RETHINKING THE PORNOGRAPHY DEBATE:

SOME ONTOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In feminist scholarship, the philosophical debate over pornography has been a debate over censorship and freedom of expression. On one side are anti-pornography feminists, such as Robin Morgan, Catharine MacKinnon, and Andrea Dworkin, who endorse some form of censorship on grounds that pornography harms women and society. Morgan has argued that, "Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice"[1], while MacKinnon and Dworkin have authored city ordinances to outlaw pornography as a violation of women's civil rights. According to these anti-pornography feminists, pornography contributes to the culture of physical and psychological violence that women experience everyday.

On the other side of the debate are the anti-censorship feminists, including Linda Williams, Varda Burstyn, and Carole Vance. Observing the uncomfortable alliance between anti-pornography feminists and the Christian Right, anti-censorship feminists challenge the assumption of normal sexuality that underlies their opponents' rejection of pornography as perversion. While many anti-censorship feminists would concede that most pornography is informed by the ideology of patriarchal power, they are more concerned to defend the expression of diverse sexualities, and see pornography as an evolving genre that holds the possibility of introducing the alternative perspective of women's power and pleasure.

Admittedly, feminists on both sides have offered compelling arguments for their position, and the pornography debate appears to have reached an impasse if it remains a debate over censorship. Can we open a new dialogue on pornography by posing a different set of questions that would situate the debate in a more constructive philosophical framework beyond

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[1]Robin Morgan, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, edited by Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), p. 139.

censorship? My paper attempts to explore such a possibility. In keeping with Linda Williams' claim that pornography is ultimately more about gender than sex[2], this paper attempts to focus the debate on gender issues surrounding an ontological study of the body--i.e., the body as we exist it, and the body as it is seen by the other. Ontological questions are questions that explore the most fundamental structure of human existence, questions that provide the necessary grounding for ethical judgments about human rights and actions. As feminists and as academics, we undoubtedly respect freedom of expression. And yet, for most of us, there is something deeply disturbing about the pornographic portrayal of women, a portrayal so offensive that it challenges our otherwise liberal sensibility. Rather than dismissing this as simply a question of subjective taste, I suggest that we try to analyze and to articulate just what it is that disturbs us by reframing the pornography debate in a different philosophical construct, one that raises serious questions concerning authentic human existence. In formulating these questions, my frame of reference is Jean-Paul Sartre's ontology of the body and his theory of intersubjectivity, with special emphasis on the phenomenon of " the look". I find the Sartrean framework to be particularly useful in that it allows us to analyze pornography in terms of the ontological categories of freedom and objectification. In the end, I hope to show that these are relevant categories that will take us beyond the issue of censorship.

Let us begin with an exposition of Sartre's ontology of human existence, which forms the cornerstone of his theory of embodiment. Human beings, he says, exist as freedom. Here, freedom is to be seen ontologically as a state of being that constitutes the very structure of our existence. As such, it is not to be confused with the actual choices we exercise but is the very *condition* for such choices. We understand that the possibility of choice is open only to a being who exists as freedom. Now to exist as freedom is to exist by disobeying the principle of identity. Unlike a rock or any nonconscious thing that has a fixed

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[2]Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy for the Visible,"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 267.

identity and is therefore nothing more than what it is, we exist by projecting beyond our past toward some future possibility. By realizing possibility after possibility, we are constantly pulling away from whatever identity our past has conferred upon us, and are always in the process of defining and redefining ourselves. This existential structure of wrenching away from what we are toward what we will become is in essence a perpetual flight from identity, which is what Sartre means when he proclaims that human beings exist as ontological freedom. Indeed, this ontology of human existence provides us with a fundamental conception of person that enables us to speak meaningfully and intelligibly about concrete freedom in terms of such issues as choice and oppression. To see this point, simply imagine what it would be like to offer concrete choices to a rock, or to oppress a rock by eliminating such choices. It is absurd to ascribe concrete freedom to a rock precisely because a rock, as a nonconscious, congealed thing in itself, is not the sort of being that exists by projecting beyond itself and in the process retains the permanent possibility of living freely. Observing the stark contrast between persons and objects, Sartre concludes that, whereas all nonconscious things derive their fixed identity from their solidity, their substantiality, and their total fullness of being, a person exists as freedom by negating all the substantial, opaque, and thing-like qualities that cement the identity of nonconscious objects. In this way, to exist as freedom is to be lacking in all the qualities that make a thing a thing; it is to be a non-thing, a "nothingness", as it were, whose identity remains perpetually in flux. But given that the body, as flesh, is obviously a substantial and solid thing with a fixed identity, how could I, as a person, be embodied and still exist as freedom? Sartre addresses this problem by distinguishing three ontological dimensions of the body, and maintaining that, in its primary dimension, my body can never be an object for me. To be sure, he acknowledges that my body has an "outward", impersonal dimension that emerges for me when I apprehend it as a physical organism much like the anonymous human body seen in an anatomy book. Now Sartre does not deny that this dimension of the body, as an object for me, serves a purpose; he wants only to caution that it is not how I exist my body from day to day. Indeed, this body-as-object is

itself derivative of a more immediate, primary, and authentic dimension of my body, which Sartre calls "body as Being-for-itself", that is to say, the body-as-subject.

In this important dimension, my body is not split from my consciousness and placed out there "in" the world. It is not itself an object of consciousness but is precisely what consciousness must surpass in order to take on an object. For example, while I am painting a picture, my attention is directed solely toward the strokes of my paint brush upon the canvas. Rather than appearing with the canvas, the paint brush, and other objects that lie in my field of consciousness, my body is the "forgotten" or "neglected" aspect of my consciousness that is "passed over in silence" while I engage in the pursuit of my projects. There can be no psychic distance or split between me and my body, the kind that is observed in any subject-to-object relation, precisely because my body-as-subject lacks the exteriority that characterizes all objects. Put simply, I *am* my body; I exist it as I project toward my possibilities in the world. Despite Sartre's abstract description here, this intuitive, unobjectifiable relation between me and my body is reflected in our everyday language. I use the sentence, "I am painting a picture", to explain my hand movements. Indeed, it would be rather awkward, if not altogether unintelligible, to say that my hand is painting a picture, as if my hand were something different and detached from who I am. For Sartre, it is this unobjectifiable and inseparable aspect of my body that constitutes the most authentic and primary relation between me and my body. I exist, he says, in complete unity with my body-as-subject.

This unity, however, is always threatened by a third dimension of the body, known as my body-for-others. Sartre develops this aspect in connection with his discussion of "the look", in which he presents his radical revision of the traditional theory of intersubjectivity. The tradition has long insisted on the primacy of the subject-to-object relation whereby I, as subject, become aware of the Other as object through the Other's body. Sartre criticizes this position for failing to uncover an even more fundamental relation: namely, my subject-to-object relation to the Other is itself founded on the Other's turning me into an object through her "look". In other words, my making an object of the

Other lies subsequent to her making an object of me (or my awareness that she, as subject, could have made an object of me). I become aware of the Other not through her body, but through my own awareness that *I* have a body which is being looked at. Through the Other's look, I experience the emergence of my own body as an object, not for myself, but for the Other. As the Other's privileged possession, my body-for-others is "outside my reach, outside my action, outside my knowledge" [3]. Here, Sartre makes it plain that the Other's look represents a threat to me. From a psychological standpoint, it exposes a dimension of my being that is "out there" and in danger. From an ontological standpoint, it destroys the integrity of my body and collapses my status as freedom, as pure subject. This is what prompted Sartre to say that "my original fall is the existence of the Other."[4] As he puts it,

> What I apprehend immediately is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and ...cannot...escape from the space in which am without defense--in short, that I am seen. ...(B)eing seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom. It is in this sense that we can consider ourselves as "slaves" in so far as we appear to the Other [5].

Sartre maintains that it is this terrifying awareness that compels me to retaliate by turning the Other into an object for me. This is accomplished through the same mechanism: by looking back at the look. Through this role reversal I reestablish my status as free subject by seizing the Other as pure object existing for me and through me. Sartre believes that this desire to rescue my body-for-others from the Other is the ontological basis for conflicts that often exist in concrete human relations.

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[3] Jean-Paul *Sartre, Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 168.

[4] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 263.

[5] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 257, 267-268.

Notice that, in Sartre's analysis of "the look", the Other is first presented to me as a conscious subject capable of turning me into an object. As the source of my objectness, the Other has to be a subject before all else because, as Sartre says, "I cannot be an object for an object" [6]. Hence, in my encounter with the Other, the Other's status as a free subject is secured first by my awareness of being captured as an object, and then by my attempt to undo my captivity by looking back at the look. After all, it is because the Other is a subject who has initially turned me into an object that appropriation of the Other through my look becomes for me a desirable attitude.

> The objectification of the Other would be the collapse of his being-as-a-look. (It) is a defense on the part of my being which, precisely by conferring on the Other a being-for-me, frees me from my being-for-the-Other. In the phenomenon of the look, the Other is on principle that which cannot be an object. ...In experiencing the look...I experience the inapprehensible subjectivity of the Other directly and with my being. At the same time I experience the Other's infinite freedom.[7]

And so even as I am trying to turn the Other into an object-for-me, I nevertheless "experience the Other concretely as a free, conscious subject.[8] The other is guaranteed the ontological status of a free subject given Sartre's theory of intersubjectivity.

It is in light of this overall ontology of freedom and objectification that I wish to assess the problem of pornography. To be sure, in a patriarchal society where women-watching has long been something of a national pastime, Sartre's analysis of "the look" as the very destruction of a person's ontological status as free subject affords us a useful tool to theorize about women's compromised existence. Indeed, its relevance for feminist

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[6]Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 257.

[7]Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 268-270

[8]Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 271.

philosophy has been noted by Julien Murphy, who argues that:

> Although Sartre does not address sexist oppression, ...his theory of "the look" is integral to a feminist phenomenological analysis of oppression and liberation. Without intending to, Sartre has provided us with a particularly useful description of women's experience of devaluation in a world where men are dominant [9]

Specifically, Sartre's theory is helpful because it enables us to reconstitute the problem of women's oppression in ontological terms. His theory makes it clear that, within the culture of "the look", women suffer not merely from a loss of dignity or power but a loss of *being*. Women's existence under the male or public gaze is problematic not only because it leaves them powerless but, more importantly, because it robs them of their very status as pure subject, as freedom, as authentic being. "The look" affirms the freedom of the looker as subject at the expense of the freedom looked-at, the person gazed upon.

If "the look" that women experience in their daily routine is problematic for the reasons discussed here, I submit that "the look" associated with pornography is drastically more so. By pornography, I refer to the typical variety that is created for the heterosexual male voyeur. As the "frenzy of the visible", it constitutes the ultimate objectification of the female body. Whereas "the look" is experienced as a threat under ordinary circumstances, in the most exaggerated form that one would find in pornography it represents not merely the total destruction, but the very *preclusion* of the woman as free subject. As "the look" of the most radical kind, pornography is the attempt to deny woman's being as free subject without ever affirming it. To demonstrate this point, let us turn to the following considerations.

We have seen in Sartre's analysis of "the look" that the Other is first presented to me as a subject before she could be turned into an object. But this is not typically the case in pornography. Unlike any Other, the woman as Other in

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[9]Julien Murphy, "The Look in Sartre and Rich," in *Hypatia*, vol. 2, no. 2, Summer, 1956, p. 113.

pornography does not cast the initial look which would secure her as momentary subject. Constructed as pure object from the start, she exists as a reified body, with no possibility of looking or looking back at the voyeur. The usual, albeit combative, juxtaposition between the self and Other, between subject and object, that is found in the reciprocal look is altogether absent in pornography. As the designated subject, the voyeur looks without being looked at: his ontological status as subject remains uncompromised so long as the Other is incapable of directing that menacing glance. Being a voyeur thus shields him from the threat of becoming an object for the Other, the kind of threat which he may feel in his own inadequate relationship with women, and from which he may have turned to pornography as an escape.

Notice that, while retaining his status as guaranteed subject before the Other, the voyeur could take on his own body as an object for himself. In the case of arousal, for instance, the voyeur could remain a subject who could no longer surpass his body but becomes aware of it as an object of pleasure. In this way he exists as the symbolic union of subject and object, which, according to Sartre, satisfies, if only artificially, the basic ontological desire among human beings to identify with the full positivity of a congealed thing without giving up our status as freedom and as nothingness. We want to have it both ways: to deny the necessary contingency that freedom brings without denying our freedom. This bad faith project to become a "freedom-thing" is the source of many of the conflicts found in interpersonal relationships. What is different in the voyeur's case is that he manages to become an object for himself, not through the Other's look, which would make him a body-for-others, but through his own look that is directed toward the Other, seizing the Other as a body. This puts the voyeur in a privileged position: he becomes a body precisely by objectifying the Other, without ever being objectified by the Other. To be sure, the voyeur's project of being an object for himself and a subject vis-à-vis the Other is carried out at the expense of the woman as Other. She exists in a structure in which her whole being is reduced to an inert body that is solicited, probed, scrutinized, and appropriated by the gazer.

But now, one may ask, how is the objectification of women in pornography different from other forms of objectification? Unlike other genres, such as film and television, that also portray woman as the Other, pornography further places the woman outside the subject in so far as she is not intended to be taken as a character with qualities we generally associate with a subject, such as having a history, a personality, or various meaningful relationships. In Sartrean language, the woman in pornography does not exist her body--she exists *as* a body, and a very *impersonal* body at that. Indeed, no other form of objectification betrays the subjectivity of woman quite the way pornography does. The voyeur puts himself in a detached position where he could glean nothing from the woman's empty images that would compel him to care about her, or even to remember her name or her face. As the impersonal body whose only reason for being is to be seen and to be possessed, the woman is the antithesis of the free subject who exists by transcending her body toward her own possibilities.

Precisely because the woman is never a particular subject, pornography does not objectify a woman but the *idea* of woman. As such, pornography is really about the objectification of all women, turning them from free subjects who exist their bodies into reified objects that exist only as bodies. If to be human is to exist as freedom, and if to exist as freedom is to exist as transcendence into the world of possibilities by surpassing one's body, then pornography reverses the authentic body-as-subject relationship that women are supposed to have with their own bodies. All told, in pornography, women suffer, above all else, from a loss of being.

In closing, I want to discuss how these ontological considerations could inform our ethical judgment about pornography. By providing the philosophical grounding for understanding pornographic objectification as the destruction of a person's being, we have opened up a new dialogue that takes the current pornography debate beyond censorship in at least two ways. First, in light of the ontological description of what it means to be human, pornography is no longer merely a question of personal taste or aesthetics as some critics have alleged, but a question of authenticity. Pornography is objectionable not

because some of us believe that its images of women are too crude or explicit or obscene, but because it robs women, all women, of their being as free subjects. Second, by predicating the debate on ontology, we have effectively obviated the burden on the side of anti-pornography feminists to prove harm, an effort dismissed by anti-censorship feminists as paternalistic. After all, why should we assume that women need to be protected? The ontological considerations explored in this paper make clear that it is not so much a question of whether women are helpless and hence require protection, as it is a question of how human beings ought to be treated. We respect a person by affirming her status as free, conscious subject who transcends her body toward her freely chosen projects. Notice that, in saying that pornography ontologically displaces the woman as subject, my argument does not imply that *all* pornography is necessarily inauthentic. Rather, it issues a challenge to anti-censorship feminists who are interested in working toward a feminist "re-vision" of pornography. I submit that, ultimately, the challenge is whether or not it is possible to secure people's status as free subjects within the context of "the look".

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