

# Adonis Mirror



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## Hot Cherry Pies: Pornography and Justice for Women

*By Stephanie Cleveland*

A few weeks ago, I attended a Take Back the Night rally on my college campus. The evening was devoted to raising awareness about rape. I was glad to be there, glad to be supporting an event that criticized men's violence against women, and glad to be surrounded by some incredible women, many of whom were survivors of sexual assault. But even though I felt proud to be taking part, I also felt sad. As I listened to the speakers who had been chosen to address our group, I heard discussion of everything from date rape, to harmful depictions of women on television, but there was one issue nobody seemed willing to talk about. No one said anything about pornography.

No one spoke about the fact that the women in pornography and prostitution are survivors, too. No one mentioned that over two thirds of women in pornography experience childhood sex abuse before entering the industry. Nobody talked about how frequently prostituted women are raped, beaten and murdered, and no one questioned whether or not there might be similarities between the descriptions given by some women in pornography, of how filming a scene feels, ("It's like I'm outside of myself, like I'm watching what's happening to me"), and the dissociation rape victims sometimes talk about experiencing. While everybody acknowledged that we live in a culture where men often feel they have the right to take sex by force, no one seemed willing to admit most men also feel they have a right to buy it. No one brought up the issue of pornography except me. As a feminist, I brought it up. I oppose pornography and prostitution because I do not believe selling women and girls for sex can ever be positive or empowering. To me, standing in opposition to pornography and prostitution seems like the only truly progressive position

to take. But I was amazed at the lack of support I got at the rally. And I am constantly amazed at how hated criticism of pornography seems to be.

I oppose pornography and prostitution because they hurt women, including me. As a woman, I would like to be treated as an equal human being. I would like equal treatment for all women, but I do not see how we can reach that goal, as long as some of us can be bought and sold for men to use. Not surprisingly, my feelings about pornography do not make me popular with men. I can count on one hand the number of male friends I have had who supported my work against pornography. I am not conservative, at all. I am strongly pro-choice, pro-environment, anti-marriage, anti-capitalist, and extremely supportive of lesbian and gay rights. Most of the men I speak to about pornography agree with me on these issues. They identify themselves as liberal, and feel that the subordination of human beings is wrong. They believe that massive corporations do not have the right to exploit people in the name of global capitalism—unless those corporations are part of the pornography industry.

The sex industry, however, is founded on capitalism, greed, and men's contempt for women and people of color. It frequently defines sex as a service women perform for men, and it almost exclusively markets women's bodies, usually photographed in submissive positions, to men and even boys. It sexualizes racist stereotypes about Black women, Asian women and other women of color, and promotes racist beliefs about men of color as well. Yet, most of the liberal men I know defend their right to use pornography despite their supposed commitment to social justice. They defend pornography despite the fact that, in the most popular pornography, women's humiliation and subordination are eroticized. In pornography, women are depicted as enjoying surrender, rape, being fucked by strangers, performing oral sex on large groups of men until they ejaculate on our faces, and almost

any other form of male dominance a person could dream up. A glance around a typical store that sells pornography, one glance at the DVDs and magazines that line the shelves, will tell you, I am describing mainstream pornography, not examples that are extreme or on the margins.

Pornography features violence, racism, and sexism, passed off as speech, but pornography is neither speech nor fantasy. Pornography is made by doing real things to real women. Many women might choose *not* to work in the pornography industry, if they were not physically or mentally coerced. Women might make different choices, if we did not grow up learning to base so much of our self-worth on whether or not men find us sexually attractive. Oftentimes, women experience having our boundaries broken down by men very early, when we are still children, through incest and other forms of abuse. Women are also poor, relative to men, and when women live in poverty, we do what is needed to survive, or to help our children survive, even if that includes selling sex. A lot can happen to women, in a male dominated culture that still teaches us sex is our greatest power, that the most valuable thing we have to offer men is letting them fuck us. People who defend pornography do not consider that these factors, rooted in sexism, do influence women to enter the industry, and might be influencing them to stay, even when they are harmed.

Often liberal men and some women remind me that pornography is not the only problem facing women. They suggest I focus my energies on more important issues. The first male friend I tried to talk to about how pornography made me feel, told me I should focus my efforts on sexist depictions of women in what he described as, other, more mainstreamed media. The pornography industry has an over 10 billion dollar a year profit margin. It is as mainstreamed as television commercials, sitcoms, or any other media that might promote sexist stereotypes about women, and pornography often infil-

trates those media as well. The average boy growing up in America will see pornography for the first time when he is eleven years old. Pornography begins extremely early, to fuse men's desire with the treatment of women as less than human, in a way TV commercials do not. Men learn to orgasm to images of women they use in pornography. Through pornography, men learn to use women for sexual release, and then put us away. At best, pornography connects male sexual pleasure with the belief men have the right to buy sexual access to women; at worst, it allows men to climax to images of women's suffering.

Most men and women I know who use pornography believe sex is about power differences. They feel domination, submission and gender are inherent and natural parts of sex. Any critique of sadomasochism, they suggest, is puritanical—the rougher the sex filmed in pornography, the realer it must be, since, according to them, male sexuality is naturally coercive, female sexuality naturally masochistic. Anyone who thinks sex could and should be about tenderness, caring or respect, is fooling herself, (or himself) being naïve, judgmental. Yet, pornography is offering its own judgments about what sex between men and women should be. Pornography offers women choices in sex, only to the extent that we do not want to choose anything other than fucking, sex that is impersonal, gendered, often violent and humiliating.

For defenders of pornography, violence against women is natural, at least within the context of the industry. It cannot be called abuse, because the women get paid. Violence in pornography does not matter because women consent, if we are given money. The underlying assumption is, that some women (if not all) enjoy being used. What does that say about women's status in the twenty first century, about men's view of women in general? One man, a poet and editor, who defended his pornography use to me explained simply, "women like to be dominated." I think that is an attitude a lot of men who use pornography hold. Women who question

pornography are told we aren't looking at it the right way. We are told never to think about what the woman being fucked in pornography might ultimately be feeling, during the scene, or after, after the cameras turn off. We are told not to consider whether or not her free choice really hurts, whether it hurts her dignity as a person, having other men watch her being used, having men bond together over the collective use of her body; whether it hurts women exposed to pornography made of her later, by men in their own lives; whether it hurts women as a class, in and outside the industry.

The majority of women who go into pornography are poor. They have fewer privileges in life, generally speaking, than men and women who defend pornography, and men who use them. A lot of women in pornography and prostitution did not get to go to college like me. Yet, as a feminist, if I show concern for women in pornography, I am sometimes accused of denying them agency. While liberal men and women agree that people living in poverty are entitled to help and compassion, that being poor does not mean you are stupid or less entitled to human dignity—for some reason, there is this assumption that women being sold through pornography do not deserve to leave, that women should not be encouraged to know they deserve better out of life. Some tell me I am *antifeminist* if I suggest that all women deserve better than being marketed as, what one prostitution survivor termed, spittoons for men's semen. I am making women into victims, if I say pornography hurts them, hurts me. Yet, the only freedom I truly want to take away is the freedom men have to buy sexual access to women. Women in pornography should be unionized and well-vetted, its defenders repeat, but never, ever encouraged to leave.

But what would happen if the women did leave? What would happen to men, if women in pornography decided to leave, if they actually could? Would men die without pornography? Are men really so hooked on the misogyny pornography sells, that they can no longer live without it?

It has also been suggested to me by liberal men and some women, that rather than attack pornography, I should work towards putting control of the industry into women's hands. The people who suggest this seem to believe even though patriarchy is still firmly in place, that somehow, where sex is concerned, women are able to make decisions out of freedom and equality. But women are forced to make choices about sex, and about entering into pornography, like all the other choices we make in our lives—under a system of male dominance we still are not free from. We do not control any industry on this planet, as women. It is absurd to think we do or will ever control men's pornography use. Men have the money and power to control what type of pornography gets made, and by whom. And judging from the direction the industry has taken in the past decade, men who use pornography want very much to be able to use women—they want to be able to use us without having to worry about being gentle, or feminist.

One male reviewer's comments on female pornographer Candida Royalle's website seem telling: "Not too much for my wife, but still arousing. I am not sure if it would be great to sit down to alone. I might want something a little less 'lovable.'" Women can waste time and energy making pornography that is arguably less overtly degrading, but men still have the final say over what pornography they'll use. Sadly, women, like men, can abuse other people, and women, like men, can become pimps. This is why the idea of a woman-run pornography industry is not only unlikely, but terribly sad. In that case, the industry would still be based on injustice—on the selling of some people as sex, on women catering to men, giving men what men want, rather than asking them for social change—the only difference would be, women would be the pimps as well as the victims.

The lives of women hurt by pornography should matter. The lives of those who feel broken by pornography should matter, too, more than any inherently compromised attempts

to rework the industry. Why is it so unacceptable to ask men to give up pornography? The speech of those raped by pornography users, and by men who pressure and force women to act out scenes from pornography—should be allowed to matter. Their voices should matter more than the speech rights of men, who *can* live without pornography. Women hurt in pornography should also count more than the voices of a small, elite group of women willing to defend pornography. These women exploit other women, in order to make money. Women who claim pornography empowers us all, operate from a position of privilege. They do not have to live through being assaulted by a father who uses pornography, or being bullied into performing sex acts by boyfriends who use it. This tiny group of women pornographers gets to stand behind the camera, producing about one percent of the industry's content. Men, and especially men who make pornography, are only too happy to support them. They pay lip service to the idea of 'feminist erotica' or whatever new names people come up with for woman made pornography, while continuing to film women fucked, in the truest sense of the word, used, marketed.

Pro-pornography women claim they are entitled to their individual freedom of expression (how free one can be to express ideas about women and sex, within a form men invented, is hard to understand.) Feminism should be about giving women choices as individuals, they say. And that's true, to some extent, but it's also true that feminism is about resisting male dominance, that the most important goal of feminism is doing what is best for the status of women as a group. Women who identify as feminists have a responsibility to think about how our choices and public statements as women, can affect other women's lives. As a woman who was harmed by repeated exposure to pornography in her childhood, I can honestly say that my father's pornography would have been just as hurtful to me, whether a man or woman made it. Some women may learn to enjoy pornography, but many more have

been hurt in and through it. Some women may try to see sex as power, but many more realize power is still in the hands of men, whenever they decide whom they will buy sexual access to. Why should women be expected to reclaim an industry men came up with to begin with? Why should we try to make lovable pornography, working within the same system of patriarchy and capitalism men continue to run? Couldn't we use our energy to create our own ideas about sex instead, ideas that do not involve pornography at all?

On her web site, Nina Hartley claims to offer pro-woman pornography. One of her films is entitled *Hot Cherry Pies*. The cover features a woman's vulva (no face of course) neatly hidden by a smashed piece of pastry. A caption reads, "sink your teeth into a slice of hot cherry pie! 20 panty-soaked scenes of toy stuffing, muff munching, dong dunking fun, [courtesy of] pussy pro Nina Hartley!" A reviewer notes enthusiastically, "The box has a scratch and sniff on it. If you scratch the pussy it smells like cherries. It's a great conversation piece."

As a feminist, I want to be able to critique sexist imagery of women in the media. How can I do that, if I have to accept Hartley's version of the same thing as liberating? The ideas Hartley expresses about women in her films are the same as those found in male pornography—that is, that sex is about women's surrender, about some degree of force, being stuffed, bitten into, compared to food. The women marketed as lesbians in her 'girl-on-girl' features do not look like lesbian women I know and care about. They enact a clichéd male fantasy, rather than honoring what sex and intimacy can be between two women. Women's bodies in Hartley's films are usually reworked to conform to sexist standards of femininity—bleached blond, fake breasts, waxed genitals, underarms, and legs, so that the bodies of fully grown women look like prepubescent children. Can it really be positive for men to find depictions of women in this state exciting? The enormous range of touch, emotion and sensuality that encompasses women's sexuality, or any kind of authentically human sexual-

ity, isn't even hinted at in Hartley's films. It cannot be captured in any pornography, truthfully. The problem is, pornography is not about women's sexuality at all—those aspects of sex that are valuable, that involve knowing and connecting with another person as a human, cannot be shown in pornography; Pornography is a substitute for intimacy, a sexist one, for relating to women through sex. But sex with women cannot be commercially boxed and marketed, precisely because it is human, because women are.

Some women, and maybe even some men, would like to experience sex that is not commercial. Some of us are 'pro-sex,' to the point of wanting sex as human beings. What happens to us, if as women, Hartley's version of sex does not make us feel better? What happens when all the men we know use pornography and think of us as pussy, or cherry pies? As a woman, I remember times when men have used words like those to hurt me. Trying to redeem them as sexy, seems as pointless as trying to redeem racial slurs.

I do not want to be pussy or pie. What I would like is the chance to be a person, even during sex. Andrea Dworkin wrote, "Girls want so much, not knowing they want the impossible: to move in a real world of action and accomplishment; to be someone individual and unique; to act on one's own feelings, appetites, and ambitions."

I have my own appetites; I do not need the sexual script that pornographers—male or female—want to sell me. I have my own ambitions. I want the chance to find my own vision of sex. I want lovers who are willing to abandon pornography, so that I can have partners in respect and equality. I want to be, not the fuck-hole of male pornography, or the hot cherry pie of Hartley's, but a human being.

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