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"A tangled web of mindfuck": Andrea Dworkin and the Truth of Pornography

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ABSTRACT: *This essay argues that Andrea Dworkin's much derided argument against pornography may still prove productive if read in relation to her fiction. Taking note of the fact that Dworkin's own novels have been accused of being pornographic according to her criteria, the essay explores the possibility that her radical feminist anti-porn stance, inevitably described as something of a moralistic backlash by sex-liberals, could be seen as a continuation of the pornographic imagination it so vehemently protests. Through critical readings of Dworkin's novels* Ice and Fire *and* Mercy*, as well as her autobiographical works and theoretical writings on pornography, the essay demonstrates that the contradictions that beset her writings echo the contradictions inherent in our contemporary understanding of pornography. Much like the pornography she would resist, Dworkin's writings invite a solipsistic mode of reading, the experiential rewards of which are not so much of an interpretive as of a sensual nature. In so doing, Dworkin's fiction paradoxically proves an invaluable point of entry into the pornographic imagination, making evident its essentially monologic nature. While this circumstance may be damaging for her status as an agitator, it points to her continued—if as yet largely unacknowledged—importance as a writer.*

Pornographic discourse is the carrier of an incontestable truth: it knows that what it shows is real. People fuck; we know they do. As pornography evolved from a primarily verbal to a primarily cinematographic genre over the course of the twentieth century, its reality became even more tangible. Its simple yet irrefutable truth suddenly coincided with the representation of the sex act. People are fucking, here, now. The reality effect of pornographic films is so intense that it matters little that we know sexual pleasure in porn to be a staged performance; if the pleasure is performed, the act remains indisputably real.

There is something decidedly odd about pornography's claim to render an unadulterated reality, however, for its assertion of veracity is constantly undermined by the preposterousness of the scenarios that platform the sex. To take but one example, in the plot of *Deep Throat* (1972), the film that turned pornographic movies into a multimillion dollar industry, the leading female character has her clitoris in her throat. If pornographic films would seem to render the sexual act incontestably real, the absurdity of their plots nevertheless makes plain that we are dealing with sheer fantasy. The truth

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of pornography, in other words, is restricted to the intensity of the moment in which the reader or viewer enters into the pornographic fantasy; when one distances oneself from the ongoing moment, this "truth" turns out to be entirely phantasmatic.

This paradox of pornography has a curious counterpart in the critical discourse that surrounds it. Critics who accept pornography as a cultural discourse no different than others are quite clear, in general, on its phantasmatic character, as are its consumers.[1] The most ardent adversaries of pornography, on the other hand, frequently insist upon its reality:

> Some people say that pornography is only fantasy. What part of it is fantasy? Women *are* beaten and raped and forced and whipped and held captive. The violence depicted is true. The acts of violence depicted in pornography are real acts committed against real women and real female children. *The fantasy* is that women want to be abused.[2]

These words are those of Andrea Dworkin, one of the pioneers of pornography criticism; the passage, from a speech called "The Lie" (1979), refers in part to pornography and in part to the denial of women's conditions in patriarchal society.[3] Dworkin would resist this pornographic lie by making her own writing communicate the truth of pornography, the whole truth, and not just the male point of view. Even as a sixth-grader, she explains in what was to be her last book, she knew that her "vehicle was going to be truth: not a global, self-deluded truth, not a truth that only I knew and that I wanted other people to follow, but the truth that came from not lying."[4] Dworkin's claim to truth-telling is intimately connected to her critique of pornography. She links misogyny to pornography in her first book, *Woman Hating* (1974), and this connection rapidly became the leading idea of her work: pornography is not merely a reflection of the subjugation of women in patriarchal society but a principal cause of men's power over women.

Several people, however, have argued that Dworkin's own discourse is every bit as mendacious as is the pornography she criticizes. Women in pornography, for instance, are not generally portrayed in the way she claims—rape and physical abuse are exceptions in the pornographic discourse rather than, as Dworkin implies, the main rule.[5] But then, subjective claims regularly turn into objective facts in her texts: the Marquis de Sade's works, she claims, embody "the common values and desires of men"[6]; there is a lively black market of "snuff-films"—movies showing real women actually being killed in front of the camera—with people willing to pay hundreds of dollars to see them[7]; it is unequivocally proven that consumption of pornography results in an increase of rape and abuse of women.[8] None of these assertions have been substantiated; on the contrary, most studies confute claims of this order.[9] Indeed, the very fact that pornographic films deem it necessary to make use of a transparently unrealistic convention—

the external ejaculation or cum-shot—in order to prove the reality of the pleasure represented, makes evident the altogether rhetorical nature of its putative realism.[10] Such unrealistic elements may not prevent the audience from being affected by pornography's depiction of the relation between the sexes, but they do prompt a question: why is it so important for Dworkin to deny the phantasmatic character of pornography?

To answer that question, we must first remind ourselves of the considerable distance that separates Dworkin from more recent attempts to critique pornography. If the first wave of feminist porn criticism to which Dworkin belonged was driven by a sense of moral outrage—"who would *do* something like that?"—the originality of the second wave of feminist porn criticism could well be described as a simple yet crucial change of emphasis: who *would* do something like that? Under what historical circumstances? And what would the answers to those questions tell us about society? Moral indignation thus transforms into sociological investigation, and a growing body of increasingly sophisticated studies on the topic has demonstrated that "pornography requires our interpretation, and in return . . . yields surprising eloquence."[11] From this perspective, there is no reason why the critical insights regarding, say, intertextuality, the polyvocality of texts, etcetera, should not apply to pornography as a genre as well. There is no denying the seminality of this approach; as I have stressed elsewhere, it has the strategic advantage of making pornography as a subject comply with the traditional interpretive approach of academic studies.[12] Taken from this perspective, it is essential to insist upon the manifold nature of the genre and to warn against conflating the many different forms of pornography into one universal concept.[13]

Dworkin refused to accept this more nuanced notion of pornography, and without in any way wanting to diminish the importance of more recent contributions to the field, I think it is precisely because of this refusal that her writings merit renewed attention. One can accuse Dworkin of many things—a love of rhetorical intensity rather than critical dispassion, a selective and tendentious citation of her sources, an unwillingness to be self-critical—but one cannot doubt that she took the subject seriously.[14] While reason sometimes seems to collapse under the sheer rhetorical force of Dworkin's argument, the very intensity of her engagement with pornography signals the genuine nature of her pornographic experience; unlike a majority of academics, she does not pretend not to be moved by pornography. For all its flaws, her argument reminds us that for readers who take pornography's singular intention of causing sexual arousal seriously, porn is not so much about cultural meanings as about enfolding its consumer within a discursive present. For such a consumer, her writings make clear, what pornography (whether verbal or visual) means will always be secondary to his or her immediate response to it. In other words, Dworkin's

conception of pornography is revealing precisely because it is in many ways the inverse image of the masturbating male guffawing at the "horny sluts" who make themselves available for his consumption on the pages of pornographic magazines. In both cases, the cultural implications of the images are lost on the reader who uses them exclusively to feed an immediate sense of pleasure—an outraged pleasure, in Dworkin's case, but a pleasure nonetheless, not least, as we will see, because it is an outrage that feeds her writing.

Dworkin identified herself first and foremost as a writer; she considered her work a "contribution to literature and to the women's movement"[15]—in that order—and repeatedly testified that she "never wanted to be less than a great writer."[16] These two functions of her identity—that of the reader/critic and that of the writer—do not easily congeal, but they reflect an interesting tension. If Dworkin's critical conception of pornography is likely to strike us as mono-causal and ultimately simplistic, her activity as a writer nevertheless makes evident that she is true to her experience of it. Her very blindness to pornography's phantasmatic quality thus yields an insight that pornography studies in the main tend to overlook. This insight will remain obscured as long as we concern ourselves primarily with the thematics of her writings, but it emerges on a closer inspection of their formal features.

In what follows, I will argue that pornography criticism in the main, in renouncing the notion that pornography is an essentially objectifying discourse yet embracing the view that gender is the key to pornography's functionality, has dismissed Dworkin where she is right and followed her where she is wrong. If we want to understand the function of pornography in culture, approaching it as an essentially gendered discourse is, I will suggest, a dead end; what needs to be highlighted, rather, is the peculiarly solipsistic mode of reading that it invites and that Dworkin's writings surprisingly echo. Much like the pornography she would resist, her writings apparently refuse to be either fiction or fact but claim to be both. "My fiction is not autobiography," she writes in "My Life as a Writer" (1997), an autobiographical article, which nevertheless makes clear that the main events in her two novels are modeled on the principal events in her own life; on the other hand, she writes, "Autobiography is the unseen foundation of my nonfiction work, especially *Intercourse* and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*" (p. 15). Under the pretext of denying the autobiographical foundation of her fiction, she thus makes a point of stressing it, while simultaneously blurring the line between literature and theory. There is every reason, therefore, to approach Dworkin's thinking about pornography from the vantage point of her literary texts and vice versa. A closer look at the rhetorical strategies informing her novels will show that Dworkin's writings, for all their shortcomings, still have a lot to tell us about the peculiar truth of pornography.

Questioning the Canon: Ice and Fire

Both of Dworkin's novels, *Ice and Fire* (1986) and *Mercy* (1990), are told in the first person and follow a young woman's growth from a childhood and adolescence filled with abuse and degradation to the point when she takes control over her own destiny. Like Dworkin's nonfiction, the novels deal with the vulnerability of woman (rather than women—Dworkin tends to think in universals rather than particulars) in a patriarchal society that has adopted pornography as its ideology, but they also tell stories about the conditions of female authorship. Hence they acquire a self-reflective strain with no evident counterpart in her other writings, both deepening and rendering more complex her otherwise seemingly simplistic contention that pornography is the root of woman's subjugation in society.

Ice and Fire, Dworkin's first novel and on the whole her most successful attempt to dramatize the predicament of the female writer, follows an unnamed female protagonist from her childhood days in the Jewish quarters of Camden, New Jersey, to the publication of her first book. The plot basically follows Dworkin's outline of her own life in "My Life as a Writer," which opens her collection *Life and Death* (1997): boarding school undergraduate studies, slumming in New York with a female companion, hoping to make a film but getting by from day to day through prostitution and a massive intake of drugs, resettling in Europe, marrying a man who soon starts physically abusing her, transforming that experience into writing, and finally attempting to be accepted as a writer upon returning to America.

Dworkin's novel is divided into eleven sections, which, instead of being named or numbered, are headlined by six epigraphs culled from the Western canon: Baruch Spinoza, Henry James, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Franz Kafka, Charles Baudelaire, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In two cases (those of Spinoza and Pasolini), a single epigraph headlines several sections, suggesting that these headings do not name the content of the section so much as serve as starting points for the written discourse itself. In each case, the epigraph at some point spills over into Dworkin's text, which invariably inverts the meaning of the quotation. The truth of canonical literature, it is thus implied, is inverted by female experience and hence cannot be as universal as is sometimes claimed. Literary truth, in short, is exposed as gender determined.

While not very original in itself, this insight acquires significance in relation to Dworkin's own writings, in which a tendency towards what could be mistaken for novelistic embellishments would seem to undermine her avowed ambition to tell it like it is. Reading Dworkin is an ethically fraught experience partly in consequence of how her texts blend objective and subjective truth. For example, it does not seem implausible that Dworkin was sexually molested by a man when she was nine years old,

but her contention that she was at the time carrying "a paperback of Baudelaire's poems with me, in French with an English prose translation," at least strikes this reader as somewhat posturizing ("My Life as a Writer," p. 23). It is not that the detail is incredible in itself—it is certainly not unheard of for bookish children to read and carry sophisticated works of literature—but that it seems somewhat too neat a coincidence given that she has told us a mere seven pages earlier that becoming a feminist would mean that "I'd have to give up Baudelaire for Clausewitz" (p. 16). Similarly, at eighteen, Dworkin caused newspaper headlines by accusing the staff of the notorious Manhattan Women's House of Detention of having brutalized her after she was arrested at an antiwar demonstration; her recollections twenty-five years later of the hearings related to these events are so colorful, they are liable to be seen as exaggerated, quite regardless of what actually took place. She received "hundreds of obscene letters from men," she claims, all to the same effect: "The man would say what he wanted to do to me or what he was going to do to me when he came and got me and how he masturbated to what the prison doctors had done."[17] The newspapers threatened to "use a telescopic lens" to follow her every move; "for months," she was followed wherever she went; people ran after her on the streets and surrounded her in the subways when she went to New York "repeatedly to testify"; men approached her "sexually excited by the public narrative of my abuse" and started "talking about vaginal bruises and how they would like to rub their penises up against them."[18] The literariness, as it were, of statements of this order, need not reflect any conscious strategy on Dworkin's part but may simply be the way she remembers the events. Be that as it may, her willingness to transform even the most painful of personal experiences into writing has proven controversial. Most notoriously, her claim in a self-penned article published in the *New Statesman* on 5 June 2000 that she was drugged and raped in a Parisian hotel on 19 May 1999 caused considerable critique.[19] The article was published only days before her new book, *Scapegoat: The Jews, Israel, and Women's Liberation* (2000), was published, and its reliability was almost immediately called into question. Some felt that it was odd that Dworkin had not mentioned the incident when she was interviewed by British press earlier in May. Adding to the scepticism, Dworkin claims in the article that the rape occurred on "Thursday, 19 May, 1999," but 19 May 1999 fell on a Wednesday. One reader remarked, "Offered like this, as evidence, the article contains so many opacities, begs so many questions, that it reads almost as if Dworkin wants to be doubted."[20]

"As if Dworkin wants to be doubted"—odd as such a suggestion may seem, it makes sense if seen as a textual strategy. I do not mean to imply that Dworkin invented her rape stories.[21] On the contrary, I think that she represents them more or less the way she remembers them and that it is

precisely because she relates them in the way she remembers them even when it must be plain to her that the way she remembers them is likely to be doubted that we can and should talk about it as an intentional strategy on her part (bearing in mind that the intentionality in question here is not the psychological one of Dworkin's consciousness but the structural intentionality that comes with writing literature).[22] In her rhetorical praxis as writer, that is, she believes that she has a right to say what she wants, and what she wants to say is that her experience counts, regardless of whether others find it believable or not. To do so is simply to invoke that writer's privilege that Dworkin associates with the "almost exclusively male tradition of literature" that she repeatedly tells us she "had been brought up in," which taught her that she had "a right to say what I wanted."[23] In order to claim this privilege, she is willing to have her words as a woman questioned; that is, she is willing to trade the credibility of her singular truth—a truth that depends upon her personal experience—in order to gain access to the realm of general truth—a truth that is not dependent on her experience as a woman but on her word as a writer. For Dworkin, speaking as a writer is to speak as someone who may very well be aware that her testimony is likely to be called into question, but who is determined to provide it anyway because it is more important to her to relate how she experienced things than that people be convinced that things actually happened the way she describes them. In her case, claiming this privilege of the writer comes with the additional benefit of almost automatically confirming her overall message, since she has set her text up in such a way that questioning its local truth (her personal testimony) will confirm its general truth claim (her writerly message). Thus by staging her statements *as woman* as doubtful, her texts automatically confirm the truth of her statements *as a writer*: in patriarchal society, to be a woman is to be mistrusted, wherefore in order to be listened to, she has to become something else. Undermining its own credibility as objective report by flaunting its status as subjective account, in short, is a means for Dworkin's text to produce something of an imperative reaction, a reaction independent of interpretation, almost a conditioned reflex. The polarized opinions that her writings have engendered are ample testimony to how often her texts succeed in calling forth that kind of reaction.[24]

The link between this strategy and Dworkin's engagement with pornography becomes clearer if we take a closer look at the relationship between canonical epigraph and text in *Ice and Fire*. The overall structure of Dworkin's novel is simple. The events can be divided into three stages: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing (or publishing). Each phase comprises two epigraphs: Spinoza and James corresponding to the pre-writing phase of childhood and adolescence, Pasolini and Kafka to the coming of age in writing, and Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky, finally, to the post-writing

phase of maturity in all its vengeful bitterness. The story thus sets down the conditions for Dworkin's writing. With this relationship in mind, it is interesting to observe that the epigraph from Kafka that sparks the narrator's account of how she starts to write explicitly connects writing and intercourse: "Coitus as punishment for the happiness of being together."[25] It is likewise highly significant that the whole section, short as it is, is nothing but an extended catalogue of reruns, repeating the epigraph in inverted form. Instead of being the punishment for the happiness of being together, coitus is here presented as the punishment for fear of the happiness of being alone, which in turn is presented as a precondition for writing: "coitus is the punishment for being a writer afraid of the cold passion of the task. There is no being together, just the slow learning of solitude. It is the discipline, the art" (p. 88). We witness in the fourteen discrete passages that make up this section the necessary requirement for Dworkin's writings: repetition. Each passage says essentially the same thing: coitus, intercourse, is the punishment for being afraid to face the happiness of loneliness, and loneliness is a precondition for writing; thus coitus is the punishment for not daring to write. Through these repetitions, however, Dworkin's writing makes apparent a contradiction that complicates the insight she formulates but which she cannot deny, as doing so would entail renouncing the pleasures of writing.

Loneliness enables writing as an immediate expression of feelings, of an experienced truth, perhaps not entirely unlike the collection of "poems and Genet-like prose" Dworkin herself claims to have published as *Child* while on Crete in 1966—a form of writing that is true in its capacity of being alone ("My Life as a Writer," p. 27). Thus coitus is not only the punishment for not daring to be alone but also for being afraid of the disordering of the senses writing entails:

> Coitus is the punishment for not daring to be extreme enough, for compromising, for conforming, for giving in. Coitus is the punishment for not daring to disorder the senses enough: by knowing them without mediation. Coitus is the punishment for not daring to be original, unique, discrete. (*Ice and Fire*, p. 89)

But if such is the case, every attempt to widen the loneliness by letting it come into contact with another person must inevitably result in a kind of forgery. Writing, then, turns out to be conditioned by an inner contradiction. Writing, after all, looks forward to being met by a reader; it is the locus at which loneliness ceases and intercourse follows: "This is a private passion, not for exhibit. Coitus is the punishment for exhibiting oneself: for being afraid to be happy in private, alone. Coitus is the punishment for needing a human witness" (p. 90). Coitus paradoxically punishes both the failure to write and the happiness of having written, but the happiness derives from being alone, so the writing which strives towards publication

("I write. I publish.") is by definition a transgression of loneliness (p. 90). Coitus is thus not only the punishment for writing but also its precondition, which explains why Dworkin's writing must take the form of the very punishment exacted for happiness: intercourse, the central event not only in *Ice and Fire* but in all of Dworkin's writings. Symptomatically, *Ice and Fire* would be followed by *Intercourse* (1987).

Coitus, in short, is a figure of the text itself. Writing thus conceived turns into a self-generating mechanism—a machine that produces a truth incapable of reaching itself, for at the moment the word praises the joy of loneliness, loneliness is already broken. Thus writing becomes a contradictory element, both ice and fire at once, a space in which the chill of loneliness is constantly intersected by the heat of sexuality—sexuality not as a meeting point but as the discourse that prevents true meetings from taking place: pornography.

A Pornographic Countermove: Mercy

As coitus functions in Dworkin's work as a figure of the text, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that her writings contain many traits characteristic of porn; often set in the present tense, they are repetitious and weak in plot yet informed by an intensity calculated to make the reader inhabit every moment of the textual present. While Dworkin's intention is not to arouse but to repulse, her texts, Harriet Gilbert has observed, fulfill "every one of Dworkin's own criteria for pornography."[26] Dworkin's unwillingness to make her writing conform to the dictates of plot is symptomatic. Although Dworkin has accounted for the principal steps of her own development into a writer in no less than four longer texts, the inner coherence of this story appears loose to the point of evasiveness (in addition to the novels, *Life and Death* and *Heartbreak* [2002] both sketch out Dworkin's biography). We never learn, for instance, *why* she goes to Holland nor how she came to meet the young revolutionary who becomes her husband. Ellipses like these could be biographically motivated. If Dworkin's intake of drugs was as heavy as she implies in *Ice and Fire*, it is hardly surprising that she went to the Netherlands with their liberal drug policy nor is it to be wondered at, if such was the case, that she should choose to repress her reasons for going there. Showing off one's drug abuse in a novel is one thing, but for a writer who wants to be taken seriously in social debate and who insists, moreover, that her own experience is the key to truth, the risk of being dismissed as an ex-junkie would be too apparent.

Nevertheless Dworkin's episodic account of her autobiography remains primarily aesthetically motivated. By underplaying plot, her novels inescapably displace the reader's attention from the overarching train of events to the individual episodes, to the effect that the text *as story* becomes less

interesting than the text *as a discursive present*. The Kafka-section in *Ice and Fire* discussed above is a case in point; there are no real causal connections tying the individual episodes together. It is as if the truth Dworkin would communicate is not primarily of a narrative kind but something that must be looked for in every moment of the text, as if a hard kernel of truth inhabits every sentence.

Dworkin's unwillingness to subject her writing to a narrative paradigm—and hence to allow the individual episodes to take on new meanings in the course of events—is an even more marked feature of her second novel, *Mercy*, which tracks more or less the same events as the earlier novel but with an even greater stress on their brutality and a greater drift towards stylization. Where *Ice and Fire* renders the events in impressionistic segments, ranging in length from a sentence or two to three to four pages, every chapter of the later book contains a single solid paragraph. Content-wise, too, *Mercy* is a more homogenous work; it is made up of an almost unbroken chain of outrages. Already eight lines into the first chapter, the narrator, Andrea, declares: "I wasn't raped until I was almost ten which is pretty good it seems when I ask around because many have been touched but are afraid to say."[27] The basic premise of the book is thus laid down: Andrea's case speaks for that of innumerable other women—in some way, no doubt, for all; singularity in this novel is but universality in another form. Structurally, the chapter reads like a well-made rhetorical argument. It starts with a shocker ("I wasn't raped until I was almost ten") yet keeps building the intensity over the first five or six pages that render the child's horror at being molested, then settles for a less feverish tone in the following fourteen or so pages by switching to Andrea's childish conception of God. It then concludes on a note of maximum intensity by returning to the scene of sexual abuse, now climaxing with the moral violation perpetrated by Andrea's parents in not believing her rather than with the physical violation that preceded it. This rhetorical movement discloses the logic of double or even triple violation associated with rape throughout. Physically violated by an unknown man in a movie theatre, Andrea is also morally violated by her parents' apparent relief and insistence that "nothing happened" (p. 28). Finally, and most outrageously if less apparently, Andrea could also be said to be metaphysically violated by God's indifference to her plight: "I knew He could do anything and made us all so why did he make that man?" (p. 15).

This pattern of manifold violation is repeated throughout. In chapter after chapter, Dworkin presents us with scenarios that articulate the double violation of rape: Andrea is raped by her lover's best friend and then has to fake pleasure for the sake of her bereaved lover (chapter three); she is imprisoned at a demonstration against the Vietnam War, raped with a steel speculum by two prison doctors and then betrayed by her mother who "said

I should be locked up like an animal for being a disgrace because of jail" (p. 73); her utopian attempt to live out her vision of free love and uninhibited sensuality on Crete comes to a brutal end when she not only is physically abused by her Greek lover but also has to face the moral humiliation of finding that the abuse leads her to desire his best friend, a "handsome fascist" she formerly despised (p. 98); in New York, she is raped at knifepoint for several hours and then "saved" by a big black man, who "says I owe him and he fucks me and I say God You must stop him now but God don't stop him, God don't have no problem with this" (pp. 129, 131). The rape is doubled not only physically but it also acquires a moral and even religious dimension through the added hostility of an apparently misogynistic God. Andrea seeks sanctuary from further abuse by marrying a man in Europe, only to find that marriage ironically is tantamount to the institutionalization of rape, the moral equivalent of Nazi death camps "Birkenau, sometimes called Auschwitz II or The Women's Camp" (p. 164). Back in New York, she begins to fraternize with artists and starts looking to art as a way to give meaning to life, but by the end of the chapter, she is savagely raped by an artist whose sensitive art is demonstrably incapable of providing any deeper meaning to her experience of being raped. And when Andrea picks up a soft-spoken, sympathetic British cabdriver, with whom she wants "to make real love, arduous, infatuated love touched by his grace," it is only to find that the desires of seemingly decent men, too, have been perverted by pornography, and the dream of real love turns into a throat rape nightmare, modeled on the fellatio technique of Lovelace in the pornographic classic *Deep Throat* (p. 268).

Rape for Dworkin, then, is not only a physical but also a moral violation. Consistently abused psychologically as well as physically, Andrea can be read as a figure of how women in contemporary society are the victims both of sexual oppression and of the discursive humiliation that comes with not having your experience registered, of being continuously distrusted. Indeed, the recurrence of this pattern of double violation is central to Dworkin's conceptual realism.[28] In Dworkin's world, every individual is the carrier of an experience that is inherently true, meaning that the truth of the individual is not singular but universal in nature. Lived experience thus transcends the compass of the individual and becomes all-embracing. From such a perspective, every woman must be recognized as an instance of Woman as such.

With this collapse of the distinction between the singular and the universal, we come to the brink of the inner contradiction of Dworkin's thinking. Dworkin's truth is lived experience and, as such, always individual, yet at the same time, by virtue of its veracity, of general compass. Such an affirmation of the individual's privileged relation to truth can only be maintained, however, if all individuals who fall under the univer-

sal concept of Woman experience the same truth. In order to hold on to the notion of individual experience as incontestably true, then, Dworkin must deny the experiences to which a number of actual, individual women can testify: "I, the author, insist that I stand in for us, women."[29] Thus the Individual (in a universal rather than specific sense) automatically comes to fill the entirety of the discursive space, which in consequence takes on the appearance of a monologic system, allowing only a single voice to speak.[30] This monologic character of Dworkin's textual system is a noticeable feature of the narrative discourse as such, in spite of the fact that at the beginning of the third chapter, Andrea explicitly alludes to the I-Thou philosophy of Martin Buber:

> My name is Andrea. It means manhood or courage, from the ancient Greek. I found this in Paul Tillich, although I like Martin Buber better because I believe in pure love, I-Thou, love without boundaries or categories or conditions or making someone less than you are; not treating people like they are foreign or lower or things, I-It. Prejudice is I-It and hate is I-It and treating people like dirt is I-It. (*Mercy*, p. 35)

This implied dualism, however, is not given any real scope in the novel. To the extent that Andrea enters into a dialogue at all, it is with God. Symptomatically, the book begins with a biblical epigraph from Isaiah 54:7-8: "For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer" (n. p.). The technique is familiar to us from *Ice and Fire*; as in that earlier work, *Mercy* can be read as inverting the patriarchal Word and thus exposing its insufficient truthfulness. Perhaps that is why Andrea tends to blame "the God that doesn't exist"—as if God's nonexistence itself were blameworthy. At any rate, the absence of God suggests that there is no real Thou to address, and as a result, Andrea must fill both positions of the Buberian dialectic, becoming "you" as well as "I" within the bounds of the story, as literally happens on a number of occasions.

Already on the first page of the narrative proper (discounting the prologue), the first person narration slips into the generic "you," subtly suggesting that the trials of Andrea represent the plight of Woman in general:

> You get asked if anything happened and you say well yes he put his hand here and he rubbed me and he put his arm around my shoulder and he scared me and he followed me and he whispered something to me and then someone says but did anything happen. And you say, well, yes. (p. 5)

This transformation of the narrating "I" into the impersonal "you" reappears throughout the novel, underscoring the impression of the novel as a version of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) in which Andrea fills the world. The full significance of these pronominal shifts becomes clear

only when one observes that God is likewise addressed with two different pronouns, either "He" (as in chapter one) or "You," and that at times the impersonal "you" comes very close to a religious address, as in this lengthy citation from chapter seven, into which I have interpolated a running commentary within brackets:

> He punches my breasts. He burns my breasts with a lit cigarette. He didn't need to hold me down no more. He could do what he wanted. [The husband has become all-powerful, like God, for "God is the master of pain and He made it so you could love someone forever even if someone cut your heart open" (p. 99).] He was punching me and burning me and I was wondering if he was going to fuck me, because then it would be over; did I want it? He was shouting at me, I never knew what. I was crying and screaming. I think he was crying too. I felt the burning. I saw the cigarette and I felt the burning and I got quiet, there was this incredible calm, it was as if all sound stopped. Everything continued—he was punching me and burning me; but there was this perfect quiet, a single second of absolute calm; and then I passed out. ["He" has ceased to be all-powerful, ceased to be God. Now the pronoun changes.] You see how kind the mind is. ["You" here involves the writer too, who is thus delivered from the task of having to put words to the unspeakable.] I just stopped existing. You go blank ["You" here involves the protagonistic "I"], it's dark, it's a deep, wonderful dark, blank, it's close to dying, you could be dead or maybe you are dead for a while and God lets you rest. [God at this point is tantamount to the writer who lets her narrative counterpart rest.] You don't know anything and you don't have to feel anything; not the burns; not the punches; you don't feel none of it. I am grateful for every minute I cannot remember. I thank You, God, for every second of forgetfulness You have given me. (pp. 161-62)

In the span of these last three sentences, there is a movement from the impersonal "you" that stands for a generalized "I," passing through the particular narratorial "I," to a God who is no longer "He" but an understanding "you," a transformation achieved by the intimization of the concept of God, which allows God to blend and become one with Andrea as story-teller, if not with Andrea as protagonist. Although this achieves a remarkable androgynization of the concept of God, the resultant God, no matter how destabilized its gender, is incapable of inverting the punitive function associated with the Godhead. It must replicate rather than undo the violent male ideology it would counter: "it is very important for women to kill men" (p. 328).

Mercy is thus a distinctively monologic discourse; it has room only for one voice. Strange as it may seem, just as in the pornography the novel sets out to subvert, Dworkin privileges the voice that emanates from the autonomy of the moment; the voice that does not recognize anything beyond the intense feeling that inhabits the present, whether in the form of pleasure or pain.

A Pornographic Aesthetic: Woman Hating

Considering the monologism discussed above, it may at first seem surprising that *Mercy* has two endings, seemingly incompatible with each other. In the first, Andrea sets herself on fire as a gesture of sympathy for the women who are abused and mistreated in the pornographic system of male dominance. In the second, she directs her anguish outwards instead of inwards, taking karate lessons and prowling the streets to kill men as revenge. It may seem as if the narrative presents the reader with an option: either you become a victim to the male system or you actively fight it. The two alternative endings, however, both bear the same title: "April 30, 1970 (Age 27)"—the publication date of *Woman Hating*, Dworkin's first book (*Mercy*, pp. 273, 308). While the two endings may seem mutually exclusive, both are to be seen as symbolic expressions of Dworkin's emergence as a writer. *Mercy* thus reprises the insight of *Ice and Fire* with greater emphasis: to become a writer is to obliterate yourself as a woman since patriarchal society is suffused in a pornographic mentality that makes it impossible for women to speak up for themselves and simultaneously claim to be telling the truth. Woman thus seen seems caught in an inescapable aporia; she is either obliterated physically by assault or obliterated spiritually since fighting back against assault is tantamount to giving up one's female identity and assuming not only the name ("My name is Andrea. It means manhood or courage") but the behavior of a man (pp. 5, 35). Yet as we have seen, this radical incompatibility between the identities of writer and woman is not unwelcome to Dworkin; rather, it is the tragedy that impels her writing.[31]

This paradox stems from Dworkin being something of a sexual romantic, her critique of pornography notwithstanding; in her view, sexuality is the passageway to a society of real equality. In *Intercourse*, where Dworkin propounds the notorious and frequently misunderstood notion that intercourse is a contributing cause to woman's subjugation in society, she also makes plain that sexual intercourse can become the locus of a skinless encounter between individuals who merge and become one:

> Sometimes, the skin comes off in sex. The people merge, skinless. The body loses its boundaries. We are each in these separate bodies; and then, with someone and not with someone else, the skin dissolves altogether, and what touches is unspeakably, grotesquely visceral, not inside language or conceptualization, not inside time; raw, blood and fat and muscle and bone, unmediated by form or formal limits. . . . time is gone—it too has no meaning; there is no outside. . . . There is only touch, no boundaries; there is only the nameless experience of physical contact, which is life; there is no solace, except in this contact; without it, there is unbearable physical pain, absolute, not lessened by distraction, unreached by normalcy—nearly an amputation, the skin hacked off, slashed open; violent hurt.[32]

Dworkin's view of the sexual act is thus fundamentally utopian. In a sexual encounter, woman and man can become one in a moment of absolute presence beyond time and language. Symptomatically, such an apotheosis of the moment is advanced in defense of Andrea's promiscuous Cretan lifestyle: "It's not a matter of being faithful; I don't have the words or categories. It's being too alive to stop and living in the minute absolutely without a second thought because now is true. Everything I feel I feel absolutely" (*Mercy*, pp. 80-81). True sexual pleasure is equivalent to the truth of the moment.

This utopian strain of Dworkin's thinking is particularly prominent in *Woman Hating*, in which she extensively cites Artaud-inspired actor and director Julian Beck's *The Life of the Theatre* (1972):

> We are a feelingless people. If we could really feel, the pain would be so great that we would stop all the suffering. . . . If we could really feel it in the bowels, the groin, in the throat, in the breast, we would go into the streets and stop the war, stop slavery, stop the prisons, stop the killings, stop destruction. . . .
>
> When we feel, we will feel the emergency: when we feel the emergency, we will act: when we act, we will change the world.[33]

As passages like this make clear, Beck posits a direct correspondence between emotion and motion; to feel genuinely is to translate that feeling into activity. From such a conception of the relation between art and revolutionary practice, the writer must achieve in writing the kind of feelings that enable acts, to attain, that is, a kind of writing that promotes action rather than reflection. Even if literature may often produce feelings in its readers, few feelings are transparent enough to flow directly into deeds. To produce this effect, the writing must somehow be discursive feelings, and these feelings, when experienced by the reader, must translate spontaneously into some kind of physical performance. There is only one mode of discourse that even approaches this kind of transparency, and that, of course, is pornography.

Pornography may well crystallize into Dworkin's principle object of opposition because it has precisely those qualities that Dworkin looks for in literature, yet it abuses them by promoting objectification rather than subjectification, isolation rather than community. It is thus not really surprising that Dworkin's writing can be seen as a kind of inverted pornography, the pornography she takes such relish in denouncing. Dworkin's rhetoric consistently aims at invoking the presence of the awful violations she would have us resist. Her recurrent technique for reporting the content of the pornographic texts she studies is to force the reader to live the horror of sexual abuse to the full, over and over again:

> Bart has a huge, meaty erection. Bart pushes and pushes and pushes in. She realizes with terror that Bart's cock is not even nearly in her yet. He keeps

> going in farther and farther. It is like a crucifixion, "the nail pounding into her . . . defiling her asshole." Then she starts to get excited and like it. She screams, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, hurt me, fuck my ass my lover. Robert Grey fucks harder. Angela makes Kelly eat her cunt while the two men are fucking Kelly. Bart cums. Kelly cums and cums and cums. Her cumming makes the two men hard again. The four continue their lusty, wild abandonment.[34]

In relinquishing an academic, distanced tone, Dworkin is true to her insight that the pornographic discourse is never detached but is, on the contrary, always trying to realize itself in the present. Pornography wants to become a mode of action; it does not try to tell us what the world is like but instead wants to penetrate reality by momentarily extinguishing the line between fictive discourse and lived historical reality. It is for this reason that Dworkin, together with Catherine MacKinnon, has argued that pornography is a direct cause of sexual abuse.[35] Such a view is overly naïve; however, it is also dependent, as Leo Bersani has pointed out, on a pastoralizing conception of sexuality as an unambiguously positive force.[36] Indeed, it might well be because Dworkin disregards the *manner* in which pornography extinguishes the line between fiction and reality that she tends to reproduce in her own writings the pornographic intensity she explicitly denounces.

Pornography is designed to elicit not an intellectual but a visceral response.[37] That the genre succeeds in doing so is apparent from the fact that it is most commonly used as an aid for masturbation. For the masturbating reader or viewer, the pornographic discourse is treasured not because it says something of interest about the world but because it makes available an alternative world into which the reader has the privilege of entering. To contemplate the potential meaning of a given image is to consider it a socially meaningful artifact, that is, an artifact that has significance beyond the viewer's immediate perception of it. Masturbation is a way of preventing that social dimension of interpretation from materializing, locking the significatory potential of the image down to what it means for the viewer in the moment it is subjected to his/her desire. Consider Lisa Palac's description of how she "figured out how to use porn and come":

> I didn't understand the appeal of porn until the day I stopped looking for a political theory and let myself go. I made an important decision to be alone with pornography; to watch it without peer pressure, without talking. . . . I was determined not to care about the plot. I didn't wonder about the performers' family histories. I was determined not to think about anything except what my body was feeling. . . . When I came, it was intense.[38]

Thus divested of its social dimension, the pornographic text invites us to take pleasure in consuming images of what is culturally coded as desirable

without having to worry about how to interpret these things. The line between fictive discourse and historical reality is literally dissolved by this consumptive mode of reading; for the moment of consumption, the masturbating reader lives the represented fantasy as reality. One's mental activity during masturbation is not insignificant, but it works to privatize the discourse at hand. Pornography users might well be quite capable of recognizing that the pornographic text holds a social significance at odds with the private pleasures they are deriving from it, but since they are interested in the text primarily as a conveyor of immediate (physical) pleasure, they will in effect, as Palac makes plain, disregard any aspect of it that might interfere with this end.

Pornography, in short, aims at the masturbatory ecstasy in which the line between life and fictive discourse momentarily dissolves. Its consumer enters the discourse so fully that a purely physical reaction is triggered, and the form of engagement Dworkin wants her texts to elicit is precisely of such a physical order. The rationale behind this technique is laid out in the afterword to her first book, *Woman Hating*, in which Dworkin laments that the publisher has refused to print the book as she wrote it, with lower case letters and non-standard punctuation. In her view, this decision inevitably inserts a distance between the revolutionary ideas propounded by the book and the reader's experience of that revolutionary content:

> very few ideas are more powerful than the mechanisms for defusing them. standard form—punctuation, typography, then on to academic organization, the rigid ritualistic formulation of ideas etc.—is the actual distance between the individual (certainly the intellectual individual) and the ideas in a book.
>
> standard form is the distance.
>
> one can be excited *about* ideas without changing at all. one can think *about* ideas, talk *about* ideas, without changing at all. people are willing to think about many things. what people refuse to do, or are not permitted to do, or resist doing, is to change the way they think. (p. 202)

Dworkin solicits a visceral rather than intellectual response and, in order to achieve that effect, must overcome the distance between the reader and the text. As a result, already in this early book, Dworkin castigates academics for "lock[ing] books in a tangled web of mindfuck and abstraction" and for suffering under the notion that "there are ideas, then art, then somewhere else, unrelated, life" (p. 24). Being a writer for Dworkin is inseparable from a direct mode of communication: "It means telling the truth. It means being incorruptible. It means not being afraid, and never lying" (p. 25). A writer's words ideally should not have to rely upon the critical mediation of the mind, wherein they will inevitably be tried in the light of norms acquired by mere habit. Instead Dworkin envisions a utopian space in which the distance between ideas and their perception is annulled,

a realm in which "about" becomes an impossible word and speaking an idea is tantamount to instigating an act, to the creation, verily, of "a world—a community on this planet—where instead of lying to survive, we can tell the truth and flourish" (p. 203).

The Pornographic Truth

Ice and Fire shows us that Dworkin's writings revolve around a contradiction: to be believed as a writer, woman needs to speak as a man. At least, such is the contradiction Dworkin presents. As we have seen, however, this contradiction veils another, more fundamental contradiction at work in her novel, which is one not of gender but of writing: to write, one needs to embrace loneliness, but to write for publication is already to transgress loneliness since it entails establishing intercourse with a reader. This insoluble paradox of writing arises, Dworkin's nonfiction makes plain, because she equates truth with the immediacy of her private phenomenal experience. Truth in this view can only be shared by being negated, which is precisely what happens when it is turned into an intersubjective linguistic structure, as liable to be misinterpreted as a woman's experience is liable to be misrepresented. *Mercy* represents a more radical attempt to deal with—or rather to escape—this paradox. Rather than acknowledging, as *Ice and Fire* does, the contradictory nature of sexuality and writing alike, *Mercy* is designed to repress it altogether by allowing only one voice (of Andrea) to speak yet pretending that this one voice speaks for all: the voice of truth, the voice that inhabits immediate experience and therefore can never change but only be repeated indefinitely.

In consequence, Dworkin's discourse is pornographized, standing forth as simultaneously singular and universal. Possibly, this collapsing of the singular-universal distinction detracts from the literary value of her novels since it prevents them from becoming genuinely dialogic. However, it also means that they show us something of principal importance about the nature of pornography, which—while not really surprising—is seldom mentioned in discussions of the genre: pornography is a monologic system, a form of discursivity that allows only a single voice to resound. The voice of truth is immediate; the moment of truth leaves no room for doubts, for the uncertainty that comes with living in the social space of history rather than in the private sphere of the moment. Dworkin renounces pornography, but as her writings, too, are impelled by an apotheosis of the moment, she is incapable of offering a real alternative to pornographic discourse. Instead, she must rest content with trying to outdo it:

> I'd like to take what I know and just hand it over. But there is always a problem for a woman: being believed. . . . My only chance to be believed is to find a way of writing bolder and stronger than woman hating itself—smarter,

> deeper, colder. This might mean that I would have to write a prose more terrifying than rape, more abject than torture, more insistent and destabilizing than battery, more desolate than prostitution, more invasive than incest, more filled with threat and aggression than pornography. . . . Yes, okay, I will. Yes, okay: I did. In retrospect, that is just what I did: in *Mercy* and *Intercourse* and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* and *Ice and Fire*. ("My Life as a Writer," pp. 16-17)

This is not to say that Dworkin's writing can be equated with pornography as commonly understood. That her books, as Gilbert points out, could be classified as pornography according to her own criteria does not necessarily make them palatable to the pornography consumer in general, though as Ariel Levy puts it: "Sometimes, when you're reading Dworkin, it can be difficult to determine whether you are supposed to be offended or masturbating."[39]

This quality of Dworkin's works also goes to show, as I suggested to begin with, that her writings provide us with a key to pornography's singular intermixture of truth and falsehood; just like the pornography she would have her works outdo, they are designed to elicit a visceral, nonreflective mode of reading. As we have seen, Dworkin's texts are not conducive to reflection but seek rather to conjure up such an awful sense of presence that the reader is forced to change his or her way of thinking: "people are willing to think about many things. what people refuse to do, or are not permitted to do, or resist doing, is to change the way they think" (*Woman Hating*, p. 202). It is in this sense that Dworkin's texts deserve to be labeled pornographic; they seek, like pornographic discourse, to overcome "the actual distance between the individual . . . and the ideas in a book" (p. 202). Thus by exposing the imperative command that stems from the discursive now, Dworkin's writings surprisingly provide a much more truthful account of the nature of pornography than do more detached, academic studies. Dworkin is quite right in insisting that pornography is not primarily about sex but about power. Where she goes wrong, however, is where most commentators on pornography go wrong (including some of Dworkin's most ardent opponents), namely in assuming that the lie of pornography must be conceived of in terms of gender. While it is indeed the case that almost all pornography produced for a heterosexual audience portrays female sexuality as willfully subservient to male desire, one need only observe that pornography is not an exclusively heterosexual phenomenon but also exists in homo-, bi- and transsexual variants to realize that the gender divide in itself cannot be the cause of the pornographic scenario.[40]

The lie of pornography, rather, is of a linguistic nature, and to complicate matters, it is inextricably mixed up with the truth of pornography. Simply put, it derives from the masturbatory promise with which every pornographic text implicitly addresses its viewer: "I exist just for you—do with

me what you will!" As I have suggested above, insofar as the pornographic text is read in private (which is not necessarily the same thing as reading it alone), pornography is certainly capable of staying true to this promise. However, the pornographic discourse is not really addressed to *you* in particular but to some general notion of what "you" should be like to take pleasure in the sexual scenario depicted.[41] Pornography, then, essentially involves the universalization of the singular subject addressed—that is, its functionality is dependent upon the reader being prepared to give up his or her own sense of self while partaking of the text, accepting the position already prepared for him or her by that text. Thus seen, the objectification of the desired body so conspicuous in pornography cannot be seen as a product of the inequality between the sexes but must be recognized rather as a consequence of the peculiar intentional structure of pornography as a mode of reading; it is offered up as an object to be consumed not so much by a male gaze as by a subject that has, so to speak, agreed to shed its singularity. Pornography, in short, is less an expression of male supremacy than of our own historical conditions, which have called forth a discursive situation in which texts *can* invite a private, consumptive mode of reading in spite of the fact that such a response would seem utterly at odds with the essentially social nature of language.

As we have seen, Dworkin understands this singular intent of pornography much better than she is generally given credit for. She rightly identifies the immediacy of the pornographic discourse as the key to its singularity, but she refuses to acknowledge its essential emptiness as to do so would entail saying practically nothing at all, or at least nothing immediately communicable, about what pornography is like. Immediacy, after all, knows neither before nor after and hence cannot be narrativized; this is why there is no real story-telling in pornography proper but only the repetition of a set of highly stylized linguistic postures, suitably arranged: Ahh . . . Yes . . . Mmm . . . More . . . Ahh . . . Yes . . . Now! But Dworkin, as she herself insists, will be a writer, and she arrives at a story to tell by imbuing the immediacy of the pornographic discourse with a goal beyond itself. Although her fiction makes plain her awareness that pornography consumes the experience of its consumer by wrapping him or her up in its immediacy, she makes herself believe that the pleasure the male subject enjoys when consuming porn is in truth merely a means to an end: woman hating.

In thus making misogyny constitutive of pornography, Dworkin mistakes for a necessary feature of pornography what is more adequately described as a historically contingent aspect of the genre. Such blindness to pornography's historical dimension is precisely what enables her own discursive practice to disclose an insight into the pornographic imagination: namely, that pornography is always what *I* want it to be because pornography proper—its ahistorical essence, as it were—is a wish-fulfilling discourse *for*

me. The identification of such an ahistorical essence of the pornographic imagination might seem a flat-out contradiction of pornography's historicity, but it is better seen as the paradoxical yield of a structural instability that besets the discussion of pornography to this day, the reason for which ought now to be obvious enough. When we use the term pornography, it is simply not clear whether we are thinking about a genre with specific characteristics (the depiction of explicit sexual activities being one), a concept with an identifiable range (designating, say, that which is *too much*), or a solipsistic mode of imagination. Because pornography might mean any of these things, alone or in combination, the genre and/or concept of pornography might well change without the pornographic imagination doing so and vice versa.

Dworkin's work on pornography, too, is beset by this instability. As we have seen, she denies the historicity of pornography by suggesting that it has and must *always* entail misogyny. In so doing, she inadvertently reveals the ahistorical nature of our own current conception of pornography and thus reasserts the historicity of pornography in the very act of denying it. Clearly, the pornographic imagination Dworkin helps us understand is itself thoroughly historical, a product of and intervention into our own contemporary situation. It does not tell us the whole story of pornography as Dworkin would have us believe, but it does suggest that paying closer attention to pornography (in all of its senses) may prove seminal for understanding a range of other cultural discourses as well. In particular, it might help us understand why self-involved modes of reading—whether of pornography, penny dreadfuls, video nasties, or violent computer games—are often viewed with such a distinctly repulsed fascination.

That this repulsed fascination haunts Dworkin's writings as well is ample evidence of how difficult it is to conjure up a utopian alternative that does not immediately reproduce the dilemma it wants to escape. Brilliantly insightful insofar as they truthfully record her own experience of pornography, her writings remain fatally flawed insofar as they promote a conception of truth as a universal rather than singular category. However, her writings may also serve as an indication that the most important function of the utopian imagination may not stem from its ability to formulate tenable alternatives to the existing situation but, on the contrary, from its very inability to make good on its promise of a better world. As we have seen, it is precisely by virtue of their failure that Dworkin's books are able to tell us the truth of pornography; by failing to persuade us to subject ourselves to the decree of the discourse (Be appalled! React! Protest!), Dworkin's novels are able to show us how the pornographic imagination turns on the transformation of the singular into a universal "you." Just like the pornographic discourse she criticizes, Dworkin wants to produce the truth as an entity that is discursively present rather than created through the reader's

intercourse with the discourse. Luckily, her texts are willful enough to tell the story of their own conditions to the reader who chooses to engage with the letter of the text rather than with the message Dworkin would hand over as if it were a gift the writer bestowed upon us without intermediaries. That willfulness gives the lie to Dworkin's claim to truth, but it testifies to her achievement as a writer.

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NOTES

[1] In *Porn: Myths for the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), the late psychoanalyst Robert J. Stoller aptly points out, "Everything but the erection and ejaculation is simulated in porn, and even that display is surrounded by hokum" (p. 223); see also Stoller with Ira Levine, *Coming Attractions: The Making of an X-Rated Video* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). That the consumers of porn are generally quite clear on its phantasmatic character is verified by Alan McKee, Katherine Albury, and Catharine Lumby, *The Porn Report* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008); and David Loftus, *Watching Sex: How Men Really Respond to Pornography* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002). Former performer Scott O'Hara testifies in *Autopornography: A Memoir of Life in the Lust Lane* (New York: Haworth Press, 1997) to the same thing: "like the voyeur at the window, most consumers of pornography are clearly aware that there is a window there, a line that can't be crossed: *this* is fantasy, *that* is reality, and the two don't necessarily have anything in common" (p. 83). See also Richard Dyer, "Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998), 504-15. Dyer not only stresses the staged nature of pornography but points out that this staging is as likely to enhance as to detract from the viewer's excitement, an argument that would seem to be borne out by the success of so-called gonzo porn, in which the actors consistently signal that they are aware of being filmed; see Isabel Tang, *Pornography: The Secret History of Civilization*, with an introduction by Fenton Bailey (London: Channel 4 Books, 1999).

[2] Andrea Dworkin, "The Lie," in *Letters from a War Zone: Writings, 1976-1989* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), 11.

[3] Dworkin's insistence on the non-phantasmatic nature of pornography is

far from unique among anti-porn critics and activists. In *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), Catharine A. MacKinnon claims, "Pornography is not imagery in some relation to a reality elsewhere constructed. It is not a distortion, reflection, projection, expression, fantasy, representation, or symbol either. It is sexual reality" (p. 149). Susanne Kappeler goes so far as to suggest that "what feminist analysis identifies as the pornographic structure of representation . . . is a commonplace of art and literature as well as of conventional pornography"; see Kappeler, "Pornography: The Representation of Power," in *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*, ed. Catherine Itzin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 94; and Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

[4] Dworkin, *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 25.

[5] In *Sex and Sensibility: Reflections on Forbidden Mirrors and the Will to Censor* (Hopewell: Ecco Press, 1994), Marcia Pally reports "that in XXX explicit pornography, sex accounted for 41 percent of all behavioral sequences, sexual violence for 4.73 percent, and non-sexual violence again for 4.73 percent. In R-rated films, sexual behavior accounted for 4.59 percent of all sequences, sexual violence accounted for 3.27 percent, and nonsexual violence for 35 percent" (p. 33). Pally draws her statistics from Ni Yang and David Linz, "Movie Ratings and the Content of Adult Videos: The Sex-Violence Ratio," *Journal of Communication*, 40, No. 2 (1990), 28-42. An analysis of the content of fifty of Australia's best-selling porn videos in 2003 confirms that violence is a rare phenomenon in mainstream pornography; of the 838 scenes analyzed, "sixteen scenes—2 percent—contained an element that might be described as violent" (McKee, Albury, and Lumby, p. 53). According to McKee, Albury, and Lumby, pornography has grown less violent over time as it seeks to cater to women's pleasure as well as to men's. Violent pornography does exist, however; see, for instance, Jennifer Lynn Gossett and Sarah Byrne, "'Click Here': A Content Analysis of Internet Rape Sites," *Gender and Society*, 16 (2002), 689-709. While Gossett and Byrne agree that "violent images are only a small part of the overall pornography market," they maintain that the very "accessibility of violent pornographic images on the Internet makes questions regarding the proportion of violent pornography less important now" (pp. 693, 703). Furthermore, there is no denying the violent content of movies by filmmakers such as Max Hardcore and others.

[6] Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1981), 99.

[7] Dworkin, "Pornography is a Civil Rights Issue," in *Letters from a War Zone*, 304-05.

[8] Dworkin, "Terror, Torture, and Resistance," in *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War Against Women* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 115-25.

[9] The myth of the snuff-film is effectively exposed in David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff* (London: Creation, 1994). Similarly, studies that are often cited to verify the harmfulness of pornography have regularly been proven flawed; see, for instance, Pally, *Sex and Sensibility*; and Alison King, "Mystery and Imagination: The Case of Pornography Effects Studies," in *Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to*

Reclaim Feminism, ed. Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol (London: Pluto Press, 1993), 57-87.

[10] See Linda Williams, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). The cheap tricks behind the spectacle of the cum-shot are also discussed in John R. Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995), 77.

[11] Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 62.

[12] See Magnus Ullén, "Pornography and its Critical Reception: Toward a Theory of Masturbation," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 51 (2009), http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/UllenPorn/index.html.

[13] See Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), for an instructive example in this regard.

[14] The limitations of Dworkin's censorious position on porn have long been apparent, as her argument is clearly self-contradictory. Thus Mandy Merck, "Bedroom Horror: The Fatal Attraction of *Intercourse*," *Feminist Review*, 30 (1988), 89-103, highlights "Dworkin's circular account of causation, in which intercourse constructs male power and male power constructs intercourse" to the effect that "history evaporates, leaving us in an immutable present of male oppression" (p. 101). Linda S. Kauffman's *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) likewise stresses the ahistorical nature of Dworkin's reasoning and points out its "faulty cause-and-effect logic: porn is responsible for all the varieties of exploitation women have endured throughout history" (p. 231). Many others have pointed out that Dworkin and MacKinnon take the feminist insight that gender relations are structurally unequal "to the point of denying that consent is a real possibility for women," in effect renouncing the possibility of female agency; see Kate Ellis, "I'm Black and Blue from the Rolling Stones and I'm Not Sure How I Feel About It: Pornography and the Feminist Imagination," in *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship*, ed. Kate Ellis, Beth Jaker, Nan D. Hunter, Barbara O'Dair, and Abby Tallmer (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1988), 44.

[15] Dworkin, "My Life as a Writer," in *Life and Death*, 29. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[16] Dworkin, "Loving Books: Male/Female/Feminist," in *Letters from a War Zone*, 63.

[17] Dworkin, "The Third Rape," in *Life and Death*, 57.

[18] Dworkin, "The Third Rape," 58. That Dworkin's testimonies of the conditions in the prison were highly publicized is confirmed by the fact that they are cited in Sara Harris, *Hellhole: The Shocking Story of the Inmates and Life in the New York City House of Detention for Women* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1967).

[19] Dworkin, "The Day I was Drugged and Raped," *New Statesman*, 5 June 2000, http://www.newstatesman.com/node/197866.

[20] Catherine Bennett, "Doubts about Dworkin," *Guardian*, 8 June 2000, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jun/08/society. For other, similarly skeptical accounts, see Susie Bright, "The Baffling Case of Andrea Dworkin," in *Inspired By Andrea Dworkin: Essays on Lust, Aggression, Porn, and the Female Gaze that I Might Not Have Written If Not for Her* (Santa Cruz: Bright Stuff, 2005); Julia

Gracen, "Andrea Dworkin in Agony," *Salon*, 20 September 2000, http://www.salon.com/2000/09/20/dworkin; and Leah McClaren, "Doubting Dworkin: The Radical Writer's Dubious Account of being Drugged and Assaulted Does No Good for Rape Awareness," *The Globe and Mail*, 17 June 2000, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/doubting-dworkin-the-radical-writers-dubious-account-of-being-drugged-and-assaulted-does-no-good-for-rape-awareness/article768435.

[21] Given the ethical and cognitive complexity of talking and writing about rape accounts—see, for instance, Jan Jordan, *The Word of a Woman? Police, Rape, and Belief* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004)—it is perhaps understandable that much of the critical debate about Dworkin has revolved around whether or not she tells the truth when speaking about her own experiences; see, for instance, Tanya Serisier, "'How Can a Woman Who Has Been Raped Be Believed?': Andrea Dworkin, Sexual Violence, and the Ethics of Belief," *Diegesis: Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research*, 4, No. 1 (2015), 68-87. Victor J. Vitanza in *Sexual Violence in Western Thought and Writing: Chaste Rape* (New York: Palgrave, 2011) goes so far as to suggest that her writings can be seen as an attempt to embody rape trauma theory. Dworkin's *New Statesman* article, he suggests, "can be read as a test with typical implicit questions embodied in Dworkin's reportage for us to answer," the ultimate aim of which is to make us aware of how we are part of a system that makes us question the veracity of rape victims' accounts almost by default (p. 54). While I think Vitanza is right to detect in the article a rhetorical strategy, I find his suggestion that we should take Dworkin's word for granted problematic. He states, "There is every good reason for thinking Dworkin was raped in Paris, if for no other reason than she said that she was," while accusing those who think otherwise of acting out "a rapist ethics" (p. 53). His argument thus clearly illustrates the overall thesis of the present piece: namely that to insist on the truth of Dworkin's testimony as a woman results in a dichotomous way of thinking that reenacts and exacerbates the conflict between the sexes that her writings claim to deliver us from. We stand a better chance of accounting for the genuine insight of her writings if we grant that their truth is in no way dependent upon the empirical question of whether things really happened the way Dworkin reports them or not.

[22] As Paul de Man puts it: "The structural intentionality determines the relationship between the components of the resulting object in all its parts, but the relationship of the particular state of mind of the person engaged in the act of structurization to the structured object is altogether contingent"; see de Man, "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 25.

[23] Dworkin, *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics* (New York: Perigee Books, 1981), xiii.

[24] The reaction of course need not be one of disbelief but can just as well be one of immediate relief. Thus several people have testified to an unflinching belief in Dworkin because they find in her a voice that dares to speak the truth about the horrors of rape and prostitution. See, for instance, Christine Stark, "Andrea Dworkin and Me," *Off Our Backs*, 35, Nos. 5/6 (2005), 16-19; and Robert Jensen's statement in *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007) that "Andrea Dworkin's writing brought me to tears" (p. 8). My point is simply that Dworkin's writings tend to elicit an *immediate* rather than a reflected reaction.

[25] Dworkin, *Ice and Fire: A Novel* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), 88. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[26] Harriet Gilbert, "So Long as it's not Sex and Violence: Andrea Dworkin's *Mercy*," in *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, ed. Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (London: Virago, 1992), 216. Gilbert's argument is borne out by James Lindgren, "Defining Pornography," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 141 (1993), 1153-1275, who reports that 63 percent of the participants in a study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania found an excerpt of *Mercy* pornographic according to the criteria of Dworkin and MacKinnon (p. 1200). See also Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess," in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih with Butler (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 183-203, who questions whether it is at all possible "to do the kind of reading that Dworkin does, that involves a retelling and repetition of the pornographic scene without making use of precisely the variable identifications that the pornographic fantasy itself occasions?" (p. 194).

[27] Dworkin, *Mercy* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1992), 5. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[28] Butler, too, in her critique of the censorious view of pornography, observes its implicit conceptual realism. The view of the pornographic representation as a harmful act "relies upon a representational realism that conflates the signified of fantasy with its (impossible) referent and construes 'depiction' as an injurious act" (p. 185).

[29] Dworkin, *Pornography*, 304.

[30] See, by way of comparison, Martha C. Nussbaum, "Equity and Mercy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 22 (1993), 83-125, according to whom the very form of the novel entails that narrative be an expression of mercy. In Nussbaum's view, Dworkin's book is really an anti-novel since it exclusively relates the narrator's point of view: "We are refused perception of the particular, for, as in the male pornography that Dworkin's activism opposes, her male characters are not particulars, but generic objects" (p. 122). Roz Kaveney, in "Dworkin's *Mercy*," *Feminist Review*, 38 (1991), 79-85, likewise finds the novel a failure, primarily because of its solipsistic character (p. 84). For a reading that contradicts Nussbaum's, see Marisa Anne Pagnattaro, "The Importance of Andrea Dworkin's *Mercy*: Mitigating Circumstances and Narrative Jurisprudence," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 19, No. 1 (1998), 147-66. See also Rosa A. Eberly, "Andrea Dworkin's *Mercy*: Pain, Ad Personam, and Silence in the 'War Zone,'" *Pre/Text: A Journal of Rhetorical Theory*, 14 (1993), 273-304, reprinted in her *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), which argues that the media's scant interest in *Mercy* can be explained by the fact that Dworkin's own rhetoric would seem to invite us to focus on her rather than on what she is trying to say.

[31] Not incidentally, perhaps, Dworkin claimed to have modeled her artistic persona exclusively upon male writers: "The books I loved when I was younger were by wild men: Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, Allen Ginsberg among the living, Baudelaire, Whitman, the undecorous. . . . I did not learn writing from women" ("Loving Books," pp. 62, 64).

[32] Dworkin, *Intercourse* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1987), 24-25.

[33] Julian Beck, *The Life of the Theatre* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1972), quoted

in Dworkin, *Woman Hating: A Radical Look at Sexuality* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 91. Subsequent references to *Woman Hating* will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[34] Dworkin, *Pornography*, 215; ellipsis in original. Dworkin is here paraphrasing *Black Fashion Model*, no author or publication data provided.

[35] See MacKinnon and Dworkin, eds., *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[36] Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October*, 43 (1987), 215.

[37] By "pornography," I mean here more precisely that which sets itself up as a consumable object rather than the varieties of pornography in which its market value is secondary to some artistic purpose: *Playboy* rather than Annie Sprinkle, *Penthouse* rather than Georges Bataille, *Playgirl* rather than Robert Mapplethorpe.

[38] Lisa Palac, *The Edge of the Bed: How Dirty Pictures Changed My Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 33-34.

[39] Ariel Levy, "The Prisoner of Sex," *New York Magazine*, 29 May 2005, http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/11907.

[40] To clarify, I am not saying that pornography does not have a bearing upon our view of the relationship between the sexes. John Berger's acute observation in *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972) still very much holds true: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (p. 47). Berger's thesis finds empirical corroboration in Beth Eck, "Men are much Harder: Gendered Viewing of Nude Images," *Gender and Society*, 17 (2003), 691-710. While pornography certainly reinforces such inequities, it can hardly be said to cause them. As Clarissa Smith makes clear in *One for the Girls: The Pleasures and Practices of Reading Women's Porn* (Bristol: Intellect, 2007), the specific "male" quality of the objectifying gaze that Berger pinpoints is a result of social conditioning, which is in principle, if more seldom in practice, open to women as well.

[41] For a fuller discussion of the linguistic specificity of pornography, see Ullén, "The Solipsism of Pornography: Speech Act Theory and the Anti-Porn Position," *Sexuality and Culture*, 17 (2013), 321-47, doi:10.1007/s12119-012-9154-1. That the addressee of pornography is in fact much less universal than the pornographic text usually lets on is suggested not only by the difficulties that many women have in taking pleasure in "heterosexual" porn but also that these difficulties often cut through the targeting of specific audiences; see, for instance, Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *Q and A: Queer in Asian America*, eds. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 115-34. This is not to say, of course, that individuals who do not belong to the specific target group of a particular pornographic text could not find it stimulating in practice nor that masturbatory or consumptive modes of reading can be described as passive; consumption, after all, normally requires significant amounts of activity.