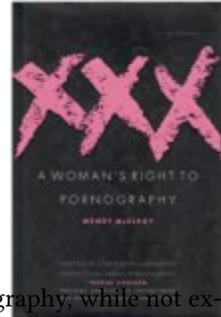


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wendy McElroy. *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. xi + 243 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-15245-1; \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-13626-0.

Reviewed by Rita Rippetoe (University of Nevada-Reno)
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Wendy McElroy examines the pornography industry and defends it as part of a flow of information about sex which both individual women and society need. McElroy defines pornography as “explicit artistic depiction of men and/or women as sexual beings.” Defining pornography in opposition to anti-porn feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, McElroy defends it as vital to individualist feminism. She traces connections between suppression of pornography and anti-feminism, noting that Comstock laws prohibited information on birth control and women’s reproductive health. McElroy argues that disillusionment with feminism following the defeat of the ERA was filled by radical feminist theories of gender oppression. These theories attack pornography as an oppressive construction of human sexuality causing violence against women. The accusations made against pornography are that it is morally wrong; that it leads to violence against women; and that it is, itself, violence.

The heart of this book is an individualist feminist defense of pornography. Individualist feminism defends women’s rights to make choices and accepts a woman’s word as to whether a choice was voluntary or not. This is in opposition to radical feminist’s assertions that sex workers are incapable of giving true consent because they have been psychologically damaged by a patriarchal society. McElroy explains her view that pornography is personally and politically beneficial to women. She returns to the personal with interviews with women in the business and an account of a meeting of COYOTE, the national sex workers’ rights organization.

Whether the reader agrees or disagrees with McElroy, her work is valuable. Discussion of the content and

production of contemporary pornography, while not exhaustive, adds details to the discussion of free speech. Discussion of the attack on women’s freedom of contract contained in proposed anti-porn laws is also valuable. The women McElroy interviews are people with bodies and minds, not just victims of sexism. While her interviews and surveys do not prove that such victims do not exist, a point McElroy admits, they do prove that not all sex workers fall into such categories.

The argument of the book is that the sexual information conveyed in pornography is good but that defending pornography on this basis would be difficult or impossible if the charges made by radicals—that women are coerced into performing, subjected to violence by the industry, or that the majority of pornography portrays violence and may, therefore, encourage such violence—are true. McElroy, therefore, views pornography and talks with actresses and producers to assure herself that the charges are not true. Reassured, she defends pornography, not merely as speech to be tolerated lest *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* share the fate of *Debbie Does Dallas*, but actually as valuable to women for its own sake. While it is possible that radical feminists will feel that their arguments have been distorted or unfairly attacked, the book is a valuable examination of a volatile topic. As McElroy suggests, it also opens avenues for further research.

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