotica. But not just anyone else's. Pornography belongs to the vulgar, the rude, and the plebeian, people whose lack of good taste and money prevents them from procuring the kind of erotica rendered safe by its unquestionable quality. Erotica becomes a class privilege when money replaces photographs hung on the walls of a workshop with luxurious albums on pre-Columbian pottery.

Pornography, when viewed honestly and without hypocrisy, is indefensible. Even those who produce and consume it — when they have done with their simple defences in the name of freedom of expression and are smitten by a desire to justify their behaviour, at least to themselves — still appeal to such generalities as the effort to make social customs more liberal, or the necessity to break away from the stifling restraints of a former regime, or even the promotion of some kind of sexual revolution. In short, they conjure up vast theoretical matrices in order to avoid saying that the spectacle of sex is enjoyable, and that enjoyment is a good enough excuse.

Pornography, then, is a new forum for the age-old debate between the defenders of public morality, disposed to restrict individual liberty in

order to protect the common good, and their adversaries, who defend individual liberty even at the risk of allowing excesses on the part of some minorities. This opposition is obviously not restricted to the realm of pornography, since it comes up time and again in the interminable search for a socially acceptable compromise on where to place the point at which one individual's freedom violates the freedom of another. The point, in other words, where one good comes in to conflict with another good. Is pornography to be regarded as a form of hate literature, which certain societies condemn in the name of public morality? Or, in our defence of the freedom of the individual, would it not also be necessary to prohibit magazines that depict images of the Pope, or royalty, or what, since each citizen has the right to find such depictions immoral, obscene, or disgusting? Since these questions avoid the subject in order to discuss the principles, the debates will never end; no true believer in democracy would even want them to.

But the aficionados of pornography very rarely participate in such debates, either because those who cannot afford erotica can also not afford public platforms, or because their love of pornography is a dirty secret, and having a dirty secret is the source of a large part of their pleasure. If, as the old proverb has it, a sin confessed is half-forgiven, there is no reason to deprive oneself of half the pleasure of feeling guilty. Hence the silence of the brick wall.

No one defends pornography, and yet it seems to resist every attack made upon it. There are those who believe that its survival is due to the simple fact that authority to prohibit it is in the hands of precisely those people who most profit from it, or at least are not sufficiently convinced of its pernicious effects. Others believe that, on the contrary, the phenomenon of pornography is a social fact that remains unaffected by either politics or the outcome of public debates about it.

What is certain is that the debates have travelled along a few unexpected paths. First, there is all the scientific research on the social impact of pornography, which has shown primarily that science is sometimes stupid and always fragile. Then there are the conservative protests made in the name of respect for order and the traditional system of values — values that are, ironically, absolutely essential for the survival of pornography. Finally, there are the feminist denunciations, which constitute the most notable debates over the past few years, and which have raised questions that are at once fundamental and completely unanswerable.

All these debates deserve attention, despite the limited effect they

The reader is first struck by the totally utilitarian nature of this documentation. Attempts have been made to demonstrate either that pornography has noxious effects on the individual and on society, or else that it has no such effects, or else that it can sometimes be useful and beneficial and sometimes not. Its effects have been feverishly studied because it is not in itself that pornography is judged good or bad, but in its consequences. It is as if we no longer permit ourselves to declare a thing intrinsically bad, and have to fall back on its effects, which are then presented as unquestionable arguments. As A. W. B. Simpson has remarked,³ such a route is endless and does nothing but delay identifying the point at which a chain of consequences must be stopped by declaring a particular link in it to be intrinsically bad. For example, to say that pornography should be condemned because rape is one of its consequences is not only to assume that rape is reprehensible, but also to imply that if we could somehow make rape impossible, there would then be nothing wrong with pornography.

The second immediate impression: the sense that the debates about pornography swing back and forth in reaction to general social moods. During the 1950s and 1960s, when censorship of all depictions of sexuality was common, the majority of commentators were convinced that pornography implied none of the psychological or social catastrophes predicted by a conservative morality, but that it rather signalled a long-awaited and welcome liberalization of social mores. The Kronhausens were a typical example of the period. They saw pornography as a useful weapon against ignorance and as a means of promoting a sexual blossoming without which repression could very well lead to rape, sadism, and other forms of sexual violence.⁴ Ten years later, when pornography had become omnipresent, more and more studies appeared that tried to demonstrate that it was not so inoffensive and that its proliferation raised several important and urgent social questions. In the mid-1980s, when a segment of the feminist movement and the political right (which spoke directly from the heart of the Meese Commission) unanimously denounced pornography, we listened to a replay of arguments heard twenty or thirty years earlier. In short, speeches follow political fluctuations without leading to any resolution of the main question. This is usually the case when the question has been wrongly posed – which, as a malevolent observer might say, helps to keep university researchers in grants.

have had on majority opinion, and the fact that they are interminable, since they usually deal with themes that remain on the periphery of the real questions that pornography raises. The impatient reader can object to so much space being given to these debates, especially since they have, for the most part, died out without leaving much trace. But in them we find one of the most remarkable characteristics of the phenomenon that will be discussed later on: the capacity for a society to produce both pornography and public debates without any social consequences.

The Effects of Pornography

Let's hope history retains more from the social sciences than their contribution to the debate over pornography. The uselessness of some of their efforts is absolutely scandalous, marked as they are by an often bewildering simplicity and a perception of the problem that can most kindly be described as naive. The idea of basing social policy on social science is enough to make one long for the days of the alchemists.

Compiling an inventory of the work done by social-science researchers requires the patience of the proverbial monk. The bibliography of the Meese Commission Report cites 252 books and articles in the section headed "Social Sciences" alone, which does not include references to public debates, judicial questions, history, and so forth. In Canada, for the Fraser Commission, the inventory was so huge that it was gathered into a separate volume by H. B. McKay and D. J. Dolff, under the aegis of the Department of Justice, and published under the title *The Effects of Pornography: An Analysis of Research and Its Results*. Other bibliographies and surveys exist,² all of them consisting of considerable enumerations, which, taken together, confirm that even a simple thumbnail sketch of all the inquiries into the psychological and social effects of pornography would take up several hundred pages.

Such a task might also prove a bit delicate. We are entering a world of short-sighted research conducted from particular points of view that hardly bother to camouflage themselves and are characterized by false accusations, blind alleys, and narrow minds. Much better to keep our distance and try to extract a few prudent conclusions, or at least identify the principal lines of force. In any case, this literature, with its superabundance of detail, is easily accessible to the morbidly curious.

All in all, the primary objective is simple. The point is to determine whether a demonstrable link between pornography and criminal sexual behaviour exists. The question was relatively new for the social sciences, and much of the earliest work on the subject was the result of requests from the U.S. commission of inquiry set up by President Johnson (the commission funded more than eighty different studies on all conceivable links between pornography and criminality). The research tried especially to find statistical correlations between the two phenomena, either by comparing the crime rate with the availability of commercial pornography, or by carrying out certain laboratory experiments with the aim of testing the more or less immediate effects of consuming pornographic material. Most of the results of this first U.S. commission, published in 1970, were later contested, and new research was mandated to come up with more acceptable results – but all the inquiries explored possible links between pornography and crime. The idea was that the right statistical calculations would show that the growth of pornography entails a parallel growth in the rate of sex crimes. Or conversely, that an increase in pornography consumption is followed by a lowering of the crime rate. In both cases, the hypotheses were simple enough: either that consumers of pornography found in it examples of behaviour that were later imitated, or else that the fantastical evasions found in pornography soothed the savage breasts of potential sex criminals who would otherwise have become dangerous. In other words, these hypotheses became slogans: “Pornography is the theory; rape is the practice,” or “Liberalize liberating pornography.”

Western cultural distinctions between the body and the mind, the material and the ideal, the thing and the word for it were formed in the darkness of time that preceded ancient Greece. Once these were established, there was little we could do about them except discuss the possible connections between these polarized terms. This is essentially what we have been doing ever since, and what underlies most debates on the social effects of pornography. Such discussions were initiated by Aristotle and Plato and have gone steadily downhill since then, because of the falsely enigmatic character of the question, Does the idea determine the action? Can a picture push one to act? Or is it rather the action that gives birth to our interpretation of it? What is the role of the imagined in the face of living experience? Is art, as the disciples of Plato have maintained, a poison that accumulates slowly in an organism? Or is it, as Aristotle held, a remedy to which we can turn as the need arises? It seems

unthinkable to reflect and debate in this culture without rehearsing the ethnocentric formulas learned in college philosophy courses. Other cultures would remind us that reality and its representation cannot influence each other unless they are first demonstrably separate, a situation that has not yet been established.

Research on the social impact of pornography has a tendency to answer these questions by adopting either a somewhat rough-and-ready behaviourist position, or by embracing a theory of catharsis that betrays perhaps a too-rapid reading of Sigmund Freud.⁵ The investigators placed their confidence in statistical correlations (any statistical correlation, it seems), because they believed that human beings tend to imitate any models that are presented to them – or, again the opposite, that fantastical evasion has the positive and necessary effect of making ordinary life more tolerable. On the one hand, the argument is that pornography offers a “security blanket” against crime. This would explain, for example, why Denmark began experiencing a sharp decline in sex-related crimes at the exact time when censorship was abolished,⁶ or why the Chinese population of San Francisco, which, relatively speaking, consumes a lot of pornography, has a remarkably low occurrence of such crimes.⁷ Others have seen this security blanket in effect in Japan, where pornography is abundant and blatant and makes much use of the theme of rape, and yet where the incidence of real rape is relatively low.⁸ On the other hand, one meets the deeply held conviction of J. Edgar Hoover, a former director of the FBI, who blithely stated that “pornography causes crime,” or the efforts of J. M. H. Court to demonstrate that in Australia, Britain, South Africa, and Singapore, pornography has had the direct and demonstrable effect of significantly increasing the number of rapes.⁹ Here, too, the critics have not been gentle (especially those on the Williams Commission) on the often dubious methodology that allowed researchers to single out rape when in fact there was a general fluctuation in all criminal activity. At worst, the critics have been pleased to end the discussion by casting doubts on the intellectual integrity of the researchers, recalling for example the case of Court, who described himself less as a scientific researcher than as a Christian psychologist and a promoter of a vast campaign against obscenity in all its various shapes and forms.

As was no doubt to be expected, most of this research has had no noticeable effect on those who were not already convinced, because the givens have often been too doubtful, the statistics too unreliable,

and the results too uncertain. In some cases, the inquirers were frankly accused of having cooked the results. According to Augustine Brannigan, the Thatcher government's law to control pornographic videos depended on statistics (compiled at the otherwise highly respectable Oxford Polytechnical Institute) that had been completely made up, some results having been erased and others changed in order to lead to conclusions that had been decided upon before the inquiry took place.¹⁰ As we have said, in these debates science and facts have not always been respectable.

As well as criticism of these inquiries' analytical methods, the fact that many of them were based on particularly simplistic theories about the relationship between learning and behaviour has also contributed to their rejection. On one side, the researchers seem genuinely to believe that people behave in ways that reproduce what they have seen in the movies. On the other side, people seem to believe that dreaming about violence is enough to render a person calm and inoffensive. And in the hope of demonstrating one or the other of these opposed notions, researchers look for a statistical correlation strong enough to be construed as a valid explanation. The illusion is unfortunately current in the social sciences, in which ideas formed on nothing but a statistical correlation based on a foregone conclusion that has never been discussed often pass for incisive interpretations of reality. A statistical demonstration in itself has no meaning unless its premises are first established as being logically acceptable: that is why, for example, a statistical correlation between pornography and family violence will be seen as reasonable, whereas the equally probable statistical correlation between pornography and annual total rainfall will be dismissed as absurd. In the present case, what makes any term-to-term correlation particularly suspect and unconvincing is that, in a complex social situation, it is difficult to justify the elimination of any factor whose pertinence has not been discussed and whose relevance has never been verified. We are, after all, dealing with human beings, and it would be preferable, as the Williams Commission report pointed out,¹¹ to interrogate the whole of human personality rather than try to isolate a few questions about sexuality and violence. Even the most uncontested statistical correlation leaves doubts about its ability to explain anything, which is why the report of the Meese Commission, which tried very hard to prove that pornography is evil, cautiously limited itself to saying that the link between pornography and rape seemed plausible, but might also be

totally nonexistent.¹² It is probably for the same reason that, in all the controversies over the effects of pornography, each interpretation seems most convincing when it is concentrating on destroying an adverse position.

Because the real world is too vast and its models too often uncontrolled, researchers have pursued their inquiries in laboratories in the hope of finding some shelter from outside perturbations and thus controlling factors that, in society, can influence the results of an experiment. The rules of this art are simple but rigorous: randomly divide a group of subjects into two groups, submit half of them to a stimulus, and measure the differences between the two groups in such a way as to establish with reasonable certitude that the administered stimulus is responsible for the difference.

Luckily, those who conducted these simple laboratory experiments proceeded from a somewhat more adequate conception of social life. Rather than aligning the consumption of pornography directly and unilaterally with behaviour, they studied its impact on the learning process and on the adoption of values and attitudes. They also took into account the complexity of certain social distinctions – sex, age, social class, political opinion, and so forth – and it is in such long series of experiments that social psychology offers its most serious efforts to evaluate the effects of pornography.¹³ The point here is not to establish a direct link between consumption and behaviour, but to see how pornography contributes to conditioning (the impact of which may remain unclear but be disturbing nonetheless). Among the more notable conclusions is that violent pornography tends to modify men's attitudes to the point of making them more tolerant when confronted by rape and more aggressive toward women, even contemptuous of them. This would stem from a sort of saturation, comparable to the state of mind of any spectator who has seen too much of something and is no longer moved by it. The effect would be common to all forms of pornography: after the imaginary evaluation of pornography, real life might seem dull and far too imperfect.

It must be said that even if the results of these experiments had gone uncontested, nothing would really have been demonstrated by them. And they did not go uncontested. Their significance was deemed uncertain, and the experiments themselves were challenged. First, the majority of them were administered in laboratories on university students, and the critics were quick to point out that not only is there a marked difference between laboratory and real-world conditions, but there is also

not much overlap between university students and habitual consumers of pornography. What's more, the experiments tended to measure the effect of pornography immediately following its consumption, even though its major impact may well be discernable only after a long time. Others accused the researchers of not specifying the exact nature of the "pornography" used as a stimulus, which sometimes made comparisons difficult and dubious.

In the end, the distance between attitude and behaviour remained considerable, and no one would dare advance the idea that the passage of one to the other could be made unhesitatingly and despite all the filters that explain why human beings do not always do what they have in their minds. Replying in advance to these criticisms, the Meese Commission report, in a passage that no one seems to have found astonishing, described the only acceptable conditions for an "ideal" experiment: divide a group of men into two groups, submit one group to scenes of sexual violence, and then see if the men thus stimulated commit more rapes than those in the other group. The report had the grace to add that conducting such an experiment would be bound to raise a few ethical eyebrows among scientists.¹⁴

Scientists also raised some technical eyebrows, not being entirely satisfied with the way in which the subjects' reactions to pornography had been measured. Plethysmographs were attached to penises to measure their dimensions as indications of erection, and photo-plethysmographs were inserted into vaginas to record variations in blood temperature, in hormone and especially testosterone levels, the amount of acid in urine, and heart rate, and all of the information was checked against the consumption of drugs or medications such as contraceptive pills, and further calculated for different phases of the menstrual cycle and the importance of feelings of sexual guilt. Thus, the researchers, not surprisingly, amassed all sorts of statistical combinations and a plethora of details concerning pornography. They found, for example, that women who are conscious of modifications in their bodies at times of sexual arousal, who find erotica sexually exciting, and who make love often are more likely to be physiologically stimulated by pornography than women who differ in these respects, and that transsexual men are excited by photographs of women even when the stated object of their current affections are other men.¹⁵ There was much more of this sort of vital information, to such an extent, in fact, that the reader

becomes convinced of nothing so much as that a disturbing number of psychology students at certain American universities must spend a great deal of their time with wires attached to their sex organs. Most of these experiments are quite legitimate and their results are not without interest, but they seem so far removed from the questions that gave rise to them that one feels little obligation to immerse oneself in their details.

The laboratory experiments claimed respect on the basis of their methodological rigour, but even in that regard they presented some important difficulties. First, there is the problem of instrumentation: the measuring apparatus could itself provoke sexual excitement quite apart from the erotic stimulus. In another case, couples who had watched pornographic films for a number of days found it more exciting to fill out the questionnaire at the end of the experiment, which asked them to describe in detail their sexual excitement.¹⁶ And since the parameters of the experiments were generally very narrow, one cannot really tell if the observed reactions were specifically caused by pornography at all. For instance, although it is no doubt true that pornography provokes a measurable excitement in certain people, and that that excitement can lead to some radical, even aggressive tendencies, it can also be shown that these same tendencies can be provoked by other stimuli, such as loud military music, strenuous physical exercise, certain drugs, or even films showing such repellant images as a surgical operation on the eye.¹⁷ And the reverse is also true: if a sexual stimulus can provoke cruelty, it is also generally accepted that cruelty sometimes works as a sexual stimulus, as on the night a dictator decrees the War Measures Act, or among Roman citizens after an afternoon at the forum. In short, pornography provokes a state of excitement that brings on a chain of similar reactions. This should come as no surprise. All the same, we can't imagine that Genghis Khan's troops needed mass exposure to pornography in order to get pumped up for battle.

To pretend that they did would call into question most of our current theories about maturity and sexual development in human beings. By the time most normal adults arrive at the age at which the consumption of pornography is legal, their sexual orientation, sexual tastes, and even their sexual fantasies have already been determined, and pornography won't change those very much. That is why descriptions of deviant practices only reach restrictive audiences: they are only interesting to deviants. For exactly the same reason, in order to convince anyone that the

central message of ordinary pornography is disturbing or insupportable it would be necessary to demonstrate at a very different level that its contents expose a much broader social problem.

Even faced with such damaging criticism, it may be useful to dwell for a moment on two vital questions that will come up again later on. One is the different reactions and attitudes of men and women to pornography. Kinsey's early studies found that the principal difference lay in the fact that nearly all men react the same way to erotic stimuli, whereas among women there are such strong variations that it is impossible to speak in terms of a communal experience. In other words, while men are almost equally receptive to pornography, certain women are much more excited by it than the most excitable men, while other women remain totally unaffected. While Kinsey's conclusions have never been refuted, current thinking is somewhat more sophisticated, and seems to be veering toward the opposite conviction: that the sex of an individual is in the final analysis a less determining factor than such things as age, life experience (in particular, sexual attitudes and behaviour), religious and political beliefs, and other variables that, as every good sociologist knows, are in turn connected to education, family circumstances, integration into the workforce, and so on and so forth, until one completely forgets what one was talking about. The best example of all this: it seems that husbands and wives react more uniformly and coherently to pornography as a couple than men do among men and women do among women.¹⁸ Some people will find this reassuring, but no one should find it surprising, since the couple is still the privileged locus for the social expression of sexuality. Nonetheless, this result, like the others, comes from the kind of experimental research that will not permit us to take for granted here what has been doubted elsewhere: in real life, away from psychologists' probes, human reactions can be widely different.

Elsewhere, there has also been a brief series of inquiries that approached the same question from the other direction. Rather than try to measure the impact of pornography on students, they measured its effect on individuals who had already been found guilty of criminal sexual offences in order to see if such criminals were (or had been) more or less active consumers of pornography than the population in general.

First, it is probably not necessary to repeat that true psychopaths do not need pornography to act. One of the most savage murderers of the twentieth century became convinced, while watching the film *The Ten*

Commandments, that the women who danced around the golden calf were directly responsible for the people's disobedience to the commands of Charlton Heston and immediately set out to murder more than twenty women. This type of mental disorder seems beyond the influence even of pornography.

Roughly speaking, the first studies concluded that sexual "deviants" (in this case, rapists and pedophiles, but the finding also applies to male homosexuals and transvestites) had in general been less exposed to pornography than so-called "normal" groups. There are many possible reasons for this: the bulk of pornography deals with heterosexual relations that are of little interest to "deviants"; rapists and pedophiles usually come from families in which there was a total ignorance of sexuality and where the introduction of pornographic material was severely punished; or because "deviants" just don't seem to be particularly curious about the secrets of sexuality.¹⁹ Elements of these studies have been criticized (for example, because they dealt essentially with adolescence, and that some frustrated adolescents later accompanied their activities with a demented consumption of pornography), but all observers, even those on the Meese Commission, came to the same conclusion as that reached by more recent studies: people who consume pornography become rapists neither more nor less often than those who do not consume it. On this point, the debate seems closed, and everyone today recognizes that pornography is not in itself a sufficient or a necessary cause of violent sexual behaviour.

But to end the debate here would conjure away one potentially crucial detail that was revealed in these studies: violent rapists and pedophiles are not very fond of pornography. Unfortunately, that is exactly the kind of response rarely obtained by social psychologists, who are usually too preoccupied with measuring the importance of the consumption of pornography to ask their subjects what it is that really does turn them on. Criminals who have been asked about pornography agree that the representation of sexuality often seems to them more upsetting or embarrassing than pleasant. Pornography stimulates them as it does others, but they don't seem to enjoy the stimulation. What's more, they say that they quickly become bored by the spectacle of sex, and that the artificiality of pornography seems to them to be too unbelievable. Sexual violence depicted in pornography strikes them as a sham, and they much prefer the realism of rape trials, or the accounts of such trials in certain

newspapers. They like the extremely graphic and straightforward descriptions of sexual violence such trials elicit. Pornography, by contrast, is a boring theatre of lies.

After twenty years of trying to demonstrate the existence of a causal relationship between pornography and social behaviour, it has become common – that is to say, easy – to affirm that nothing has so far been proven, and that it is impossible to draw any conclusions because the best studies have only come up with weak and contradictory evidence. During the heat of public debate, this is the main theme of reviewers and magazines that try to be thoughtful enough to rise above the dispute. They usually end up angering almost everyone and provoking an indignant burst of mail from readers. But most recent public inquiries have also resigned themselves to the same inconclusiveness. Despite their very different premises and radically opposed political objectives, the Williams Commission in Britain, the Fraser in Canada, and the Meese in the United States, all concluded their surveys of the experimental literature by saying we must have enough intellectual honesty to admit that nothing has yet been demonstrated (which has not stopped all three reports from passing directly on to making recommendations as divergent as their original theoretical premises and political convictions). The very moderate Fraser Commission goes on to say:

This conclusion seems certain to go against the opinion of many witnesses who testified before the Commission, but it follows from a close analysis of the research. It therefore seems to us to be very important to underline that it signifies, not that the research has established in any precise way the existence of a line between pornography and antisocial behaviour, nor the existence of a positive consequence of pornography, but simply that the research is so unsatisfactory and disorganized that it provides no coherent body of information at all. We know very well that certain studies may have proven the existence of negative or positive effects of pornography, but on the whole, the results have been contradictory and inconclusive.²⁰

The most astonishing thing about this conclusion is that good sense would seem to dictate the opposite. It is rather the case that everything has been proven, and that these contradictory findings are all right at the same time. Pornography can incite rape or it can serve as a substitute for violence. It can teach one how to make love better or demonstrate

practices that are inappropriate to one's usual sexual partners. It can make one believe that all women think of nothing but sex, or it can make life more tolerable for a man who can never get up enough nerve to approach them. Of course, certain participants in the debate see an advantage in this: if everything is proven, then nothing is conclusive, all research is more or less equal and one can therefore choose whatever best fits one's favourite opinion in the hope of ending further discussion on the matter and proceeding directly to the mobilization of the masses.

The most discouraging and certainly the most pertinent criticism of the social sciences, however, comes from the discovery that everything that has been enunciated by all this advanced research had already and many times been stated by the most ordinary and casual public opinion polls on the subject. In addition to stating very clearly again and again that pornography is not seen as an important social problem,²¹ public opinion has claimed that pornography informs and educates, leads certain persons to commit violent crimes, offers a safety valve to others who have sexual problems, animates and stimulates the sex lives of couples, induces some people to hate women, amuses and distracts, liberates the spirit, and leads inevitably to a general decline in public morality. Which is exactly what all that expensive research has demonstrated: pornography is amusing, beastly, repugnant, useful, menacing, fascinating, and disturbing. Since all these things can be triggered by the same image, we can only conclude that pornography is like any other form of representation, and that it is the differences in the hearts of its audience that is the real cause of its effects.

Nonetheless, what we do know about the effects of pornography can be easily summarized. We believe that the consumption of pornography stimulates the thalamus and the hypothalamus and perhaps even the neocortex,²² which in turn produces a modification of the endocrinal system. In short, the individual experiences emotion. We still do not know why this emotion leads one person to masturbate, another to become angry, a third to commit rape, and a fourth to go to sleep.

Another thing we know is that pornography is an ideal that can be related to reality in a number of different ways. Some people find pornography boring because it is too unreal, others prefer to forget reality in order to bask in pornography's imagined splendour. Between these two extremes, it seems, most consumers find the real world a little shoddier afterward, but also a little more appealing.²³

Finally, pornography is without question an education. Neither more

nor less so than any other spectacle, perhaps, but it does provide facts, evaluations, judgements, and values. Though we cannot say that it leads to a life of crime, neither can we say that it has no influence at all, because, by the same token, we would also have to believe that nothing can be learned from books, the theatre, or the cinema, that art is absolutely trivial and that all education is morally insignificant – and, as Irving Kristol once remarked, “no one, not even a university professor, really believes that.”²⁴ To doubt the power of the image renders the emotion of the art-lover incomprehensible, as well as that of the madman who mutilates a painting. If pornography has no influence, all learning is useless and there is nothing we can do about it. At the same time, if its influence were so direct, immediate, and predictable, then all we would have to do is declare that pornography is bad to make people stop looking at it.

All of which brings us back to the fact that life is a continuous learning experience, during which an individual tries as well as he or she can to maintain a more or less harmonious dialogue with the world. That world offers models, some of which the individual will no doubt imitate, but fortunately those models are many and diverse and even contradictory, so that the individual enjoys the partial freedom of making certain choices, and even, on some occasions, inventing some new models to offer back to the world. In this sense, the effect of pornography is no different from that of other types of discourse, whether political, religious, or military. Pornography provides certain models of sexuality; so do other sources. What worries people more is seeing pornography teaching things that society has elsewhere condemned. And that concern immediately rekindles a critique that could very well have been discouraged by the inconclusive results of empirical research.

Thus the debates, which should never have been limited to the level of a falsely amoral utilitarianism, are revived on a completely different plane altogether. A lot of time has been lost. How many confusions and misunderstandings would have been avoided had those who took part in the first debates simply declared that pornography could be condemned on purely ideological grounds, which never come down to a simple point-by-point relationship with particular forms of violence? There is therefore no need to pretend that the models presented by pornography are mechanically adopted and imitated to the point of modifying behaviour. The claim instead is that repeated exposure to pornography somehow leads to a familiarity that gives the model a certain validity,

and thereby creates the impression of being normal, acceptable, a direct result of the deep nature of things, and therefore unchangeable. So, the question is being redirected. If they had only accepted that there is a discontinuity between the text and the real, between what is heard and what is adopted, between the imagination and real life, then the real question asked at the inquiries should have been directed to understanding why it is precisely these images that excite, when others do not. At the heart of the two debates coming up is the certainty that the major effect of pornography is to render less probable any other model of sexuality.

The Conservative View

We note . . . in all these paintings a luxury of postures almost impossible in nature, and which prove either a great suppleness in the muscles of the inhabitants of this country, or else a great lawlessness of the imagination.

Juliette, looking at the frescos at Herculaneum, quoted by Roland Barthes in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*

Where everything can be said with a shout, less and less can be said in a whisper.

George Steiner, *The New Eroticism: Theories, Voguees and Canons*

During the 1950s, students in Quebec schools were handed brochures that explained to them, in the form of comic strips, the terrible menace of the Red Peril. They described what would happen if communists, who were extremely ugly and menacing, took over America. There would be brutality, the violation of individual freedom, boots trampling on crucifixes. Despite all these horrific images, the narrative peak of these epic stories, the moment of highest dramatic tension, was the scene in which children led state police to their own parents' hiding place. That was the height of the communist horror: children were no longer on the same side as their parents, the State's tentacles had reached into domestic secrets. In short, it was the disintegration of the family. In the conservative mind, that clearly meant that all of society would break up, and civilization as we knew it would come to an abrupt halt.

In the same spirit, pornography is also seen as a menace to the family (it is not surprising that certain American religious leaders suspect

There is nothing astonishing, for example, in the fact that the enormous report of the first U.S. commission of inquiry, held in 1970, which brought together almost all the known empirical data of the time, was immediately rejected, first by President Nixon, who declared that the report was "morally bankrupt," and then by the United States Senate, which resolved by a vote of sixty to five to reject the results of the inquiry and all its recommendations. There was never any real discussion of the facts of the report, either by Nixon or by the Senate, or of the methods of inquiry employed by the commission (these were seriously challenged only much later). One could even believe that the report had never been read. Whatever the truth of the matter, the point is that no discussion of it was possible, and that facts have absolutely no bearing on beliefs, especially when the believers have enough power to defend themselves. As one of the editors of the minority report of that same 1970 commission stated quite clearly, "To those who believe in God, in His supremacy as the Creator and Giver of life, in the dignity and destiny He conferred on the human person, and in the moral code that governs all sexual activity — for those who believe in all those 'things,' no argument against pornography is necessary."²⁷ It is an unassailable position, except by the unlikely demonstrations of Rushdoony,²⁸ for whom pornography and violence are, along with nudism and the theory of evolution, signs of a vestigial "primitivism," and who maintains that sado-masochism is an inseparable theme of all pornography, it is useless to point to reality and to remind them, as the 1970 report did, that only five out of every hundred pornographic productions deal with sado-masochism, fetishism, or any other form of deviant behaviour. A good ideology is, by definition, proof against the challenges of empirical evidence. Those who profess to be scandalized by the apparent deafness of traditionalists should recall that facts alone have never succeeded in destroying belief. It is much better to oppose it with another belief that offers different answers to the same questions. Or better yet, to let the old ideology develop unhindered, to be swallowed up by its own internal contradictions.

The first internal contradiction in the conservative perspective appears during the transfer from the public to the private domain. If, from the traditionalist point of view, the family constitutes the elementary cell of social life, the locus of primary education and ultimate authority, and if in it we find the most profound solidarity and the essential force that drives all civilization, then it becomes a primordial

pornography of being part of a vast communist plot, the chief objective of which is to weaken the moral fibre of Western Christianity). The opening pages of the report of the extremely moralistic Meese Commission say as much: pornography is evil because it undermines the concept of the family as the only morally acceptable context for sexuality in our society. It is not simply a question of images being too crude, or too violent, or too deviant. Indeed, after considering and condemning all such excesses, the Meese Commission extended its search for the limits of obscenity by concluding that even the public representation of a sexual encounter that is "intra-vaginal and between two married adults who find mutual pleasure in it and for the sole purpose of procreation" would be totally unacceptable and obviously harmful to society.²⁵ In other words, even good, legitimate, moral sex must never be shown in public. The ideology is rigorous and consistent, and the principles that follow logically from it constitute an extremely precise moral guide.

But it also raises questions that it can't come close to answering; questions that involve some contradictions within the conservative ideology that render its struggle against pornography less convincing, and therefore less effective.

Let's first eliminate one or two apparent inconsistencies within this conservative perspective that sometimes hang up certain observers, but do not quite add up to true contradictions. There is, for example, the so-called collusion between the conservative right and the feminist movement. Feminists have often been stalwart enemies of conservatism, challenging its ideas and institutions and everything else that makes up the established order of which traditionalists are such staunch defenders. Their alliance with the right over the issue of pornography is temporary and not really surprising. Their denunciations of pornography stem from quite different analyses, and the differences seem more important than the similarity of the solutions proposed (we will come back later to the conservative aspects of certain feminist critiques). There have been attempts to use this seeming alliance to draw a parallel with earlier historical links between the political right and the feminist movement (especially during the struggle in the United States that led to the prohibition of alcohol), but this comparison seems a tad facile and not particularly illuminating.²⁶

There is also no cause for surprise in learning that those who hold strong ideological positions are not hampered by a slavish adherence to facts. That is in large part what distinguishes science from religion.

Another paradox lurking in the wings: every public opinion poll has shown that the majority of people – who, as we know from other areas, are strongly conservative – reject many forms of pornography, but believe with equal fervour that there must never be any kind of control over what the individual chooses to consume in private.³² We often hear that these are two different responses to two separate and distinct questions, but they simply show that there is a profound contradiction: pornography is a condemnable evil, but condemning it is also evil. The problem is not insoluble, and one could argue that freedom depends on the social context of its expression, but when the only admissible solution is found within the strictly and indisputably private confines of the family home, then we are obliged to remove ourselves from public debate.

And finally, traditionalists know how to appreciate pornography. They even enjoy pornography. That is perhaps the supreme contradiction in their criticism. But of course it is predictable.

After following the public hearings held by the Meese Commission, anthropologist Carole Vance described how the commissioners spent a great deal of time watching pornographic films, and how at each screening they would jostle about trying to get a better view of the screen.³³ And the report of the same commission contains details that some may find excessive: minute descriptions of pornographic material, names and addresses of all the major distributors of pornography in the United States, detailed accounts of the scripts of several pornography classics, such as *Debby Does Dallas* and *The Devil in Miss Jones*. Some people would find such information an invaluable source of officially sanctioned sexual stimulation, others might see in it evidence of an obvious fascination. Along the same lines, some critics have taken great pleasure in describing the judicial headaches of Father Bruce Ritter, a Franciscan friar and member of the Meese Commission, who had been called “a hero” by President Reagan, when he was officially accused of sexually assaulting several adolescents living in his own shelter.³⁴

The problem stems from the very demanding character of the conservative ideology, which neither tolerates nor accepts sex as normal and appropriate except in the context of a profound relationship marked by love and a sharing of responsibilities, and which also demands the renouncing of purely egotistical pleasure. Its moral code is precise: it tells you with whom you can make love, when, where, and even how. All criticisms of conservatism³⁵ agree that this is partly what makes a society's

instinct to preserve and protect it. Respect for familial autonomy becomes a fundamental law – proof against the threat of crime and social disorder, of course, but also against the intrusion of the State. If a man's house is his castle, that castle must be impregnable. No one should be allowed to go into it to tell the man how to educate his children, or what moral code he will uphold, or when he must turn off his television. By so doing, the State would be violating a fundamental right, would become a threat to family values, and would thus place itself on the same moral level as pornography. It is crucial for conservatives to struggle for the preservation of public morality, and then step back to allow the family to control its own morality.

This paradox crops up here and there in the debates and publications on the subject. We can detect it in the report of the Meese Commission when it talks of avoiding the “negative solution of the law,” or when it quite suddenly introduces the idea that, despite all the horror inspired by the spectre of pornography, it would be preferable for citizens to decide for themselves what is appropriate, and what they should do about it. After all, “we don't need a law to tell us how to set our tables, and no law has ever put a stop to tax fraud.”²⁹ In other words, the State should probably go ahead and prohibit the public display of sex and hound the sellers of pornography out of business, but it should then simply proclaim that the majority of the population finds pornography morally unacceptable, rather than impose a strong and permanent prohibition on pornography that could then become stifling. It is as if conservatism suddenly hesitated on the doorstep of individual good.³⁰

The same paradox shows up in the results of two inquiries that otherwise seem inexplicable. Zurcher and his colleagues³¹ concluded that the success of American militant organizations in the struggle against pornography was more symbolic than real: they mostly wanted everyone to witness their adherence to certain fundamental values, and to reassure themselves that there were other virtuous and honest citizens out there who adhered to the same values. Rather than try to implement any concrete solutions to the problem of pornography, they simply wanted to make an important symbolic and official denunciation of it. (There are those who would say that symbols are worth their weight in gold with an electorate that seems to appreciate such hollow gestures.) Indeed, putting in place the means to eliminate pornography would be tantamount to admitting that morality is something that needs to be imposed by law, something that is not uppermost in the heart of man.

sexual attitudes and practices neurotic, and explains why sex becomes for so many couples a boring routine and an obstacle to communication. But what concerns us here is that the conservative moral code is also perfect for assuring the value, attraction, and power of pornography. Censorship always runs the risk of attracting attention to other possibilities. The greater the prohibition, the more it deals with an important aspect of human experience, and the more it is felt to be omnipresent and omnipotent. That is why, for instance, during a laboratory experiment, an image will be judged more exciting if the group has first been warned that it is going to be shown an obscene picture.³⁶ It is also why, in totalitarian states where censorship is strictly enforced, the subtlety of political speeches is always greater than in liberal countries, where people are used to hearing citizens, like those on Hyde Park Corner, ranting on about just about anything. If pornography invites one to sin, moralists first have to define what sin is. And as soon as they do, sin becomes inviting.³⁷

Nonetheless, even with its fascination with evil and its internal contradictions, the traditionalists' point of view does try to resolve several elementary questions that no society can afford to leave unresolved. And even though certain of its defenders have demonstrated an extraordinary talent for heaping ridicule upon themselves (more ridicule than any caricaturist could ever hope to achieve), the conservative ideology represents a political and philosophical position that must be taken seriously, or in any case a position that is extremely popular. To say that pornography threatens the family is to suggest that it threatens the dominant mode of controlling sexuality, typical male and female roles, the social organization of reproduction, and the basic unit of economic production. According to pornography, an orgy is a good thing, all pleasure is commendable and anarchy is sweet. Traditionalists know very well that that represents a menace to their whole mode of life, which is why they speak so often of "social fibre" and "moral cement" — one senses that society is composed of parts that must somehow be kept together, that some kind of binding agent is indispensable if the whole building isn't to come down about our heads. Pornography is both a symptom of decadence and an agent of putrefaction.

Chastity is . . . obligatory from a natural point of view, because it is submissive, conforms to reason, the flesh to the spirit, which is necessary to the honour and prosperity of the family, and because it

maintains unity and peace in society. . . . Luxury produces disastrous effects on the intelligence and the will, and causes innumerable evils among individuals, families, and even nations.³⁸

Literary and art critics go even farther by saying that the easiest and most universal denominator to understand is actually the disappearance of such things as utility, order and standards, accompanied by a dependence on a relationship between sex and violence. One could then logically deduce that, from the moment when violence and free sex infiltrate our imaginations and our creativity, an impoverished conception of the human being is encouraged and even popularized.³⁹

Despite these warnings, a sense of urgency and panic in the face of so great a menace does not seem very widespread, perhaps because those who adopt pornography as a model are very rare. Traditionalists have excited themselves for nothing; there will be no mass copulating in the streets in the foreseeable future. The model proposed by pornography is concerned only with sex and makes the improbable suggestion that the rest of life can go on unchanged: society will outlive the bordellos of Roissy, the châteaux will not crumble if the principal philosophical positions of the Marquis de Sade are democratically adopted. Simple common sense teaches us that the model is a complete hoax. Which pornography, for its part, has known all along: it achieves its goal only by offering the opportunity to dream, which necessarily presupposes a certain conservatism in its clientele. Revolutionaries who succeed are rarely dreamers, and a true sexual revolution would certainly make pornography less seductive.

If the threat, then, is not imminent, the critics still want to know why conservatives insist so much on treating sex differently from other phenomena. Why commercialize every other human experience, from childbirth to cremation, from Dracula to Jesus Christ, and yet refuse to profit from sex? Why encourage the potentially dangerous values inherent in the competitive spirit in American football, in the lies and corruption in the defenders of national security, in the ruthless avarice found in our best financial institutions, in the false hopes preyed on by lotteries, in the drive to reduce human beings to ciphers in the workforce and measure them by the size of their paycheques, and still go on condemning without appeal every representation of sex? Why excite ourselves over the social impact of pornography and yet ignore the danger

represented by works that provide instruction on the proper use of bayonets, or the correct way to torture heretics.⁴⁰ Critics throw up their hands because the contradiction between exploitation of anything at all for profit and the protestations against pornography is too flagrant. The respect for human value is so sudden it astonishes. But the same critics conclude too readily that such inconsistency is a holdover from an old religious complex whose most devastating effect is maintaining ignorance and sexual underdevelopment. The answer, however, seems simple enough: sex must be reserved and relegated to the discrete world of the private life of the family. Holders of conservative views, whom sociologists⁴¹ unanimously describe as being rural, female, older, and less educated than the average good Christian, seem convinced that life in society is a thankless struggle and that the individual can only find true peace in the tranquility of the familial bosom, which must never be threatened by the brutality of football or the avarice of the stock market. It is thus fundamental to preserve the border that defines private life. The eroticization of ordinary life (a huge theme in pornography) is inadmissible, because one cannot tolerate any intrusion from outside that would threaten the peaceful refuge of the fireside.

In short, sex and our public lives belong to entirely different and incompatible universes.⁴² Sex represents one of our last refuges against society, against the State, and we must avoid any commercialization that would transform it into ordinary merchandise. Its exploitation in the marketplace is thus a particularly potent symbol of the threat that hangs over moral order, if not a symbol of its total failure. That's why pornography will always be intolerable. Its consequences promise to be disastrous. Traditionalists and revolutionaries agree on this point: sex has the power to destroy society. It's just that the former are alarmed by that fact, while the latter find comfort in it.

As we shall see later, the whole story is not as simple or straightforward as all that. For the conservative conscience, however, pornography is inadmissible because it proposes to modify the totality of life in society. It calls for change without constituting a just cause, and promises a new world that is uncertain and even more disturbing than the old one. It is therefore essential to oppose it. Pornography is the evil issue of established order, a kind of bastard child, because it emerges from a conservative morality to which it feels perfectly well adjusted. An internal contradiction is always more menacing than a communist invasion.

By way of contrast, the feminist position is much more subtle.

Feminists argue that pornography is conservative, both a product and a symbol of the oppression of women. When conservatism holds that a woman must not undress in public because her place is in the home with her children, feminists can obviously not support such a view. But feminism must, at the same time, refuse the alternative that pornography proposes. Despite an equally fervent opposition to pornography, the feminist viewpoint is quite different. But it, too, has engendered its own contradictions.

Feminist Perspectives

It's not so much that you take your desires to be reality, it's that your desires become our reality.

Nancy Huston, *Le genre humain* 10, *Le masculin*

It is probably never easy for a woman to work in a shop, or even to bring her lawnmower into one for repair, when the walls are covered with photographs of young, pretty, naked women, all smiling, all welcoming, and apparently all willing. If these images are meant to represent and summarize femininity — half of humanity — if they define what is interesting in women or what appears to be the most promising features of womanhood, then any woman who enters that shop receives the clear message either that she is invited to take off her clothes immediately, or that she is not good-looking enough to receive such an offer and is only being tolerated because the men there have to earn a living by repairing her lawnmower (even then, of course, they would prefer it if she were a real slut and had come in for something else), or finally that, when it comes right down to it, if the men really wanted to, they could get her clothes off either by persuasion or by force, exactly as they have successfully undressed the girls pinned to their walls.

Pros and Cons

Pornography seems inexplicable outside the context of relations between men and women. But before going into that, we must first take note of the debates undertaken by feminist criticism, at least in order to grasp what these sexual relations are that are taking over centre stage. Toward the end of the 1970s, the feminist movement seemed

unanimous in its denunciation of pornography, which had become a kind of modern equivalent of nineteenth-century prostitution as a particularly blatant and unacceptable example of the exploitation of women by and for the interests of men. Briefly, the widespread opinion⁴³ that informed most public debates on the subject was that pornography constituted a threat to feminine integrity and should be condemned. On the one hand, condemned because it propagates an image of woman as easily undressable, open and offering, always eager to satisfy the sexual instincts of the male, and having no other social or moral identity than that of her sex organs. A diversion for men who amuse and excite themselves by looking at naked women, thereby penetrating at will, and for their sole pleasure, parts that are justly called "private." On the other hand, condemned because pornography also teaches a certain kind of rapport between the sexes, based on a precise definition of the ideal role of Woman as offering and submissive, obsequious and inferior, often defeated and violated, sometimes even beaten and maltreated. And a woman who, on top of it all, keeps asking for more. To the extent that pornography is an educational experience for young men by furnishing them with models to be imitated, it is seen as disturbing. Considered as a vehicle for public propaganda for a certain image of women, it becomes insulting. From these views come the campaigns against pornography as a degrading vision of sex and a form of violence against women, which must be placed on a par with other forms of hate literature, and which many states prohibit as intolerable and a threat to the social order.

In the case of pornography, the threat is that it is sometimes seen as an apprenticeship to rapists, or as encouraging a more generalized but no less real atmosphere of violence toward women. It is precisely this that inspired many of the empirical researches into the connection between pornography and behaviour.

For some observers, the question is not necessarily one of immediate violence. The real threat of pornography is that it propagates a model of sexuality too exclusively masculine,⁴⁴ totally ignoring female sexuality and leading to a profound incomprehension between the sexes; as Margaret Atwood says,⁴⁵ she shudders to think of a young couple composed of a man whose sexual education came from pornography and a woman who reads Harlequin romances. From this point of view, pornography is either the reflection and the result of the oppression suffered by women in other areas of society, or it is one of the ideological tools with which that oppression is maintained. Or both. In the first case, the

phenomenon is perceived as an integral part of ambient culture. It is not a marginal excrescence or a morbid aberration: pornographic production seems as normal, comprehensible, and predictable as any other sexist social creation designed for the exclusive service of men. In the second case, which does not necessarily contradict the first, pornography is an instrument of domination, the fabrication of a distorted image of female sexuality and of everything feminine, which leads to the clear and not in the least symbolic conclusion that women can be submissive and that rape remains a constant possibility.

The purpose of repeating these statements is to suggest that women are not the obscure objects of desire of whom advantage can be taken in any way imaginable, and who in fact like it that way, even if they don't always admit it. The point is not to denounce sexual obscenity, as the traditionalists would have it, or to insist on the reserve and modesty necessary to the maintenance of good moral order. It is rather to instigate an analysis of politics and power in relations between the sexes. As Susan Brownmiller has said,⁴⁶ it is discouraging, to say the least, at a time when so much energy and effort is being dedicated to humanizing relationships between men and women, to see pornography propagating sexual ignorance, contempt for women, and, in effect, the continuation of so much incomprehension. Other women observers have even suggested that it is not a coincidence, that pornography constitutes a timely and defensive response from the masculine power structure to the hard-won victories of the feminist movement.

These positions are backed by examples both concrete and abstract, but it is essentially around this central theme that a consensus was forged at the end of the 1970s, which inspired the formation of anti-pornography feminist groups in many North American cities.⁴⁷ In most cases, the protest was comparable to – and often associated with – other struggles aimed at gaining judicial and political parity, full economic and social rights for women, the freedom of their bodies as well as of their minds. All these facets of the attempt to correct and transform the feminine condition became indivisible. The argument was thus irrefutable: by defining pornography as "violence against women," everything relevant had been said about it and it became unthinkable to not want it to disappear, along with all other injustices, through the courage and tenacity of the militants.

However, the consensus did not last. On March 8, 1987, in tracing the history of the feminist movement over the previous decade, the

Fédération des Femmes du Québec congratulated itself on the progress achieved in almost every area.⁴⁸ Many of its objectives had been attained, its protests were being heard, women's rights were being recognized—if not always granted—popular education programs were in place, and customs as well as behaviour were evolving along satisfactory lines. The only area in which little progress had been shown was that of the fight against pornography. Groups that had struggled against pornography had for the most part disbanded, their pressures had met with little or no success—the public controversy seemed dead, and its resurrection, thanks to some commissions of inquiry or to the manipulation of confused or backward laws, seemed improbable.

It wasn't simply a matter of fatigue, since other feminist battles continued to be waged that had been going on for at least a century, and the movement in general seemed invincible. There was also no reason to believe that the adversaries of the anti-pornography groups were any more tenacious than others had been in different areas of concern, where feminists had won economic, political, domestic, and symbolic power. It would be more accurate to say that it was in the area of pornography that the resistance to the feminist agenda was weakest: there were the usual mild protestations in the name of freedom of expression and so on, but no one actually stood up and defended pornography, whereas elsewhere many people seemed perfectly at ease shouting at the top of their lungs that a woman's place was definitely not in the Church, the government, the sports arena, or the army. And not only was there little resistance, there wasn't even much dialogue. No one really responded to the accusations, apart from a few discreet opponents of all forms of censorship, a handful of hard-core pornocrats with little credibility, and some very rare but ardent defenders of masculinism.⁴⁹ Apart from these feeble voices was that familiar and constant wall of silence. In fact, the only relevant and effective replies came from within the feminist movement itself, often from women who were very much involved on the side of feminism in the debate. Here again, the interpretation of the phenomenon, logical and coherent as it was, could not but engender its own internal contradictions.

First of all, we must mention the particularly direct and sometimes brutal criticisms that come from women who consider themselves "sex workers," and who are rarely given a platform in these public debates.⁵⁰ Women who work in the pornography industry try to voice their impatience with the popular stereotype, current among the right-thinking

participants, that paints them as poor, somewhat stupid and hapless victims of a frightful social milieu—if not of incestuous fathers—languishing in brutal economic conditions, white slavery, hopeless drug addiction, and all the rest of it. Such an image of constraint is, they say, a testimony to the unhealthy concerns of people who know nothing about the business and who are, moreover, uncomfortable dealing with matters of sex. The image is entirely false, outdated, and even insulting, according to the organization formed to defend the rights of prostitutes (which gave itself the rather explicit name *COYOTE*, for *Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics*). Women say that they enjoy working in the sex industry, the salaries are good, the work is more pleasant and less brutalizing than making bedsheets or pounding typewriters in a dean's office, that there is the immediate gratification of knowing that you are good-looking, desirable, and wanted; in short, that their life is a lot more tolerable and satisfying than is usually taught in schools. The protest at times erupts into open revolt, with some women accusing the feminists struggling against pornography of being more violent than pornography, and of causing them more trouble than the pornocrats do.⁵¹ The revolt sours when these same women claim that the struggle against pornography is the exclusive cause of "middle-aged matrons who drive Volvos and give each other medals, while daring to pretend that the Playmate of the Month is nothing more than a common, stereotyped image of women."⁵²

The protesters speak again and again about ignorance. The sex industry, they say, is a remarkably impenetrable subculture that has often had to protect itself from the rest of society, and which has thus developed its own laws, its own customs, and its own worker solidarity. It is a world almost completely unknown to outsiders, particularly to women outsiders, many of whom, because they aren't consumers of it, have probably never set foot in it. And, in the end, it has been suggested that the most useful struggle would be to examine the working conditions, form unions, and negotiate collective agreements to address such concrete questions as unemployment insurance, air conditioning, noise, hours, AIDS prevention, retirement funds, and so on. In short, to bring the same kind of help and understanding to the sex industry as has been brought to any other workplace, and to stop seeing it as exceptional.

As we'll soon see, other feminists have explored the same issues raised by the sex workers, perhaps with even more vigour. But it seems wise to follow the debate from the beginning by hearing from those who have direct knowledge of what they're talking about. It is also useful because

the feminists who tried to defend pornography, or at least halt the campaigns against it, were at times thought of as intellectuals who had never had to sell their bodies in public.⁵³ It is important to keep in mind that a story like Linda Marchiano's (the former Linda Lovelace, star of the classic porno film *Deep Throat*) — who was beaten and forced into activities against her will, as have no doubt dozens of other women in the business — can be both true individually and at the same time insulting and even damaging to other women in the same line of work. To say that pornography is a form of hate literature does nothing to explain why thousands of women seem inclined to keep it going, apparently without being very disturbed about it. But then, by the same logic, these women see themselves as blatantly accused of being collaborators in hate literature, something which Jews, Blacks, Amerindians, and other victims of history always had the decency and courage to refuse to do willingly.

The consensus failed on other levels as well. Some militant women questioned the strategic importance of the struggle against pornography, wondering whether it wasn't more important and more pressing to combat real oppression and real violence, rather than tilting at windmills. If pornography is merely the reflection of an unjust social order, they pointed out, it follows that it will disappear only when that order disappears; in other words, when feminism has succeeded in transforming concrete social relations between the sexes.⁵⁴ Helma McCormack summarized this in a somewhat stone-faced fashion by reminding us that women's breasts and sex organs are not mutilated by the publishers of *Penthouse* and *Hustler*, but by the highly respected medical profession, which increasingly performs unnecessary mastectomies and hysterectomies.⁵⁵ The point here is first and foremost strategic: without contradicting the main argument, the goal is to prevent feminism from diverting itself into a preoccupation with secondary considerations. A sadder thought was expressed in an article by Lesley Stern, who, taking stock of the debates within the feminist movement, concluded that she was afraid that pornography might be becoming an easy target for a movement that was losing momentum and seemed on the verge of self-destruction.⁵⁶ In the same worried tone, Kate Millet⁵⁷ and others warned that if the feminist movement hoped to remain a force for change, it must never give up struggling against all forms of censorship. Freedom of speech, they said, was the most valuable weapon women had, and it must be protected at any price. And because it is the nature of censorship to attack everything that deviates from the norm, including

dissidents and reformers, all those who were fighting pornography were running the risk of working toward their own demise.

Besides formulating these critiques concerned mostly with strategy, and which were therefore somewhat superficial, other feminists challenged the very fundamentals of the consensus. First, as in other social protest movements, feminism had to address the question of who ought to be allowed to speak on behalf of women; a question particularly vast since it has to do with half of humanity.

When asked the question, *Pornography: What Do We Want?*, I had trouble answering because, as I realized when I thought about it, it begged another question, namely, who the hell is "we" anyway? To ask what "we" want implies that there's a homogeneous consensus on how we approach sexuality, sexual representation, and sex work. It certainly does not exist with respect to that large and various discourse we call, all inclusively, pornography. There isn't that kind of unanimity. For a long time there hasn't been that kind of unanimity among feminists even with respect to prostitution. The consensus that might have appeared before or that operated as a kind of "public face" feminism is crumbling in a very healthy way. We are all learning that if we're going to have a "we" that really works for feminists and for feminist supporters, it has to be more inclusive.⁵⁸

After this, the question becomes somewhat more embroiled. A new group of the feminine "we" appeared, for example, which represented female consumers of pornography, a group Nathalie Petrowski, for one, found particularly difficult to comprehend:

At the corner of Sanguinet and Sainte-Catherine, fifty people are waiting in line. . . . It's a Tuesday night, a night like any other in the east end of Montreal. The temperature is 20 below zero. Curiously, the line is made up almost exclusively of women, but passersby don't seem to find that so unusual. The line of women has become a familiar sight seven nights a week on this particular corner. It's been here since April 14, in fact, and has shown no signs of diminishing: quite the contrary, it has been growing steadily night after night.⁵⁹

Finding this line-up of women "curious," the author joined it, and eventually found herself a nightclub that featured male nude dancing. She watched a performance and spent five dollars for a more private session at her own table, which she describes as "a cold descent into hell,"

and a "torture," and she concludes that "gogo boys are the eloquent symbol of phallocratic society. . . . Presenting their sexuality as a veritable monument, they command respect and even veneration. . . . Gogo boys continue . . . through the merchandising of their own bodies, to hang on to the last vestiges of virile pride." For Petrowski, it was another example of male oppression. And, to the extent that that indeed was her impression, she was right. The penis brushing her face reminded her of everything she knew about the relationship between the sexes, perhaps even reminded her of some unpleasant experiences of her own. At the same time, however, her very personal interpretation is profoundly scornful of and arrogant toward the other women who had lined up with her in the cold. The real question is: Why do these women continue to guarantee the success of that form of pornography? By what extraordinary process of madness or masochistic perversion have they developed such an unhealthy desire to be so publicly despised?

Critics have had to recognize what until recently has been a closely guarded secret: there is a significant number of inveterate female consumers of pornography.⁶⁰ The statistics are not necessarily reliable, but they should suffice to explode once and for all the facile myth that pornography is the act of men looking at women. The most radical examples come from Karen Haehne, who says she led a committee composed entirely of women that chose pornographic films for a television station in Washington, and that the audience for these films, established by the usual rating methods, was 60 per cent female.⁶¹ Or from Linda Williams, who estimates that women now consume 40 per cent of all pornographic videos in the United States, and that one woman in two is a regular user.⁶²

The final death throes of the broad consensus – which at any rate was beginning to sound more and more like an over-simplification – may well be identified, when the history of the feminist movement is written, with the conference held at Barnard College in 1982, entitled "The Scholar and the Feminist ix."⁶³ After the conference, people talked about the "crisis in feminism," as they do about any political movement when for a while it was thought that everything would be better after the revolution, but the morning after is found to be not what was promised.⁶⁴

Like all truly difficult questions, this one sounds remarkably simple: if pornography is condemned because it is sexist, stupid, and boring, what should things that are permitted be like? What images of human

sexuality, or more precisely what images of feminine sexuality, would be politically more acceptable? Which ones would more closely represent the effort being undertaken to transform today's humiliating reality and bring it closer in line with the projected utopia? As the philosophers of the Frankfurt School would have put it, we know that such images aren't going to be like the ones we see today, but we hesitate in deciding which new ones would best promote the revolution.

The truth is that no one, neither feminists nor anyone else, has a convincing answer to this simple question. Muriel Dimen⁶⁵ reminds us that what is radical today can cease to be so tomorrow, and can become traditionalist and oppressive as soon as it is recognized as being "politically correct." Gayle Rubin⁶⁶ adds that traditional feminist opinion against pornography is a thin cover for a need to exorcise sex, and often leaves no other conclusion than that any sexual act is repugnant and threatening; which, she says, despite all the protests against the traditional model of feminine sexuality as passive and submissive, changes that form of feminism into an ideal mate for traditional ideology. Mariana Valverde⁶⁷ hopes that feminism, by opposing the pornographic representation of women as an indistinguishable series of "trollops," does not react against it and seek refuge in the opposite stereotype by praising the valour of those perfect, virtuous, innocent women who search for the sweet romanticism of the Holy Family. Pat Califia loudly entered the debate by demanding to know why the feminist movement, more than the Church and the State, both stoutly patriarchal, should have the right to prohibit her from having sado-masochistic pleasure, especially if, being between lesbians, this pleasure from pain had nothing to do with male domination. Why refuse to explore all dimensions of female sexuality and insist so exclusively on one that is necessarily loving, sweet, and full of tenderness – which was exactly what was at the heart of bourgeois oppression in the nineteenth century? Ann Snitow⁶⁸ takes this allusion to the previous century further by suggesting that the usual feminist opposition to pornography simplifies the question, since once again it presents a world full of convenient oppressors and victims, in which excessive luxury can only be male, and irreparable outrage is unmistakably female. For Snitow, no consensus was ever possible except at the price of a ridiculous oversimplification around the myth of universal male brutality, which has no other merit than to act as a purification ritual allowing an instantaneous assembly of sister victims.

In the end, the consensus broke up but the discussions went on. It is

tempting to say in retrospect that this was entirely foreseeable, especially given that it was the usual kind of rupture that threatens every social movement that goes beyond identifying and denouncing evil and tries to define good. To denounce pornography because it presents a false and degrading image of feminine sexuality is, at the same time, to imply that there exists somewhere a better and truer image of it.

Among American feminists, the debate degenerated at times into a confrontation of Bad Girls and Good Girls, a sort of recreation of the ancient dichotomy of the Mother and the Whore.⁶⁹ The Bad Girls denounced the feminists fighting pornography as puritanical reactionaries, for whom the essential virtues of womanhood were still purity and morality, and who simply condemned all forms of sex that deviated from that norm, especially sado-masochism, as being fundamentally contrary to femininity. Such a position, they said, allowed only two acceptable positions – equality and romanticism – in other words, a return to the former model, which the Bad Girls took as being much more degrading than pornography.

The Good Girls replied by accusing their opponents of having somehow become like de Sade's Juliette: women who willingly adopt a retrograde, aggressive model of sexuality that leads them to defend a profoundly anti-feminist position. They accused the Bad Girls most of all of being victims of social and cultural indoctrination (there was even some mention of brainwashing) which presents as acceptable the male notion of a link between sex and domination.

These reciprocal accusations were serious, and the rupture rapidly widened. Ann Russo shows clearly that it was an irreparable rift between two views of the feminine condition. The Bad Girls worried about the cultural and social repression (or suppression) of female sexuality and wanted above all to get rid of the loaded traditional notion of a passive, receptive, sweet, pure, and good woman, while the Good Girls worried more about the *colonization* of female sexuality in a society that defined femininity as that which excites, attracts, and provokes men. It is in this sense, says Russo, that the debate degenerated into mutual accusations of being either "good mothers" or "wicked whores."

Since the two viewpoints are founded on demonstrable criteria, and since they involve nothing less than the global and universal definition of a sexual politic for half of humanity (with obvious consequences for the other half), it is no wonder the debate has yet to be resolved. Which of these two positions corresponds best to feminine sexuality? To answer

that question requires a precise understanding of how female sexuality differs from male sexuality. Now, the question of the difference between the sexes has haunted much of Western history. Few themes have fed so many debates with such nourishing fodder; so much so that some day we'll have to reflect on the extent to which the question of the relationship between the sexes has become a profitable enterprise, providing stable employment to a great number of speakers, writers, filmmakers, actors, and even university professors. Love may not be completely dead yet, despite the pessimism of the poets, but the old masculine-feminine debate is doing very well, thank you. Cutting through all the research that has recently occupied neurologists as well as theologians, moving beyond all the apparently inexhaustible assertions of the commentators, we return again and again to the classic question of the innate versus the acquired. It would be naive to expect the debates about pornography to escape it for very long.

Unlike other microcosms dominated by men, such as taverns, professional sports, political power, or ecclesiastical hierarchy, which have about them the aura of private clubs, pornography is not restricted to men. Admission to sex clubs and video-rental outlets is forbidden only to minors. What is more, the industry has been trying for a long time to double its profits by coming up with a formula that will reach women and turn as many of them as possible into faithful consumers. At first, they tried word-for-word translation, so to speak: simply replacing naked women with naked men.⁷⁰ This didn't work at first, which prompted some commentators to claim that women were quite simply not interested in that kind of spectacle. Then some producers, especially Kathy Keaton, publisher of the magazine *Viva*, changed their product in the hope that their pages would become more attractive to women if the subjects were placed in contexts in which they seemed to be actively engaged in a story, rather than simply appearing naked. The obstacles remained, and the result was failures and bankruptcies. By the end of the 1970s, pornographic material aimed specifically at women seemed destined for a complete lack of sales, and some found in that a confirmation of the old idea that women remained the true guardians of public morality in our society.

At about that time, however, Béatrice Faust⁷¹ declared that what was currently called pornographic was by definition a product reserved for men, but only because we live in a world in which laws are established by men, and in which what is forbidden – what is socially recognized as

obscene and dirty – can obviously only be that which interests and stimulates men. Anything that attracts and excites women, she said, runs little risk of being labelled pornographic, or even of being recognized for what it is, ignorant as men are of the female condition. For Faust, commercialized sexual stimulation intended for women, or, if one preferred, pornography for women, belonged to the domain of touch (body lotions, vibrators) and sound (rock concerts by Sting, Prince, even the Rolling Stones, which have been known to turn on adolescents).

Unlike men, who seem to enjoy explicit representations of the sex act, women find more pleasure in images of sexuality placed in a psychological setting. Faust therefore suggested that we forget the current, sexist definition of pornography. If we ask what women really dream about, she said, we would have to admit that pornography for women exists already, and everywhere. It is found in such magazines as *True Love*, *True Confessions*, and even *Paris Match*; it is in Harlequin romances, which seem as tailored for women as any pornography is for men. In other words, it is pointless to try to translate the nudity that fascinates men into something that would attract a female audience. As Barbara Cartland (perhaps the woman most read by women in the history of literature) has put it, the really seductive man is fully dressed, preferably in a uniform.⁷² One also finds pornography for women in the stories that Béatrice Faust calls “historical hysterias” (one of the best examples of which is a French series that recounts the epic exploits of the beautiful Angélique, “the Marquise of Angels”) in which the panting viewer is shown the spectacle of a sexually active but never responsible woman: the beautiful heroine who makes love often and well, but always for her country, or to save the life of her loving husband, or the King, and never for her own pleasure, never for herself. Men, of course, hold such stories in contempt, just as women do pornography.

Faust willingly adopts the thesis of innate difference. The contrast between the sexes seems to her to be fixed and unshakable. It doesn't matter whether the difference is due to a hormonal equilibrium in the uterus, to the reproductive function, or to the fundamentally erotic nature of maternity, the difference is there and can never be forgotten. Thus there will always be pornography and Harlequin romances, she says, and mutual incomprehension is simply the price we pay to keep heterosexual relationships alive. Along the same lines, Helen Hazen finds the feminist embracing of censorship an embarrassment, and

considers absurd the idea that there will one day be a typically feminine form of pornography.⁷³

Other analysts, on the other hand, attribute the differences between male and female to what are usually called, vaguely enough, the multiple social conditions that have, over the course of history, come to form the models for modern men and women. In other words, the difference is essentially an acquired one. And for Mariana Valverde, among a great many others, nothing is more pornographic or degrading than making the psychological domination of women seem “sexy,” as do those bodice-ripping romances, popular magazines, and television specials usually written by women for women. She sees evidence in these that the West has too long denied sexuality in women, who until the last century were advised to “close their eyes and do it for their country,” or to remember that “a man needs sex to relieve tension, whereas a woman can enjoy sex only after she has freed herself from stress.” In other words, it is not a question of there being a natural or immutable difference between the sexes; if it were, then any kind of liberation would be not only impossible but unthinkable. For some women, the ideal is to attain a sexuality as simple, direct, and immediately gratifying as that which our culture assigns to men (looking for Mr. Goodbar, for example, or Erica Jong's “zipless fuck”). In the same sense, to understand why women are generally less stimulated by explicit, contextless pornography, we should remember that because they have been trained to be receptive and passive, they can never know what to expect from a man; never having been in control of sexual situations, they need to know more about psychological and social contexts.

Still following the same reasoning, it would be wrong to assume that women do not produce pornography. The notion put forward by Alexandrian,⁷⁴ that there has never been a great, erotic literary masterpiece written by a woman and that the “female genius” tends more to the sentimental, is received as a sexist insult. Furthermore, if women have traditionally consumed little pornography it may be simply because the product has until very recently been “foreign” to them, as well as only available in rather rough neighbourhoods and from sordid establishments into which no decent woman would risk going. This has been summed up with humour by Susan Cole: place *Viva* on the shelf beside *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, she says, and you won't reach your female target market, place it next to *Chatelaine* and *Good Housekeeping*, and

you'll get apoplectic fits from the readers of these typically feminine publications.⁷⁵

This line of reasoning has certainly not convinced everyone. According to some critics, it completely clouds the issue, and is in fact the culmination of the same repressive education it decries. It perpetuates the cult of the phallus by trying to impose an essentially male sexual ideology on women, telling them they must enjoy sex *the same way that men do*. Such a banal and naive reversal of the masculine model is to be avoided. One wearies of this kind of reasoning, which they say can lead to the belief that the horror of rape, for example, is largely the result of women's oppressive education. The truth is quite the contrary: we must first transform the education of men and thereby eliminate this unhealthy pornography that propagates such a simplistic, infantile, and dehumanizing model of sexuality. Instead of trying to liberate women by imposing a sexual liberty that is in fact male, it would be better to initiate men in erotic feminine pleasures.

It is from this rationale that the need to create sexually stimulating works for women has arisen, in order to make it publicly known that there is such a thing as true feminine eroticism, and to wipe out this acknowledgement of masculine power according to which male pornography is somehow the only legitimate kind. There have certainly been many efforts along these lines, from the publication of special issues of feminist magazines dedicated to the new feminine erotica, to the creation by Candida Royale (a former star of pornographic movies) of the film company Femme Distribution, whose explicit aim is to offer products specifically conceived for women.⁷⁶ Linda Williams and Anne McClintock are enthusiastic: at last, women are gaining control over pornography – the goal has been achieved.⁷⁷

The question obviously remains open, but most of these attempts seem inconclusive. There has either been an inability to produce truly feminine erotic works, or else the works produced have exhibited few identifiable signs of being particularly "feminine" (for example, the very successful novel *The Butcher* by Alina Reyes, or the novel and film *9 1/2 Weeks* by Elizabeth McNeil). Above all, it has quickly become clear that it would be impossible to offer a single product that pleased everyone. Pat Califia opted for a lesbian sado-masochism that shocked a great many women, while the daintiness of the saccharine eroticism-in-lace that underlies so many feminist critiques of pornography, she says, makes her want to throw up.

In some ways, it could be that the debate has confirmed the early findings of the Kinsey inquiries, which timidly suggested that women react to erotic stimulation in less uniform ways than men; in other words, that the range of their reactions is much wider (a suggestion that later studies have tended to corroborate⁷⁸). But to describe a reaction is not to explain it. Is such diversity a reflection of an innate plasticity or the acquired result of numerous ways of being a woman? Can we conclude from the research that the cultural model of masculinity is narrower and more restrictive? A woman could choose among a number of models – at the very least between the two opposed stereotypes of the happy virgin and the contented whore – and then go on to adopt an attitude toward sex appropriate to each one. Men, however, would be simply imbued with a single, unequivocal view of male sexuality, with the apparent contrast between the saint and the gigolo coming essentially from men's unequal ability to control their desires.

All this might seem to be taking us off track, but it is necessary to show the degree to which the major debates over pornography at the heart of the feminist movement have come up against some inevitable questions concerning the nature of femininity, and even the definition of human sexuality as a whole. And, obviously, there are no easy answers. Especially as long as people insist on lumping more than half of humanity into a single category that must then be kept separate and distinct.

On this the debates have more or less come to an end. Not for lack of combatants, but because dialogue has largely become impossible. The fundamental conceptions of femininity, masculinity, and relations between the sexes imposed such different readings of the phenomenon that any controversy over pornography meant having to redefine the premises of each argument. The split had become too wide. As in most modern public debates, as soon as it became evident that the wheel needed to be reinvented each time, it seemed wiser to restate one's position and simply note the disparity of points of view. In April 1985, the magazine *MS*, a long-time semi-official voice of the American feminist movement, recognized the end of the accord and concluded that one group's pornography could well be another group's erotica. Since then, feminists struggling against pornography have had to go on without being able to pretend honestly to be speaking for all women. In the end, the discussions degenerated into simple statements of disagreement⁷⁹ that betray certain profound paradoxes: some women regularly frequent strip clubs, some women like showing their bodies in public, others see in

any representation of sexuality resonances of humiliation and wounding,⁸⁰ and still others are more convinced than ever that popular language is perfectly correct in stating that to be penetrated by any penis is to be screwed, had, and fucked.

The discussion has undoubtedly helped crystallize these questions, but don't look to pornography for clarification of them. Quite the contrary, pornography is never either easy or unambiguous. The lines between a work of the imagination and the society that produces it are often tortuous and obscure, and the work can usually be read in any number of ways, some of which are contradictory. That a work can be socially recognized as either art or pornography doesn't alter the fact that its success depends in part on the number of interpretations it permits. Take *The Story of O*, for example. To read the novel at its face value can be painful, which is why it has been so often said that the author, Pauline Réage, must in reality be an extraordinarily sadistic and malevolent man. Susan Brownmiller said frankly that "no female mind" could have conceived such a horror.⁸¹ The opposing view is held by Susan Griffin,⁸² who said Réage could only be a woman because the story requires an intimate and profound knowledge of how women in our society are educated, by which she means slowly and cruelly reduced to a state of autism. As for Susan Sontag, as we shall see later on, she sees in it an example of a passionate quest for excess, explored here in the field of sexuality but also found everywhere else in our culture. There is also Kaja Silverman's reading of the novel,⁸³ inspired by the writings of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Michèle Montrelay, and by the work of Jacques Lacan. Silverman finds *The Story of O* an example of what she describes as "the supra-determination of feminine subjectivity through a dialectic on corporeal materialism, presented as a structurant, but which above all preconstructs and externalizes the feminine experience." All the above are talking about the same book, remember – the same perversion, the same whips applied to the same buttocks. One begins to appreciate why dialogue is difficult and consensus rare.

To return (at last) to our topic, it remains to be shown how this quarrel between *Good Girls* and *Bad Girls* is founded on two very different but not necessarily contradictory conceptions of pornography: one, the notion of pornography as violence toward women; the other, the notion that pornography liberates, breaks down age-old models of oppression, and eulogizes the joys of sex, but at the same time is completely unacceptable and a source of the deepest anger.

Matters of Violence

The notion of violence always requires a great deal of tact. Introducing it clumsily can create misunderstandings that produce effects opposite to those intended. Some of the first outcries against socially sanctioned violence toward women came from people who were shocked by a poster that depicted a battered woman; the poster was advertising a new album by the Rolling Stones. The protesters called themselves "Women Against Violence in Pornography." Later, when the group changed its name to "Women Against Pornography," several members dropped out, saying the two causes were not identical. The first name denounced a particular type of pornography that implied that sexual pleasure was derived from sadistic violence toward women – perversions, rape, torture, and death – in short, the sort of things found in the works of the Marquis de Sade, but expanded and refined by modern methods of production and distribution. The new name signalled a change in direction from the specific to the generic by stating that all forms of pornography constituted a form of violence toward women; a statement that was not immediately obvious to everyone and which it was first necessary to demonstrate.

Some critics of this position felt it was enough to show that the statement was empirically erroneous: physical violence exists, to be sure, but it occupies a relatively small niche in the pornography marketplace. Violent pornography hardly exhausts the totality of production, and doesn't even come close to matching the production devoted to male masochism or even male homosexuality. Even those most convinced in their condemnation had to admit that the theme of violence has been marginal. The Meese Commission report concluded that the use or even threat of violence did not form a significant part of current pornography production. Other studies even advanced the idea that sexual violence is much more present in films that are not classed as pornographic. The Canadian federal inquiry investigating the sale of pornographic magazines concluded that violence (which it defined as rape, murder, the use of weapons or bondage, and anal penetration) represented about 10 per cent of the content of the magazines it looked at.⁸⁴ The Fraser Commission drew a similar conclusion.

Studies of magazines and video cassettes do not confirm the resolutely frightful images given them by some witnesses. While we certainly

understand that to some people, one film or magazine depicting sexual violence is too many, nothing has led us to believe that much use is made of violent or child pornography. Naturally, one can state that contemporary pornography degrades women by presenting them as sexual objects, which is as deplorable as images of sexual violence, but there is nothing to suggest at this time that the majority of pornography corresponds to such characteristics.⁸⁵

Evidently, the debate stalled over a problem of definition. The notion of violence toward women was not understood in the same way by everyone, and the confusion became more and more crippling. The problem was admirably summed up by the reactions in Canada to the December 1984 issue of *Penthouse*. Pages 119 to 127 of the issue presented a series of photographs by Akira Ishigaki showing young women with their wrists bound and their mouths gagged, and either tied to trees or hanging upside down from them. In Canada, these photographs were found to be so scandalous that the solicitor general of Quebec issued a court injunction against the company that distributed the magazine in that province. But in the very same issue, three pages further on, there was a series of photographs of Linda Kenton, *Pet of the Year* (the highest distinction to which a *Penthouse* model can aspire), posing in extremely luxurious surroundings, with expensive cars, and with fur coats carefully arranged to cover only her shoulders. There was no scandal, and the solicitor general was evidently not perturbed. There was no apparent violence in them, the young woman was not trussed or bound or maltreated; in fact, she seemed to be very comfortable, happy, and consenting.

The vast majority of pornographic images are more like the photographs of Linda Kenton than like the images by Akira Ishigaki. In order to gain support for the idea that all pornography is a form of violence against women, therefore, it was necessary to expand greatly the definition of violence.

Some of the early efforts to do that were not particularly convincing. For example, charts were drawn up of the positions of women's bodies in photographs in order to show that woman were most often shown either lying down, bent over, or on their knees – in other words, in positions of submission. But a photographer would likely defend the positions as being dictated by the unavoidable constraints of anatomy upon anyone trying to see or show the female sex organs. Others saw violence in the context of the photographs; the decor of the rooms, for example, or in

certain gestures, articles of clothing, facial expressions, and makeup. The ultimate point was stated by Susan Griffin,⁸⁶ who said that all pornography was sadistic and degrading simply because to be undressed in public is humiliating in our culture. Throughout all of these more or less convincing demonstrations, the original notion remained unchanged: public nudity constitutes a prelude to a chain of events that includes degrading poses, the practically forced performance of certain acts, and submission to a variety of cruelties and eventually to physical mutilation and even death, either real or imagined. Violence toward women is the same wherever it is found.

For most people, this reasoning was evidently too simplistic and open to attack. As Duggan, Hunter, and Vance explained at some length,⁸⁷ violence, sexism, and explicit sexuality are first and foremost three completely different realities: many acts of violence have nothing to do with sex or sexism; sexism itself is not limited to matters of sex and is not necessarily violent; and it must at least be conceivable to show sex without violence or sexism. What is rightly disturbing is the roping together of the three elements, so that sex is also violent and sexist. But the authors found the notion that such a conjunction existed was so ubiquitous as to become inevitably unjustifiable and also damaging to the feminist movement. It might lead to the belief that other forms of depiction do not exist or, worse still, that women are incapable of recognizing them.

This semantic shift, which paints all pornography as equivalent to violence toward women, has been so sudden, so makeshift, and so astonishing that it seems worthwhile to take some time over it.

In an interview,⁸⁸ shortly after the appearance of her film *Not a Love Story*, filmmaker Bonnie Klein replied to the accusation that she grossly exaggerated the physical violence that formed the central axis of her denunciation of pornography by explaining that the shock she felt after her contact with that particular type of pornography had been so great that afterwards detachment became impossible: she was unable to take her eyes off it. The images seemed to her so aggressive, so horrifying, that everything else became insignificant. In other words, the conjunction of sex, violence, and sexism can hit with such force that everything else disappears.

A simpler explanation has been that pornography, like other kinds of merchandise typically reserved for men, was often not very well known by most of the women who denounced it. In a commentary on the work of the Williams Commission,⁸⁹ A. W. B. Simpson proposed that certain

feminist pleas made so few distinctions between the various types of pornography available in the marketplace that it was difficult to believe that their authors had ever seen much of it. Far from being improbable (it's the Bonnie Kleins who are rare and astonishing), this ignorance explains most of the sweeping arguments supported by a few particularly untenable examples. One should be concerned about the social effects of such ignorance on the women who work in the pornography industry, on the men and women who consume it, and also, as Simon Watney⁹⁰ has so rightly pointed out, on homosexuals and deviants, who always have much to fear from censorship.

There is one final observation to be made here: denunciations of pornography as violence against women have never had very much support outside North America. European feminist groups, though very active in Italy, Scandinavia, France, and elsewhere, have never placed much emphasis on the struggle against pornography and even less on the association of pornography and violence.⁹¹ Two reasons for this come to mind. First, violence may be one of the few things North Americans understand really well. Whereas sexism remains a fluid concept and sexuality is still largely virgin territory, violence is immediately recognized and often constitutes a familiar daily experience. Pornography thus turns to violence, just as American sports, politics, television, the New York Stock Exchange, and the streets of Washington do. It is not a question of knowing whether American pornography is more violent, but rather of thinking that violence is easier to understand, simpler to grasp within the more familiar parameters. In this way, everything becomes simple and one can be sure what the question is.

The other reason turns up when one leaves this North American literature and encounters a concept of pornographic violence that is radically different, apparently more subtle, and sometimes even the reverse of the previous definition. In Europe, for instance, one senses that the debate see-saws: while the American feminist movement was splitting up over a discussion of what it is to be a woman, European pornography has always been understood as an exploration into the mystery of masculine eroticism.

Imaginary Inversions

Not even the cruelest of masters needs to dream about the pleasure of whipping slaves, because he can spend entire days doing it. It is the

contrary that is more attractive: for a slave to dream of whipping the master. If imagining violence is to give pleasure, it is necessary that the violence be perpetrated against someone who is seen as holding at least a modicum of power. One can, for example, be convinced that women are the absolute source of all the evils on earth, or just that they have the power to refuse a sexual advance.

Anyone who knows even a little about the universe of pornography sees immediately that its favourite theme is not chained, humiliated, and battered women. Such violence exists, certainly, but as the titles of most pornographic films suggest, the norm is rather an uninterrupted flow of "college girls in heat," "naughty nurses," and "Swedish holidays." These films promise women who, far from being tied up, show every intention of being as loose as possible. Women whose presence is even greater than in any work by Fellini or Rubens,⁹² and who are the carnal incarnations of an obvious and very deep fascination. More than that, these are women with overflowing desires, who love sex and want it again and again. Women who are satisfied each time and almost never exhausted. Insatiable women, so active that they often make the first move and become even more demanding after that; who have multiple orgasms and come as quickly and loudly as males do (the women in de Sade are always "ejaculating" with pleasure). And to add to the pleasure, the ideal man in pornography is above all a superb and desirable lover, who always succeeds in satisfying each of his partners. A man all women crave and who is refused nothing, who manipulates them and has the power to satisfy their every wish. Even to the point of killing them all, if that would give him pleasure.

A glance beyond all the naked women reveals part of the world of masculinity, and since pornography exposes the realm of fantasy without shame, it opens the door on what it is to be a man.

It was first noted that the image of women depicted in pornography actually shows some masculine traits. Here is a woman most often dreamed of by men (and dreamed up for men), and it is an image that describes female sexuality in terms that are most comprehensible to men because they are the most familiar. This miracle of masculinization constitutes a partial effort toward mystification.

This is the double subterfuge of pornography: to naturalize the masculinization of woman; to turn men's resentment (impotence and anger) engendered by her erotic autonomy into fantasies of liberation;

to dictate woman, and, from this dictation, to give her the power of a norm and the value of an emancipation.⁹³

In short, it would seem that man is endowed with a rather lowly and limited imagination that renders him somewhat incapable of exploring what André Malraux recommended as the only true mystery: the eroticism of the opposite sex. Lacking great imaginations, men surround themselves with the known and predictable, and imagine the other world in their own image.

This vein seemed rich enough, and others have mined it for further analyses of the masculine condition. Anne-Marie Dardigna, toward the end of her impressive study of the (exceptionally violent) works of Klossowski, Bataille, Réage, and Robbe-Grillet, states that the point at issue in all their work is not so much the domination of women – or the putting of women in their place – as it is of their exclusion from the world of men.

On the erotic scene, the exchange is not between a man and a woman, but between two men, and the feminine only enters into it as an instrument of that "exchange."⁹⁴

It has been said that pornography is egalitarian only in the sense that both sexes in it are phallic. For Dardigna, the pornographic gaze does not despise women, it exterminates them.

Under this examination, the female body disappears through role reversal and transvestitism: she is replaced by phallic woman, a woman who has a phallus-clitoris, a wo-man who gets an erection, ejaculates and who is sodomized. . . . What a man really wants to see under him is another man.⁹⁵

The feeling is one of anger directed against women, and of a very deep desire for vengeance that can betoken either a need for relief from the obsession with femininity and the polite obedience and respect imposed by the model of courtly love; or else an anguished reaction on the part of men threatened by a real or imaginary matri-hierarchy; or else, according to Dardigna, a sort of side-effect of the attempt to establish a rapport between father and son, an effort to please the elder, which is realized to the detriment of woman, who is seen as an obstacle. In any case, all these questions have nothing to do with the feminine.

Certain currents of the argument, inspired by psychoanalysis, read

into pornography the expression of a masculine fear of castration that makes men want to reassure themselves by the spectacle of the absence of a penis in women. Elizabeth Wilson⁹⁶ does not see in this any grandiose celebration of the power of men, but rather their morbid need to reassure themselves and to lessen their fear of impotence. In a recently defended thesis at Carleton University, Berkeley Kaite even goes so far as to say that the pornographic image allows the spectator to traverse the gap between the sexes. The feminine image, she says, is loaded with symbols of the penis (high-heeled shoes, a single bared breast, phallic accessories, and so on) and thus invites the viewer to forget his own penis and let himself be penetrated by the woman on the screen; in this way, he can relive the ultimate experience of femininity.⁹⁷ In sum, pornography here is not the base and simplistic vision of women imagined by men who do not know them, but rather it's a much more profound – but still essentially masculine – effort to experience the other, to approach and know what it is to be the other.

Faced with any psychological interpretation, the highly conditioned reflex of the ethnologist is to begin to wonder what the Maoris, the Penan, or the Inuit would make of it. It quickly becomes apparent that the details in many of these analyses seem excessive to the unbeliever, and that the proposed interpretations certainly do not exhaust the entire phenomenon of pornography.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, the rationale is coherent, and the path is perhaps a good one. If we wished to translate psychoanalysis and spread it out on a more familiar table, we could say that pornography functions in the manner of a good myth: it provides an imaginary exploration of all the possibilities while placing the world in a certain order and stating a few profound truths along the way, playing games that attract and constantly incite us to keep reshuffling the deck and playing again, and all of it in a marvellous illusion of freedom. It seems plausible that pornography, after having superficially shown something that resembles a woman, would go on to a deepening of this knowledge, which would in turn generate a taste for inversion.

On the other hand, it would be most astonishing if this enchantment were fully accomplished in each pornographic act, and if all of it concerned only men. Some would protest that life is not always that complex, that the psychic state of every consumer of pornography runs little risk of corresponding with the interpretation given by psychoanalysis. Others would note that these interpretations, until now proposed mostly by women, often deal only with the masculine condition; perhaps

because pornography for women was at the time nonexistent. What we can say about it now shows that the vein was indeed a promising one, even without resorting to psychoanalysis. It's enough to understand how we learn and experience the most elementary of cultural models.

Here's an example. When it was still in business, the Club Britannia in Saint-Romuald, a suburb of Quebec City, offered its clients two completely segregated showrooms, one with female strippers, the other with male strippers. In a short ethnographic report, Marie-Claude Dionne⁹⁹ described that as well as the constants of the genre (the gradual removal of clothing already noted by all observers, from Roland Barthes to Jean Baudrillard), she noticed a marked contrast between the dancers on the women's side and their counterparts in the other room. The male strippers were young and athletic, they strutted around the stage, pranced to the music, took off their clothes with precise and determined movements, displayed their penises and buttocks while regaling their audience with a repertoire of attitudes ranging from jovial complicity to solemn arrogance. In the other room, the female dancers proceeded with more softness, more sensuousness: their clothes defined and then slid off their bodies, their eyes were half-closed, their mouths half-open. There was no strutting about, they simply got down on the floor and displayed all the usual signs of idealized lasciviousness. On one side, male dancers whose penises were never in a state of erection, on the other, female dancers in an almost constant state of advanced sexual excitement.

Such a spectacle would make no sense and have no success in a society that did not encourage opposite models of sexuality, as ours does. The traditional education of young girls, for example, taught them some clearly defined essential values:

Sweetness, generosity, modesty, humility, obedience, control, economy, charity, reserve, decency, purity – these are the particular virtues of the ideal girl; but of these, purity is the most excellent, the one most deserving of the title *Virtue* with a capital V.¹⁰⁰

Help your boyfriends in their struggles. Avoid any langorous attitudes, immodest clothing, seductive words. Remember that a filthy beast lurks within the most virtuous boy, ready to leap out at the slightest provocation. Counsel prayer and the holy sacraments.¹⁰¹

It's a familiar model. Young women were taught to be modest. They could never undress fully, not even when alone in the washroom of a

convent inhabited exclusively by other young women and overseen by nuns. In their contacts with young men of their own age, they were to be careful to maintain their modesty so as not to awaken the more or less bestial instincts that are always present in malekind. Avoid strangers, wait to be properly introduced and hope that it would be only to the better sort.

Across the frontier, young men were taught to have respect for girls because one of them would some day be the mother of their children. Never to try to see a girl's body, but to take cold showers instead to calm the lurking beast. To shun rough behaviour that leads to brutality, and to make only honest propositions that would elicit a woman's respect and eventual true love. There was no hint of homosexuality, Michelangelo's *David* was long forgotten, and no possibility that a young man's body could be attractive to the other sex. As a result, a woman who flaunted herself on a street corner was applauded for her audacity; a man who did the same thing was thrown into jail. As another result, men could be fascinated by Salomé and consume great amounts of pornography: that was an acquired pleasure, and since they saw themselves as having the entire responsibility for sexual matters, the tools for such a heavy responsibility must be learned somewhere.

The female dancers at the Britannia Club made it clear how enjoyable life could be if women loved sex, if they dispensed love without making men assume the costs: the boredom and the risks inherent in the effort of seduction. If women were perpetually excited, langorous and voluptuous, with no need for foreplay. If they were forever in heat, always raw, always on the verge of orgasm, and there was never any question of a man being humiliated and rejected. While in the other room, the male dancers equally dispensed their dream world, in which men could walk completely naked among women without getting erections, without throwing themselves on them, without the violence of possession. How beautiful the world of sex would be if there were nothing to fear, if a man's body, despite all reports, could be attractive without being threatening. Such a world would be even better than the reassuring but fictional set-ups of Harlequin novels. Even the frustration caused by watching a spectacle that always left something to be desired could be transformed into pleasure. One could happily switch roles in sexual affairs, or at least remain passive, willing to watch without running any risk, without feeling any obligation.

In some ways it's the pleasure of dreaming, at least for a while, that

particular moment in the evolution of the society that produces them. From another point of view, the game is never free because any reversal of models leaves traces. To masculinize women and feminize men is not simply to state the opposite of the norm or the reverse of good sense, nor is it a kind of travesty of reality meant to incite laughter or the enjoyment of one's sin with greater precision. Reversal can also weaken the model. If women can be modest but also unchained and perpetually in heat, and if men are violent beasts who prance about thinking themselves sexy, the rest of us may no longer be quite sure of where we are. Which, in certain cases, has already become very frustrating.

The Sources of Rage

In order to get what is important to us, it might be necessary to lose everything else.

Bernadette Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*

In closing this survey we should add a word or two about a particular characteristic trait of certain feminist debates, with a view to appreciating how some people's reaction to pornography is neither pleasure nor amusement, goes beyond shock and scandal, beyond even disgust and discouragement, and simply turns to rage.

Will we ever recover from the wounds inflicted on us by all this violence? Fortunately, I have never been a victim of physical violence, but I have felt all its horror through this psychological violence that was for me the most intensive "term" in porno clubs and magazines. And yet. I have not seen or known the worst. . . . but I still feel as if I have been flayed alive. . . . I have become irritable. . . . and I still become outraged when I hear people denouncing sexism in advertising, the exploitation of women in the workplace, the treatment of rape victims, prostitutes, battered women, and all women everywhere, and yet I am treated with polite indifference when I try to talk about the violence suffered by women caught in the daily grind of placement agencies and cabarets. . . . Of the many facets of my experience, the most painful has been the sight of these workers at the rapacious mercy of pornophiles and pornocrats.¹⁰²

I had hoped to come here as a militant, filled with pride and possessed by a holy anger. But more and more, anger seems to me to be a pale

things are no longer the way they usually are, and that another, inverted world is possible. It's a measure of the distance that still separates us from happiness: for a man, not having to be the seducer, to at last become the object of seduction; for a woman, to dream of a man who is aware of the attractiveness of his own sensual body and feels the seduction. Those male and female dancers were surely meant to get along, as the inverse images of daily life. And how boring it would be if such spectacles simply repeated ordinary life!

Reversing roles, however, is never without some risk. To complete the thesis of inversion, we have to imagine that the male dancers prancing about on the stage are also teaching women that femininity can be very attractive, and can lead to the exclusion of men. Is it entirely unexpected that women commentators (Dardigna, Wilson, and Kaité, among others) would note that the logical end of much modern pornography is the exclusion of women? Soon someone will no doubt come along and add that women who consume pornography are following the same logical path. The film *The Devil in Miss Jones*, for example, which exploits the well-known theme of the sudden and late blossoming of a woman who has been a prude all her life, ends with her descent into Hell, which takes the form of a room in which she is in a permanent state of over-excitement while her sole companion (Damiano, thought to be the film's director) is constantly exhausted and incurably impotent; the heroine has been perfectly masculinized, but the change has rendered her male partner as passive and unreceptive as she was before.

All this is possible because the logic of the system is very simple. A culture that divides humanity in two and calls one half Sex A and the other Sex B, with Sex A exhibiting traits 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9, and Sex B exhibiting the opposite but complementary traits 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10, will also engender a series of permutations that animates its dreams, its fantasies, and its pornography. It will produce men who want to be mistreated little girls, or who dream of being dominating women who penetrate their kind and gentle masculine partners; and it will produce women who want to be seduced by other daring women, or who imagine themselves to be rapacious pirates or seductive prisoners; and vice versa and so on, until all the possible permutations have been exhausted.

All of which is not to say that the game is entirely gratuitous. Of course, pornography – in which one finds all of the above – wishes to divert its whole world, but certain permutations are more popular than others, and therefore sell better, because they are more suitable to the

shadow of the grief that has invaded me. If a woman has any idea of her own worth, seeing even a scrap of pornography would move her to a useful rage. But to study pornography as I have done for more months than I care to remember, the volume of it, the depth of it, can only awaken in that woman a feeling of grief.¹⁰³

The examples can be multiplied, but they could not show any better the degree to which some women are profoundly troubled by pornography. Misery and horror are common enough in the world, but rarely do we find such harsh terms used to express such all-consuming rage, to such an extent that the debates grew so bitter, so envenomed, that eventually no useful exchange of ideas was possible. So many varied aspects of the condition of women – from unequal salaries to the threat of rape – are considered to be not only inseparable from pornography, but literally identical with it, that, as Bonnie Klein has said, any empirical demonstration and verification becomes totally superfluous. And if other women dissociate themselves from this position they are made to feel that they are not “real women.” One is led to believe that nothing on earth is more horrible than pornography.

This radical attitude is not the result of chance. It's too easy for critics to attribute such rage to the naivety and narrowness of an obsessed mind. Neither is it the usual product of internal wrangling and segmentation that so often affect assertive social movements and which churn up some ferocious quarrels between sects of political and religious orthodoxies (the early Christians, the early psychoanalysts, not to mention the schisms among the French monarchists). We should first ask whether such anger wasn't in fact triggered by the discovery that the debate over pornography was touching on some deep, fundamental issue. Pornography itself may be largely insignificant, but what it was bringing to the surface certainly was not.

We must not forget that the feminist movement has always proposed a radical re-evaluation of feminine sexuality. After having been reduced to sexual objects for centuries, women had to pass through a period of sexual liberation, of asserting themselves as beings endowed with their own sexuality, ready to regain control of their own bodies and never again be subjected to the libidinous and reproductive whims of males. It was imperative that they denounce the traditional model of feminine sexuality as a form of violence against women.

That being done, the next step was to explore solutions. And that is

precisely what pornography does: the subversion of the conservative ideology of romantic love and heterosexual monogamy that had long confined women to the roles of mothers and domestic servants. As Angela Carter¹⁰⁴ and others after her have shown, the first models for liberated women in European literature were John Cleland's Fanny Hill and de Sade's Juliette, women who consciously disengaged themselves from an exclusively procreative sexuality and egotistically used sex to gain their proper place on the social ladder. They were intelligent women who renounced marriage, love, and especially maternity, and who succeeded in their careers by means of treachery, cynicism, and wickedness, which made them the equal of any man whatsoever. In short, they were women who were no longer under men's thumbs but who proved to have their own considerable talents for manipulation. The model of feminine sexuality in modern pornography is a radical departure from the old norm, and provides one possible response to the search undertaken by modern feminism. It presents women who are not at all shy about sex, are not ashamed of their bodies, who clearly enjoy sex enough to be sexually active, provocative, even aggressive, who allow themselves to do anything they desire, who are not bound by sexual exclusivity, who have no need for sentimental attachments and no fear of becoming pregnant. In this sense, pornography and feminism seem to deliver more or less the same message: the age of the passive victim is dead, long live female sexuality.

Pornography's message, however, is a few jumps ahead in that it offers a ready-made solution. It doesn't just say that women are interesting, as feminism does, but adds that we must give up our oppressed reserve in order to explore and express the totality of human sexuality, to try all combinations, all imaginable perversions – even, on occasion, those that are most disturbing. The feminist movement hesitates before such a bewildering array of complex and often paradoxical options.

Any protest against the old model relies on a moral judgement that explains why the model was bad, but at the same time transposes and rekindles the same old contradictions. Muriel Dimen's example¹⁰⁵ is the ambiguity of saying it is “politically correct” to declare one's refusal to be a sex object, and to stop caring about one's physical appearance, and at the same time to want to remain attractive in order to avoid being defined as a person with no right to a sexual appetite and no chance to explore all forms of this new freedom. In other words, wanting to abolish pornography but preserve the spectacle.

For Gayle Rubin,¹⁰⁶ the pornography debate has forced modern feminism to the ropes by bringing about the clash of two tendencies that appear to be irreconcilable. One insists on the importance of liberating feminine sexuality and tends to minimize the significance of pornography. Lisa Orlando, for example, likes to see as models women who exercise their right to pleasure, who contradict everything well brought up young women ought to admire. Paula Webster¹⁰⁷ wants to let herself be guided by pornography in an exploration of a marvellous universe that has always been denied to women. Sara Diamond¹⁰⁸ declares that women must recognize that the public exhibition of their sex does not necessarily turn them into whores, and that it should not only be men who gain power by virtue of their sex. In the end, one begins to think that if actual pornography is often sexist, it is neither less nor more so than the rest of society, and that if it is so powerful it should be converted, not abolished.

The second perspective is that of most of the adversaries of pornography, according to whom this particular liberalization of feminine sexuality is nothing but a dangerous illusion, since it can never be anything but the extension of male privilege, especially if the way to achieve it is defined within a universe as traditionally male as pornography is. Joan Hoff¹⁰⁹ says that the "standard" of individual sexuality is still a male construct, and she does say what she would replace it with. From this viewpoint, pornography is important because it is at the heart of the question of power between the sexes, and central to any analysis of the feminine condition. On the other hand, sexuality then becomes less crucial, and the result is often a new sexual conservatism. According to Gayle Rubin, who openly declares her preference, and for whom this second tendency is nothing less than a demonology as terrifying as the most oppressive of patriarchies, the censorship of pornography leads to the reactionary absurdity of arranging sexual behaviour in order of what is politically preferable: general promiscuity and sado-masochistic relationships (whatever the sexes involved) at the bottom; heterosexuality in the middle; and lesbian monogamy at the top. Obviously, such a suggestion is highly controversial (as are all the others, since we are dealing with a paradox), but it does show how the question of pornography leads to nothing less than the adoption of a general cosmology that defines the sexes and the nature of their relations with each other.

The force of one feminist critique runs the risk of turning itself against women. By making pornography an object of horror, it could not only

suggest that sexual intimacy must always be shrouded in secrecy, but it also risks stepping on a lot of toes by insinuating that it is indeed a woman's most precious asset: a simple restatement, in other words, of the old position that a woman's essence is to be found in the mysterious depths of her uterus. The argument is trapped. It is embarrassing to have to explain that it is sex itself that makes all the difference, and which justifies the suggestion that a woman is more reduced to the rank of "object" in pornography than when she is a fashion model, a carnival queen, or the wife of a minister. If the three cases are not comparable, it is certainly not because of their relative degrees of passivity.

What is at times most annoying is that pornography seems to have anticipated all the angles, and to have prepared all the answers. In the debates at the heart of the American feminist movement, the most acerbic exchanges have often been between lesbians. Perhaps because, on one hand, lesbians understand better than anyone what pornography proposes when it lauds the merits of sex for sex's sake, without procreation and with no other objective than pleasure — lesbians may even appreciate this better than male homosexuals, who, being men, have already been taught that sex for sex's sake is agreeable and that the repose of the warrior must be joyful. Thus, for some lesbians, pornography could become an ideological ally in the struggle against discrimination. For others, who raise their sexual orientation as a political gesture in the power struggle between the sexes, the avenues opened by pornography seem particularly detestable. Not so much because it makes such a big thing of heterosexuality as because it still represents women whose principle concern is to please men, as if men had invented and manufactured the future sexuality of these liberated women in the image of their own desire. There must be other issues, but the discords are so profound that they are not evident to the naked eye.

Bit by bit, we begin to understand a few of the reasons for the rage that characterizes these debates. First of all, that pornography decries the venerable model of woman as discreet, modest and shy, domesticated and virtuous, for whom sex is a conjugal duty unfortunately necessary for the propagation of the family, the nation, or the species, and attacks that model by affirming, as feminism does, that women are also sexual beings. But pornography proposes a solution that threatens to topple into its own opposite: the appearance of women who let everything loose, endorse the role traditionally reserved for men, and thereby become passive voyeurs or voluntary and contented victims. The idea may seem

ridiculous, and one can be offended by men who think they know what it is that gives women pleasure. One can also sense the frustration of having no other acceptable solution that would effectively rally all women together. But none of that is enough to explain the rage.

Let us note here an unconvincing line of reasoning, if only so we can do away with it. There has been some suggestion that jealousy is the principal motive for this rage, that in a society in which the relationship between couples is still important and in which cultural tradition would have us believe that a woman begins to lose her appeal as soon as she can hold a pencil under her breast,¹¹⁰ the omnipresent vision of near-perfect bodies (bodies which have for a long time now ceased to be those of slovenly, lewd women who have lived a "hard life" and are vulgar and often ugly, and have been replaced by those of beautiful, rich, and intelligent girls) creates an absurd and unsustainable competition. This is thought to lead to frustration, jealousy, and rage. One no longer has to prove that pornography teaches men to make all sorts of unacceptable demands, it's enough to show that they carry around in the backs of their dirty minds the image of Bo Derek.¹¹¹ Without even resorting to jealousy, a woman could easily conclude that such nonsense is exasperating.

But there is, of course, nothing new in the idea of jealousy caused by imaginary infidelity. It is not something that can be limited to a single sex and has probably been around since the Lower Paleolithic era. We can understand that most people are ill at ease with the idea that their sexual partners habitually resort to masturbation, but the argument remains too incomplete,¹¹² and the rage must have other sources.

Perhaps it comes from feeling trapped between two models of femininity that are equally unacceptable. On one side, the traditional model that even now is not so easily dismissed and which condemns loose women to being despised by men and ostracized by other women. And as if that weren't enough, women know from experience that the traditional stereotype of womanhood is intimately connected with sexuality and forces them to be permanent spectacles of seduction – which, if successful, will provoke the admiring wolf-whistle on the street – while they must at the same time remain modest and demure and never let on that they are aware of the spectacle. Then, on the other hand, there is the model that pornography offers, which is unclear, disquieting, and based on high sexual voltage and the total satisfaction of all men's whims (a terrain that men seem to know better and on which they claim to feel perfectly at ease).

The uneasy feeling can be increased by the realization that the traditional role of women offered at least a modicum of power, and that the concept of courtly love, despite its oppressiveness, also provided a definition of attraction and seduction on which a woman could rely – by remaining "an obscure object of desire" – to gain some social security.

Now, there is nothing obscure in pornography. No reserve, no discretion. Femininity becomes profane and loses all its mystery. The only power offered by the new model is that of conquest, which in the past has been the prerogative of men. To adopt a unisexual sexuality, women will have to invade the territory of men and somehow turn them into allies without forcing them to change their own models. In fact, their models will even be confirmed: more liberty, more partners, more often – in short, everything to please the "beast."

Faced with this prospect, some women become nostalgic for the old model, for amorous and more discreet intrigues. Others, however, can't wait to relieve men of the conquering initiative in sexual conduct, just as they want to invade the preserves of men and partake in all their positions of authority. Still others propose to win on both levels by being strong and clever enough to profit from both models. They obviously also risk losing on both levels, however, by moving away from their traditional power to attract but without acquiring enough new powers in a society that does not give them up easily. They risk losing the power that comes from the right to be different, in exchange for the privilege of declaring men to be seductive. They risk becoming victims in the field of sexuality, not unlike the women who, in the domestic world, became responsible for the essential second income while still doing most of the housework. All these discussions are still taking place, the solutions have yet to be found, and there is little chance that any kind of unanimity will emerge. Even the hypothesis of homosexuality as a refuge seems unacceptable and too multifaceted. The situation, in other words, might appear to be hopeless, and hopelessness can easily lead to rage.

Whom to Protect?

In conclusion, these debates leave an important question unanswered, one that was very briefly raised by Murray S. Davis¹¹³ when he remarked that pornography may well be the only social phenomenon that has been accused of being simultaneously dangerous, disgusting, and boring.

How can anything be insignificant and threatening at the same time? This is not the kind of danger caused by boredom: we are told that pornography is insipid, repulsive, and harmful.

One might see in that an easy handle for the censors, who simply want an excuse to impose their will. They can pretend that their decisions represent the greatest good for the greatest number of people (pornography is dangerous), but also that imposing them does not in any way constitute an abuse of authority (pornography is insignificant). One could also contend that pornography offends because it must, being a product of the imagination, depart dangerously from reality by suggesting, for example, that ugly and miserable people can contemplate the private parts of the beautiful and the seductive. Such things do not happen in real life, and it could be dangerous to dream too much. One could even argue that pornography stains everything that comes into contact with it, which would explain why so many obscenity trials have fixed their attention on works by recognized, serious authors (de Sade, Miller, Roth) while the kind of pornography that really could stain the court, the real, gross, and brutal pornography, was often sold next door, and not even under the table. And finally, we could follow Alan Soble's example and worry some people by giving the answer to a question no one was asking: yes, there will be pornography in the future ideal communist state!¹¹⁴

But it is not really such dangers that are worrisome. Pornography doesn't add much to the exploitation of the masses or to the power of the censors. It mostly confirms what is already known in a cosmology that includes a definition of sexuality and has a good idea of its place in life. It is in this sense, says Simon Watney,¹¹⁵ that part of the feminist movement could only interpret pornography as a revolting aspect of a global system in which men dominate and exploit women, whereas the conservative ideology had to see it as an inadmissible carnal display that was totally obscene. Any meaning attributed to pornography suggests an understanding of the world that is already structured by the minds of adults capable of facing contradictions. And if pressed to specify what it is about pornography that is dangerous, they will usually reply that it is the expression of a widespread malaise that it can only serve to spread even wider: said malaise being the alarming state of relations between the sexes, or the destruction of public morality.

Since pornography has nothing new to say, it is easy to call it boring

and disgusting. Its threatening nature – the reason books are burned and televisions are turned off – must be established more distinctly and rigorously.

Boring, disgusting, and dangerous at the same time, pornography has no uniform, predictable effect, and its consequences, at times totally contradictory, depend essentially on the predisposition of its audience. As David Freeberg has said in his book about the authority of the image,¹¹⁶ it is never the image itself that is disquieting, but the reaction that it evokes. We have nothing to fear but our reactions. Or, rather, the reactions of others. Because we believe that certain persons might react badly, what we feel when faced with pornography is the fear of the impact it might have on them. And we can usually identify who these other people are: groups or social classes whose reactions are fearful, or who must be protected. Such people are more at risk of being affected by pornography than we are; our only fear is the possibility of becoming their victims. It is especially interesting to note that, over the past century or so, the threat has shifted, and our assessment of which social categories are to be feared and which are to be protected has changed radically.

Keeping Freeberg's interpretation in mind, we can appreciate the importance of conserving full control over our emotions and their public expression. Pornography is in the business of public images (all the debates speak at some point about censorship), and it would be intolerable to display in public reactions that were too sincere or too intimate. For a long time it has been considered essential to the maintenance of civilized society that everyone remains in control of his or her emotions in order to view the world with the proper amount of distance required by the coolness of contemporary society. That, in any case, is what good, nineteenth-century manners taught us.

Almost immediately upon their discovery by a passionate and nascent archeology, the scandalous findings in the excavations at Pompeii were promptly sealed up in the silence of a "secret museum" (the Borbonico in Naples), access to which was forbidden to women, children, and the poor of both sexes and all ages. It was assumed that only adult, educated men were capable of resisting the power of these obscene frescos. Civilization was safe with them, because they alone were capable of remaining calm, dignified, and moderate, whereas a more delicate or impressionable creature, such as a woman or a child or a member of the

ansophisticated poor, would be unable to resist the destabilizing power of pornography, and would without doubt plunge directly into debauchery. Also, as Walter Kendrick¹¹⁷ explains, all those ignorant barbarians outside the gate might possibly have seen in these erotic scenes a vestige of their own needs and desires, and contact with pornography could incite them to dreams of sexual liberation that would then lead to other needs, and before we knew it three million years of civilization would come to an immediate and unpleasant end. In the face of so considerable a risk, one can only put one's faith in gentlemen, who obviously have no intention of knocking down the very edifice that serves their needs so well.

Things haven't changed all that much since the discovery of Pompeii. In the eyes of the powerful, pornography is always disturbing when it falls into other people's hands. As Nixon so bluntly put it, the relaxation of sexual mores leads inexorably to every kind of debauchery, until in the end it brings about the redistribution of wealth and the equal sharing of property.¹¹⁸

More than a century after the excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii, the hierarchies have changed and the threat of pornography has shifted. New techniques (photography has replaced fresco painting) have permitted a more democratic access to pornography, and now no one can restrict it from women and the poor. Pornography thus becomes a "social problem" when it is no longer the preserve of gentlemen whose reactions to it are predictable and who know how to keep themselves aloof from its threat, as well as from the law. But obviously the social context has changed, and it would now be somewhat laughable to try to dictate lines of conduct to the poor and the working classes. And women no longer seem to have anything directly to fear from pornography, because they are not supposed to be interested in it. They can view it without emotion, and express no other reaction to it than a certain distaste. The vulnerability is now elsewhere.

The most likely target and victim of pornography today is unquestionably male, not necessarily young, or of humble origins, but certainly a bit weak-minded, a bit wild, and often brutal. He is the new planetary village idiot: every day he learns how easy violence is, and it is on him that pornography can have the most threatening effect for the community. Just as the gentlemen of old may have feared women and the poor, a world that thinks of itself as a social democracy can conceive of no more terrible threat than that of the barbarian at the gate, waiting to bring in

revolution and the destruction of social order. The monster's aspects are gross, vulgar, racist, skinheaded, fascist, and brutal, and countless times it has manifested an alarming capacity to adjust reality to fantasy, either by sheer madness or by brute force. This is the new vulnerable clientele among whom pornography can do the most damage. That's why people try to prohibit it, in order to protect the world from these new barbarians by protecting the barbarian from something that would make him more barbaric still.

In the end, there remains only one complete unanimity, one argument that has not changed during the past century: children are still considered particularly vulnerable, and adults have no right to abuse them either by showing them obscene things or, much worse, by using them to produce obscene things. After all the most acerbic arguments, the most complex discussions, the most radical divergence of views and opinions, that one fact is universally agreed upon. And that is why every commission of inquiry, no matter how many of its conclusions have fizzled into doubt and uncertainty, can always save face in the end by stating with the greatest possible determination what it knows will be universally accepted: there must never be any conjunction between childhood and pornography. And every decent government hastens to give the impression of strength by promising that here, at least, any even minor contravention will be swiftly and severely punished.

It may seem surprising, but it should be asked whether the real menace isn't, in fact, or at least in part, the opposite. Could it be that deep down the prohibition of child pornography is not so much to protect children as it is to neutralize a potential danger to society? First, it is incontestable that children are seen as extremely vulnerable, and any abuse of authority on the part of an adult constitutes a particularly heinous crime. On this point there can be no debate. Anyone accused of incest, child abuse, or pedophilia appears before the world looking ashamed; anyone engaged in such activities lives under the constant threat of very severe laws, and even the unwritten law of being butchered by fellow prisoners. On the other hand, as I. C. Jarvie¹¹⁹ has pointed out, the social problems raised by the small number of individuals who find sexual pleasure in children are minimal, and there is no reason to believe that they would be increased by the effects of a child pornography that interests practically no one. At the same time, prohibiting it has very little effect on a perfectly marginal world that is already used to living in total illegality. All the inquiries agree that this

sector of the industry is and always has been exceptional in every sense of the word. To declare from the rooftops that child pornography is an evil would probably be neither more nor less effective than to proclaim that it is also forbidden to rape children and then murder them. In addition, to oblige defenceless children to participate in obscene spectacles constitutes an abuse of power so generally condemned that any discussion of it seems superfluous. But – and here is the point – we do keep talking about it, and so children find themselves promoted to the level of the perfect victim. At which point we must ask why, beyond the need to find some mutual ground on which to end the controversies, is such importance placed on the question of children in most of the debates about pornography? Why such importance, especially when a shift in meaning has taken place, and when, having nothing to add to the horror of using children in pornography, people insist on the need to protect our children from pornography, which is not the same thing at all.

It seems worth mentioning that during the course of these discussions, it became clear that some of the participants do not seem to know children very well. To imagine that children will all go rushing down to the pornography newsstands is to suppose, in a most astonishing manner, that there is in children a curiosity about such matters, about which they are often a lot more open and frank than adults. While some governments would like to limit access to pornography by placing it on higher shelves or behind counters, in the Netherlands and in Denmark, where coin-operated vending machines for pornography are found on street corners, and can be used by anyone who comes along, and where schools are especially tolerant about such things, it was found that children show very little interest in them.¹²⁰ After the hearings held by the Williams Commission, A. W. B. Simpson¹²¹ expressed his surprise at adults talking with great confidence about children “as if someone had once described one to them”; someone even suggested that, if children spent their pocket money on pornography, the first consequence would be an improvement in their dental hygiene. It seems obvious that children are in general a lot more at ease than adults when they talk about penises, vulvas, anuses, piss, shit, and so on, whereas one of the essential elements in the attraction of pornography is embarrassment.

Jarvie suggests that it is precisely children’s familiarity with sexual matters that annoys us and makes them a threat to the adult world. We have now learned (not without some shock and a certain amount of resistance) that children do not live in the kind of virginal purity

in which adults would like to believe. They are rather perverse polymorphs, both exhibitionists and voyeurs, who go through periods of homosexuality, coprophilia, and zoophilia. Child sexuality attempts to explore all the variations, and refuses to acknowledge barriers between the masculine and the feminine, the oral and the anal, or even the very limits of the species. It does not recognize a single rule, and has not yet learned what normalcy is, or even good manners. In short, child sexuality is an insult to civilization.

Again, society feels the need to protect itself, and its self-defence mechanism takes the form of protection imposed on someone else. It pretends to be protecting children from adult sexuality, but it is the civilized world that needs to guard itself against the sexuality of children. This is because child sexuality, like that of women, the poor, and native peoples in former times, represents a defiance that has the power to demystify sex, to explode the repressive nature of adult sexuality, and soon, perhaps, to place the family, school, religion, and all possibility of an orderly life in utter peril. So nothing is new, and that same pornography that has no effect on us must be prohibited from others who could react badly to it, especially those others who are our most significant sources of worry.

We can close this long survey of the public debates by underlining the obvious: pornography is a problem whenever it risks unchaining the public enemy – deviants, the backward, the uncultured, the barbarians, and all the other pariahs of proper social order. And if most of those who take part in the debates use this platform to draw attention to the dangers that pornography represents, it may be because we can only really talk about pornography when we are threatened.