EROTICA VS. PORNOGRAPHY

by Gloria Steinem

In short, pornography is not about sex. It's about an imbalance of power that allows and even requires sex to be used as a form of aggression.

Look at or imagine images of people making love; really making love. Those images may be very diverse, but there is likely to be a mutual pleasure and touch and warmth, an empathy for each other's bodies and nerve endings, a shared sensuality and a spontaneous sense of two people who are there because they want to be.

Now look at or imagine images of sex in which there is force, violence, or symbols of unequal power. They may be very blatant: whips and chains of bondage, even torture and murder presented as sexually titillating, the clear evidence of wounds and bruises, or an adult's power being used sexually over a child. They may be more subtle: the use of class, race, authority, or just body poses to convey conqueror and victim; unequal nudity, with one person's body exposed and vulnerable while the other is armored with clothes; or even a woman by herself, exposed for an unseen but powerful viewer whom she clearly is trying to please. (It's interesting that, even when only the woman is seen, we often know whether she is there for her own pleasure or being displayed for someone else's.) But blatant or subtle, there is no equal power or mutuality. In fact, much of the tension and drama comes from the clear idea that one person is dominating another.

These two sorts of images are as different as love is from rape, as dignity is from humiliation, as partnership is from slavery, as pleasure is from pain. Yet they are confused and lumped together as "pornography" or "obscenity," "erotica" or "explicit sex," because sex and violence are so dangerously intertwined and confused. After all, it takes violence or the threat of it to maintain the dominance of any group of human beings over another. Moreover, the threat must be the most persuasive wherever men and women come together intimately and are most in danger of recognizing each other's humanity.

This confusion of sex with violence is most obvious in any form of sadomasochism. The inability to empathize with the "opposite sex" has become so great that a torturer or even murderer may actually believe pain or loss of life to be the natural fate of the victim; and the victim may have been so deprived of self-respect or positive human contact that she expects pain or loss of freedom as the price of any intimacy or attention at all. It's unlikely that even a masochist expects death. Nonetheless, "snuff" movies and much current pornographic literature insist that a slow death from sexual torture is the final orgasm and ultimate pleasure. It's a form of "suicide" reserved for women. Though men in fact are far
more likely to kill themselves, male suicide is almost never presented as
sexually pleasurable.

Sex is also confused with violence and aggression in all forms of popular
culture, as well as in respectable theories of psychology and sexual
behavior. The idea that aggression is a "normal" part of male sexuality,
and that passivity or even the need for male aggression is a "normal" part
of female sexuality, are part of the male-dominant culture we live in, the
books we learn from, and the air we breathe.

Even the words we are given to express our feelings are suffused with
the same assumptions. Sexual phrases are the most common synonyms
for conquering and humiliation (being bad, being screwed, getting
fucked); the sexually aggressive or even expressive woman is a slut or a
nymphomaniac, but the sexually aggressive man is just normal; and real
or scientific descriptions of sex may perpetuate the same roles; for
instance, a woman is always penetrated by a man though she might also
be said to have enveloped him.

Obviously, untangling sex from aggression—from violence or the
threat of it—is going to take a very long time. And the process is going to
be greatly resisted as a challenge to the very heart of male dominance and
male centrality.

But we do have a wisdom to guide us: the common sense of our bod-
ies. Pain is a warning of damage and danger. If that sensation is not
mixed with the intimacy we are given as children, we are unlikely to con-
fuse pain with pleasure and love. As we discover our free will and
strength, we are also more likely to discover our own initiative and plea-
sure in sex. As men no longer dominate and have to find an identity that
doesn't depend on superiority, they also discover that cooperation is
more interesting than submission, that empathy with their sex partner
increases their own pleasure, and that anxieties about their ability to
"perform" tend to disappear along with stereotyped ideas about
masculinity.

But women will be the main fighters of this new sexual revolution. It
is our freedom, our safety, our lives, and our pleasure that are mostly at
stake.

In this wave of feminism, we began by trying to separate sex and vi-
olence in those areas where the physical danger was and is the most imme-
diate; challenging rape as the one crime that was considered biologically
irresistible for the criminal and perhaps invited by the victim; refusing to
allow male-female beatings to be classified as "domestic violence" and
ignored by the law; and exposing forced prostitution and sexual slavery
as national and international crimes. With the exception of wife beating,
those challenges were made somewhat easier by men who wanted to
punish other men for taking their female property. Women still rarely
have the power to protect each other.

Such instances of real anti-woman warfare led us directly to the pro-
paganda that teaches and legitimizes them: pornography. For the same
reasons that we had begun to differentiate rape from sex, we realized that
we must find some way of separating pornographic depictions of sex as
an anti-woman weapon from those images of freely chosen, mutual sexu-
ality.

Fortunately, there is also wisdom in the origin of words. Pornography
comes from the Greek root pornt (harlot, prostitute, or female captive)
and grapheos (writing about or description of). Thus, it means a descrip-
tion of either the purchase of sex, which implies an imbalance of power
in itself, or sexual slavery.

This definition includes, and should include, all such degradation,
regardless of whether it is females who are the slaves and males who are
the captors or the rare examples that are vice versa. There is certainly
homosexual pornography, with a man playing the "feminine" role of vic-
tim. There is also role-reversal pornography, with a woman whipping or
punishing a man, though it's significant that this genre is created by men
for their own pleasure, not by or for women, and allows men to pretend
to be victims—but without real danger. There is lesbian pornography,
with a woman assuming the "masculine" role of victimizing another
woman. That women rarely choose this role of victimizer is due not to
biological superiority, but to a culture that is far less likely to addict
women to violence. But whatever the gender of the participants, all
pornography is an imitation of the male-female, conqueror-victim para-
digm, and almost all of it actually portrays or implies enslaved woman
and masterful male.

Even the 1970 Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornog-
ography, whose report is often accused of suppressing or ignoring evi-
dence of the causal link between pornography and violence against
women, defined the subject of their study as pictorial or verbal descrip-
tions of sexual behavior that was characterized by "the degrading and
demeaning portrayal of the role and status of the human female."
In short, pornography is not about sex. It's about an imbalance of power that allows and even requires sex to be used as a form of aggression.

*Erotica* is a word that can help us to differentiate sex from violence, and to rescue sexual pleasure. It comes from the Greek root *eros* (sexual desire or passionate love, named for Eros, the son of Aphrodite), and so contains the idea of love, positive choice, and the yearning for a particular person. Unlike pornography's reference to a harlot or prostitute, *erotica* leaves entirely open the question of gender. (In fact, we may owe its connotation of shared power to the Greek belief that a man's love for another man was more worthy than love for a woman.) Though both erotica and pornography usually refer to verbal or pictorial representations of sexual behavior, they are as different as a room with doors open from one with doors locked. The first might be a home, but the second could only be a prison.

The problem is that there is so little erotica. Women have rarely been free enough to pursue erotic pleasure in our own lives, much less to create it in the worlds of film, magazines, art, books, television, and popular culture—areas of communication we rarely control. Very few male authors and filmmakers have been able to escape society's message of what a man should do, much less to imagine their way into the identity of a woman, and even depictions of sex between men or between women often fall into the dominant-passive paradigm. Some women are now trying to portray equal and erotic sex—whether with men or with other women—but it is still not a part of popular culture.

And the problem is that there is so much pornography. This underground stream of anti-woman propaganda has existed in all male-dominant societies, but mass communication, profiteering corporations, and a backlash against female equality have now turned it into an inescapable flood in our streets and theaters and even our homes. Perhaps that's useful in the long run. Women can no longer pretend pornography does not exist. We must either face our own humiliation and torture every day on magazine covers and television screens, or fight back. There is hardly a newsstand without women's bodies in chains and bondage, in full labial display for the conquering male viewer, bruised or on our knees, screaming in real or pretended pain, pretending to enjoy what is hurting and killing us. The same images are in mainstream movie theaters and respectable hotel rooms via closed-circuit TV for the traveling businessman. They are brought into our own homes not only in magazines, but in videocassettes and on cable TV channels. Even video games offer such features as a smiling, rope-bound woman and a male figure with an erection, the game's object being to rape the woman as many times as possible. (Like much of pornography, that game is fascist on racial grounds as well as sexual ones. The smiling woman is an Indian maiden, the rapist is General Custer, and the game is called "Custer's Revenge.") Though "snuff" movies, in which real women are eviscerated and finally killed, have been driven underground (in part because the graves of many murdered women were discovered around the shack of just one filmmaker in California), movies that simulate the torture-murders of women are still going strong. (*Snuff* is the porn term for killing a woman for sexual pleasure. We are not even allowed the seriousness of a word like *murder*.) So are the "kiddie porn" or "chicken porn" movies and magazines that show adult men undressing, fondling, and sexually abusing children; often with the titillating theme that "fathers" are raping "daughters." Some "chicken porn" magazines offer explicit tips on how to use a child sexually without leaving physical evidence of rape. The premise is that children's testimony is even less likely to be believed than that of adult women, and as we see in the few cases of the sexual abuse of children that reach the courts, this is true.

Add this pornography industry up, from magazines like *Playboy* and *Hustler*, to movie classics like *Love Nest*, *Style*, *Deep Throat*, or *Angels in Pain*, and the total sales come to a staggering ten billion dollars a year—more than all the sales of the conventional film and record industry combined. And that doesn't count the fact that many "conventional" film and music images are also pornographic, from gynecidal record jackets like the famous *I'm Black and Blue* from the Rolling Stones—and *I Love It!* (which showed a seminude black woman bound to a chair) to the hundreds of teenage sex-and-horror movies in which young women die sadistic deaths and rape is presented not as a crime but as sexual excitement, plus the many mainstream films and TV shows that tailor pornography to pass minimal standards. Nor do those industries include the sales of the supposedly "literary" forms of pornography, from *The Story of O* to the works of the Marquis de Sade.

If Nazi propaganda that justified the torture and killing of Jews were the theme of half of our most popular movies and magazines, would we not be outraged? If Ku Klux Klan propaganda that preached and
glorified the enslavement of blacks were the subject of much-praised “classic” novels, would we not protest? We know that such racist propaganda precedes and justifies the racist acts of pogroms and lynchings. We know that watching a violent film makes test subjects more likely both to condone violence and to be willing to perpetrate it themselves. Why is the propaganda of sexual aggression against women of all races the one form of group hatred in which the “conventional wisdom” sees no danger? Why is pornography the only media violence that is supposed to be a “safety valve” to satisfy men’s “natural” aggressiveness somewhere short of acting it out?

The first reason is the confusion of all nonprocreative sex with pornography. Any description of sexual behavior, or even nudity, may be called pornographic or obscene (a word whose Latin derivative means dirty or containing filth) by those who insist that the only moral purpose of sex is procreative, or even that any portrayal of sexuality or nudity is against the will of God.

In fact, human beings seem to be the only animals that experience the sex drive and pleasure both when we can and cannot conceive. Other animals experience periods of heat or estrus in which sexual activity is concentrated. Humans do not. Just as we developed uniquely human capacities for language, planning, memory, and invention along our evolutionary path, we also developed sexuality as a form of expression, a way of communicating that is separable from our reproductive need. For human beings, sexuality can be and often is a way of bonding, giving and receiving pleasure, bridging differentness, discovering sameness, and communicating emotion.

We developed this and other human gifts through our ability to change our environment, adapt to it physically, and so in the very long run to affect our own evolution. But as an emotional result of this spiraling path away from other animals, we seem to alternate between periods of exploring our unique ability and feelings of loneliness in the unknown that we ourselves have created, a fear that sometimes sends us back to the comfort of the animal world by encouraging us to look for a sameness with it.

For instance, the separation of “play” from “work” is a feature of the human world. So is the difference between art and nature, or an intellectual accomplishment and a physical one. As a result, we celebrate play, art, and invention as pleasurable and important leaps into the unknown; yet any temporary trouble can send us back to a nostalgia for our primitive past and a conviction that the basics of survival, nature, and physical labor are somehow more worthwhile or even more moral.

In the same way, we have explored our sexuality as separable from conception: a pleasurable, empathetic, important bridge to others of our species. We have even invented contraception, a skill that has probably existed in some form since our ancestors figured out the process of conception and birth, in order to extend and protect this uniquely human gift for sexuality that is a means of expression. Yet we also have times of atavistic suspicion that sex is not complete, or even legal or intended by God, if it does not or could not end in conception.

No wonder the very different concepts of “erota” and “pornography” can be so confused. Both assume that sex can be separated from conception; that human sexuality has additional uses and goals. This is the major reason why, even in our current culture, both may still be condemned as equally obscene and immoral. Such gross condemnation of all sexuality that isn’t harnessed to childbirth (and to patriarchal marriage so that children are properly “owned” by men) has been increased by the current backlash against women’s independence. Out of fear that the whole patriarchal structure will be upset if we as women really have the autonomous power to decide our sexual and reproductive futures (that is, if we can control our own bodies, and thus the means of reproduction), anti-equality groups are not only denouncing sex education and family planning as “pornographic,” but are trying to use obscenity laws to stop the sending of all contraceptive information through the mails. Any sex or nudity outside the context of patriarchal marriage and forced childbirth is their target. In fact, Phyllis Schlafly has denounced the entire women’s movement as “obscene.”

Not surprisingly, this religious backlash has a secular, intellectual counterpart that relies heavily on applying the “natural” behavior of some selected part of the animal world to humans. This is questionable in itself; but such Lionel Tiger-ish studies make their political purpose even more clear by the animals they choose and the habits they emphasize. For example, some male primates carry and generally “mother” their infants, male lions care for their young, female elephants often lead the clan, and male penguins literally do everything except give birth, from hatching the eggs to sacrificing their own membranes to feed the
enforced, the sexual slavery and exploitation of children used in pornography go unpunished, the forcible use of teenage runaways is ignored by police, and even the torture and murder of prostitutes for men’s sexual titillation is obscured by some mitigating notion that the women asked for it.

In all other areas of privacy, the limitation is infringement on the rights and lives and safety of others. That must become true for pornography. Right now, it is exempt: almost “below the law.”

As for class bias, it’s simply not accurate to say that pornography is erotica with less education. From the origins of the words, as well as the accurate way that feminists working against pornography are trying to use them, it’s clear there is a difference of content, not just artistic or economic form. Pornography is about dominance. Erotica is about mutuality. Any man able to empathize with women can easily tell the difference by looking at a photograph or film and putting himself in the woman’s skin. Perhaps the most revealing thing is that this argument is generally made on behalf of the working class by pro-pornography liberals who are middle or upper-class themselves.

Of course, the notion that enjoying pornography makes it okay is an overwhelmingly male idea. From Kinsey forward, research has confirmed that the purchasers of pornography are almost all males, and that the majority of men are turned on by it, while the majority of women find it angering, humiliating, and not a turn-on at all. This was true even though women were shown sexually explicit material that may have included erotica, since Kinsey and others did not make that distinction. If such rare examples of equal sex were entirely deleted, pornography could probably serve as sex aversion-therapy for most women; yet many men and some psychologists continue to call women prudish, frigid, or generally uptight if they are not turned on by their own domination. The same men might be less likely to argue that anti-Semitic and racist literature was okay because it gave them pleasure. The problem is that the degradation of women of all races is still thought to be normal. A male-dominant system must teach men that dominance over women is normal, and that’s just what pornography does.

Nonetheless, there are a few well-meaning women who are both turned on by pornography and angered that other women are not. Some of their anger is misunderstanding: objections to pornography are not condemnations of women who have been raised to believe sex and
domination are synonymous, for we have all internalized some degree of sexism and are struggling to dig it out. Other women’s anger results from an underestimation of themselves: being turned on by a rape fantasy is not the same thing as wanting to be raped. As Robin Morgan has pointed out, the distinguishing feature of a fantasy is that the fantasizer herself is in control. (Both men and women have “ravishment” fantasies in which we are passive while others act out our unspoken wishes—but they are still our wishes.) And some anger, especially when it comes from women who consider themselves feminists, is a refusal to differentiate between what may be true for them now and what may be true in the future. For example, a woman may be attracted only to men who are taller, heavier, and older than she, but still understand that such superfluous restrictions on the men she loves and enjoys going to bed with won’t exist in a more free and less-stereotyped future; or more seriously, she may be drawn to cruel and distant men because she is still trying to get her cruel and distant father of the past to love her, but understand that a future of mutuality is possible and preferable. Similarly, some lesbians may find themselves following the masculine-feminine patterns that were our only model for intimate relationships, heterosexual or not; yet still see these old patterns clearly and try to equalize them. It isn’t that women attracted to pornography cannot also be feminists who are doing their best with their own internalized demons, but that pornography itself must be recognized as a perpetuation of those demons for other women now and into the future.

Finally, there is the First Amendment argument against feminist antipornography campaigns: the most respectable and publicized opposition, but also the one with the least basis in fact. Feminist groups are not arguing for censorship of pornography through prior restraint, just as we are not arguing that Nazi literature or racist propaganda of the Ku Klux Klan cannot be published. For one thing, any societal definition of pornography by a male-dominant society (or of racist literature by a racist society) might well be used to punish the powerless even more. Freely chosen gay or lesbian expression might be deemed more “pornographic” than snuff movies, school sex education courses more “obscene” than bondage, just as generalizations about European Americans might be more punished than those about African Americans. Furthermore, censorship in itself, even with the proper definitions, might only drive pornography into more underground activity

and, were it to follow the pattern of drug traffic, into even more profitability. Most important, the First Amendment is part of a statement of individual rights against government intervention that feminism seeks to expand, not contract: for instance, a woman’s right to decide whether and when to have children. When we protest against pornography and educate others about it, as I am doing now, we are strengthening the First Amendment by exercising it.

The only legal steps suggested by feminists thus far have been the prosecution of those pornography makers who are accused of such crimes as murder, assault, and kidnapping; prosecution of those many who use children under the age of consent; enforcement of existing zoning and other codes that are breached because of payoffs to law-enforcement officials and the enormous rents paid to pornography’s landlords; the use of public nuisance statutes to require that pornography not be displayed in public places where its sight cannot reasonably be avoided; and the right to sue for damages the makers of any pornography (or other hate literature) that can be shown to the satisfaction of a jury to have contributed to a crime. None of these measures keeps material from being published: “prior restraint,” in the terms of censorship law. Most just require that those responsible for pornography no longer be immune from prosecution for crimes committed during its production and distribution.

Perhaps the reason for this “First Amendment” controversy is less substance than smoke screen. Just as earlier feminist campaigns against rape were condemned by some civil libertarians as efforts that could only end by putting more men of color or poor men in jail, or in perpetuating the death penalty then on the books in some states as a punishment for rape, antipornography campaigns are now run on similarly high-minded grounds. When rape victims began to come forward, however, the public learned that white psychiatrists, educators, and other professionals were just as likely to be rapists as were poor men or men of color. Furthermore, changing the patriarchal definition of rape to degrees of sexual assault made the law more realistic and thus more likely to be administered, eliminated the death penalty for rape, and protected males against sexual assault, too.

Though there are no statistics on the purchasers of pornography, those who serve this clientele—clerks, movie-house owners, video-cassette dealers, mail-order houses, and the like—usually remark on their
respectability, their professional standing, their suits, briefcases, white skins, and middle-class zip codes. For instance, the last screening of a snuff movie showing a real murder was traced to the monthly pornographic film showings of a senior partner in a respected law firm; an event regularly held by him for a group of friends, including other lawyers and judges. One who was present reported that many were "embarrassed" and "didn't know what to say." But not one man was willing to object, much less to offer this evidence of murder to the police. Though some concern about censorship is sincere—the result of false reports that feminist antipornography campaigns were really calling for censorship, or of confusion with right-wing groups who both misdefine pornography and want to censor it—much of it seems to be a cover for the preservation of the pornographic status quo by a left/right coalition of men who are dependent on this huge industry, whether psychologically or financially.

In fact, the arguments against taking on pornography seem suspiciously like the virgin-whore divisions of the past. The right wing says all that is not virginal or motherly is pornographic, and thus they campaign against sexuality and nudity in general. The left wing says all sex is good as long as it's male-defined, and thus must be protected. Women who feel endangered by seeing ourselves as the victims, and men who feel demeaned by seeing themselves as victimizers, have a long struggle ahead. In fact, pornography in some form will continue as long as boys are raised to believe they must control or conquer women as a proof of "masculinity," and as long as society rewards men who believe that success or even functioning—in sex as in other areas of life—depend on women's subservience.

But at least now we have words to describe our outrage, and to separate sex from aggression. We have the courage to demonstrate publicly against pornography, to throw its magazines and films out of our houses, to boycott its purveyors, to take even friends and family members who support it as seriously as we would if they were supporting and enjoying Nazi literature or the teachings of the Klan.

But until we finally end the male dominance that has equated sexuality with aggression, there will be more pornography in our lives and less erotica. There will be little murders in our beds—and very little love.


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