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Appreciating Pornography

I've been looking at a number of magazines and videos lately featuring extremely large naked women in sexual situations--by large I mean perhaps two hundred to five hundred pounds--with titles like Plumpers, Jumbo Jezebel, and Life in the Fat Lane. According to my informant at Frenchies, a Chicago porn emporium, they can barely keep these titles in stock--when a new one comes in it sells out quickly. And there are similar items in the gay sections of most porn stores, as well--magazines and videos featuring very large naked men, with titles like "Bulk Male," "Husky," and "Bustin Apart at the Seams." That fat might contain erotic charge in a culture so maniacally devoted to achieving thinness that vomiting food is a national epidemic among college women makes either no sense or perfect sense depending on your operating theory of the linkage between sexuality and social relations. However, the appearance of these titles on the shelves of your local pornographer most certainly defies what many have come to think of--in large part due to the efforts of the feminist antiporn movement--as the typical in hard core porn: that is, an undifferentiated mass of sexualized violence devoted to objectifying, dehumanizing and perhaps most of all, genericizing women. The sub-categories of porn--fat, tickling,

rubber, cross-dressing, older men and women--are far more varied, and even surprising, than most anti-porn writing would lead you to believe, and it would seem a futile--or intellectually uncredible--effort to reduce such rampant diversity to a single property or purpose. However, what I don't want to do here is rehearse the standard arguments for and against porn--or for and against the anti-porn movement, which has generally managed to set the terms of these debates. All the arguments I would make--about fantasy, about female agency in porn, about a renewed right-wing puritanism around sex within feminism, about the confusion of representation with reality--all these arguments have been made ably elsewhere. What I want to do instead is try to enlarge the terms, not just of the debate, but of the whole question of what pornography is and does, through looking more closely at the nuances of pornographic sub-genres (or here, one particular sub-genre).

Nuance has been in somewhat short supply in anti-porn arguments, which generally take a two-pronged strategy: simultaneously inflating the amount of "harm" porn is said to cause, while deflating its complexity and contradiction into a series of slogans and overarching generalities, to the point where I imagine that my making the claim that porn is actually a fairly complex field of representation is provoking smirks in my audience. The campaign to suppress porn is curiously contradictory: an effort to remove from visibility or attention precisely what the dominant culture itself also prefers not to know, and has already exiled to the hinterlands of pornography. I'm going to be suggesting that pornographic sub-genres hinge on

categories, or areas, of culturally problematic meanings that get taken up in porn precisely because there's no sanctioned discourse for them in the larger culture. To be relegated to the pornographic is a form of intra-cultural exile--a purdah (if I can use a cross-cultural metaphor)--the thing remains, but in a veiled form; its unveiled appearance is exactly that which violates social norms of the proper.

Shocking the bourgeoisie--or perhaps more specifically, revealing to them their aesthetic limits--was once the mission of the avant garde. Pornography these days is doing it much better, usurping the avant garde's role as an aesthetic practice of visual shock and social critique, which through tactics of defiance and violation, probes at the social order's margins and borders. This is easy to see once you dismantle distinctions between high culture, and low or mass culture (one of the defining characteristics of what gets called postmodernism). Like any marginalized practice (and like the historic avant garde) pornography's perimeters are exactly coterminous with, and dependent on, the larger culture's carefully patrolled boundaries: leaving them vulnerable through exposure. (If I followed through this metaphor Dworkin and MacKinnon would emerge as INS agents extraordinaire.) The feminist debates about porn have, in so vehemently foregrounding gender, generally missed the fact that porn also engages other motifs than gender alone--or other facets of subjectivity--particularly those of class and aesthetics. I've argued elsewhere that overlooking class has turned the anti-porn movement into a renewed bourgeois reformism.

If porn does anything well it is to pit itself against bourgeois taste and bodily norms; working to suppress pornography is a not very coded way of enforcing and reproducing those norms.

I'm also going to argue that in terms of aesthetics, sex is pornography's medium, like paint is for painting; to say porn is simply "about" sex is a quintessentially modernist statement that overlooks content--especially social content like class conflict--in favor of medium. So I'd like it to be understood that my local argument about fat porn has larger ambitions. What we could call the pornographic response: the visceral, sexual, aesthetic disquietude porn produces, and which is hardly dissimilar in its proponents and its adherents (and seems to demand an outlet, whether beating off or sounding off), this disquietude is a glimpse, I think, at how deeply embedded within the fabric of subjectivity these margins and borders lie, and in turn, how very deeply aesthetics is installed within the individual subject. There's no aesthetic response, no pornographic response, no visuality or vision, that's not already profoundly social.

PLAY CLIP

Fat is a locus of deep social contradiction. Fat is something a significant percentage of the American public bears not only undisguised contempt for, but also in many cases, an intense, unexamined, visceral disgust. Here, for example, a psychiatrist writes of the feelings of repugnance stirred in him

by a fat women patient he calls Betty:

I have always been repelled by fat women. I find them disgusting: their absurd sidewise waddle, their absence of body contour--breasts, laps, buttocks, shoulders, jawlines, cheekbones, everything, everything I like to see in a woman, obscured in an avalanche of flesh. And I hate their clothes--the shapeless, baggy dresses or, worse, the stiff elephantine blue jeans with the barrel thighs. How dare they impose that body on the rest of us?

"The origins of these sorry feelings?" he wonders. The answer: "I had never thought to inquire." For the psychiatrist, Irvin Yalom, also a professor at Stanford, the patient who scratches this nerve provides an opportunity to work through what he calls "a great trial of countertransference," whose genealogy he attributes variously to a family of "fat, controlling women," or perhaps to the childhood playground desire always to have someone lower on the social rung than oneself to kick around. For that purpose, he writes, "there was always fatness, the fat kids, the big asses, the butts of jokes, those last chosen for athletic teams, those unable to run the circle of the athletic track."

Apparently one fat woman is worth a thousand words. The flurried excess of non-stop metonymy in this passage is a perfect prolix testimony to the anxiety these excessive female bodies apparently provoke within him. Although Doctor Yalom, whose professional competence is supposed to be in supplying deeper meanings for just these type of "symptoms," provides somewhat banal explanations for his loathing of fat, this isn't entirely surprising even though he seems astute enough when confronted

with any subject other than fat. He's hardly alone in his undertheorized anxiety: according to fat activists (I'm going to be drawing on collection of writing by women about fat oppression called Shadows on a Tightrope from Spinster Press), fat hatred is more or less demanded by the culture, not to mention the last remaining protectorate of safe bigotry. Thursday's New York Times [9/30/93] trumpeted a New England Journal of Medicine Study claiming to be the first study "to document the profound social and economic consequences of obesity," which merely confirms what any fat person will tell you--that this culture is particularly vicious to the fat.

Fat. Few topics excite such interest, emotion or capital investment. A book on measuring fat has been on the New York Times best seller list for almost three years: no other subject can so reliably actually incite Americans to actually read. With a multi-billion dollar diet and fitness industry, tens of millions of joggers, bikers, and power walkers out any sunny weekend all trying to banish fat, work off fat, atone for fat; health ideologues who talk of little these days besides fat; research and development dollars working overtime to invent no-fat substitutes for fat--fat is certainly the most present absence in our pantheon of cultural ambivalence. Given the vast quantities of energy and resources devoted to annihilating it, and, in turn, making life miserable for those who are unfortunate enough to bear the humiliation of its exposure, fat might be considered, not just an obsessive focus, but even perhaps, the most central focus of contemporary American culture. The mission

of all this cultural energy? To insure fat's invisibility: to banish it from sight, exterminate it from public view.

What is surprising is how little general cultural explanation there is for this national revulsion about fat. As everyone who's cruised the psychology section of any bookstore lately is aware, there's an expanding body of literature now devoted to the ruinous effects of the cult of thinness on women's lives, usually pointing the finger of blame at the media and fashion industries. There's a fairly vast literature--clinical, popular, literary--on anorexia and bulimia: and a corresponding expansion of metaphor around food deprivation and overconsumption--The Famine Within; The Hungry Self, Starving for Attention, Feeding the Empty Heart, Feeding the Hungry Heart, et al. We can knowledgeably speculate about why it is people, most often women, voluntarily starve themselves (we might psychologize about mothers and control issues; or for the intellectual set, the desire to diminish women, ambivalence about the maternal body, even perhaps even geopolitical insights--like what does it mean to refuse food in a society of overconsumption). But generally, there's comparatively and surprisingly little attention devoted to just what it is about fat qua fat that's so very disturbing at this particular historical moment. It seems, actually, like a fairly ridiculous question.

One reason the question seems so stupid is the appearance of nature and common sense that attach themselves to this anxiety

over fat. Fat is simply unaesthetic. If pressed we resort to medical explanations. "It's not healthy to be fat" we proclaim knowledgeably as we reach for the little pink envelope of chemical compounds known to cause fatal diseases in lab animals, or as we ingest glutinous and ill-conceived oxymorons like non-fat desserts. And current medical ideology works overtime reinforcing this common sense. I say "medical ideology" to make a stab at stripping away some of its presence to scientific certainty. In fact, the visual taste for thinness--fairly hegemonic since the end of WWI--far preceded current medical notions about fat: medical ideology followed fashion rather than vice versa. But even though recent studies in Scandinavia have indicated that fat women actually live longer than thin women, and even though there is a preponderance of evidence that weight and distribution of body fat are for the most part genetically determined--including a recent National Institute of Health study which concluded "There is increasing physiological, biochemical and genetic evidence that overweight is not a simple disorder of will power, as is sometimes implied, but is a complex disorder of energy metabolism"--all of this has had little effect on either the medical establishment's insistence on low ideal body weights or the larger culture's phobia of fat, which according to anecdotal accounts by fat people, doctors equally share. Fat activists have also pointed out that any oppressed population suffers from stress related illness i.e. the well documented incidence of high blood pressure among African-Americans. The reliance on medical explanations for fat loathing seems hardly to account for the intensity of the experience, and is rather, I

suspect, part of the symptomology rather than its source.

This cult of bodily thinness and obsession with banishing fat is, of course, historically recent, and in contrast to bodily aesthetics for the past 400 years or so--roughly between 1500 and 1900--when for both men and women a hefty body was a visually appealing body. Paintings throughout the period portray both men and women as solid and even rotund. Nudes--a la Rubens--shamelessly displayed thick pink rolls of flesh. And clothes themselves were bulky and designed to add volume to the body rather than emphasize a svelte profile--if you were thin you did your best to hide it under large bunched garments. That these body types have or had complicated social connotations is a fairly unproblematic insight when thinking art historically. In Rubens' time, according to art historian Anne Hollander, thinness connoted poverty and deprivation, along with the threat of disease and old age. It was also seen as implying "spiritual poverty and moral insufficiency...an undesirable morbidity--not only a lack of good fortune and muscle, but a lack of will and zest." Whereas in the middle ages bodily thinness echoed the Church's teaching on the unimportance of the flesh, by the 16th century,

Rubens' glorification of the flesh was an outgrowth of the Renaissance belief in the almost limitless possibilities of the human mind and body. In the visual arts, human importance seemed most appropriately expressed in terms of solidity, of undeniable substance and weight....There was more than sensuous pleasure associated with the fullness of body. It was a visual expression of stability and order.

What will the art historians of the next century have to say

about our own investments in bodily norms, what connections between socially sanctioned bodies and social ideologies and anxieties will they uncover? One clear link we can make between the body and the social is the complex chain of association between body type and social class. More or less since the beginning of the century, thinness began to be affiliated with wealth and higher social standing, whereas fatness now tends to be associated both stereotypically and in real earned income with the lower classes. There is in fact a higher concentration of body fat the lower down the income scale you go in this country. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, almost 30% of women with incomes below \$10,000 a year are obese, as compared with around 12.7% of those with incomes above \$50,000 a year. But interestingly, all the cliches--that fat is more tolerated farther down the social rung, or that there's a greater consumption of pork rinds and doughnuts--are not so much the case as that fat is actually a predictor of downward mobility: if fat, you have a lower chance of being hired, and if hired a lower chance of being promoted, and this is particularly true in jobs with a greater concentration of women. Heterosexual fat women are less likely to marry up socially or economically. And given that the tendency to fat is inherited, fat children are more likely to be born into a lower social class and because of fat discrimination, to stay there. This association between fat and the lower classes is yet another twist in the twisted tale of current social responses to fat: if fat contains a certain imaginary narrative, that is, of how the fat person got to be that way--a narrative of gluttony and overconsumption--in class

terns this reads like something of a displacement, assigning responsibility for overconsumption and gluttony to the social class by far least culpable of overconsuming. Researchers studying the psychology of body image report that fat is associated with a range of fears from loss of control, to a reversion to infantile desires, to failure, self-loathing, sloth, and passivity. Substitute "welfare class" for "fat" here and you start to see that the phobia of fat and the phobia of the poor are heavily cross-coded, and that perhaps the fear of an out-of-control body is not unrelated to the fear of out-of-control masses with their voracious demands and insatiable appetites.

The fat are seen to be violating territorial limits: they take up too much room. Fat is by far the only physical characteristic so deeply culturally connotative; clearly the burden borne by the fat is not only of pounds, it's of oversignification. One of the best testaments about the social experience of being fat is a book called "Such a Pretty Face." The title derives from what seems to be a universal experience of fat women: hearing this sanctimonious one-liner delivered by everyone from "well-meaning" relatives to--in a startling violation of norms of social conduct--strangers on the street or in restaurants. What the line means is, of course: "if only you'd lose weight." But what puts the public on such terms of intimacy with the fat? Fat people report that it's very common to have pig noises directed at them when they walk down the street. Other types of public ridicule are common. In one anecdote, a fat woman tells of attending a college lecture class with over a

hundred people in it. The professor stops speaking in the middle of a sentence and says to her 'When are you going to lose weight? You're really fat.' What makes the fat a kind of public property whose bodies invite the vocal speculations and ridicule of strangers? What imaginative investment does our citizenry have in putting the fat on diets?

Of course the individual body in our culture is pretty much the sole locale for scenarios of transformation: you can aerobicize it, liposuction it, contract it through diet or expand selected parts with collagen injections. A fat person seems to be regarded as a transformation waiting to happen, and whose scandal, whose insult to the transformative fantasies of the population at large, is the failure to effect that transformation. Perhaps our investment in fat is something of a fantasmatic and utopian investment in potential social transformation, one that, when displaced to the individual is, of course, doomed to fail: the recidivism rate in weight loss is estimated at 98%. The angry, contemptuous social reaction to the resistance of the fat to transform themselves is a testament to the very degree of our investment in the potential of change, as is the degree of emotion attached to the spectacle of its failure--it is, in many cases actual violence: a quarter of fat men and 16% of fat women reported being hit or threatened with physical violence because of their weight.

It's interesting that fat activists have seized on evidence provided by genetic research indicating that the propensity for fat is a genetic inheritance as conclusive

evidence of fat oppression and social victimization. Their argument is that if fat is no more chosen than, say, race, bigotry toward the fat should be no more officially sanctioned than racism--and activists hope that these recent findings will result in institutional recourse like its own Title 7 act. (Only one state--Michigan--has laws forbidding employment discrimination on the basis of size.) Many activists now claim that the fat glutton is a vicious stereotype and that the fat actually eat less than the thin, that fat has nothing to do with food or caloric intake but is solely a metabolic disorder. You find very little in fat activist literature that actually endorses choosing to be fat or that supports overeating.

This back and forth over personal responsibility for a socially marginal or reviled trait resonates interestingly with the recent controversial and much discussed findings by a researcher at the National Cancer Institute indicating a genetic basis for homosexuality--evidence that links male homosexuality to a particular region of the X chromosome. This discovery has led to speculation in the mainstream press that this will be the great leap forward for more widespread social acceptance of homosexuality: after all, the argument seems to go, if you don't choose to be gay but are "born that way" then there really is little grounds for discrimination (which of course seems remarkably forgetful about the experience of racial minorities in this country.) The discovery of the "gay gene" comes along just as queer politics has provided the distinction between being gay and being queer, which, to follow the genetic analogy, means you

might be born gay but choose to be queer--being queer is a political act. Just in time, science has stepped in to remove the whole issue from the realm of political agency, eliminating the need for politics while appealing to the majority's "understanding" for a remedy to intolerance.

This is pretty much the line in fat activist literature as well: there is very little sentiment there for actually choosing or having chosen to be fat, little that endorses choosing to defy social bodily norms. (I agree in principle that this is really too much to ask--the experience of being fat in this culture is so devastating that a majority of those who have lost weight through surgery report that they would rather lose a limb and for some even eyesight than be fat again.) The preference among fat activists--perhaps in reaction to the general insistence on individual blame--seems to be to see fat as non-volitional and to demand the majority's understanding, as opposed to celebrating the defiance of social bodily controls. Although much of the political wing of the gay community reacted with suspicion to the news of the "gay gene", protesting that whenever there's a new "cause" for homosexuality proposed, there shortly follow proposed "cures," there isn't particularly the same zeal to preserve fat against elimination on the part of fat activists. (Although the more radical do protest against specific cures, especially surgery which is both dangerous and carries many side-effects, and there is a lot of protest against the insistence on diets mainly because they simply don't work.)

Against this near universal chorus of loathing of fat, just

about the only pro-fat discourse in our culture is fat pornography. Where else can you find stretch marks, cellulite, weight-gain and flabby thighs celebrated? One argument might be that fat is already pornographic in our culture, a site of shame and defilement, and that fat porn merely reinscribes the fat, particularly the fat woman, in a pornographic economy. The other argument is that this is a celebration of bodies that defy social norms, an erotic identification with bodies that are unresponsive to social control, an attraction for voracious, demanding non-proper female bodies. What's interesting in fat porn is the pedagogical, somewhat defensive tone of the writing: the assumption that this is sex that requires an explanation. There are numerous "articles" with titles like "Why Men Love Large Ladies." There is an entire magazine called "Dimensions" (subtitled "Where Big is Beautiful") which is a sort of support publication for what are called "Fat Admirers"--men of generally ordinary weight, desirous of fat women, who themselves feel discriminated against and beleaguered in their sexual preferences. This is a publication which although not in any way pornographic, seems only to be available in porn stores.

It's of course true that patriarchal ideology works by projecting all things bodily onto the female, particularly the female body; the female body becomes a privileged site for apparatuses of social control. The anti-porn argument is that pornography is one such form of social control. I'd counter-argue that controls over the female body are far more pervasive and insidious than pornography, and porn is as likely to be a forum

for female empowerment as oppression. The culture's insistence on proper female bodies of specific sizes--and the various industries this spawns--diet, fashion, fitness, medical--not only impinge on women to a vastly more destructive extent, but is internalized to such a degree that this seems to comprise the very fabric of contemporary female subjectivity.

If fat porn "objectifies" fat women (and porn equally "objectifies" men and women if we have to use that terminology), it does so in defiance of all societal norms and social controls. Sexualizing fat--even oversexualizing fat--is a radically counter-hegemonic social act: refusing the connotations and oversignifications that the dominant aesthetic order attaches to fat can only be considered a form of social transgression. This isn't in any sense an intrinsic or essential property of liking fat, any more than fat has intrinsic or essential meaning. What pornography now provides, in the aesthetic realm--and in the absence of any other discourse or social institution, other than perhaps what was once called the avant-garde--is a space to defy the dictates--aesthetic, sexual, bodily--of the dominant order's mechanisms of visual social control. For those non-fat admirers in the audience, the disbelief and incredulity (I suspect quite visceral in many cases) that these enormously fat bodies shown earlier could be in any non-perverse way, a turn-on, shows just how deeply these bodily dictates have embedded themselves in our psyches, our aesthetics, and our sexualities. To the extent that pornography causes distress to those sensibilities--so much a part of our nature as to seem unquestionably always already

there--we might instead of seeking to suppress it, regard it as performing a social service: one of explaining the culture to itself, of elucidating the connection between the psychic and the social, between us and our culture.

