

Adonis Mirror



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The Weapon of Choice

By Richard Leader

We live in an image-saturated world. We enjoy shocking ourselves with statistics—spurious or not—regarding how many hundreds of advertisements and product logos we view on a daily basis. And we feign outrage over the supposed horror of it all without seriously stopping to consider what would be *left* if it were not so. After all, in a world without an overabundance of graven images the rare ones that exist have an equal power over their audience, not through force of numbers, but through the heightened effect granted by their esoteric nature. Just as the images of the sainted and the damned circling the doors of the medieval cathedral evoked both awe and fearful obedience, the richly oiled hues of the pastoral paintings of the 17th century stood as a catalog of wealth to their collectors, distilling their worldly possessions into a form that could serve as a constant reminder of their authority and thus their inherently moral station.

The idea of powerful, singular images is not completely alien to us today—burning crosses and swastikas are obvious enough examples—and yet the very idea of that power strikes most of us as a bit funny, flying in the face of our all important mantra of “free speech.” Such power can even be seen as comedy, the reaction of the African Bushmen to the presence of a mysterious bottle in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* being emblematic of our mirth. Despite the ambivalence of the film regarding race, teetering between myths of the noble savage and pitiable bumpkins, it becomes obvious that civilization, whether it be good, evil, or merely banal, is a professed and profound indifference to images. We transcend them, surpass them, feast upon them and yet feel empty, unchanged, still as ravenous as ever: or at least we pretend and hope that we do, arguing against legislation to criminalize forms of hate-speech while choosing to view any form of violence, racism, and sexism in the media as satire—of what, we dare not ask—zero-calories and no carbohydrates.

Interplay between image-saturated cultures and those that lack such density happens far more often than many people would believe. Rather than just the domain of anthropologists working in far flung regions, such intersections happen all around us, everyday: gender exists as a cultural division in nearly every area of the world. Many forms of ideography are typically common to one gender, where it is enjoyed, accepted, and thus eventually expected, allowing the social grouping to which it is native to become inured to it. This process allows members of that gender (especially so when that gender is considered the normative one) the pretense of obliviousness, despite the multitude of political effects the imagery could possibly have, any deeper meaning can be negated through its ubiquitousness: the imagery, in this case, is pornography.

Catharine MacKinnon's 1993 book, *Only Words*, made the argument that the images produced under the aegis of pornography were not speech, nor even obscenity, but an institution that actively works to transform the lived experience of human beings in a way that results in the oppression of women. In a review for *The Nation*, the writer Carlin Romano thought it would be cute to test her theory by asking if he, and a separate hypothetical character, both plotted to rape MacKinnon, only if at the last second the real author "chickened out," would they both be legally responsible for the rape? While he had largely missed her point, he aptly illustrated it by publicly transforming her into a rape-able entity, a woman, while his own body and words remained inviolate: placing him in a social position of power over her, even within the limited realm of a book review.

The outline of that event is still retold on a regular basis, a decade later, as the exchange remains a watershed moment for both liberal and libertarian white males who privilege freedom of speech over all other considerations—as that freedom tends to privilege them above any other demographic given their access to presses, pulpits, and professorships—and feminists who feel betrayed that a supposedly progressive journal such as *The Nation* would so utterly undermine them. The social effects of pornography can indeed be difficult to quantify beyond the women who are harmed directly in criminal acts, notions of causality always are, but especially so

because patriarchy refuses any form of subjectivity but its own, which it often views as 'objectivity' to a frightening degree (few of the male professors and journalists, including Romano, who publicly took on MacKinnon's book with their own unbridledly confident criticisms had a tenth of her background in law or philosophy, their identity as males clearly superceding their status as mere dilettantes): thus, any challengers to the status quo must present evidence that is empirical beyond the possibilities of empiricism.

What Romano did not anticipate, however, was the arrival of the internet where men have yet again learned to use pornography as a weapon, where its use as such is direct and unmistakable—now quantifiable and a matter of public record, no longer subsumed in the complications of private interpersonal relationships where ambiguity allowed proponents of pornography to discount the frequency with which men have used it to control their female partners in one way or another—and where the forms that are often employed rival or even exceed the most horrific variety culled by MacKinnon for *Only Words*, detractors having argued that she misrepresented the industry with a few bad apples.

Pornographic images are used to disrupt discourse in online forums, to silence political opponents without the appearance of political action, and for basic puerile amusement that belies the existence of the other two utilities: given the limited political consciousness of mainstream male-culture which thrives on mock-ignorance, to whom the word "politics" is often a boring expletive or simply limited to talk about Democrats and Republicans, even when they venture into feminist or women-only spaces on the internet to deliberately 'troll' through pornographic words or pictures the social meaning of their behavior is allowed to remain as background to their own entitlement to 'fun' which is held as a separate sphere of human activity that must remain unimpeachable.

Women are not the only ones targeted for pornographic assaults. Men enjoy turning the same treatment towards their peers as well, often to achieve the same results. As pornography is frequently an aspect of male life, only the most virulent images are used: scenes involving fecal matter or deformity are common, as are images of rape and violence, as well as sexualized medical or foren-

sic photos, the suicides and murders hosted by the ‘shock-site’ Rotten.com serving as a modern follow-up to John Alan Schwartz’s 1978 film, *Faces of Death*. Most twenty to thirty-something men possess at least some memory of the film, whether they saw it in whole or in part—the scenes of violence sometimes presented to them by their fathers as a rite of passage, much in the same way as the proverbial *Playboy* in the woodshed. Just as many boys were acquainted with it indirectly through the hushed retellings of the most gruesome moments in *Faces of Death*, typically presented as real rather than cinematic embellishments, that we often heard at the playground during recess or across lunch tables in the school cafeteria, the grim stories bringing minor fame and popularity to the boys who possessed them.

Indeed, as abhorrent as many men find these extreme images, whether they fall under the domain of pornography in the strictest sense or under a more liberal interpretation of the word that allows for a lust and intoxication that eclipses the focus on the sex act itself, men do tend to develop a soft spot for the images of their—or the internet’s—salad days. Shock-sites were common while the internet was in its adolescence, the period of mainstream migration to the technology that followed the early days when it was an insular community of professionals and college students: during this period men would commonly misrepresent hyperlinks they gave, using misleading headlines, to redirect newcomers to shock-sites that would fill their screen with ‘pop up’ windows filled with pornographic images of various sorts, effectively locking up their computer, sometimes with audible cues to draw the attention of others at the victim’s workplace or home in order to create even further consequences. As web-culture developed and moved away from the old-pro/newcomer dichotomy and began to recreate the same subcultures that exist in real life, most of these sites fell by the wayside and the focus turned instead towards deciding which pornographic images are or are “Not Safe for Work” (the NSFW acronym can now be seen as a logo on clothing), splitting hairs over what degree of “nipple insinuation” is to be considered over the line.

One such shock-site was Goatse.cx (the “cx” country code standing for Christmas Island, the Swiss-Bank of internet domains

that allows its clients an often excessive degree of protection and anonymity, even when the server hosting the actual files for the domain resides in the United States; having the additional benefit of allowing the site to be phonetically pronounced as “Goat Sex”) that, among other images, showed a photograph of a man “stretching” his anus. Some claim that prior to 1998, the primary image on the webpage depicted a sex act between a woman and a goat. Whether or not this was true is highly uncertain and ultimately improvable, more salient is how this example of mythology is similar to *all* mythology in its ability to frame and reify the culture that propagates it. To crib from Voltaire, even if the image of the woman having sex with the goat did not exist on the site, it was necessary for man to invent the myth of it having been there to complete an idealized picture of history.

In January of 2004, a full six years after the launch of the site, a female resident of Christmas Island lodged a formal complaint with the CIIA, the authority responsible for the CX registry, citing the fact that the domain did not give adequate warning to potential visitors, often tricked into seeing the site’s contents, which constituted an illegal act in the cases of minors and those residing in locations where such imagery has been banned.

For her part, being that she was not at first given anonymity by the CIIA until after she received a bevy of personal threats, she herself became an overnight internet celebrity, where men linked to an Archive.org (a site that catalogs and preserves web pages on a periodic basis for historical reasons) listing of a webpage that contained a picture of her, rendering futile any action to remove the picture from her workplace’s site. Many online forums populated by men started topics claiming that her image “raped their eyes” and that her face was more offensive than the contents of Goatse.cx—the direct quote “Not only is she damn ugly, she looks like a goddamn Martha Stewart wannabe too,” paraphrasing the bulk of their acrimony.

This did not just happen in the so-called “gutter” regions of the internet, allegedly plagued by pubescent boys seeking to emulate Howard Stern and other similar idols, but in the upwardly mobile world of male dominated technology sites such as

Slashdot.org and Kuro5hin.org who also flocked to troll the CIIA's website, posting their own pornographic images in the defense of "free speech." The internet allows boys to behave as if they have the authority of men and for men to behave as if they have the freedom of boys. Males of all ages seemed to genuinely mourn the loss of the site: the collaborative dictionary project, Wikipedia, contains an outlandish 3,500 words detailing the rise and fall of Goatse.cx in faux-academic detail, while nearly 12,000 supposed signatures fill out an online petition demanding that the CIIA restore the site. Though most of the reasons given by the signatories amounted to juvenile banter, the more detailed accounts fell into a variety of categories, beyond those advocating for unmitigated "free speech."

Many claimed that the webpage was of historical significance—the numerous copies or 'mirrors' of it being present at the same Archive.org that was used to terrorize the female plaintiff were not deemed sufficient; to them, only the genuine article would do. Indeed, since it was shut down, Goatse.cx has been cloned directly by many other domains in order to keep the tradition alive, even to the extent of so-called "tribute" pages that stockpile imagery created as a homage to the pornographic pictures of the original site: only now transposed onto carved pumpkins, the icing of birthday cakes, and perhaps even a level in a best selling video-game, the "AS-Junkyard" stage in *Unreal Tournament 2004*, which necessitated a cameo in a competing product, *DOOM 3*, as well.

Others claimed that stumbling into Goatse.cx was akin to a rite of passage or coming of age ceremony, and a rather mild one at that, compared to fraternity hazing and other potentially violent activities. Because it happened to them, they wanted their younger peers to suffer the exact same abuse before being admitted to a place in the current social hierarchy—a common enough reason for such kourotophic rituals in patriarchal societies—and they were willing to fight tooth and nail to continue the circle of abuse in order to give reason and purpose to the cruelty which they themselves endured, even if the extent of it was merely clicking on a disturbing hyperlink.

The final reason given built off of that argument, summed up by the 11,941th entry in the petition, "I thought it was pretty gross... until I found out there was an actual following. Now its [sic] funny

as hell. We must not let it fall!" For all the actual disgust it generated, Goatse.cx was a building block, a pillar, of men's gendered community, and thus deserving of protection. The foremost result of men's pornographic attacks on each other is desensitization, an inuring that occurs, that makes such attacks easier to commit on women (men have to look at the pictures that they are using to harass others, at least once, after all) and more increasingly effective, as it widens the gulf between men's and women's culture and hence males and females.

Even if women were not harmed in the production of pornography, even if it never revealed in women's degradation, even if it did not teach men to view all or even some women as sexual objects—and even if it granted only half of all the great and miraculous benefits to human society that its defenders continue to claim it provides, even then it would *still* remain a vestige of sexism, given that it works to create a separate culture for men (maintained by men's ritualized abuse towards each other) through the process of image-saturation, one which works to the benefit of all males. Certainly, women's culture is also saturated with images—different images—ones that feminists at least point out were often manufactured and served to them by men, for men's benefit, but when it comes to pornography, especially the shock-variety that is commonly used as a weapon on the internet, that women would have a greater than "baseline" reaction to it becomes obvious, given that men are the normative or baseline class.

Not all women react thusly—of course—some women, even among those who consider themselves feminists, try to tomboy their way into male-internet culture, but even then, it is only men who are able to leverage their nonchalance when being faced with undesirable imagery or speech into political power for themselves. Witness the sadistic abuse that occurred at Abu Ghraib: for all of the male Left's supposed outrage, they did not have much of a problem circulating images of it, blurred faces or not, in the interest of truth, justice, and electing John Kerry or even Ralph Nader. This is not meant to conflate jailed prisoners with performers in pornography, nor their comparative levels of agency, but to indict male culture across the board—from the authoritarian conservatism of the military that

inspires by-all-accounts ordinary people to commit heinous atrocities, to the American Fear Clothing company who caters to “Disaffected Youth Culture.”

They sponsored an “Anti-Bush” computer game, hosted at Emogame.com, which launched in June of 2004: the rudimentary game begins with an extended opening which depicts Bush and Cheney taking control of “Voltron,” a robotic cartoon character from the 1980s that most twenty-something men remember rather fondly, who then use it to graphically rape the Statue of Liberty, his very un-robotic swinging testicles calculated to inspire mirth amongst its audience before any sense of outrage at a political situation that may or may not have warranted such a boorish allegory: once again, a violent and sexist act receives protection under the blanket of satire, when the primary reason for the creation of the so-called ironic image is the male public’s nihilistic focus on ‘fun.’

Moments later in the game’s introduction, after the professional wrestler Hulk Hogan is presented as the hero-of-the-people, the rape continues, Voltron adding “Yeah Bitch. Say My Name. Say My Name.” To the website’s intended audience, it suggests a similar line in the 1999 film, *American Pie*, where it was uttered by a female performer in the middle of a sex act. There, the unexpected and ludicrous nature of the outburst, given her gender and characterization, worked to inspire the laughter that followed but not the enduring popularity of the line: a popularity that is not at all concerned with context. It is now just as funny to male audiences regardless of who voices it. Screenwriters might have made the language palatable by so ‘politically-correct’ standards, perhaps even feminist in some people’s imagination, by forcing it onto a female character, but that only opened the door for the phrase to be spoken by anyone, indiscriminately, pulling it inline with the sexism of the general culture.

Given the indifference of male society to rape in general, where the word can mean everything from paying too much for gasoline to looking at the picture of the woman who complained about Goatse.cx, it is fairly disingenuous for one group of men to presume themselves in the high ground and use Abu Ghraib as evidence of it. There have even been cases in the workplace of male supervisors summoning female employees—perhaps deceitfully—

to computer screens in order to make them look at the images of Abu Ghraib, the political and presumably educational nature of the photographs and videos somehow rendering them “Safe For Work”—knowing, and more importantly *hoping*, full well in advance that they will instantly be disgusted and avert their eyes: men enjoy nothing more than rooting out some form of ‘weakness’ in women in order to self-justify their positions of social authority over them. After all, the idea of ‘throwing like a girl’ goes back to texts from the fourth century BC, where it was used by Aineias Tacticus.

What the flippant use of “rape” in our vernacular, pornography, and even the images coming out of Abu Ghraib have in common is their ability to bond men together as men, apart from women, making each of them a potent weapon in preserving existing social structures: those claiming to be on the Left, at least, should have the grace to realize that anything that allows the confusion of compassion with weakness is not speech—but madness.

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