

## **Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography [book review]**

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### **Abstract:**

This book is a must for feminists. Diana Russell and the other contributors resolve many of the contradictions between the belief in free speech/first amendment rights and abhorrence of pornography. The articles also clarify distinctions between pornography and other forms of sexually explicit materials. This book quite strongly reveals pornography for what it is: violence against women. Russell states, "pornography sells sexism and violence against women" (p. 8).

**Keywords:** book review | feminism | pornography | sexual violence

### **Article:**

*Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*, DIANA E. H. RUSSELL (Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press, 1993. 302 pp. \$46.00 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8077-6225-3 (cloth), 0-8077-6224-5 (paper).

This book is a must for feminists. Diana Russell and the other contributors resolve many of the contradictions between the belief in free speech/first amendment rights and abhorrence of pornography. The articles also clarify distinctions between pornography and other forms of sexually explicit materials. This book quite strongly reveals pornography for what it is: violence against women. Russell states, "pornography sells sexism and violence against women" (p. 8).

Although liberal rhetoric is used as a weapon in the crusade to support the rights of pornographers, Russell and her colleagues provide us with compelling critiques of this approach. It becomes obvious that supporters of pornography have coopted the language of the liberal left as a means of diffusing and confusing our understanding of pornography. This book strips away the illusion that acting to prevent the harm caused by pornography is equal to censorship. This false equivalence is one of the ways pornography proponents have combatted antipornography activists. There are a variety of ways to combat pornography ranging from writing letters to acts of civil disobedience. The work of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin is one example presented in the book. In response to documented effects of pornography on women, they designed a new legal theory for Minneapolis that reframed pornography as a civil rights issue. This law permitted victims of pornography to sue for damages for the harm done to them.

*Making Violence Sexy* is divided into four parts. In the first section we are provided with accounts of what the life of a porn star is like. We come to understand that "Deep Throat" is not a movie but a documentary of the rape of Linda Lovelace. We see how pornography is used to set children up for incest and prostitution, and how it gives rapists new and creatively vicious ideas of ways to sexually victimize women.

In the second section the reader learns about the current state of pornography. We see aspects of the intense debate over pornography and censorship, and how the concept of sexual freedom has taken a harmful turn. Presently in society, sexual freedom lacks justice, and what sexual freedom there is (which in reality is available primarily to men) is tainted with hatred for and degradation of women. Women are portrayed as body parts instead of as whole beings, and are objectified. Black women are further degraded by being portrayed as animals. The links between racism and sexism in pornography are explored.

Differences in the ways feminists and nonfeminists conduct research on pornography are presented in the third section. Russell provides a causal model of rape and discusses ways in which pornography affects the various factors in the model. A summary of research concerned with the potential harm that pornography causes is presented and discussed. The book provides a possible explanation of the confusion surrounding the question of whether or not pornography is harmful. One researcher notes that the confusion may be due to a mixture of erotica, nonviolent pornography, and violent pornography being used in the studies. Russell points out the additional confusion created by research experts reversing or hedging their conclusions. She provides a critique of the studies as well as a report of her attempt to get one researcher to explain his contradictory positions on the issue of harm resulting from pornography.

In the last section several contributors give detailed accounts of actions they have taken to fight pornography. Some of the actions are humorous, such as throwing Sugar Baby candy at the movie screen during the sexually violent scenes of "Kill Me Again." Some are gruesomely serious, such as the protestor who costumed herself as a corpse and stretched across the sidewalk, forcing movie goers to step over her to attend "Dressed to Kill." One contributor described her arrest for reading aloud excerpts from the book *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis while she was in a bookstore where the book was being sold. In this book, killing and raping women is simply a recreation for the novel's hero. Other actions described in this section are clearly illegal, such as destroying pornography in stores or fire-bombing the stores. Though neither of us endorses the violent actions employed by the protestors, it is obvious that some protestors feel such behavior is necessary. Fortunately, the authors provide many nonviolent alternatives and examples that readers can use in their own fight against pornography.

Reading this book is apt to leave the academic reader with a mixed reaction. When considered for its academic usefulness, it provides an excellent collection of information on the current status of how violence is sexualized in society. In this sense reading the book generates an intellectual and emotional satisfaction. When considered as a documentary of the sexualized abuse and violation of the civil rights of women, reading some of the contributions, especially the first person accounts, causes much pain. The accounts are so vivid that the reader may want to skip pages to avoid empathetic pain or may find passages too violent to want to continue reading them. On another level, the writings may lead readers to feel as though they are the

targets of anger from feminist activists who are working to stop the spread of pornography and who think other feminists are not doing enough to protest pornography. The reader may also grow more angry chapter by chapter as the evidence of abuse piles up. With these many facets to *Making Violence Sexy*, the reader can hope to cut through the confusion surrounding the pornography-erotica distinction, gain knowledge on the personal, political, and academic aspects of pornography, and be motivated to further the civil rights of women by helping to prevent the harm caused by pornography.

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