



A DISCUSSION OF
ANDREA DWORKIN'S
1981 ESSAY
'PORNOGRAPHY: MEN
POSSESSING WOMEN'.

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A Discussion of Andrea Dworkin's
1981 Essay 'Pornography: Men
Possessing Women'.

Podcast Transcribe:

**A Discussion of Andrea Dworkins
1981 Essay, 'Pornography: Men
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Steph:

Welcome to this postmodern podcast. This podcast was recorded on the 8th May 2015 and is a discussion undertaken by myself, Steph Darke and Nicola Wood. Nicola will now introduce the discussion topics.

Nicola:

The topic for discussion here is Andrea Dworkins 'Pornography: Men Possessing

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Women'¹. The essay discusses the relationship between masculine power, sexual aggression and pornography and attempts to demonstrate how Male power as expressed in pornography objectify women. She identifies this power as being that of the self, physical power, the power of naming and of owning, the power of the economy and of money and of course the power of sex itself.

Steph:

Though I enjoyed the essay and it works as a fantastic counterpart to for Carter's

¹ Dworkin, A. (1981). 'Pornography: Men Possessing Women'. In: Humm, M. (1992) *Feminisms: A Reader*. Oxen: Routledge.

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short-stories in the Bloody Chamber², in 2015 it is a little dated purely because of the advances in feminist thought. I know you enjoy Carters fiction Nicola but how did you find Dworkins essay?/

Nicola:

/Yes, I'm inclined to agree, to a contemporary reader the essay is outdated but if you bear in mind the bloody chamber was written in 1979 and only two later in 1981 Dworkin wrote her essay, contextually they are both written within the same era of feminist thought so yes, I'd probably agree they do complement each other.

² Carter, A. (2006). *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage.

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Steph:

I think one of the first and most important points in Dworkin's essay is the concept of male power, especially in regards to the short stories we are focussing on from Angela Carter's collection, *The Bloody Chamber*². Dworkin states that pornography is the explicit and pure output of male power. I think we can say it is absolutely still relevant and to some extent with the advances in Photoshopped images and such, the image of the female is more than ever idealised to pander to the male fantasy of the submissive, perfect object to be used for his own gratification. The pornographic

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female is often manipulated to replicate the image of the sex doll or the fantasy video games characters for example. In 2015 we have reached a point where life is imitating art that previously imitated life. Thus, the female in the real world is left only with unrealistic ideals about what it is to be attractive, and perpetuated by the patriarchal media, the male gains significant power by imposing fake ideals and unrealistic ideologies. In this way, male power is still very much at the helm of society. I think that the way Angela Carter subverts this male power in some of the short stories directly challenges the male power in place. The story

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of Wolf Alice³ is loosely based on a number of fairy tales but none more overt than Little Red Riding Hood. The feral child in the story has no need to fear the gaze or power of the Duke as she herself has the power of the wolf, she is athletic, fearless and revengeful.

Nicola:

She claims these strains of patriarchal power are used to normalize hateful values held against women. These ideologies are a mode of economic control and distribution of values which

³ Carter, A. (2006). 'Wolf Alice'. In *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage.

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become deeply embedded within our society and within works of art and literature in order to maintain the appearance of objectification of women as something acceptable and normal. The author in this sense is in control of how these ideologies are distributed, in the case of this discussion Angela Carter is the ideological distributor with her collection of short stories the bloody chamber. The text from this collection will specifically concentrate on is 'The Snow Child'⁴. While Carter distributes the ideologies it is the character the count who holds the power of

⁴ Carter, A. (2006). 'The Snow Child'. In *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage.

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creation, he has the ability to create an object of desire, by simply wishing for it, this being the snow child His wife can also be seen as an object of his creation which he possesses, only existing as countess due to her marriage, the count thus becomes the pornographer justifying men's need to objectify women. The physical image of the erect penis is that which determines the male self both in an ethical and sexual context, and becomes a much larger concept encompassing myth, religion and aesthetics cementing the concept of the male supremacist. The significant part of the text which expresses this phallic symbolism is when

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the snow child picks a rose and
"pricks her finger on the thorn,
bleeds, screams and falls."⁴.
The count proceeds in raping
the girl, in an act of
necrophilia, while he is
described as being virile, after
her death the snow child
amounts to nothing more than
a collection of objects,
suggesting she was never real
to begin with; and is merely a
figment of the Count's libido.

Steph:

I think this discussion would
be missing something if we
failed to touch upon Laura
Mulveys 1975 theory of the
Male Gaze⁵. The 'Male Gaze' is
perhaps the key element
behind Dworkin's piece.

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Women, traditionally, are expected to be beautiful in order to attract a mate and in Pornography, as well as mainstream cinema and television, the heterosexual male gets his wish! The camera focuses on the woman's body, cinematically carving it up for the male to feast on. I think this is interesting to consider as a comparison to the way that Carter uses the mirror in many of her stories. The mirror acts as a vessel for Alice to learn how to perform the gender forced onto her and combined with the beginning of her menstrual cycle, she becomes aware of time, space and the acts she is expected to perform as a female, she finally accepts

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how she is perceived and dresses accordingly to perform for herself and others. Before she was captured & without the ideological gender boundaries of society, Alice was able to live how she chose without pressure to perform for anybody.

Nicola:

This concept is also visible in the snow child, the woman he creates with her white skin, black hair and red lips is an image of his the perfect women, a beautiful and naked object, the reflection of male idealization of women. I feel the counts wife can also be interpreted as in relation to Mulvey's essay representing

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the contemporary fear of castration, endangering his vision, the unity of his diegesis and menialusing his creation to an illusion and to merely a "one dimensional fetish" - in this respect the perfect woman is obsessively subordinate by the needs of the male ego⁵. Both women within this short story and their lack of penis imply this "threat of castration and unpleasure"⁵. The wife attempts to enforce her authority or even superiority over both the count and the snow child in the final words of the text "it bites". This for

⁵ Mulvey, Laura. (1975). 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. In: Humm, M. (1992) *Feminisms: A Reader*. Oxen: Routledge.

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me highlights Mulveys
proposal of a disruption of
symbolic order within the
ideologies behind the figures of
father and husband,
challenging the perception of
the gaze and of women's status
as being icons of pleasure and
enjoyment.

Steph:

One of the final points
Dworkin makes in her essay is
that the left-wing is inevitably
an enemy of progress if they
condone the porn industry and
the commodification of
women. In 1981, I don't doubt
this was true, so today are
things any more liberal? Is
porn any more "ethical"? I

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argue not and in fact I think one thing we said we'd like to address the myth that today pornography isn't sexist anymore. It is. The so-called 'Fifty Shades of Grey' phenomenon actually serves to reinforce male power. Though many, many women bought into this idea of popular porn for women, it is a story of a man who stalks a woman, controls every aspects of her life until she submits to his sexual wishes. The kind of sex that both male and female consent to is irrelevant, the male has the power to control and manipulate the female in order to have her. As Angela Carter conveys in her stories, women enjoying sexual power

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is only revolutionary if we are willing to accept that first and foremost, men are the true dominant sexual power. If sexual power for women is only in reference to the power men have, is it truly power at all? I'd argue that it isn't. Wolf-Alice grows up without these boundaries or pre-existing power struggles and is truly free until she is imprisoned both literally and within the female gender role.

Nicola:

Sex in fifty shades of grey rather than being overtly empowering to women becomes about cultural marginalization and male power which I feel negatively

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reinforces typical boundaries of gender and sexuality that feminism has attempted to move away from, Dworkin identifies the struggle women face for dignity and self-determination as a struggle to maintain control over their own bodies. Fifty shades for me emphasizes wider symbolic implications which Dworkin suggests by submitting to male sexual domination women are being represented as whores fulfilling their natural function within society (84/5)¹ - such negative connotations justify the legal abuse of women, in order to maintain their state as objects. Dworkin believes the objectification of women to be

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a celebration of patriarchy and what it stands for (83)¹.

Steph:

I'd like to finish just where we began really by stating that Dworkin and Carters work are inherently conveying the same message, Dworkin posing the question that Carter answers in her short stories. The one other thing that can be taken away from Carters stories is that women are sexual creatures just like men and require no permission to be sexual. Sexuality isn't a camera objectifying a women's body but is just as natural as the sexual desires of a man.

Nicola:

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I'd just like to briefly mention Dworkin's reference to renowned feminist Simone de Beauvoir and her statement that male power is autistic in nature, she reference this to the marquis de Sade, claiming this autistic expression to be self-obsessed and violent (84)¹ De Sade according to Beauvoir both proposes and defining the concept of the other using violent sexual extremes, justifying suffering and cruelty with his perverse definition of freedom. The rationale behind this freedom is the power created in dominating women for pleasure. Pornography as this form of freedom becomes a legal means by which women are exploited by patriarchal

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identity formation and thus denies women the ability to define the parameters of their own identity leaving them unequal and in fact without freedom (82)¹.

Steph:

Thanks for listening to this podcast.

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