

John Stoltenberg. *Refusing to be a Man—  
Essays on Sex and Justice*. Meridian, 1989. (Excerpts)

Over the past ten or twelve years, radical feminists have developed a content analysis of pornography. At the core of that analysis is a new way of looking at pornography: as a window into acculturated male sexuality: what it is, what it desires, what it does, and why. The picture pornography exposes is not a pretty one; pornography reveals in the sexuality of the men for whom it is made an addiction to force and coercion for arousal, eroticized racial hatred, a despoliation of the female, a fetishizing of erection and devotion to penetration, an obsession with interpersonal power differentials, an eroticized commitment to violence—and through it all an ugly striving to assert masculinity over and against women. About the only aspects of male masculinity that one doesn't discern by studying pornography are those that have not been acculturated to respond to pornography—whatever those variations might be. But apart from that, pornography is about the most reliable evidence we have about male sexual identity and the sexuality that reinforces it and the values that construct it. (p. 120)

When one looks at any pornography, one sees what helps some man somewhere feel aroused, feel filled with maleness and devoid of all that is non-male. When one looks at pornography, one sees what is necessary to sustain the social structure of male contempt for female flesh whereby men achieve a sense of themselves as male. When one looks at pornography, one sees what men as a class need to feel sexed; one sees what men as a class need to feel real. Pornography tells lies about women. But pornography tells the truth about men. (p. 121)

Pornography—“the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women”—as a civil rights issue:

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**Four criteria for what constitutes pornography**

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1. **Graphic** (unambiguous, not merely implied or suggested)
2. **Sexually explicit** (not merely sexually suggestive or implicit)
3. **Subordination of women** (actively do so, not merely promote it)
4. **Include at least one from a list of specific scenarios:**
  - Women presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities;
  - Women presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation;
  - Women presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped;
  - Women presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt;
  - Women presented in postures of sexual submission;
  - Women's body parts—including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, and buttocks—are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts;

- Women presented as whores by nature;
  - Women presented being penetrated by objects or animals;
  - Women presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual.
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As luck would have it, a few folks happen upon an erotic potential that is actually rooted in the same values that bring kindness and exuberance and intimacy to the rest of their life. So then the question becomes: How does anyone pass along their knowledge of that potential to other folks on the planet—how do they express it, show it, *communicate* it—without having to sleep with everyone?

Some cultural artifacts will of course be necessary to get the word out—to attempt to convey to people what can be good about sex and to help people disentangle their sexual histories from the social norms that keep sex from being good. There will need to be expressions in the form of many kinds of messages—words, pictures, performances, combinations. Information will need to be shared, but I imagine that this communication would be very different from most sexually explicit media that now exist, which are essentially things made for consumers to have a sexual relationship to. The whole point of communicating about this human erotic possibility is that people be whole people to one another—not parts, not things, not objects, not consumables. Obviously, then, the media appropriate to such communication cannot itself be produced and marketed as things to have sex with—as “orgasm totems”—which would merely reinforce sexual relating to *people* as things.

What I believe needs to happen is a radical reexamination of the values in the kinds of sex we are having. We need to make a commitment to responsibility and responsiveness in sex. We need to make a personal commitment to stay conscious during sex, to stay alert to what is going on even as it is going on, a commitment to being ethically awake instead of doped. As individuals, and perhaps as friends (I don’t believe there is any readiness for this in any existing moment), we need to begin to understand more about what is going on between us when we have sex, the values in it, how it is related to the rest of our lives, how it is related to how we treat people, and how it is related to political change—and we need to talk about it, face to face, one to one, before, during, and after. Our bodies have learned many lies. If we dare to be ruthlessly honest, we can perhaps recover truth. (pp. 113f.)