

## Pornography and the Doubleness of Sex for Women

REMEMBER UNCLE MAX? EVERY WOMAN I KNOW HAS AN Uncle Max. Say you're fourteen, at a family Passover celebration in a room so crowded that changing seats is almost impossible, and Uncle Max (who's your great-uncle, really, in his 60s) has suddenly begun telling you how much he loves you (he's never had two words for you before), how wonderful you are, how you're his favorite niece, and meanwhile he keeps kissing you sloppily on the cheek (or the mouth) and holding the back of your neck with one hand while he strokes your forearm with the other. You manage to get up and make your way to the kitchen, where you indignantly tell your mother what's happened and she says, looking past you with unfocused eyes, "I'm sure you must be mistaken, dear." You (angrily): I'm fourteen, not a baby, and I know what's happening, &c.

Mother: Well, I'm sure it's only your imagination, but if it bothers you, just sit somewhere else.

Once I had remembered Uncle Max (he came up in a discussion between me and a friend in which we finally realized we were talking past each other) all sorts of memories began to come back, like the fifteen-year-old male stranger at a party when I was twelve who had grabbed my wrist hard enough to leave bruises, dragged me to a couch, and sat there kissing me while his fingers dug into my flesh, like the boy (he must have been fourteen) who said to twelve-year-old me in high school, "Hey, baby, your pants are showing," like my mother's telling me in a strangely embarrassed voice when I was going to summer camp, "Remember, boys can't get pregnant." Or my friend's mother who, upon hearing on the radio that a woman had been beaten up in the subway at three A.M., said, "No decent woman would be out there alone at that hour."

Are there more? Oh, yes, lots more, from the constant obligato of Don't go out alone after dark, Don't go into "bad" parts of town, Don't let boys go too far, Don't get "in trouble," Don't "get caught," Don't ever visit a boy's apartment, Don't stay out after midnight, Don't go to a local doctor for contraception or you'll be expelled (this was in college), to another male fifteen-year-old who at camp said as he passed the counselors' bungalows, "Menopause Alley," to the girl friends who kept worrying aloud if "he" would respect them if they went "all the way" and the friend, with whom I conducted a little theater in our twenties, who came out of the women's room, saying in tones of intense relief, "Thank God it's come." When I was twelve or thirteen at my parents' New Year's Eve party I was pulled out on the living-room floor by our family dentist, to dance. Mind you, *nobody* likes a dentist, but this one (a friend of the family) never completed a filling in less than an hour, and didn't ever let me know about novocaine. (I was sixteen before I

found out that there was such a thing as local anaesthesia.) This was the detestable, incompetent boob who insisted on dancing with me. I hated it and I hated him so I shrunk away. He pulled me ostentatiously close and grinned.

And everybody laughed.

My mother laughed. My father laughed. The guests laughed. And in my head a voice said: *Come on now, this isn't serious, You're oversensitive; after all, he didn't rape you, did he? It's all in fun. Don't be a prude* (and so on).

I hear this voice still. I suspect most women do. It chided me in college when I solved the conflict between being an artist and being a woman, when the choices presented to me and my friends were: 1) Marry so you can have sex in safety, and thereby prove your inferiority and vulnerability, 2) stay celibate and go crazy (it was an article of faith then that all spinsters were "sexually repressed" and therefore diseased, 3) have sex outside marriage and die of an illegal abortion, or 4) become a Lesbian—a state so unthinkable and unspeakable, so utterly absent from anyone's view of reality that it probably didn't exist—but was, of course, unutterably criminal, insane, and destructive at the same time.

Shall I go on? Shall I mention the movies and plays in which "non-sexy" women were ridiculed? Or the ones in which ultra-"sexy" Marilyn Monroe was ridiculed? (My, some folks are hard to please!) Or what Erica Jong calls the King Kong school of art? As late as the mid-seventies a young male poet swaggered on the stage at a University where I taught, and prefaced his first poem by grinning and saying, "Women don't like this one." Earlier, in the late 60s, at the same institution, poetry readings inevitably included hairy young men who exclaimed, "Fuck you, America! I want to ram my cock up your asshole!" At which several women students whom I had carefully encouraged to attend, got up and left, surmising quite correctly that their

own poetry—and their presences—were not welcome.

I remember a discussion in the mid-seventies in which all the group (including me) said that their parents had been liberal and honest about sex, whereupon the group leader said, “Did they ever tell you about your clitoris?” and we all looked at one another and were struck dumb. A close friend of mine was dragged (at age eleven) into the boys’ bathroom by a group of boys; they handled her breasts, and when she started to cry, they told her she had to like it because she had big boobs and women with big boobs “liked it.” And there were the exquisitely sensitive young men of my ’teens, artists all, who chided us young women for not being free, beautiful, and spontaneous, by which they meant putting out for them—this in an era when abortion was illegal!—and one who said to me scornfully only a few years ago when I asked for his company to the subway (in New York), “I didn’t think you were like all those *other* women.”

If I stop now, don’t believe there isn’t more. There’s much more, like the psychoanalyst of my twenties telling a woman who had almost been raped, “But you must have known there was something wrong with him. Why did you want to punish yourself?” (This was a woman who’d attended the singles dance, where she met this man, at the psychoanalyst’s express suggestion.)

If I cite so much from my own life, it’s because my life has been in no way exceptionally or spectacularly bad. I wasn’t battered as a child, wasn’t raped by father, stepfather, or mother’s boyfriend, didn’t have an illegal abortion, didn’t run away from home to find that the only way I could keep eating was street hustling, didn’t get pregnant while unmarried (or while married either) and never went through the pressures of outright rebellion against gender norms. I wasn’t seduced or abandoned or beaten up, and I wasn’t even caught masturbating—except once, come to think of it, when my parents told me I might “hurt myself” (I knew this

was a lie)—and oh yes, they caught me playing doctor with friends at the age of five and solemnly gave me the same warning. And, my word, I’ve forgotten the psychoanalyst I saw in my twenties (for symptoms of a chronic physical disease which was diagnosed fifteen years later) who told me that I envied the male penis. (I was willing to believe this, but hadn’t the faintest notion of what to do about it.)

Perhaps the worst thing about our sexual training as women (if I’ve been citing heterosexual incidents it’s because the vast majority of women, Lesbian or not, are brought up in heterosexual families and learn their lessons about sex from heterosexual standards and situations) is the enormous social pressure not to see or name the kinds of incidents I’ve been describing: to view them as trivial, to discount them, to accept them “tolerantly,” to pretend to enjoy them or find them funny or simply to deny that they exist or existed or, worst of all, to deny that they are painful and out of our control.

Take a woman raised like this (and we are all raised like this, more or less) and expose her to arguments about “sexual liberation” and her response is likely to be that men are taking too many liberties with women as it is. What I need (she is likely to say) is safety and respect, not any more “liberation.” Expose such a woman to pictures of women meant to turn men on, and she will—quite simply—become enraged. Show her *anything* designed to titillate men sexually, whether violent or not, and you will rouse the envy and rage of a whole lifetime—and it is utterly enraging, although the envy is not at all the envy of concrete sexual acts. Rather it’s the envy of men’s freedom, the envy of those who’ve been battered into choicelessness and silence for those who are entitled to speak and make choices.

Sexuality for men (including gay men, as far as I can see) is by and large a realm of free choice, limited to be sure by practical considerations, but not limited by the very fact of

being male. Men are "entitled to" sex.

Sexuality for women is a realm of helplessness and unpleasantness, in which bad and painful things are done to you that you can't control, in which you must "go along" with male behavior even when you dislike it, in which you are not entitled to your own wishes and your own enjoyment, and haven't even the privilege of seeing or naming the above facts. In the light of this truth, the anti-pornography movement is not only understandable; it's absolutely necessary. A society that claims that women's real trouble is "sexual repression" (whatever that is) badly needs to be enlightened. We aren't sexually repressed; we've been sexually battered and sexually brutalized. It's about time this particular vileness were exposed for what it is, once and for all.

But that's not the whole truth.

I also remember passionate "friendships" with girls and women, especially the friend who wanted me to kiss her and hold her. I remember necking in the front seat of a car at sixteen with a young man I'd lusted after for weeks, and being gloriously, sexually high for days. I remember endless crushes on movie stars, mostly male. I remember (with enormous pleasure) Mae West's "She Done Him Wrong," and some blazingly incandescent experiments with masturbation in my twenties. I remember coming out of a Gay Liberation Front lecture at thirty-three into the most luminously beautiful June twilight I've ever seen, and saying to myself over and over, that Lesbianism was real, that people really did it, and that I wasn't the only one and I hadn't invented it. I remember desire so pure and intense that it was almost enough just to feel it, I remember touching the delicate and precise helmet of bone under a beloved's fair, fluffy hair, I remember a New Year's Eve party where grown-up women went about playing wonderful kissing games, like kids. I remember, years later, another car

(cars seem to be some kind of adolescent American theme) and a curly-haired young man with a delicious amber moustache.

I think that for women sexuality is inescapably double. Even women whose sexual education has been horrendous (for example, those who are raped repeatedly by adult male relatives) have also to deal with some positive feeling, much of it sexual; even women whose experiences have been much more positive than typical cannot entirely escape this culture's negatives. I suspect that even Lesbians who've never had so much as a heterosexual thought must still deal in some fashion with the tangled mess sexism makes of sex.\* Not to mention the male side of this equation, that is, the glamorization of male power and violence and the sentimentality about women and "family" which is the obverse of the violence. Sex is ecstatic, autonomous, and lovely for women. Sex is violent, dangerous, and unpleasant for women. I don't mean a dichotomy (*i.e.* two kinds of women or even two kinds of sex) but rather a continuum in which no one's experience is wholly positive or negative, and to which different women will give very different weightings.

I think this doubleness of experience may explain the bitterness of the fight against pornography (to which I've contributed as much as anyone, I'm afraid) and the phenomenon of the sides being so very horrified by each other because they are perpetually talking past each other. When A attacks violence and B hears her attacking sexual freedom, B will defend sexual freedom—and A will hear her defending violence. You see how it goes, round and round and louder each time, though A doesn't intend to attack

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\*Women who've been exclusively Lesbian from a very early age probably face a different set of problems growing up. It would be interesting to know how much of the anti-pornography movement such women make up. My impression is that most of those active in the anti-pornography movement are either heterosexual or Lesbian feminist—that is, women who have spent a good part of their lives as heterosexuals.

sexual freedom *per se*, and B doesn't mean to defend violence.

I think a woman's position on this continuum (which can change even from week to week) will determine on which side of the pornography issue she finds herself. The more your life has had to do with the violence and cruelty of (male) sexuality, the more salient these are to you, the more you will attack (male) sexuality as violent, callous, and cruel. And you will be perfectly correct. The more your life has had to do with the autonomy and joy of sexual expression, whether you have had to work your way through to this joy or not, the more sensitive you will be to issues of sexual suppression, and the more you will tend to defend sexuality *per se* as a valuable good. And you will be perfectly correct.

To make the whole business even worse, on the anti side there's not only sensitivity to the violence of patriarchal sex, but also *some* women who perceive any kind of open expression of sex as dangerous and brutal. And the other side has *some* women who perceive sexual expression as so important and valuable that any kind of sexual expression, no matter what it is, is fine. There are, indeed, *some* women who do get off on power, *some* who proselytize. (I suspect that they've simply felt really sexual for the first time in their lives, and are treating sexual pleasure as their own exclusive property.)

I am now more sensitive to the issue of sexual suppression than I was five years ago, when I was more sensitive to the issue of sexual dangers and pains; *therefore* I've been perceiving the opposite side as inexplicably crazy. No doubt they've perceived me the same way. We're both right—not about the craziness, I mean, but about sex. It is inescapably double. Depending on the kind of attention we pay to it (which may even vary from day to day or mood to mood) we will stress one side or the other—and mis-hear our op-

posite numbers on the other side. Each will perceive the other as having gone mad and we'll end up with just what's been going on for the past few years, with me passionately denouncing Andrea Dworkin, for example (for which I'm very sorry and wish to apologize publicly) and Robin Morgan, in her new book, not only denouncing Pat Califia (which I rather expected, considering the whole mess-up that's been going on) but also wasting invective on Deirdre English, of all people! I suspect that Morgan has gotten her information second hand (she cites the sloppy and sensational *San Francisco Chronicle* for some important figures and ignores *For Her Own Good*, a fine piece of work by Deirdre English and Barbara Ehrenreich) or is simply so caught up in the whole mishearing, misperceiving mess that she's as bitter and quick to denounce as everyone else. Something of the same kind happens when an anti-porn activist describes with horror the photograph of a woman in a sex magazine who's lying on her back with her knees up and spread and is spreading her labia apart with her fingers. I have heard this position called degrading and humiliating, though as far as I can see the position indicates only that the woman wants to be penetrated, which certainly isn't in itself degrading or humiliating. And yet in the context of the whole sexist treatment of women by men, the picture is another assertion of men's property in women and men's control over women.

Meanwhile, I hear that in this city, some woman tried fist-fucking another and caused permanent physical damage, hospitalization, and surgery in her victim. But what about a friend of mine who did S & M (she's a very good person) who described it to me as mostly play-acting? The fantasies involved were fantasies of violence, true, but nobody she knew wanted anything like that to happen in reality. And surely there's nothing wrong with that—except that fantasies like those, acted out by men *and sold to the public as*

depictions of reality, are among the things that create a cultural atmosphere in which rape and property in women are seen by men as "glamorous" and promoted as "natural."

Is there any way of establishing that we are not at each others' throats? That what's driving us all crazy is that women's experience of sexuality under sexism is inescapably double? I think only c.r. groups have a chance of succeeding in this matter and then only if the groups absolutely outlaw statements about women in general and any judgment of particular women's practices and everybody's political positions about everything. We must start with our own experiences—NOT judgments or opinions—and then we may have a chance of undoing the wickedness done to us by this violent and antisexual society. The con game that's been practiced on all of us has been the equation of sex with violence, as if we have to choose between being sexual and victims of violence on the one hand or no-violence-therefore-no-sex on the other. If we detest the violence inherent in our sexual experiences in the world as it is, the culture gives us to understand that we are denying sexuality itself; if we choose the positive good of sexuality itself (and I certainly believe that sexual expression is *per se* a very valuable and important thing) the culture then insists that we must also choose violence. If some of us go a little gaga and talk as if any exhibition of sexuality (especially male sexuality) were humiliating and coercive, it's no wonder. Meanwhile others of us are going out of our gourds in the other direction, insisting that even obviously hostile books and pictures are redeemed because they have sex in them at all.

Trouble is, we're both right—and both wrong.

Meanwhile nobody has bothered to define pornography or S & M or even prostitution (sometimes) in any precise and objective manner, so that we can begin to talk about them in a reasonably analytical and non-judgmental way.

After all, before you can judge something as good or bad, you do have to know what it is. And we need to stop calling "obscene" anything we don't like. We also need, I think, to find out a lot more about prostitutes and the only way to do this is to talk to the prostitutes themselves. (An early conference on prostitution, I am told, was an embarrassing flop precisely because this wasn't done.) I also think—and here I do disagree with a good many women—that psychoanalyzing somebody else's experience or fantasies (especially without listening to their account of it) is necessarily ineffective, however passionately you may feel about the subject. The only people capable of analyzing what fantasies really mean are those to whom the fantasies appeal most.\* I have heard feminists explain the horrible psychic depths of S & M's to me and S & M's describe with relish the twisted Puritanism of anybody who doesn't like them. This is very much like hearing monogamists decry the revoltingly neurotic motivations and moral degradation of the promiscuous—not that they know anyone like that, of course, nor have they—Heaven forbid!—been promiscuous themselves. And so on and so on. Is it necessary to point out that these "explanations" and "analyses" are worth exactly zero? They are passionate self-defenses, not analyses of phenomena or people. In the first issue of *Trivia: a Journal of Ideas*, in an essay called "Sadomasochism" Kathleen Berry states that condemnation of the feminist anti-pornography movement "can threaten the very existence of feminism" and that when Gayle Rubin (in *Coming to Power*) asks for a repeal of all sex laws "except those dealing with actual, not statutory, coercion" what she really means is that threats of death are not coercion. Clearly, we are talking past each other!

When c.r. groups first formed, what we brought to them

\*This doesn't mean that they will analyze them, or that their analyses will be accurate; it means only that they can know the context of such fantasies.

were those areas in which we felt most crazy, most weak, most wrong, and most defeated. I believe that knowledge of our real sexual histories (that is, not our political opinions) may be similarly difficult to feel and express. Such a task, considering our own tangled feelings and the inescapable contradictions built into female sexual experience by this culture, demands an honesty that will, at times, produce intense shame and (I would expect) feelings of defeat and self-condemnation. These must be listened to, not short-circuited by shoulds and oughts. What we need is the gritty reality of what we really feel, what we really want (however "disgusting" or "wrong" it seems to be) or how "anti-feminist." These feelings are very painful.

They are also messages.

Before we can know what something means, we must allow it to enter consciousness in full force. Is horror at something "fear swollen by a hidden wish" (as one psychologist, writing about something completely different, once said)? Is bravado merely hiding self-hatred? And so on.

I hope I won't be misunderstood here to be saying that our troubles with sexuality are "merely psychological" or due to our training in the past but not to constant pressures today. Any message our sexuality or feelings about it gives us is bound to be about us *and* our society; if there's any piece of crucial feminist knowledge, this is it.

If only we can do this, what an enormous gain it will be for the whole women's movement! I think we all feel right now that sexuality is a crucial issue for feminism—nobody would be so upset if it weren't. I don't think we'll be in shape to take on sexuality as an issue without a lot of consciousness-raising about female sexuality and female sexual fantasy.

Even so, pornography seems to me a very tricky issue merely from the point of view of tactics, and we might do well to direct our anger elsewhere, at least for a while. Not

only is feeling about this issue very divided in the women's community, it's an issue that is bound to be misperceived by the culture at large as anti-sexual no matter how many declarations we make to the contrary. *Some* women talk as if pornography were the one single cause, or the most important single cause, of misogyny in this society—and this is, I think, plainly untrue. (One limited issue after another has been proclaimed—by *some* feminists—to be "the" cause of patriarchy, a view that's ahistorical and much too simple. Something as long-standing as woman-hating can hardly be caused by a phenomenon so relatively new as pornography.) I've also heard—I may be wrong—that pornography is an issue which will enable us to reach right-wing women, an idea I find very self-destructive and dramatic rather than politically practical. The right is organized and wealthy, remember, and far more apt to use us that vice versa. And what good is it to reach women who disagree with all our other issues? Why the dickens are we not trying to reach the millions of women who are already inclined our way? I remember a c.r. group, the very young members of which spent an enormous amount of time and energy working with one battered woman, only to have her finally return to the man who battered her. Battering is, goodness knows, an emotionally gripping issue, but as Virginia Woolf says, a battle that wastes time and energy is as ill-advised as one that wastes lives.

And why, if what we're against is the glamorization of male violence, don't we direct our fire at Hollywood's ostensibly "realistic" depictions of life, like *Apocalypse Now* or *A Clockwork Orange*? Or those endless cop shows on TV? Or all those women so terrified on prime time TV because they are menaced by one man and need another man to protect them? Or the "family" shows which glorify traditional values (traditional ever since the 1950s) at the expense of our autonomy, humanness, and self-respect?

Surely this sort of stuff pollutes the cultural atmosphere far more than commercial fantasies made for masturbation. Movies and TV affect many more people (like women and children) that specialized, commercial, male fuck-books or films don't reach. More than that, the pornography I've seen—I have fifteen S & M books in my closet at the moment—seems to be aimed at specific sub-groups of male buyers. (The books advertised on the backs of the books I have come in clusters, *i.e.* monks-and-nuns books, Nazi-slave books, teenage-girls'-school books, and so on. The settings seem to matter, though they are sketchily limp; the sex scenes are just about identical from book to book.) As for the men's magazines, surely heterosexual men's desire to look at women's bodies is in itself perfectly acceptable. What's not acceptable is that the images sold to men are plastic and unreal, and that such sale takes place as part of a deeply sex-hating and woman-hating society. But to attack pornography seems to be going in the wrong direction. Sexual fantasies—to judge from women's—don't make much sense if taken at face value. Moreover, those fifteen books (chosen by a friend of mine for the horribleness of their covers) are much more concerned with fucking than they are with violence. It's not pornography *but the mainstream culture* which delivers violence *as a substitute for sexual pleasure*. I think the mainstream culture is much more dangerous than specialized-for-sex stuff, which has at least gotten to a sort of halfway position on the matter. It's true that if the Holocaust is of personal importance to you, and you read, say, *Nazi Love-Slave*, and lend it your own reality, you may be disgusted and frightened. That doesn't mean that the book is the cause of woman-hating or even an important cause. I find many of the things we take for granted much, much worse—like the sentimentality of “Little House on the Prairie,” the TV tape of which I would very much enjoy burning with my own hands.

Several essays on pornography have stressed that the Nazis used it to flood occupied countries in order to corrupt the population thereof, but the fact that they did it doesn't mean that it worked or that they knew what they were doing. They allowed no such stuff in Germany itself; instead, the kind of propaganda made for home consumption was very much like what we're getting now from the right: For women, motherhood and “femininity” glorified, and for German youth, in general, the Virgin Mary as an ideal. For young men the ideal was the fervent love of comrades (some of these artifacts look very homosexual today) along with rigid sexual purity. The classic union of sexual repression with violence can't occur in pornography, which has sexual expression as its *raison d'être*; it's, as far as my experience goes, in supposedly non-sexual material that the viciousness gets really bad. Nothing in *Hard Knocks for Honey* or *The Sadistic Sisters of Saxony* (honest, I'm not making up these titles) comes close in vividness, realism, or loving attention to detail of the commercial for Hitchcock's TV program which was made up of a montage of different women screaming in terror. I would not mind too much re-reading the S & M titles (above) for the only hazard there is boredom; but I walked out of “A Clockwork Orange” a few years ago, shaking with anger, and would do so again.

That's the sort of stuff we should be attacking.

I've tried to find an inspirational ending to this essay and can't. The doubleness of sexuality will certainly continue. For years I hated myself for still having any affection for my father (who had become ill when I was about eight, and used to assuage his own fear by bullying my mother, and later, me). I thought I must be crazy to keep on feeling anything positive about someone who had so obviously hurt me. It took a long time to decide that I had not been defeated and that his misbehavior was far less humane than my continuing affection. When you live in a badly sexist



world and continue to have some positive feelings for those who are oppressing you, it's all too easy to become horrified at yourself and try to wipe away all positive emotion towards the oppressors. Since that is not entirely possible, many of us are left with an entirely understandable terror at ever expressing these feelings—it feels like total defeat—and a lot of energy must be taken up denying that these positive feelings exist. I have even heard of a few rape victims who were aroused sexually by the situation of rape—mind you, this does not make rape less Godawful; on the contrary, to my mind, such an impossible-to-deal-with contradiction makes the whole business infinitely more horrible.

Well, I am talking only about my own experience; this is the kind of thing I would say in a c.r. group. Double situations are not only painful but terribly confusing. If dancing with my dentist was sex, I certainly didn't want any; and yet—

Two other speculations; I don't think we should expect gay men's experience with pornography to be anything like ours. For many gay men, gay male pornography was the first (and sometimes the only) validation of their sexuality they could find. Nor—I'm convinced—is the issue of pedophilia identical with what little girls experience with adult men. For one thing, the major emphasis of this society is that women are passive or childlike vis a vis men. Contacts between adult males and boys are not harmonious with the major emphases of the society. Boys are brought up (once into adolescence) to be entitled to sexual feelings and experimentation as girls are not, and are therefore probably more capable (certainly in adolescence) of refusing and choosing sexually than girls are. (I'm not saying that this is the whole truth about male teenagers/adult males relationships, but that they are different from teenage female/adult male ones. \*)

\*I'm not talking about children.

How to stop Uncle Max? I think an anecdote a friend of mine told me lately is instructive. She has a fourteen-year-old son whose friends have taken to hanging around her house, in part because she's willing to give them straightforward information about sex and smoking and so on, and accepts the fact that they are sexually active without accepting dishonesty or coercion or manipulateness as O.K. because "anything goes." Recently one of the girls, at the age of twelve, decided to have intercourse (for the first time) with her thirteen-year-old boy friend. "She said that it hurt at first but after that she liked it a lot." This same little girl (she's under five feet tall) was recently grabbed from behind by a neighborhood rapist who'd already made attempts on two other pubescent girls; Lily (not her name) stamped backwards on the rapist's instep, crunching it heavily, and then screamed as she ran away. What was striking to both me and my friend was what Lily did NOT do: She didn't panic, wasn't helpless, and above all (says my friend) was enraged but without feeling the slightest guilt. When something like that happened to me at the same age, I felt that I must have invited it or colluded with it, or liked it somehow. I suspect that the two incidents are related and the more open and autonomously chosen sexual pleasure a woman has, the better she's equipped to deal with this culture's substitution of violence for sexuality and the sexual repression that makes such very bad things possible.

Perhaps a word here about "sexual repression." As far as I know, the only male authority who does not think that anything goes in sex is Wilhelm Reich—one of those clunky Germans who know only one thing (but one good thing) and kept repeating it ad infinitum. When I speak—as Reich does—about sexual "liberation" I do not mean (as he didn't either) any kind of sexual outlet of any quality, and the only superiority of this to that being which one happens more often. What Reich (I think very perceptively, for a man)

understood was that when classic forms of sexual suppression—like the Nazis' in their own country—first begin to disappear, what you get is not freedom but a lot of very nasty behavior in which the pre-existing violence begins to be visible, *along with* some genuinely progressive behavior and events. I don't know what Reich's opinion of S & M would be since he never mentions it. What he does call "sadism" is what we would call simply cruelty and viciousness—like (he mentions) getting a woman drunk so that she can't resist when several men fuck her, a practice that used to be common in college fraternities when I went to school twenty years ago, and may be still.

"Sexual liberation" does NOT mean, when I use the phrase, joylessness, furtiveness, compulsion, threats, or the kind of behavior Phyllis Chesler notes in *About Men* in which she asked men whether they enjoyed sex with women and got the answer, "I like orgasm, of course; who wouldn't?" This kind of partial and miserable activity is a sign of repression, not freedom. We are surrounded today by plastic images of "sexuality," of beautiful models with painted faces and blow-dried hair cavorting in stylized situations of glee, by endless stupid chatter about "sexiness," and "freedom," of endless exhortations that we must be (hetero) sexual—but with the partner of the right sex and age and class and capped teeth and advertisers' clothing, and semi-naked bodies shown in titillating poses without any (God forbid) real nudity or vulnerability or real touching. Anyone who thinks this society is anywhere near "sexual liberation" should try sitting in a bus with her hand on a friend's genitals, and watch the faces around her. Unfortunately we are caught today between two lies, not one: The still powerful beliefs of the right and the "you *must* be sexual and any way is O.K." which involves the utter unreality of, say, *Playboy* pictures—are women born air-brushed?—and any damned thing at all, from the pleasures

of shared fantasy (which do promote intimacy) to the acting out of power fantasies *against* others.

And, just to make it even more confusing, sexual situations (as defined by the culture), and the contact of warm bodies does indeed rouse some minimal response, which explains the man in *About Men* who has to fantasize a baseball game to come to orgasm and me and my dentist. I had responded, after all, and not knowing that this minimal, reluctant response, very much mixed with loathing, was not "sex"—how could I? I had no genuinely free sexual experiences to use as a comparison—believed that this sort of contact *was* "sex"—and I had somehow colluded in the whole business.

The best cure for pornography is sex—I mean autonomously chosen activity, freely engaged in for the sake of real pleasure, intense, and unmistakably the real thing. The more we have experiences like this, the less we will be taken in by the confusions and lies and messes all around us.

Sexuality is a personal issue for everyone, and an extremely painful one for many of us. Let me stress again that the early c.r. groups dealt with the kind of things that made us feel strong and free. In fact, the strength and freedom came directly from expressing the things that made us feel hopeless and crazy.

Let us begin—please!

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**Joanna Russ**

***Magic  
Mommies,  
Trembling  
Sisters,  
Puritans &  
Perverts***

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