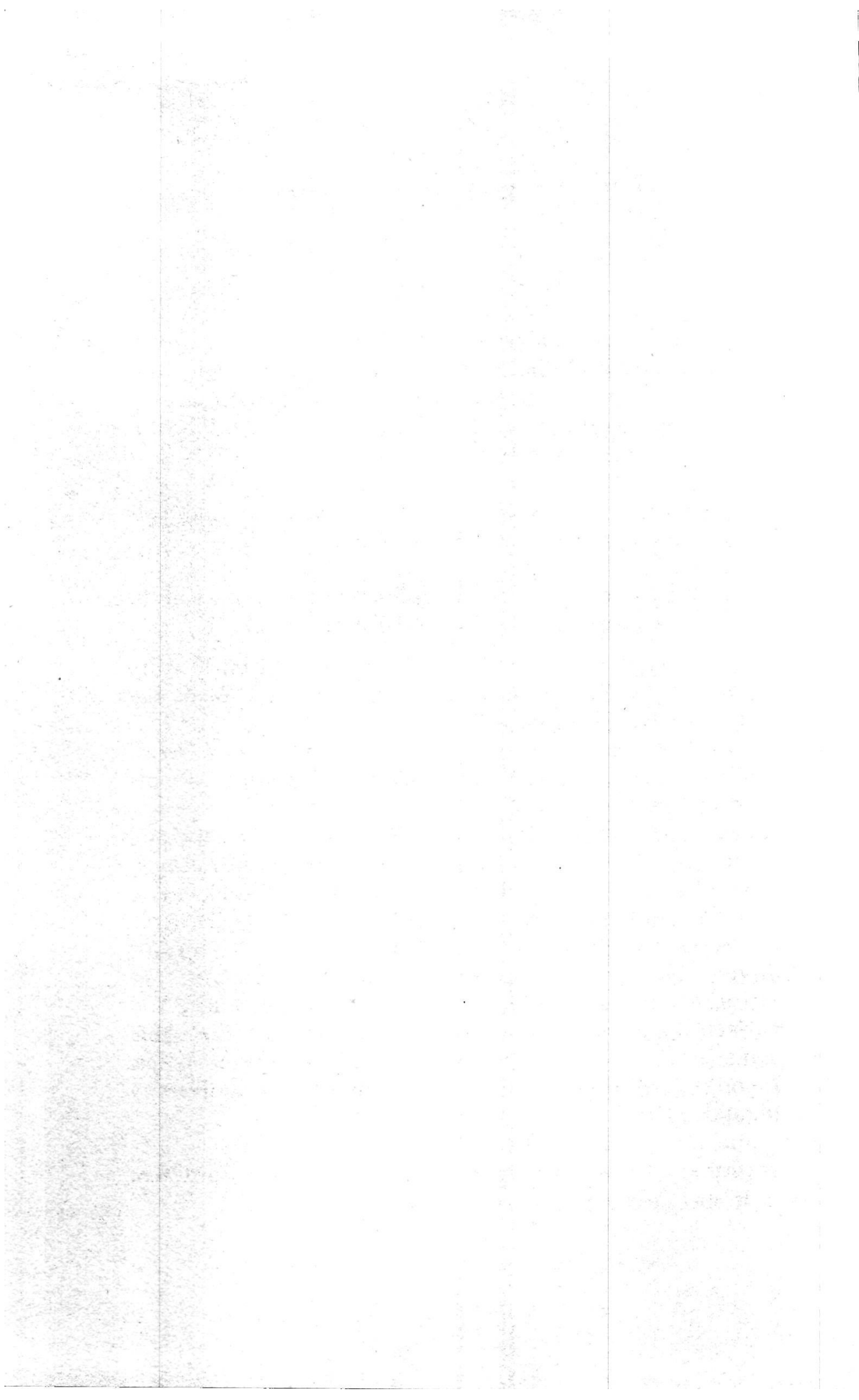


The
Pornography
— of —
Representation

Susanne Kappeler



THE PORNOGRAPHY OF REPRESENTATION

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The Pornography of Representation

Susanne Kappeler

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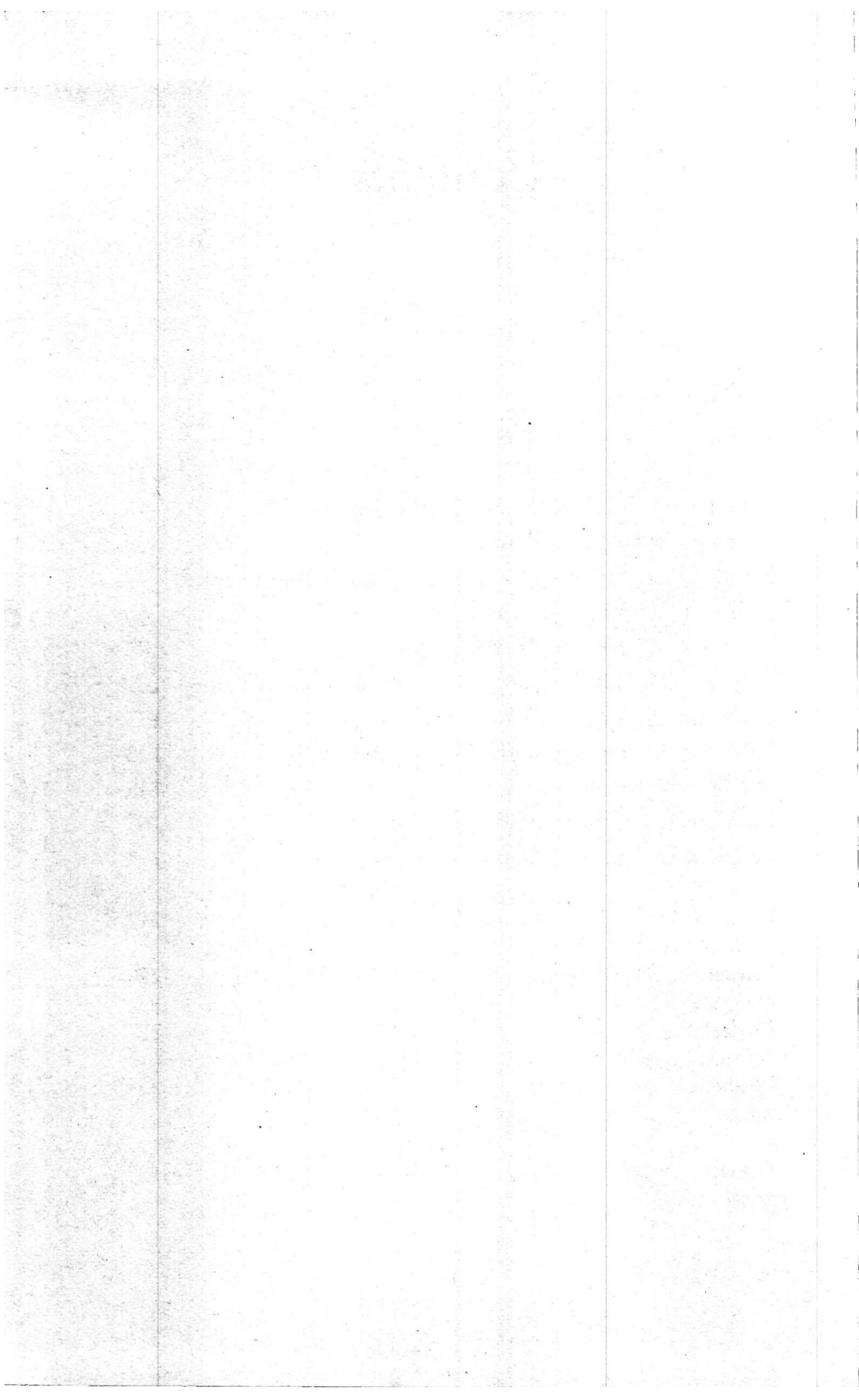
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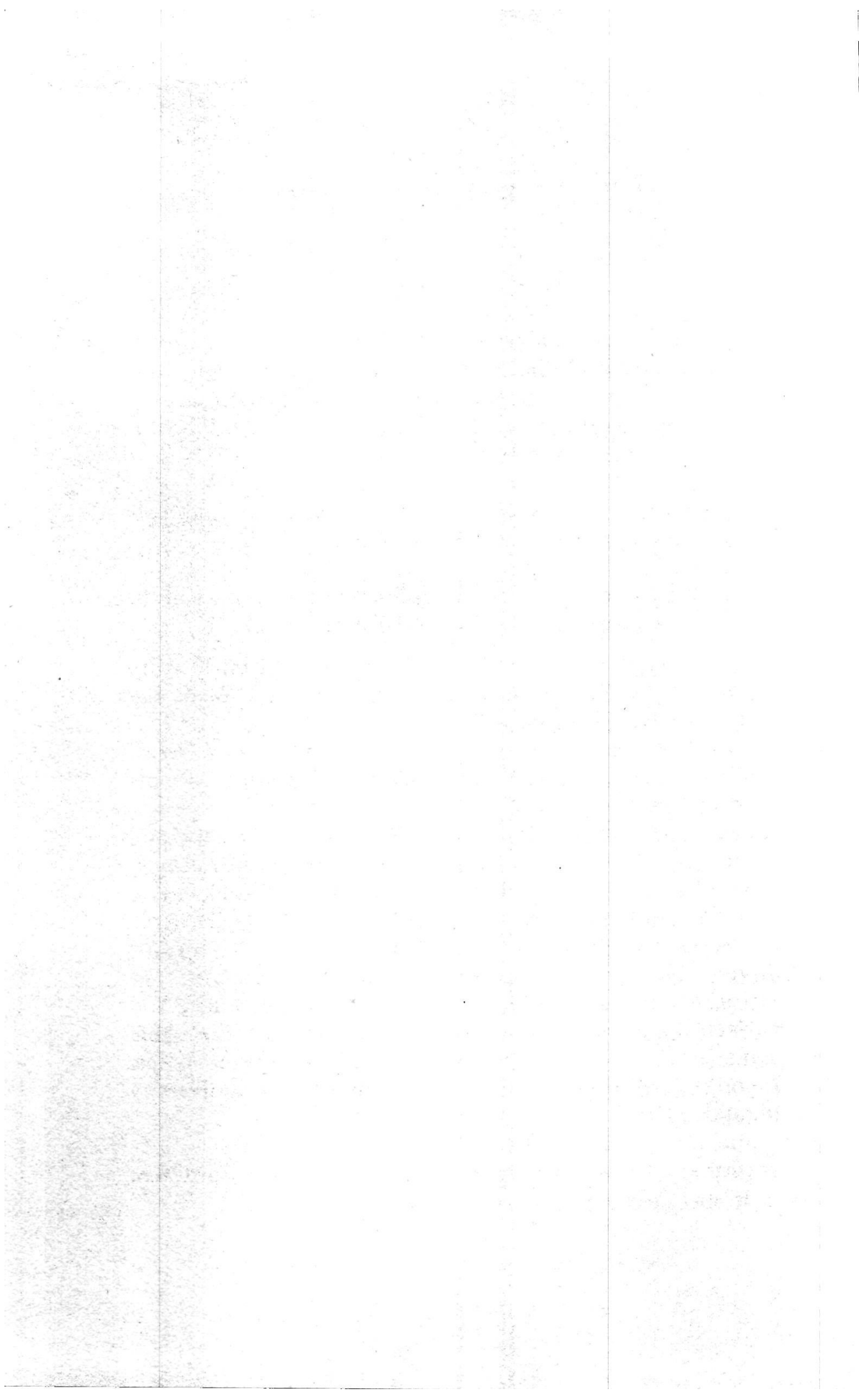
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Preamble

A feminist critique of pornography needs first of all to engage with the terms in which pornography is discussed. Pornography is not a given entity in the world, but the construct of particular discourses. It is notorious that there exists no clear-cut definition of pornography; instead, different discussions identify different characteristic elements as their basis for a discussion of the phenomenon.

The opposition to pornography, whether feminist or otherwise, has almost unanimously argued its case in terms of an assumption that pornography is a special case of sexuality. Feminists and anti-pornography lobbyists alike slip easily from discussing the goings-on inside pornographic representations to discussing goings-on in the world. Their concern is that practices portrayed in pornography may become practices in our lives. The traditional emphasis is on 'obscenity': the immoral or 'dirty' quality of the sex portrayed. Feminist argument has shifted the focus on to violence: the violent quality of the sex portrayed. In this respect, the feminist emphasis has not so much introduced new ways of dealing with the problem of pornography as a new basis for morality.

On the other side of the argument, censorship experts and advocates of free pornography deny that a link between pornography and criminal sexual practice in reality can be proven. They assert a fundamental difference between fantasy and reality. Pornographic representations, for them, belong to the separate realm of fantasy and fiction. We should therefore look at this pure realm of fantasy, how it has come about, and where exactly it lives if it is not part of reality.

It is my contention that the feminist argument about

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pornography would significantly advance if we were to shift the ground of the argument. Pornography is not a special case of sexuality; it is a form of representation. Representation, therefore, not 'real-life sex', should be the wider context in which we analyse this special case of representation: pornography. The traditional debate has focused on 'porn' at the expense of 'graphy', an emphasis duly reflected in the customary abbreviation to 'porn'. 'Porn', in this slippage, has gradually come to mean 'obscene sex' or 'violent sex' – forms of sexuality we disapprove of. We do not like them (or would not like them) in real life, therefore we do not want them represented.

The object of this study is pornography, that is representations, word- or image-based, or, to be more precise, representational practices, rather than sexual practices. The fact of representation needs to be foregrounded: we are not just dealing with 'contents'. Sex or sexual practices do not just exist out there, waiting to be represented; rather, there is a dialectical relationship between representational practices which construct sexuality, and actual sexual practices, each informing the other.

Forms of representation have their own histories, yet we have become so accustomed to representations in many media that the media and their conventions have become naturalized, 'transparent', apparently giving a key-hole view on make-believe reality, reflections of reality. Literature and the visual arts are the expert domains of representation, and they embody the history of the naturalization of the medium. Their concepts of realism have fostered our commonsense attitude of dividing representations into form and content, medium and represented reality. The aim of realism is to obliterate our awareness of the medium and its conventions and to make us take what is represented for a reflection of a natural reality. Realism sees itself as holding up a mirror to life. The mirror, if not transparent, reflects, and it is above all 'faithful'. The question should never arise as to who is holding the mirror, for whose benefit, and from what angle; at least it should not arise in terms which would make this

concept of the mirror – and hence of reality – problematical.

Within the disciplines of the study of art and literature, cinema and photography, the analysis of realism and of the relationship between form and content has long significantly advanced beyond this simple sketch. Yet the notions of 'realism' and of 'form and content' still have a firm hold upon our commonsense responses. They are at the bottom of the content orientation towards pornography (the focus on sex). They are at the bottom of our easy division into fact and fiction. And they are at the bottom of official newspaper policy, of professional organizations of editors and journalists claiming to produce neutral, unbiased, objective or transparent reporting – to hold up the mirror of events to the reading public. It is for this reason that a more elaborate analysis of representation needs to be brought to bear in a feminist analysis of pornography.

Representations are not just a matter of mirrors, reflections, key-holes. Somebody is making them, and somebody is looking at them, through a complex array of means and conventions. Nor do representations simply exist on canvas, in books, on photographic paper or on screens: they have a continued existence in reality as objects of exchange; they have a genesis in material production. They are more 'real' than the reality they are said to represent or reflect. All of these factors somehow straddle the commonsense divide between fiction and fact, fantasy and reality.

So a first shift of ground, for a feminist critique of pornography, involves moving from a content orientation to an analysis of representation. This move however takes us out of the comfortable seclusion of the Arts – the storehouses of (respectable) representations – and leads us to look at the functions of representations in society. Crucial factors of representation are the author and the perceiver: agents who are not like characters firmly placed within the representation as content. They are roles taken up by social beings in a context. This context is political: a question of class, race, gender. This context is cultural: a question of the relationship of representations to a generalized concept of culture (and

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'reality'). And this context is economic: a question of the relationships of cultural production and exchange. None of these questions of course is independent of the others, which poses a problem of how to present them.

The procedure in this study will be two-fold: on the one hand I shall be clearing the ground, challenging a plethora of concepts that appear as the givens of the debate on pornography; on the other, I shall build up the concepts and methods necessary for a feminist critique of pornography and patriarchal culture.

Problem I

Fact and Fiction

The Guardian Weekly, in its first issue of 1984, carried an article entitled 'A Murder in Namibia'. A white farmer, van Rooyen, aged 24, had tortured and killed the 18-year-old Thomas Kasire, a new black worker on his farm. The history is as follows: on account of the language Kasire speaks and the area he comes from, his white boss accuses him of being a supporter of the national liberation movement SWAPO (South Western African People's Organisation). He

throws a heavy chain around the throat of Thomas Kasire. For two days the white farmer keeps Thomas chained fast in his farmyard. Eventually, Thomas is killed as van Rooyen's drinking pals applaud and take pictures. This happens on a farm, in Namibia, in 1983.¹

Three pictures accompany the article, one showing the murderer 'as he appeared in court', wearing a suit and tie. The other two pictures are from the 'scene' of crime: a close-up of Kasire's head, bleeding, one ear half cut off, a heavy iron chain around his neck, with the white left arm of his torturer holding on to the chain, intruding from the left into the middle foreground of the picture. The third photograph has the caption: 'The victim is forced to pose with a clenched fist (SWAPO salute), while a friend of the murderer takes photos.'² The murderer himself is in the picture, towering over the young black man whom he holds by the chain. He is wearing farm clothes and a cap (they could also be paramilitary gear) and he is facing the camera. The young black man looks as if he were held up on his feet chiefly by the chain the white man holds.

The event is a curiosity in criminology, for the pictures

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were the damning evidence. Without them, the court would in all probability have acquitted [van Rooyen]. The explanations given by him and his white friends would have outweighed the statements of black witnesses. So safe are the whites in their dominant position within the apartheid system that, incredibly, the whole event was photographed at van Rooyen's request.³

The coincidence of this kind of violence and its representation is no accident. It is no curiosity in the domain of representation. The pictures are not documentary evidence, snapped by a journalist or observer by chance in the right place at the right time. The pictures are compositions, deliberate representations, conforming to a genre. The victim is forced to 'pose'; the perpetrator of the torture positions himself in the other picture with reference to the camera. Another white man is behind the camera, framing the picture. The picture may remind us of those taken by fishermen and hunters posing with their catch, smiling into the camera. But the catch is a human being, a victim, and thus the picture also reminds us of some of the darkest photographic memories of the Vietnam war, those pictures which break the documentary mould and where a temporary victor briefly poses for the camera with his victim vanquished, acknowledging the presence of the camera, drawing it into complicity. The picture may also remind us, or some of us, of pornography, a woman in the place of the black man, the white men in their respective positions – in the picture, behind the camera – unchanged.

The written report, too, cannot but align itself with the existing literary tradition of the genre:

Sunday afternoon – two white guests arrive at the farm. Thomas has now stood, bound, for two days without food or water. Van Rooyen suggests to his friends that they should have some drinks and soon they begin celebrating the capture of a young 'terrorist'.

The victim is fetched and forced to pose whilst one of the guests borrows van Rooyen's Instamatic camera. A

short time after the pictures are taken there is an almost inaudible sob from Thomas Kasire. After a faint shudder he falls backwards – lifeless.⁴

For ‘Thomas’ – the ‘boy’⁵ put ‘Justine’ or ‘Emanuelle’ or ‘O’ – the victim already designated by reduced identity, a first name, no family name. For ‘farm’ put ‘chateau’, retain the aristocratic patronym of its owner and you have the perfect scenario of sadan libertinism, the classic paradigm of the genre.

Experts on pornography, obscenity and censorship, experts of the law as well as experts of the arts, will argue that the issue of real violence, physical violence to people as in ‘A Murder in Namibia’, is irrelevant to the question of pornography. Real violence is a case for the courts and the criminologists: it is fact, not fiction.

Experts in law are for the most part concerned with fact, although with cases of threat, libel and with the question of censorship they are themselves concerned with a realm of representation that relates ambiguously to the realm of fact. Experts of the arts are now virtually exclusively concerned with fiction, since the modern understanding of art and literature highlights the creative and imaginative as the defining elements, coupled with an evaluative criterion of ‘excellence’.⁶ When the issue is pornography, both sides offer themselves as the obvious experts while at the same time effectively disowning it. Thus the arts experts, while coyly refraining from claiming pornography as an art (not ‘excellent’ enough), nevertheless recognize its affinity with their own subject and, moreover, have memories of the law interfering in the arts proper with its censorship arm, as in the famous literary obscenity trials.⁷ They claim, as it were, the other side of the boundary between fiction and pornographic fiction (without apparently any contradiction). Liberalism is in favour of a clear separation of expertise and of restricting the law to unambiguous fact. The law, increasingly complying, restricts its concern to the possibility of a factual relation between fiction (potential fact) and actual

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fact, thus placing pornography itself outside its proper domain.

Hence the present situation where protectors as well as critics of pornography face each other over the (law's) problem of refuting or proving a causal relationship between the consumption of pornographic fiction and the perpetration of sexual crimes: does represented content lead to content being acted out? Did a sexual assailant get his crime out of a book, film or magazine? Representation itself, pornography itself, is already no longer in question, in this search for a match between contents. Sociology provides statistics: they prove nothing. Perhaps it is rather a case for the psychologists, and there are psychiatric estimates: 'no correlation'.⁸ What is clear from this division of domains and competencies is that representation itself is not considered a part of the real; as fiction it is opposed to fact, and it does not apparently involve any acts, activity, action, save fictional ones in its content.

In the murder of Thomas Kasire, 'posing' for pictures was an integral part of his torture; in fact, it was the final cause of death. In the murdering of Thomas Kasire, taking pictures was an integral part of the act of torture and an integral part of the enjoyment of the act of torture. This particular form of violence has two parts: doing it and enjoying it, action and appreciation. Today, we loosely call it sadism. Enjoyment, according to Sade, requires a sophisticated intellectual structure, beyond sheer gratification. It requires an audience. With an audience, torture becomes an art, the torturer an author, the onlookers an audience of connoisseurs. This sophisticated structure is manifest in the present case: there is a host, the owner of the farm, and there are guests. One white man, the host, is the *maître de cérémonie*,⁹ also acting as torturer in the content of the picture, another white man, a guest, behind the camera, acting in the production of the picture. The two look at each other. The one in the picture will come out of the picture and take the place of the man behind the camera, looking at the scene he has framed. The host and his guests mingle and merge in the audience, they

become one as the audience, but the host is the author of the party, and they are 'celebrating'.

The victim does not come out of the picture, the victim is dead. In this case literally, in the general case of representation virtually, or functionally, as there is no designated role in the world, and in the continued existence of the representation, for the victim to take up. If the person filling the role of victim is not actually dead, s/he should be. In the words of the Marquis de Sade:

There's not a woman on earth who would ever have had cause to complain of my services if I'd been sure of being able to kill her afterwards.¹⁰

An interesting use of the word 'cause'.

The white men's party, their action of representing the torture and death of Thomas Kasire, is disregarded by both camps of experts. In the face of the 'real', factual violence involved in the production of the representation, the arts experts deem that the representation ceases to be fiction and a relative of the arts. The case is handed over to the courts, where the representation becomes 'evidence', a chance windfall for the prosecution, who treats it as a mirror reflection of reality, the reality of the crime. Van Rooyen is tried for murder; his action of producing pornographic representations, relatives of the snuff-movies, goes unnoticed and untried.

Experts on fiction and art will say that this incident does not count, because the incident was real (the victim really died). Fiction, of course, has always had a troubled relationship with reality, its investment in realism motivated by a concern with authenticating its own enterprise in an increasingly secular culture, guaranteeing a certain relevance. But it wants no part *in* reality, it is the Other to the real. It is the surplus of the real, it need have no function in the real, it need serve no purpose. It is the leisure and the pleasure which complements the work and utility of the real. That is its beauty, the beauty and privilege of the arts. Gratuitousness becomes the trademark of the arts' sublimity.

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Gratuitousness is the mark of the murderer's photography. It is for sheer surplus pleasure, as is the torture itself, which has nothing of course to do with fighting so-called terrorists or any other utility in the world. It serves the leisure and the pleasure of the white man (the incident happens at a weekend, Friday–Sunday),¹¹ it is a form of his free expression of himself, an assertion of his subjectivity.

Van Rooyen's production of pictures is fiction *par excellence*. The pictures are *made* (fiction from *ingere* = to form), careful compositions according to the laws of aesthetics and representation. The fiction exceeds fact in its representation of reality: Thomas Kasire lives on in his representation, though Thomas Kasire is dead. The fiction continues its existence in reality.

Problem 2

Human Rights

In its present, received position, the case of pornography is unanswerable. Radicals and conservatives are confused about on which side of the fence they are or ought to be; only liberals and intellectuals know their place is firmly on it. The problem, as they all see it, is that pornography is about sexuality: radicals and some liberals are 'for' it, and for its 'liberation'. Conservatives are against liberation, and very concerned about 'public morality'. There is a further problem, and this is freedom of expression. Liberals and intellectuals become almost radical when it comes to this question. Conservatives are not too sure freedom is good for everyone, and are in favour of regulating it. All of them thus happily agree that the problem of pornography is one of morality and censorship, or sexual liberation and freedom of expression, depending on the colour of the vocabulary. Feminists – radicals from the point of view of patriarchy – slot themselves uneasily into the debate in these terms: depending on their other allegiances they may come down on either side of the fence. Radically opposed to pornography, they may find themselves pleading with Mary Whitehouse for its 'abolition', for censorship. With an investment in intellectual liberalism or the arts (not to mention the 'sexual liberation' of the sixties) they may argue that pornography is not really an issue.

The Minneapolis City Council narrowly approved a new ordinance on 30 December 1983, which declares that 'certain kinds of pornography violate women's civil rights.'¹ The importance of this new ordinance – for the drafting of which the City Council had consulted two feminists, Catharine MacKinnon, a lawyer, and Andrea Dworkin, teacher and author of a book on pornography – is that it shifts the issue of

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pornography from its traditional place of obscenity and censorship to a question of civil rights: the civil rights of women. What is further interesting is how this vote split up the conventional categories of conservative, liberal and radical (although in American parlance 'liberal' already covers a spectrum from centre to left). The *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* staff writers report:

If [the Mayor] vetoes it, the proposal will come up before the new council, which takes office Tuesday. Supporters [of the new ordinance] said they fear the new council will be less favorable to the proposal.

The new council members are widely viewed as *more liberal*, particularly in the area of civil liberties, and not as amenable to the ordinance.² (My emphasis)

Being more liberal, especially in the area of civil liberties, apparently renders council members less amenable to the civil rights of women. The report continues:

Yesterday's vote was basically an alignment of council *feminists* and people who are *conservative morally*. However, two feminists . . . opposed it. And two *men* who generally vote for conservative moral issues . . . voted against it.

The Minnesota Newspaper Association released a statement opposing it and the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union also has said it will challenge the ordinance. Both are worried about censorship.³ (My emphasis)

Pornography has here become an issue of the civil rights of women, though some (most) conservatives still see in it an issue of morality and vote accordingly. Thus they vote along with feminists, who are for the radical proposition of enshrining civil rights for women in law.

However, two *women* ('feminists') oppose the ordinance; one 'said that while she's a feminist "I'm concerned what this does to the fight for human rights . . . It's censorship".⁴ It is not, in fact, censorship, as a woman would sue the purveyors or producers of pornography in a civil suit. But for this

woman, it is a case of women's civil rights versus 'human rights', and her allegiance to the latter overrides her commitment to the former, without apparently any contradiction. Two *men*, who as conservatives would normally vote for the ordinance (for morality), vote against it. Their allegiance to patriarchy (the rights of men, 'human rights') overrides their conservative moral interests. One of them says that he and his advisers, 'dozens of people, lawyers, civil rights commission members, a judge' (note: experts), are 'all concerned about pornography, but they don't think this is the way to go . . . There would be a perception in the country if we lost that the city couldn't do anything about pornography.'⁵ The need to succeed is more important than the cause that might be attempted; the need to *be seen* to succeed by the rest of the country a concern beyond the civil rights of women. 'There would be a perception' if we lost: notice the anxious glance of the white man into the camera of the media and of public opinion. There would be a representation of us as impotent and as losers which we cannot risk. Control *this* representation, at the cost of the rights of women violated in pornographic representations.

One could say that this muddle of conventional political categories and of the concepts of what pornography is has the virtue of introducing, at last but clearly, the issue of gender. And the issue of gender does not principally reside in the pornographic scenario itself where the woman usually occupies the place of victim, the man the place of master. The gender issue here concerns the structures and functions of representations, the authors and the perceivers of pornography. For the woman voter-against, for the liberals, for the Civil Liberties Union, and for the professionals of representation – the media (Newspaper Association) – women's civil rights are pitted against, are in competition with, human rights. The human rights protected here concern the freedom of expression, the freedom of the producers and purveyors of pornography (the white man behind the Instamatic), and the freedom of consumption of the pornographic clientele (the white man's guests). In the

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face of their claims, there is nothing to be done for the rights of the victim, who 'dies' in any case in the production of the representation. And if the victim has not died, an effort should be made to kill 'it', to silence the voice that might complain of the 'services' received. In the case of fact (murder in Namibia) as in the case of fiction (pornography) no overt connection is established between the particular individual who has fallen victim and a class of people who share the potential for victimization. In Switzerland, women took the military to court for allowing officers to use photographs of a woman as targets for shooting practice. The reply of the Swiss authorities was that only the particular woman, the model of the photographs, could sue. And she would be unlikely to, added a spokesman, since she had posed in the first place.⁶ In other words, the victim was dead, on account of posing, for any subsequent role in the life and tribulations of the representation.

The attempts of women to introduce ordinances such as the one in Minneapolis, or to take the Swiss military to court on the basis that pornography and its use are degrading to women as a gender, constitute an attempt to establish the connection between the individual victim and a class of potential victims. The persistent denial of such a connection by courts, censorship commissions and media points to an implicit recognition of the far-reaching consequences that would ensue from the overt acknowledgement of this link. The denial comes from a consolidated establishment of powers that be, which bear the gender of the white male, despite the odd token woman who has erred into these institutions on her aspiration to be counted as 'human'. Women as a gender-class are in the anti-pornography lobby on the basis of their recognition that they and the particular victim are one.

A feminist critique of pornography therefore has to address this narrow literalism which particularizes the singular victim and detaches her or him from any class or race affiliation. We also need to challenge the literalism of the argument of fiction experts that the victimization in porno-

graphic representations is only make-believe, and that in fact the woman model (usually) gets up unharmed after the photographic session, or does not really exist in the case of literature. We need to shift the discussion to an analysis of the role of representation in society, and to assert the civil rights of the victim in the scenario, to complement the rights of the master in the scenario and his guests. The human rights as they stand protect the rights of the author and the audience, but they do not protect the rights of the victim. We therefore need a cultural theory of representation, an analysis of power relations and the concepts of gender and race.

Representations are not just snapshots or texts, disembodied and innocuous. Take the photographs of the murder in Namibia. The victim is dead. Were it a pornographic picture, the victim would be paid and dismissed. What lives on, in either case, what has a continued existence and practice in society, is the structure of production and consumption represented by the two white men. The particular man behind the camera has opened up a dimension of viewing, has engendered a spectatorship, an audience of white men in general (a gender-race-class).⁷ And the white man in the picture is still at large, joins the viewers, is interchangeable with them.

There is collusion between the two white men of the picture. They look at each other. One is the host, the other his guest. There exists a structure of identification and solidarity, a common purpose, a shared understanding, a communicated pleasure between them. What is more, there are further white men: in the courts. Without the pictures, the court in all probability would have acquitted the murderer and his guests. But in this particular case the pictures are hard factual evidence. Yet 'despite the evidence of the pictures, the sentence was mild . . . van Rooyen was sentenced to just six years.'⁸ And there are further white men still: manning the parole commission. 'The latest information from our Namibian sources is that van Rooyen actually was secretly freed on parole shortly after his prison sentence began.'⁹ And there are further white men, in the police force, who occasionally

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make embarrassing blunders: 'The press would not have known of his release had he not been stopped for drunken driving.'¹⁰ A case, no doubt, for the lobby for the freedom of expression and information, although there is no doubt as to who – what gender-race-class – has exercised its freedom of controlling information in the interests of itself. There might have been 'a perception', in the country at large, in the public eye, that we (justice and authority) had 'lost', that we couldn't or didn't do anything about racist murder. We are all concerned about racism and crime, but we don't think this is the way to go. Control this representation of us as 'impotent', or as not exercising our power, as 'losers' in the combat of racism and murder and as winners in the protection of white male privilege. Control this representation, at the cost of the rights and lives of the victims in the case.

The voices of black people, in the Namibian case (identifying with the victim as a race-class of potential victims), would have been outweighed by the voices of the white man and his guests. And the black people would sit neither in court nor on parole commissions, nor in the boardrooms of the media. The voices of women, speaking up on behalf of the woman as victim of pornographic representation, have so far been outweighed by the voices of pornographers and their clientele. 'So safe are the whites in their dominant position within the apartheid system', so safe are the men in their dominant position within the patriarchy, 'that, incredibly, the whole event was photographed at van Rooyen's request', that, incredibly, representations of the victimization of black people and of the victimization of women, are produced at the request of the white male.

Human rights rule. Women have not, until recently, sat on law commissions, censorship commissions, city councils; neither have they defined or interpreted 'human rights'. If a woman's voice is heard, is made to be heard, in single and particular cases such as those of Mary Whitehouse or Phyllis Schlaefli, or a woman member of the city council, it is because she speaks in the voice and language of the white man. She