

LIFE AND DEATH

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PORNOGRAPHY HAPPENS

For twenty years, people that you know and people that you do not know inside the women's movement, with its great grassroots breadth and strength, have been trying to communicate something very simple: pornography happens. It happens. Lawyers, call it what you want—call it speech, call it act, call it conduct. Catharine A. MacKinnon and I called it a practice when we described it in the antipornography civil rights ordinance that we drafted for the City of Minneapolis in 1983; but the point is that it happens. It happens to women, in real life. Women's lives are made two-dimensional and dead. We are flattened on the page or on the screen. Our vaginal lips are painted purple for the consumer to clue him in as to where to focus his attention such as it is. Our rectums are highlighted so that he knows where to push. Our mouths are used and our throats are used for deep penetration.

I am describing a process of dehumanization, a concrete means of changing someone into some thing. We are not talking about violence yet; we are nowhere near violence.

Dehumanization is real. It happens in real life; it happens to stigmatized people. It has happened to us, to women. We say that women are objectified. We hope that people will think that we are very smart when we use a long word. But being turned into an object is a real event; and

the pornographic object is a particular kind of object. It is a target. You are turned into a target. And red or purple marks the spot where he's supposed to get you.

This object wants it. She is the only object with a will that says, hurt me. A car does not say, bang me up. But she, this nonhuman thing, says hurt me—and the more you hurt me, the more I will like it.

When we look at her, that purple painted thing, when we look at her vagina, when we look at her rectum, when we look at her mouth, when we look at her throat, those of us who know her and those of us who have been her still can barely remember that she is a human being.

In pornography we literally see the will of women as men want to experience it. This will is expressed through concrete scenarios, the ways in which women's bodies are positioned and used. We see, for instance, that the object wants to be penetrated; and so there is a motif in pornography of self-penetration. A woman takes some thing and she sticks it up herself. There is pornography in which pregnant women for some reason take hoses and stick the hoses up themselves. This is not a human being. One cannot look at such a photograph and say, This is a human being, she has rights, she has freedom, she has dignity, she is someone. One cannot. That is what pornography *does* to women.

We talk about fetishism in sex.* Psychologists have always made that mean, for example, a man who ejaculates to or on a shoe. The shoe can be posed as it were on a table far from the man. He is sexually excited; he masturbates, maybe rubs up against the shoe; he has sex "with" the shoe. In pornography, that is what happens to a woman's body: she is

*"The word *fetish* comes from the Portuguese *feitiço*, which means 'charm' or 'made thing.' A fetish is a magical, symbolic object. Its first meaning is religious: the magical object is regarded with irrational, extreme, extravagant trust or reverence (to paraphrase Merriam-Webster). In its sexual meaning, the magic of the fetish is in its power to cause and sustain penile erection. . . .

"No sense of her own purpose can supersede, finally, the male's sense of her purpose: to be that thing that enables him to experience raw phallic power. In pornography, his sense of purpose is fully realized. She is the pinup, the centerfold, the poster, the postcard, the dirty picture, naked, half-dressed, laid out, legs spread, breasts or ass protruding. She is the thing

(continued)

turned into a sexual fetish and the lover, the consumer, ejaculates on her. In the pornography itself, he does ejaculate *on* her. It is a convention of pornography that the sperm is on her, not in her. It marks the spot, what he owns and how he owns it. The ejaculation on her is a way of saying (through showing) that she is contaminated with his dirt; that she is dirty. This is the pornographer's discourse, not mine; the Marquis de Sade always refers to ejaculate as pollution.

Pornographers use every attribute any woman has. They sexualize it. They find a way to dehumanize it. This is done in concrete ways so that, for instance, in pornography the skin of black women is taken to be a sexual organ, female of course, despised, needing punishment. The skin itself is the fetish, the charmed object; the skin is the place where the violation is acted out—through verbal insult (dirty words directed at the skin) and sexualized assault (hitting, whipping, cutting, spitting on, bondage including rope burns, biting, masturbating on, ejaculating on).

In pornography, this fetishizing of the female body, its sexualization and dehumanization, is always concrete and specific; it is never abstract and conceptual. That is why all these debates on the subject of pornography have such a bizarre quality to them. Those of us who know that pornography hurts women, and care, talk about women's real lives, insults and assaults that really happen to real women in real life—the women in the pornography and the women on whom the pornography is used. Those who argue for pornography, especially on the ground of freedom of speech, insist that pornography is a species of idea, thought, fantasy, situated inside the physical brain, the mind, of the consumer no less.

In fact we are told all the time that pornography is really about ideas.

she is supposed to be: the thing that makes him erect. In literary and cinematic pornography, she is taught to be that thing: raped, beaten, bound, used, until she recognizes her true nature and purpose and complies—happily, greedily, begging for more. She is used until she knows only that she is a thing to be used. This knowledge is her authentic erotic sensibility: her erotic destiny. . . ." Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), pp. 123, 128.

See Andrea Dworkin, "Objects," in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), pp. 101–28.

Well, a rectum doesn't have an idea, and a vagina doesn't have an idea, and the mouths of women in pornography do not express ideas; and when a woman has a penis thrust down to the bottom of her throat, as in the film *Deep Throat*, that throat is not part of a human being who is involved in discussing ideas. I am talking now about pornography without visible violence. I am talking about the cruelty of dehumanizing someone who has a right to more.

In pornography, everything means something. I have talked to you about the skin of black women. The skin of white women has a meaning in pornography. In a white-supremacist society, the skin of white women is supposed to indicate privilege. Being white is as good as it gets. What, then, does it mean that pornography is filled with white women? It means that when one takes a woman who is at the zenith of the hierarchy in racial terms and one asks her, What do you want?, she, who supposedly has some freedom and some choices, says, I want to be used. She says, use me, hurt me, exploit me, that is what I want. The society tells us that she is a standard, a standard of beauty, a standard of womanhood and femininity. But, in fact, she is a standard of compliance. She is a standard of submission. She is a standard *for* oppression, its emblem; she models oppression, she incarnates it; which is to say that she does what she needs to do in order to stay alive, the configuration of her conformity predetermined by the men who like to ejaculate on her white skin. She is for sale. And so what is her white skin worth? It makes her price a little higher.

When we talk about pornography that objectifies women, we are talking about the sexualization of insult, of humiliation; I insist that we are also talking about the sexualization of cruelty. And this is what I want to say to you—that there is cruelty that does not have in it overt violence.

There is cruelty that says to you, you are worth nothing in human terms. There is cruelty that says you exist in order for him to wipe his penis on you, that's who you are, that's what you are for. I say that dehumanizing someone is cruel; and that it does not have to be violent in order for it to be cruel.

Things are done to women day in and day out that would be construed to be violent if they were done in another context, not sexualized, to a man; women are pushed, shoved, felt up, called dirty names, have their passage physically blocked on the street or in the office; women simply move on, move through, unless the man escalates the violence to what the larger patriarchal world takes to be real violence: ax murder; sadistic stranger rape or gang rape; serial killing not of prostitutes. The touching, the pushing, the physical blockades—these same invasions done to men would be comprehended as attacks. Done to women, people seem to think it's bad but it's okay, it's bad but it's all right, it's bad but, hey, that's the way things are; *don't make a federal case out of it*. It occurs to me that we have to deal here—at the heart of the double standard—with the impact of orgasm on our perception of what hatred is and is not.

Men use sex to hurt us. An argument can be made that men have to hurt us, diminish us, in order to be able to have sex with us—break down barriers to our bodies, aggress, be invasive, push a little, shove a little, express verbal or physical hostility or condescension. An argument can be made that in order for men to have sexual pleasure with women, we have to be inferior and dehumanized, which means controlled, which means less autonomous, less free, less real.

I am struck by how hate speech, racist hate speech, becomes more sexually explicit as it becomes more virulent—how its meaning becomes more sexualized, as if the sex is required to carry the hostility. In the history of anti-Semitism, by the time one gets to Hitler's ascendance to power in the Weimar Republic, one is looking at anti-Semitic hate speech that is indistinguishable from pornography*—and it is not only actively published and distributed, it is openly displayed. What does

**Der Stürmer* is the outstanding example of anti-Semitic propaganda that reached the threshold of pornography while advocating race-hate. Founded in 1923 by Julius Streicher, a rabid anti-Semite who joined forces with Hitler in 1921 after an independent run as a Jew-hating rabble-rouser, *Der Stürmer* had Hitler's strong support, from the years of struggle (as the Nazis called them) through Hitler's reign, the years of persecution and annihilation. As late as 1942, Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda, wrote in his diary: "The Führer

that orgasm do? That orgasm says, I am real and the lower creature, that thing, is not, and if the annihilation of that thing brings me pleasure, that is the way life should be; the racist hierarchy becomes a sexually charged ideal. There is a sense of biological inevitability that comes from the intensity of a sexual response derived from contempt; there is biological urgency, excitement, anger, irritation, a tension that is satisfied in humiliating and belittling the inferior one, in words, in acts.†

We wonder, with a tendentious ignorance, how it is that people believe bizarre and transparently false philosophies of biological superiority. One answer is that when racist ideologies are sexualized, turned into concrete scenarios of dominance and submission such that they give people sexual pleasure, the sexual feelings in themselves make the ideologies seem biologically true and inevitable. The feelings seem to be natural; no argument changes the feelings; and the ideologies, then, also seem to be based in nature. People defend the sexual feelings by defending the ideologies. They say: my feelings are natural so if I have an orgasm from hurting you, or feel excited just by thinking about it, you are my natural partner in these feelings and events—your natural

sent word to me that he does not desire the circulation of the *Stürmer* to be reduced or that it stop publishing all together. . . . I, too, believe that our propaganda on the Jewish question must continue undiminished" (cited in Telford Taylor, *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992], p. 377).

†Tried at Nuremberg, Streicher was convicted of crimes against humanity and hanged on October 16, 1946. On his way to the hanging scaffolding he shouted "Heil Hitler!" and on it he shouted the bizarre—but in the circumstances clearly anti-Semitic—words, "Purim festival, 1946."

In his fascinating recent account of the Nuremberg trials, Telford Taylor, who was one of the prosecutors for the United States, suggests that Streicher was wrongly sentenced to death because "there was no accusation that Streicher himself had participated in any violence against Jews, so the sole (and difficult) legal issue was whether or not 'incitement' was a sufficient basis for his conviction" (Taylor, p. 376). This is a distinctly U.S.-based revisionism in keeping with the increasing fanaticism of First Amendment free speech absolutism. In Nuremberg, a relationship between sexualized hate propaganda and genocide was demonstrated. Many Western democracies responded by criminalizing the kind of hate speech, or incitement to genocide, in which Streicher engaged, indeed, at which he excelled. The United States has apparently, as a matter of law and public policy, decided to masturbate to it.

role is whatever intensifies my sexual arousal, which I experience as self-importance, or potency; you are nothing but you are *my* nothing, which makes me someone; using you is my right because being someone means that I have the power—the social power, the economic power, the imperial sovereignty—to do to you or with you what I want.

This phenomenon of feeling superior through a sexually reified racism is always sadistic; its purpose is always to hurt. Sadism is a dynamic in every expression of hate speech. In the use of a racial epithet directed at a person, for instance, there is a desire to hurt—to intimidate, to humiliate; there is an underlying dimension of pushing someone down, subordinating them, making them less. When that hate speech becomes fully sexualized—for instance, in the systematic reality of the pornography industry—and a whole class of people exists in order to provide sexual pleasure and a synonymous sense of superiority to another group, in this case men, when that happens, we dare not tolerate that being called freedom.

The problem for women is that being hurt is ordinary. It happens every day, all the time, somewhere to someone, in every neighborhood, on every street, in intimacy, in crowds; women are being hurt. We count ourselves lucky when we are only being humiliated and insulted. We count ourselves goddamn lucky when whatever happens falls short of rape. Those who have been beaten in marriage (a euphemism for torture) also have a sense of what luck is. We are always happy when something less bad happens than what we had thought possible or even likely, and we tell ourselves that if we do not settle for the less bad there is something wrong with us. It is time for us to stop that.

When one thinks about women's ordinary lives and the lives of children, especially female children, it is very hard not to think that one is looking at atrocity—if one's eyes are open. We have to accept that we are looking at ordinary life; the hurt is not exceptional; rather, it is systematic and it is real. Our culture accepts it, defends it, punishes us for resisting it. The hurt, the pushing down, the sexualized cruelty are intended; they are not accidents or mistakes.

Pornography plays a big part in normalizing the ways in which we are demeaned and attacked, in how humiliating and insulting us is made to look natural and inevitable.

I would like you especially to think about these things. Number one: pornographers use our bodies as their language. Anything they say, they have to use us to say. They do not have that right. They must not have that right. Number two: constitutionally protecting pornography as if it were speech means that there is a new way in which we are legally chattel. If the Constitution protects pornography as speech, our bodies then belong to the pimps who need to use us to say something. They, the humans, have a human right of speech and the dignity of constitutional protection; we, chattel now, moveable property, are their ciphers, their semantic symbols, the pieces they arrange in order to communicate. We are recognized only as the discourse of a pimp. The Constitution is on the side it has always been on: the side of the profit-making property owner even when his property is a person defined as property because of the collusion between law and money, law and power. The Constitution is not ours unless it works for us, especially in providing refuge from exploiters and momentum toward human dignity. Number three: pornography uses those who in the United States were left out of the Constitution. Pornography uses white women, who were chattel. Pornography uses African-American women, who were slaves. Pornography uses stigmatized men; for instance, African-American men, who were slaves, are often sexualized by contemporary pornographers as animalistic rapists. Pornography is not made up of old white men. It isn't. Nobody comes on them. They are doing this to us; or protecting those who do this to us. They do benefit from it; and we do have to stop them.

Think about how marriage controlled women, how women were property under the law; this did not begin to change until the early years of the twentieth century. Think about the control the church had over women. Think about what a resistance has been going on, and all the trouble you have made for these men who took for granted that you belonged to them. And think about pornography as a new institution of social control, a democratic use of terrorism against all women, a way of

saying publicly to every woman who walks down the street: avert your eyes (a sign of second-class citizenship), look down, bitch, because when you look up you're going to see a picture of yourself being hung, you're going to see your legs spread open.

Pornography tells us that the will of women is to be used. And I just want to say that the antipornography civil rights ordinance that Catharine MacKinnon and I developed in Minneapolis says that the will of women is *not* to be used; the Ordinance repudiates the premises of the pornography; its eventual use will show in the affirmative that women want equality.

Please note that the Ordinance was developed in Minneapolis, and that its twin city, St. Paul, passed a strong city ordinance against hate crimes; the courts struck down both. I want you to understand that there are some serious pornographers in Minneapolis and some serious racists in St. Paul and some serious citizens in both cities who want the pornography and the racism to stop. The Ordinance that Catharine and I drafted came out of that political culture, a grassroots, participatory political culture that did not want to tolerate either kind of cruelty toward people.

In the fall of 1983, Catharine and I were asked by a group of neighborhood activists to testify at a local zoning committee meeting. The group represented an area of Minneapolis that was primarily African-American, with a small poor-white population. The city council kept zoning pornography *into* their neighborhood. For seven years they had been fighting a host of zoning laws and zoning strategies that allowed pornography to destroy the quality of life around them. The city could write off their neighborhood and others like it because they mostly were not white and they mostly were poor; the pornography was purposefully put in such places and kept out of wealthier, whiter neighborhoods.

These activists came to us and said: we know now that the issue here is woman hating. That is virtually a direct quote: we know now that the issue here is woman hating. And we want to do something about it. What can we do?

They knew what to do. They organized MacKinnon and me, that's

for sure; and they organized Minneapolis. The whole city was organized on a grassroots level to stand against the woman hating in pornography. That was our mandate when we drafted the antipornography civil rights law; and constituencies of poor people, people of color, were organized in behalf of the lives of women in those communities. A city in the United States was organized by an ever expanding feminist wave of political workers that brought in working-class women, current and former prostitutes, academics, out and visible lesbians, students, and, *inter alia*, a small army of sexual abuse victims to demand passage of an amendment to the municipal civil rights law that recognized pornography as sex discrimination, as a violation of the civil rights of women. This amendment, which MacKinnon and I later redrafted to be a free-standing statute, is commonly called "the Ordinance."

The Ordinance got the massive, committed, excited support it did because it is fair, because it is honest, and because it is on the side of those who have been disenfranchised and oppressed. People mobilized—not from the top down but from the bottom up—to support the Ordinance because it does stand directly in the way of the woman hating in pornography: the bigotry, the hostility, the aggression that exploit and target women. It does this by changing our perceptions of the will of women. It destroys the authority of the pornographers on that subject by putting a law, dignity, real power, meaningful citizenship in the hands of the women they hurt. No matter how she is despised in the pornography or by the pornographers and their clients, she is respected by this law. Using the Ordinance, women get to say to the pimps and the johns: we are not your colony; you do not own us as if we were territory; my will as expressed through my use of this Ordinance is, I don't want it, I don't like it, pain hurts, coercion isn't sexy, I resist being someone else's speech, I reject subordination, I speak, I speak for myself now, I am going into court to speak—to you; and you will listen.

We wanted a law that repudiates what happens to women when pornography happens to women. In general, the legal system's misogyny mimics the pornographers'; abstractly we can call it gender bias, but the legal system incorporates an almost visceral hatred of women's bodies, as

if we exist to provoke assaults, like them, lie about them—and are not really injured by them. I have a character in *Mercy*—named Andrea—who says that you have to be clean to go before the law.* Now, no women are clean, or clean enough. That is what we find out every time we try to prosecute a rape; we're not clean.

But certainly the women who have been turned into pornography are not clean, and the women being sold on street corners are not clean, and the women who are being battered and pornographized in their homes are not clean. When a woman uses this Ordinance—if a woman ever gets a chance to use this Ordinance—she will not need to be clean to say, with dignity and authority, I am someone, therefore I resist.

When the Minneapolis City Council passed this Ordinance they said, women are someone, women matter, women want to fight back, we will give them what they want. The Minneapolis City Council had an idea of the will of women that contradicted the pornographers'; they got that different idea from the women who came to testify for the Ordinance, especially those who had grounds to use the Ordinance. The Ordinance's clarity and authority derive from the flesh-and-blood experiences of women who want to use it: women whose lives have been savaged by pornography. The Ordinance expresses their will to resist, and the enormous strength, translated into a legal right, of their capacity to endure, to survive.

The woman using the Ordinance will be saying, I am someone who has endured, I have survived, I matter, I know a lot, and what I know matters; it matters, and it is going to matter here in court, you pimp, because I am going to use what I know against you; and you, Mr. Con-

*“... and even if there's laws by the time they have hurt you you are too dirty for the law; the law needs clean ones but they dirty you up so the law won't take you; there's no crimes they committed that are crimes in the general perception because we don't count as to crimes as I have discovered time and time again as I try to think if what he did that hurt me so bad was a crime to anyone or was anything you could tell someone about so they would care; for you; about you; so you was human.” (See Dworkin, *Mercy* [London: Secker & Warburg, 1990], pp. 303–4.)

sumer, I know about you, and I am going to use what I know even about you, even when you are my teacher, my father, my lawyer, my doctor, my brother, my priest. I am going to use what I know.

It was not a surprise to Catharine MacKinnon and myself when, after the Ordinance was passed, the newspapers said—ah-ha, it was a right-wing, fundamentalist achievement. They were saying to us, to MacKinnon and me, you are no one, you can't exist, it could not have been *your* idea. And it was not a surprise to us when people believed it. We did not like it, but it was not a surprise.

And when the court said to the injured women who wanted to use the Ordinance, you are no one, the pimp is someone, he matters, we are going to protect him, it was not a surprise. And when the court said, the consumer is someone, none of you women are anyone no matter how much you have been hurt but he is someone and we are here for him, that was not a surprise. And it was not a surprise when the court said to women: when you assert your right to equality you are expressing an opinion, a point of view, which we should be debating in the famous marketplace of ideas, not legislating; when you claim you were injured—that rape, that beating, that kidnapping—you have a viewpoint about it, but in and of itself the injury does not signify. And it was not a surprise when the court said that there was a direct relationship between pornography as defined in the Ordinance and injuries to women, including rape and battery, but that relationship does not matter because the court has a viewpoint, which happens to be the same as the pornographers': you women are not worth anything except what we pay for you in that famous free marketplace where we take your actual corporeal reality to be an idea.

None of this was a surprise. Every little tiny bit of it was an outrage.

We wrote the Ordinance for the women who had been raped and beaten and prostituted in and because of pornography. They wanted to use it to say, I am someone and I am going to win. We are part of them, we have lived lives as women, we are not exempt or separate from any of this. We wrote the Ordinance in behalf of our own lives, too.

I want to ask you to make certain that women will have a right and a chance to go into a U.S. court of law and say: this is what the pornographers did to me, this is what they took from me and I am taking it back, I am someone, I resist, I am in this court because I resist, I reject their power, their arrogance, their cold-blooded, cold-hearted malice, and I am going to win.

You here today have to make that possible. It has been ten years now. It has been ten years. Count the number of women who have been hurt in those ten years. Count how many of us have been lucky enough to be only insulted and humiliated. Count. We cannot wait another ten years; we need you, we need you now—please, organize.