

# Book Reviews

## **CAUGHT LOOKING: FEMINISM, PORNOGRAPHY AND CENSORSHIP**

FACT Book Committee, East Haven:  
Long River Books (3rd edition), 1992.

## **DIRTY LOOKS: WOMEN, PORNOGRAPHY, POWER**

Pamela Church Gibson and Roma  
Gibson, eds., London: British Film  
Institute, 1993.

## **THE JAGUAR AND THE ANTEATER: PORNOGRAPHY AND THE MODERN WORLD**

Bernard Arcand, Translated by  
Wayne Grady, Toronto: McClelland  
and Stewart, 1993.

## **MAKING VIOLENCE SEXY: FEMINIST VIEWS ON PORNOGRAPHY**

Diana E. H. Russell, ed., New York:  
Teachers College Press, 1993.

## **PORNOGRAPHY, WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND CIVIL LIBERTIES: A RADICAL NEW VIEW**

Catherine Itzin, ed., Oxford: Oxford  
UP, 1993.

## **PORNOGRAPHY AND FEMINISM: THE CASE AGAINST CENSORSHIP**

Gillian Rodgeron and Elizabeth  
Wilson, eds., London: Lawrence &  
Wishart, 1991.

## **SEX EXPOSED: SEXUAL- ITY AND THE PORNOG- RAPHY DEBATE**

Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh,  
eds., New Brunswick, New Jersey:  
Rutgers UP, 1993.

*by Carol Margaret Davison*

North American and British Women's Studies' publications over the last few years confirm Carol J. Clover's assertion in *Dirty Looks* that "for better or worse, pornography has become the feminist issue of the decade." In the same anthology Jennifer Wicke wittily remarks that the academic examination of pornography has compelled "an orgy of publication." As several recent books on the subject attest, Bernard Arcand's insightful comment is his 1991 Governor General's award-winning study of pornography, *The Jaguar and the Anteater*, also, unfortunately, applies: "Few subjects seem to have lent themselves as easily to peremptory, but gratuitous, statements, doubtful interpretations, ill-considered conclusions, distortions, and bad faith as pornography."

As Arcand suggests, when one scratches the surface of this seemingly simple black-and-white issue, grey areas of complexity abound. For starters, establishing a clear definition of what constitutes pornography and associated terms like 'violence' and 'obscenity' has resulted in a fury of debate in which the contenders often end up arguing apples and oranges. In fact, it would seem that in many instances little progress has been made in this definition area since U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's declaration about pornography in 1964, namely, "I know it when I see it." For this vague remark, Stewart was publicly ridiculed, yet *Ms.* magazine's statement twenty-one

years later in their 1985 cover story on pornography remained equally ambiguous: "one person's pornography is another's erotica." Speaking from a more materialistic perspective, André Breton and Angela Carter also failed to clarify the issue with their assertion that eroticism is the pornography of the elite. They may have added a new dimension to the debate in advancing the hypothesis that the eroticism/pornography distinction is largely a class-contingent question of semantics, but they failed, in the final analysis, to illuminate the nature of pornography itself.

As evidenced by the fact that none of these recent anthologies includes essays representing both sides of the question, an impasse has clearly been reached in feminist discussion. Misrepresentation is rampant on what has essentially and lamentably become a battlefield. In *Pornography and Feminism: The Case Against Censorship*, for example, members of Britain's FAC (Feminists Against Censorship) describe the controversy as "a long-running conflict between the advocates of freedom of sexual expression and the defenders of puritanical social control." This synopsis is grossly misleading as anti-pornography feminists (and evangelical Real Women do not fall into their ranks) reiterate that they are not anti-sex but rather anti-sexism and anti-violence. As Diana E. H. Russell makes clear in her introduction to *Making Violence Sexy*, "What is objectionable about pornography...is its abusive and degrading portrayal of females and female sexuality, not its sexual content or explicitness." The exact definition of what constitutes "degradation" or "dehumanization" remains disputable, however, as it does in the case of the slippery MacKinnon/Dworkin anti-pornography ordinance drafted in 1983 which recast pornography as a civil rights issue and will, wherever it is passed into law, enable victims of

pornography to sue pornographers for damages. John Stoltenberg clarifies this matter to a degree in his cogent essay "Pornography and Freedom" (in Russell's anthology), when he maintains that an assessment of pornography's impact must include an examination of its eroticization of male supremacy, violence, and terror. In the light of Stoltenberg's focus upon violent pornography, few, if any of the glossy sexually explicit images contained in FACT's (Feminist Anti-Censorship Task-force) third edition of *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography & Censorship* would be deemed "pornographic" by the anti-pornography feminists represented in Russell's and Itzin's anthologies. A recommended addition to one's erotica shelf, *Caught Looking* also includes a series of generally well-considered essays addressing the pornography debate. While successful in its stimulating agenda to validate "the pleasures of looking and imagining," however, its steamy photos risk drawing attention away from the text.

A further example of misunderstanding in the pornography debate involves FAC's characterization of its engagement with the civil rights' issue of free speech. Pro-pornography feminists are often guilty in these anthologies of establishing straw-man style arguments in order to confuse the terms of the debate. Russell and Itzin foreground the fact that most anti-pornography feminists are not pro-censorship. Although her claim regarding causality is problematic, Russell's description of the pro-pornography strategy is accurate: "Under an anti-censorship banner, dissenting opinions and evidence of the harm caused by pornography have simply been suppressed, a practice that continues to this day." As attorney and anti-pornography activist Norma Ramos argues in *Ms.*'s recent pornography cover story (January-February 1994), censorship, in fact, helps pornography to flourish. She and outspoken anti-pornography activist Andrea Dworkin maintain that the United States' obscenity laws should be repealed as they can be

used by the state for censorship purposes. Ramos and Dworkin concur with Robin Morgan's arguments in her oft-cited 1974 essay, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," that "a phallogocentric culture is more likely to begin its censorship purges with books on pelvic self examinations for women or books containing lyrical paens to lesbianism than with *See Him Tear and Kill Her* or similar Mickey-Spillanesque titles." Canadians are beginning to get a taste of such distorted interpretations as a result of Bill C-128, the new child pornography law that was pushed quickly through the House of Commons by the former Progressive Conservative government in June of 1993. Toronto artist Eli Langer was charged in December of 1993 under this law as a pornographer for his paintings exploring the issues of child sexual abuse. As a result of ill-considered legislation like Bill C-128, artists like Langer may be subject to persecution by the state.

With ten essays devoted to it, Itzin's anthology provides the most thorough examination of the causality question which assesses if and how pornography actually causes physical harm. This concern with pornography's social impact is central to the debate and has generated the greatest problems for both contingents. Apples and oranges are again plentiful. While anti-pornography feminists maintain that violent, humiliating pornographic representations have sometimes fostered copy-cat crimes (and men and children—male and female—may assume the traditional "female" social role as submissive victims in these depictions), pro-pornography feminist contributors to *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* argue that violent imagery is both extremely rare and unpopular with most male pornography consumers. It is, however, these violent representations that constitute "pornography" for most of today's anti-pornography feminists. Social-science based studies may have failed to provide definite evidence in support of the claim that pornographic repre-

sentations actually cause sexual violence, but other pertinent aspects of the question have been outlined as a result of engaging with this issue. Some anti-pornography feminists regard this causality idea as potentially dangerous, for it furnishes perpetrators of sex crimes with an "addiction excuse". While Ted Bundy, for example, had often asserted that his murders had been committed by an "entity" within him, in his final confession in 1989, he adhered to a newly available cultural script: *pornography made him do it*.

In their brilliantly coherent and compelling essay on the causality question in Itzin's anthology, Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer expose both the dangers involved in this recent phenomenon of porn-blame and the truths unwittingly revealed by it. A visual representation of eroticized violence rooted in Enlightenment texts wherein the discursive concepts of sex, murder, mastery, liberty, and transcendence are inextricably connected, present-day pornography is an inherited cultural script that helps to shape our sexualities and our sexual imaginations. Moreover, as Cameron and Frazer explain, it appears in its "softer" more pervasive forms "in nearly all public environments (trucks, billboards, assembly lines, offices, the newspapers and the shops where you buy them)." Although we have the capacity to reject such representations, they have the power to shape our desires in particular ways and to tell us, effectively, what we should be doing.

According to this lucid argument, a radical shift in the subject or nature of pornographic representations will, of necessity, reflect changes in the society in which they are produced. The basic fact that pornography is not produced in a vacuum is, remarkably, undermined by many scholars. Although an interesting, articulate overview of the phenomenon of pornography and the major debates surrounding it, Bernard Arcand's study, for example, fails to recognise pornography's specific relation to the

existing power politics of patriarchal capitalism. Those engaged in the debate for political reasons are implicitly patronised in his work as fools or misguided pedants. Moreover, he uses the terms "pornography" and "erotica" interchangeably without defining them. It seems strange, indeed, that this debate has been largely driven by a guiding precept that deems pornography a monolith. This is, however, far from the case. The most theoretical and academic anthology examined here, *Dirty Looks*, underlines pornography's Janus-faced nature: for women, it functions both as a mode of imprisoning objectification and an outlaw discourse. While Angela Carter foregrounded the fact in *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* that "most pornography remains in the service of the status quo," it is also possible for pornography to function as an instrument that destabilises the official culture.

Just as narratives chronicling female desire have changed the way women see themselves in the world, so too must feminist pornographic narratives be produced in order to counter those already existing, culturally-scripted stories that tend to locate woman in the position of object of desire. Desiring sexual subjects like porn-artist Annie Sprinkle, Susie Bright, and Madonna, have manipulated pornographic representations in a transgressive fashion in a concerted effort to alter prevailing conceptions of woman as passive sexual object. In this debate's terms, however, their non-violent, non-degrading, and non-humiliating representations are more aptly described as "erotic." Women consume an increasing number of pornographic videos, and radical alternations in their content are ongoing. This has certainly generated a variety of responses from feminists which, according to Cameron and Frazer, is a healthy sign—"it is important for feminists to go on analysing and criticizing pornography, if only because it provides such a clear illustration of the themes (transcendence, transgression,

mastery) that are also to be found in the other cultural products" that help to mold our sexualities. The extent to which "pornographers," male and female, are complicit in fostering outdated and debilitating stereotypes must be constantly assessed and criticised if progress is to be made. If our voices are a little weak, our buying power will speak loud and clear.

The ongoing, heated pornography debate, then, is not as misguided as some believe. Miscommunication and an unwillingness to listen have often impeded dialogue. Ironically, feminists on both sides of the question share similar visions of woman's social progress. How to effect these advancements and what our top priorities should be, however, are bones of contention. Nonetheless, there has been consensus on certain issues. For one, the ongoing examination of visual and textual representations of women is a crucial feminist concern that must be extended beyond pornography and fostered along more than academic lines. Furthermore, the "real" people involved in producing pornography have often been left out of the debate. The stigmatisation of women who work in the sex industry has been detrimental to feminist aims. Although he overlooks the importance of feminist critiques of representation, Arcand correctly outlines that a radical shift in attitude towards those women is long overdue: "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."

To best acquaint yourself with the debate, read selections from Itzin's comprehensive volume (it has an extraordinary bibliography), alongside *Sex Exposed* edited by Segal and McIntosh. Despite its refusal to

contextualise the issue in contemporary terms, Arcand's book provides a very good overview of the subject. If arguing the more academic points of a topic like S&M turns you on, read *Dirty Looks*. Diana Russell's *Making Violence Sexy* has a wonderful introductory essay and is especially good on providing experiential material from women involved in the industry. The series of articles outlining various actions, both humorous and grave, that feminists have or should have used in their fight against pornography is innovative and gives one a great deal of food for thought.

If we put our collective purses behind our principles, and foster a concerted vocal and visual offensive on the representation front, pornography can be beaten into erotic submission.

## TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR BODY

Dr. Carolyn DeMarco, Winlaw, British Columbia: *The Well Women Press*, 1994.

by *Rona Achilles*

Carolyn DeMarco is a courageous woman. Trained as a traditional M.D., she veered from the dominant medical model and ventured into alternative therapies. She is now a proficient alternative practitioner with a background in traditional medicine. Even more courageously, she has written a book which presents the treatment options of both worlds in a balanced fashion. For health consumers (usually women) who are navigating their way through mainstream and alternative solutions to medical problems, this book is a gold mine.

"Should I tell my obstetrician that I am seeing a homeopath?" a friend asked me recently. Since I knew the physician personally, my advice leaned towards not telling. Fragmented health care is neither a good idea nor a pleasant experience but surveys indicate that Canadians are increasingly using both mainstream