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## Speaking Sex

*"The Indiscreet Jewels"*

Toward the beginning of Denis Diderot's 1748 fable *Les bijoux indiscrets* (The Indiscreet Jewels), the genie Cucufa seeks to gratify the desire of the sultan Mangogul to have the women of his court speak frankly of their sexual adventures. The genie pulls out of his pocket a silver ring:

"You see this ring," he said to the sultan. "Put it on your finger, my son. When you turn the setting of the stone, all the women on whom you turn it will recount their affairs in a loud and clear voice. But do not believe for a moment that it is through their mouths that they speak."

"Through what else then, by God, will they speak?" exclaimed the sultan.

"Through that part which is the most frank in them, and the most knowledgeable about the things you wish to know," said Cucufa; "through their jewels."

(Diderot [1875] 1966,  
148–149; my translation)

In marked contrast to the elaborate sexual innuendo of Diderot's fable and its wordplay with jewels and genitals, we might consider an American hard-core pornographic feature film, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* ("Henry Paris," a.k.a. Radley Metzger, 1975). Near its beginning we meet the female protagonist, Misty Beethoven, in a sleazy Place Pigalle porno movie theater where she gives "hand jobs" to male customers while they watch the film. The film that screens as Misty manipulates a customer to ejaculation is appropriately titled *Le sexe qui parle* (The Speaking Sex). Redundantly, it too shows an ejaculating penis. Like Diderot's elegant fantasy of the silver ring with the power to make "sex" speak, the fantasy of this film—as well as of its film-within-a-film—is also of a speaking sex. But whereas Diderot's naughty literary conceit figures its "sex" as a valuable but unmentionable part of the female anatomy that is compelled to speak the truth of its owner's sexual indiscretions, the pornographic film's sex originates from the male genitals and employs no such euphemism. The "sex" that "speaks" here is typical of the greater indiscretion of the filmic "hard core," of its seemingly more direct graphic display.

It would be futile to argue that Diderot's fable and Metzger's film are both pornography—at least before attempting some definition of this most difficult and politically charged term. Yet both works partake of what the historian Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*,<sup>1</sup> has called the modern compulsion to speak incessantly about sex. And it is this speaking sex that is probably the most important single thing to be observed about the modern phenomenon of hard core. As Foucault puts it, invoking Diderot's fable as an emblem,

for many years, we have all been living in the realm of Prince Mangogul: under the spell of an immense curiosity about sex, bent on questioning it, with an insatiable desire to hear it speak and be spoken about, quick to invent all sorts of magical rings that might force it to abandon its discretion.

(Foucault 1978, 77)

In this quest for the magic that will make sex speak, the most recent magic has surely been that of motion pictures (and later of video). With this new "magic ring," the modern equivalents of Prince Mangogul seem to be able to satisfy their curiosity about sex directly, to locate themselves as invisible voyeurs positioned to view the sex "act" itself rather than only hearing about it, as Diderot's sultan must, in after-the-fact narration. With this magic it has become pos-

sible to satisfy—but also, Foucault reminds us, to further incite—the desire not only for pleasure but also for the “knowledge of pleasure,” the pleasure of knowing pleasure (Foucault 1978, 177).

This book considers hard-core film and video pornography as one of the many forms of the “knowledge-pleasure” of sexuality. Its goal is to trace the changing meaning and function of the genre of pornography in its specific, visual, cinematic form. Foucault’s idea that the pleasures of the body are subject to historically changing social constructions has been influential, especially the idea that pleasures of the body do not exist in immutable opposition to a controlling and repressive power but instead are produced within configurations of power that put pleasures to particular use.

Foucault thus offers, at least potentially, a way of conceptualizing power and pleasure within the history of discourses of sexuality. He argues, for example, that power must be conceptualized positively for what it constructs in discourse and through knowledge. If we speak incessantly today about sex in all sorts of modes, including pornography, to Foucault this only means that a machinery of power has encroached further on bodies and their pleasures. Through the osmosis of a pleasure feeding into power and a power feeding into pleasure, an “implantation of perversions” takes place, with sexualities rigidifying into identities that are then further institutionalized by discourses of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution . . . and pornography (Foucault 1978, 12).

Important as Foucault’s ideas are to a more refined understanding of sexuality’s complex history and of the basic discontinuities in the cultural construction of sexualities in diverse eras, they are sometimes not as radical as they seem. For women especially, the central theme of historical discontinuity often seems like the familiar story of *plus ça change*. For example, Foucault stresses the difference between the *ars erotica* of ancient and non-Western cultures, by which sexuality is constructed through practice and accumulated experiences that prescribe and teach pleasures as a form of mastery and self-control, and our modern Western *scientia sexualis*, aimed at eliciting the confession of the scientific truths of sex. Despite these differences, in neither the ancient and Eastern construction of an erotic art nor the Western construction of knowledge-pleasure have women been the true subjects of sexual art or sexual knowledge.

Thus, even though pleasure is constructed differently within the

*ars erotica* and the *scientia sexualis*, and even though Foucault can argue that “sex” as an entity is radically discontinuous from one culture to the next, the fact remains that the pleasure of women is alien and other to both systems. The erotic arts of ancient and Eastern cultures acknowledged that women are different but did not actively seek detailed knowledge of women’s pleasure. Modern Western culture, in contrast, probes the difference of women incessantly, as Diderot’s fable—and most modern pornography—shows. Cinema itself, as a narrative form with certain institutionalized pleasures, is, as we shall see in Chapter 2, profoundly related to the sexual pleasures of male viewers through glimpses of the previously hidden, and often sexual, “things” of women.

My point, however, is simply to note that, for women, one constant of the history of sexuality has been a failure to imagine their pleasures outside a dominant male economy. This is to suggest that the disciplinary practices Foucault describes so well have operated more powerfully on the bodies of women than on those of men (Bartky forthcoming); indeed, that even so radical a questioner of the values of humanism and of historical discontinuity can succumb to the phallogentric norms that are at the root of all humanist thought. As Biddy Martin (1982) and others have argued, Foucault has often failed to acknowledge women’s situation in the constitution of meaning and power in Western culture, but he still gives us the tools to ask what the articulation of sexual difference involves.<sup>2</sup> Martin (p. 17) puts the question this way: “How are discipline and power constituted at the moment at which woman is made the object of knowledge?”

Modern pornography is perhaps the key genre by which we may begin to answer this question. Yet as Susan Gubar (1987, 731) notes, feminist criticism has been reluctant to “come to terms” with “genres composed by and for men,” and especially with pornography. In recent years pornography has been spoken of constantly as the quintessential male genre—as the most extreme example of what women abhor about male power. Listening to men on this topic, one sometimes wonders how the pornography industry survives, since its products are claimed to be so boring and repetitious. Listening to women, one wonders how anything else survives in the face of a pornography that is equated with genocide. The feminist rhetoric of abhorrence has impeded discussion of almost everything

but the question of whether pornography deserves to exist at all. Since it does exist, however, we should be asking what it does for viewers; and since it is a genre with basic similarities to other genres, we need to come to terms with it.

Coming to terms with pornography does not mean liking, approving of, or being aroused by it—though these reactions are not precluded either. Rather, it means acknowledging that despite pornography's almost visceral appeal to the body—its ability, as Richard Dyer (1985, 27) puts it, to “move” the body or, in Annette Kuhn's words (1985, 21), to elicit “gut” reactions—it is not the only genre to elicit such “automatic” bodily reactions. Dyer notes that other film genres aimed at moving the body, such as thrillers, weepies, and low comedy, have been almost as slow to be recognized as cultural phenomena. Goose bumps, tears, laughter, and arousal may occur, may seem like reflexes, but they are all culturally mediated. Pornography, even hard-core pornography, we are beginning to realize, can no longer be a matter of Justice Potter Stewart's famous “I don't know what it is, but I know it when I see it” (Stewart 1954, 197).

The middle-class, white male Supreme Court justice who uttered these famous last words was saying, in essence, “It moves me” (whether to arousal or to outrage hardly matters), “and that is all we need to know.” To come to terms with pornography in the late 1980s, we need not only to acknowledge the force of but also to get beyond merely reacting to these gut responses. For women this means turning the important methods and insights of feminism on a genre and an ideology that is most transparently about sexual difference as viewed from a male perspective. Because feminist criticism is ideologically committed to disrupting the exclusive prerogatives of this perspective, it is especially well equipped to perform a symptomatic reading of pornography. But to do so it needs a better understanding of power, pleasure, and genre itself than has been offered in the past.

The question I wish to pose regarding early illegal and later mass-produced legal film and video pornography is therefore not whether it is misogynistic (much of it is) or whether it is art (much of it is not); rather, I wish to ask just what the genre is and why it has been so popular. The perspective I take in answering this question could best be described as feminist re-visionism in tension with several

other approaches: psychoanalytic theories of sexuality and sexual identity; Marxist theories of reification, utopia, and the sexual marketplace; Foucauldian descriptions of power, pleasure, and discourse; and recent work on mass culture, especially mass-produced genres for women—soap opera, romance fiction, and the “woman’s film.”<sup>3</sup>

My exclusive focus on hard-core, as opposed to soft-core or “erotic,” pornography is an attempt to address the genre’s only apparent obviousness. For much as we may want to think, along with Potter Stewart, that “we know it when we see it,” it is equally true that, as the saying goes, one person’s pornography is another person’s erotica.<sup>4</sup> The bracketing of hard core only ends up setting the seemingly authentic, acceptable (erotic or soft-core) sex of the self against the inauthentic and unacceptable (pornographic, violent, or obscene) sex of the “other” (Willis 1983, 463).

Most recently, anti-pornography feminists have used this hard/soft distinction to label men’s sexuality as pornographic and women’s as erotic. But with mass-market romance fiction for women growing sexually more explicit; with hard-core film and video pornography, aimed formerly only at men, now reaching a “couples” and even a new women’s market; with women directors like Candida Royalle beginning to make a decidedly different kind of heterosexual hard-core video; and with the emergence of a renegade lesbian pornography celebrating sadomasochistic fantasy, these pat polar oppositions of a soft, tender, nonexplicit women’s erotica and a hard, cruel, graphic phallic pornography have begun to break down.<sup>5</sup>

Given the present diversity of pornographies (and sexualities), this study might reasonably have surveyed the spectrum of modes of address to particular spectators—for example, gay, lesbian, heterosexual male, and heterosexual mixed audiences—and so served the important purpose of emphasizing the multiformity of what is usually viewed as a monolithic entity. If I have opted instead for a study of comparatively “mainstream,” heterosexual, hard-core pornography in its early stag and later feature-length forms alone, it is for a variety of practical, theoretical, and political reasons.

First, as a heterosexual woman I do not feel that I should be the first one to address questions raised by a body of films not aimed primarily at me. I acknowledge that this did not stop me from presuming, as a woman, to interpret pornographic texts aimed pri-

marily at men; but since heterosexual, predominantly male-oriented sexuality *is* the dominant sexual identity of our culture, such analysis is justifiable. Moreover, ever since the early seventies heterosexual hard-core film and video has been trying—sometimes halfheartedly, sometimes earnestly—to include heterosexual women as viewers. It is thus precisely because heterosexual pornography has begun to address me that I may very well be its ideal reader. Conversely, because lesbian and gay pornography do not address me personally, their initial mapping as genres properly belongs to those who can read them better.

Second, it seems important to begin a generic discussion of film pornography with an analysis of the general stereotype of the genre. According to this stereotype, pornography is deviant and abnormal, but at the same time these qualities are seen as emanating from what has traditionally been defined as typical or “normal” in heterosexual male sexuality: its phallic “hardness” and aggression. It will be enormously important in our generic study of pornographic texts to challenge such contradictory categories of “normal” and “abnormal” on all levels. Minority pornographies should not be bracketed as utterly separate and distinct. While they are different from heterosexual pornography, they nevertheless belong to the overall “speaking sex” phenomenon in modern Western societies. To consider these pornographies as separate and distinct is only to reproduce within the study of pornography the same effect as occurs when pornography is set off from other, more accepted or “normal” forms of speech. Richard Dyer (1984, 1985) and Tom Waugh (1985) have already begun to investigate gay pornography from this perspective, and although I do not know of any extended, text-based analyses of lesbian pornography to date, such studies are sure to emerge soon.

While not a true history, this study is organized along chronological lines. Its goal is to trace the changing meanings and functions of the pornographic genre in its visual, “hard-core,” cinematic forms. Beginning in Chapter 2 I focus on a new force in the regulation and incitement of sexuality that occurs with the late-nineteenth-century invention of cinematic “machines of the visible.” I see this force as an impetus toward the confession of previously invisible “truths” of bodies and pleasures in an unprecedented “frenzy of the visible.”<sup>6</sup> Chapter 3 traces the early stages of the genre proper in an analysis of the primitive stag film. Chapter 4 then discusses the transition

from stag film to feature-length narrative, with an excursus into one of the most significant features of the form: the reliance on visible penile ejaculations (money shots) as proof of pleasure.

Analysis of the generic pleasures produced by this new feature-length narrative form continues in Chapters 5 and 6, followed in Chapter 7 by an examination of what many people consider the worst and most typical type of hard-core pornography: sadomasochism, offering the spectacle of masochistic pleasure-in-pain and/or sadistic pleasure-in-power. Chapter 8 then investigates the many ways in which recent hard-core pornography has begun to undergo revision under the scrutiny of women viewers.

I have pursued two courses in my selection of films and videos for discussion. In the area of feature-length narratives produced since the film and videocassette expansion of the seventies, I have tried to focus on titles that are well known and popular and representative of the full range of films now readily available to anyone via videocassette rental. In the less accessible realm of silent, illegally and anonymously made stag films (Chapter 3), for which no reliable information exists on exhibition history, I have restricted myself to a near-random sampling of films in the large collection at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. In this area I make no claim to thoroughness or to an extensive knowledge of all the texts. I simply hope that this initial examination will encourage further discussion about a genre that previously has evoked either so much hostility or so much ridicule as to seem beyond the pale of any analysis.

Before launching this study proper, I will attempt in the remainder of this chapter to acknowledge some of the issues and problems involved in tracing both the history of pornography generally and its hard-core forms more specifically. I have not tried to offer an objective weighing of all sides of the debate that currently rages. In fact, even to try would, I am convinced, mean never to progress beyond the question of whether these texts *should* exist to a discussion of what it means that they *do*. The following sketch of the elusive history of pornography and the questions of power and pleasure variously posed in the pornography debate is not intended to be comprehensive or objective: as will be clear from my summary of the two major feminist positions on pornography, I am squarely on the “anti-censorship” side. My goal, then, is simply to summarize, from this



perspective, just what the issue of pornography has become in late-1980s America, now that power has overtaken pleasure as a key term of analysis. It is also to offer an initial, and provisional, answer to the question, What is hard-core pornography?

### The Elusive Genre of Pornography

Pornography seems to have a long history. Most studies of the genre gesture toward this presumed history through the *OED*'s etymology: the Greek words *graphos* (writing or description) and *pornei* (prostitutes)—hence “description of the life, manners, etc. of prostitutes or their patrons.” But the few actual attempts to write this history convey little sense of a group of texts representing a continuous tradition from antiquity to the present day. H. Montgomery Hyde, for example, begins his 1964 *History of Pornography* with Ovid, then recommences in the Christian world with Boccaccio (“the first work of modern pornography”), devotes a separate chapter to “erotic pornography” of the East, another chapter to “the pornography of perversion” (primarily Sade and Sacher-Masoch), and the remaining three chapters to nineteenth- and twentieth-century questions of law and censorship and the trial of *Fanny Hill*. None of these traditions seems to bear much relation to the others. He concludes (p. 207) with the statement that although much pornography is of little or no literary merit, it is nevertheless of value to “anthropologists and sociologists,” whereupon he adds hopefully:

With a rational system of sex hygiene and education . . . the worthless and unaesthetic pornographic product, which can only be productive of a sense of nausea and disgust, must disappear through lack of public demand, leaving only what is well-written and aesthetically satisfying. For, as this book has attempted to show, there is bad pornography, and also good or at least well-written pornography, which with changing social attitudes is gradually winning common acceptance.

By tracing the history of pornography back to antiquity, Hyde suggests the legitimacy of the genre within an illustrious literary tradition; seen in this way, he says, modern pornography will find its true essence and recover its aesthetic goodness.

This (slightly anxious) hope for a more aesthetic modern pornography is an early expression of one thread of the emerging cultural history of pornography in the 1960s and 1970s. In the early flush

of the “sexual revolution,” all commentators on the genre agreed that pornography was now worthy of investigation for increasingly self-evident “anthropological and sociological”—not to mention newer psychological and sexological—reasons. As Peter Michelson put it in *The Aesthetics of Pornography* (1971, 5), pornography is “for better or for worse the imaginative record of man’s sexual will.” Aesthetically minded commentators like Michelson tended to link pornography to earlier high-art traditions as an argument for its cultural legitimacy. For Hyde this tradition went back to the Greeks and Romans; for Michelson, who saw pornography as migrating out of its own genre and into literature at large, the crucial early tradition is decadence; and for Susan Sontag (1969), in her influential essay “The Pornographic Imagination,” it was Sade.

Sontag’s essay is in some ways the vindication of Hyde’s hope for a more aesthetic pornography. Analyzing Réage’s *The Story of O*, Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye*, and de Berg’s *The Image*, Sontag makes a case for a modern, high-class, exclusively literary pornography that operates at the limits of sensual experience to explore fantasies that, like the work of Sade, radically transgress social taboos. Like the surrealists who made Sade their patron saint, Sontag pits an elitist, avant-garde, intellectual, and philosophical pornography of imagination and transgressive fantasy against the mundane, crass materialism of a dominant mass culture.

Other critics from this period are less concerned to trace an aesthetic tradition of pornography—probably because they were both less convinced of even the potential value of such texts and less comfortable with the radical claims for the importance of transgression and excess. To these critics the existence of a modern body of popular pornographic texts with unprecedented mass appeal constituted an acute and historically unique social problem. Steven Marcus (1974) locates this problem in the nineteenth-century attitude toward sex as a problem revolving around prostitution, sexual hygiene, masturbation, and so forth. The prolific and aesthetically unredeemable pornography of the Victorians was, Marcus maintains, the natural counterpart of their obsession with all things sexual: like the Victorian prude, the Victorian pornographer suffered from an infantile fixation on sex. Although Marcus was not sympathetic to his subject—he saw both the prudes and the pornographers as fixated and obsessed—his insight was to see the two groups’ dialectical re-

lation: how the repression of sex in one place led to its expression in another. (This purely Freudian explanation, however, left him at a loss to explain the proliferation of pornography in the more sexually “liberated” period in which he himself was writing.) Other critics of pornography were even less sympathetic to these transgressive texts. George Steiner (1974, 228–229), for example, speculated that the “‘total freedom’ of the uncensored erotic imagination” could easily lead to the “total freedom of the sadist.”

Although these and other studies at least vaguely define pornography as visual or written representations depicting sex, none of them—not even those that hoped to lend the dignity of age to their modern exemplars—could actually establish a continuous thread from antiquity. Much more typically Sade figures as the real origin of a relatively modern tradition of pornography, a tradition that is viewed at least as variously as the controversial marquis himself. To Steiner and to the anti-pornography feminists who began to dominate the discourse on pornography in the late seventies, the new prevalence of pornography is a dangerous and harmful unleashing of sadistic power in which aesthetic worth is hardly the issue. Nonetheless, anti-censorship feminist Angela Carter (1978) does see Sade as offering an important opportunity for women to analyze the inscription of power in sexual relations. Unlike Sontag and Michelson, Carter argues for pornography not on aesthetic grounds but on the value of Sade’s politicization of sexuality and on his insistence of the right of women “to fuck” as aggressively, tyrannically, and cruelly as men (p. 27).

A recent, nonfeminist contribution to this elusive history of pornography is Walter Kendrick’s *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (1987). Kendrick differs in one important way from all previous attempts to discuss pornography in that he refuses to define pornography—high-class or low, ancient or modern—as a group of texts with *any* common qualities. His point is the fickleness of all definitions: what today is a low-class, mass-consumed form was in the last century the exclusive preserve of elite gentlemen. Building partly on the arguments of Steven Marcus, Kendrick traces the nineteenth-century emergence of a popular pornography as well as the coterminous attempts at censorship. Observing the futility of censorship, since a censored text immediately becomes desirable, Kendrick decides that the only workable definition of pornography

is the description of this very process: pornography is simply whatever representations a particular dominant class or group does not want in the hands of another, less dominant class or group. Those in power construct the definition of pornography through their power to censor it (pp. 92–94).

This approach has the great advantage (and also disadvantage) of simplicity. Kendrick argues, for example, that in the nineteenth century the objectionable texts might be realistic novels, sensational melodramas, reports on prostitution, bawdy limericks, or the famous painting unearthed at Pompeii of a satyr in sexual congress with a goat. The important point is the continuity of social attitudes toward forbidden works. The painting of the satyr and goat had once been on public display at Pompeii; only in the mid-nineteenth century did certain “gentlemen” anthropologists who unearthed these treasures of the ancient world think to lock them up in a “secret museum.” Only then, in short, did these texts take on pornographic meaning (p. 66).

Kendrick thus holds—correctly, I think—that the relatively recent emergence of pornography is a problem of modern mass culture. While Steven Marcus implicitly argued the same point by situating his study of pornography in Victorian sexual discourse, Kendrick maintains boldly that pornography as we know it emerges at that moment when the diffusion of new kinds of mass media—novels and magazines in the Victorian era, films and videos today—exacerbates a dominant group’s worry about the availability of these media to persons less “responsible” than themselves.

Worry about the effect of pornography on impressionable “young persons” emerged most forcefully in England in 1857 with the passage of the first piece of anti-obscenity legislation: the British Obscene Publications Act. At this time the person most endangered by obscenity was a young, middle-class woman, whose “pornography” consisted of romantic novels. The responsible and powerful “gentleman” desiring to protect her from corruption was a middle- or upper-class man who did not in the least worry about the similar debasing effect of such works on himself.

Kendrick thus dates the most significant emergence of pornography as a problem in modern culture to this 1857 act. His history of pornography, then, is fundamentally the modern story of how those in power react to texts that seem to embody dangerous knowl-

edge when in the hands of the "other," a history that extends from the building of the "secret museum" at Pompeii, through the establishment of a legal category of obscenity and the famous book trials of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, right up to the recent redefinition of pornography by the Meese Commission and Women Against Pornography as sexual violence and dehumanization.

In his section on recent events, however, we begin to see the limitations of Kendrick's definition of pornography as a construction simply of the power of the censor. He claims, for example, that this later stage is really the same as all earlier stages, only with the sexes reversed; that is, now it is Women Against Pornography who define the genre as abusive violence, the old power of the "gentleman" having simply changed sides. Similarly, today's impressionable "young person" is now a lustful, illiterate male who, instead of reading novels, looks at films and videotapes that lead him to commit crimes against women (pp. 332–338).

By concluding that the modern-day feminist anti-pornography campaign simply repeats the past history of censorship, Kendrick reveals the basic problem with his approach: an inability to measure the real changes in the idea of pornography through the eyes of its beholders. Certainly one crucial dissimilarity between now and then lies in the power differential and the varying historical situations of the male and female "gentlemen" so determined to censor pornography. And Kendrick's polemical lesson that the history of pornography teaches the futility of censorship, while perhaps true, never addresses the very different reasons why other groups might *want* to pursue such a course. In fact, his concluding statement (p. 239) that "pornography is not eternal, nor are its dangers self evident," seems not so much a conclusion as the dialectical point of origin for a polemic against the Women Against Pornography position that pornography *is* eternal (though, contradictorily, growing worse all the time) and its dangers decidedly self-evident.

The lengths to which Kendrick is willing to go to attack censoring feminists suggest both the influence of the anti-pornography position and just how polarized recent discussions of pornography have become. In his analysis we also see the difficulty—rampant in studies of pornography—of talking about a genre without first defining its form. Though often clever, Kendrick's ironic history never comes

to grips with what most bothers anti-pornography feminists about pornography: the nature of the sexual representations themselves.

Curiously, however, the two sides of this dialectic are similar. Kendrick's argument is that we must learn from history the futility of censorship. The anti-pornography feminist lesson (discussed at length below) is that since history is the same old story of an abusive male power, the only recourse is to censor the representations created by that power. Both positions assert, though very differently, that the history of pornography is a history of power: for Kendrick it is an elitist power on the side of the censors, whereas for anti-pornography feminists it is, more simply, a misogynist power in which the text dominates its women victims.

We can observe in this dialectic how the issue of censorship has overwhelmed all other discussion. Thus all histories of pornography, such as they are, have turned into histories of the legal battles fought in the wake of relatively recent laws against obscenity. Kendrick's insight—and his limitation—is to have claimed that the various attempts to censor pornography, whatever it is, *are* its history. The argument that the history of modern pornography consists only in what has offended the fickle “gentlemen” is too facile. Certainly modern pornography is intimately tied up with legal and moral attempts at censorship, but like all productions of culture it has its own “relative autonomy” as well.<sup>7</sup>

The history of pornography as a definitive cultural form has not yet been written. The very marginality of pornography within culture has led us to argue only about whether pornography, like sex, should be liberated or repressed. And the fact that, as with sex, we simultaneously take for granted its “obvious” definition—assuming, for example, that it is either a liberating pleasure or an abusive power—has only confused matters.

This dilemma is, precisely, our “sexual fix,” as critic Stephen Heath (1982, 3) puts it. In the spirit of Foucault's criticism of the once-vaunted sexual liberation, on grounds that the idea of liberation through increased knowledge or freedom is an illusion, Heath argues that such knowledge inevitably leads to more complete control, conformity, and regulation, producing no “pure” pleasure but only an increasingly intensified, commodified form of sexuality: a “sexual fix.” Caught in this fix, we cannot see that the two main sides in the debates about pornography—the one that sees sexuality as

the source of all our problems, and the one that sees sexual liberation as the beginning of a solution—are just as much part of the compulsion to talk about an essential, self-evident sexual “truth” as is pornography itself.

Depending on the (sexual) politics of the perceiver, the “truth” of pornographic power or pleasure is viewed either as deserving to speak or as so “unspeakable” as to require suppression. Among feminists, only the anti-censorship groups seem willing to discuss the meaning of these truths and not to take them as self-evident. As the editors of the 1983 anthology *Powers of Desire* put it, the constant speaking about sex does not necessarily advance the cause of sexual freedom; yet at the same time, feminists can’t *not* speak about sex for the simple reason that, until quite recently, almost all sexual discourse—from the writings of Denis Diderot to hard-core film—has been spoken by men to other men (Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson 1983, 9–10).

Even though the definition and history of pornography are elusive, then, there is remarkable consensus concerning the need to include “power” as the significant new term in their formulation. We see the term in Angela Carter’s feminist-liberationist reading of Sade’s sexual politics as well as in the diametrically opposed feminist–anti-pornographic reading of Sade as inciting aggression against women victims. We see it in a different way in Susanne Kappeler’s (1986) location of pornographic power in the very form of representation, in Kendrick’s idea that pornography is created by those with the power to censor, and in Alan Soble’s (1986) notion that in a future communist society pornography would be free of the contamination of power altogether. Only one thing seems clear: the force of this newly introduced term has rendered the older arguments of the sixties and seventies obsolete—whether, like Sontag’s and Michelson’s, based on elitist aesthetics or, like Marcus’s and Steiner’s, concerned only with pornography’s effect on the morality of the masses.

Nowhere has the impact of this new concept of pornography-as-power been more forcefully invoked or more massively diffused than in the 1986 *Final Report* of the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography. This document, overseen by Attorney General Edwin Meese, is a curious hybrid of empirical and moral arguments against pornography culled from social scientists, new-right “moral major-