

POST-PORN/MODERNISM: THE STORY SO FAR.

In the beginning, sexuality was invented. This has made a lot of people - already confused about their respective subjective identities - very angry, and has been widely regarded as a bad move which quite unnecessarily made life, inter-personal relationships and society in general even more complicated than they already were. So begins the cultural ambivalence about sexuality. Discourses of sexuality pervade the minds of subjects in contemporary society, simultaneously seducing us and threatening us with the semiotic fatality of AIDS; and despite the proliferation of sexuality in the cultural imaginary, sexuality as a concept remains an open mystery, a multiple, intangible entity which we can never "fix". There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what sexuality is for, and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable.¹ It is for this reason that I will postpone proposing how sexuality will be textually explored in the future while firstly summarising where it has been.

Feminine sexuality in the texts of the Sexual Revolution is systematically repressed and manipulated by the power of patriarchy, which postulates that only men are sexual subjects. Women are defined in relation to men as the sexual objects of Erotomaniacs, masculine sexual subjects gone mad. Miranda's captor in *The Collector*, Ferdinand Clegg, defines her as an object which he manipulates in the exploration of his own sexual fantasies, totally ignoring her needs and wants. Although women resist this phallogentric appropriation and misrepresentation of their sexuality and subjectivity, their sexuality remains marginal in the patriarchal textual economy of the Sexual Revolution. Women such as Caroline in *The Comfort of Strangers* and Jessica in *Blackeyes* both defy the men who portray them as passive sexual objects in order to assert their individuality and their own sexual desires and experiences, but their sexual independence is achieved at the cost of life and liberty.

Dirty's absolute perversion in *Blue of Noon* and her active self-debasement defines her subjective and sexual identity and independence, and while her desires are complicit with and complimentary to those of her lover Henri Troppmann, Dirty is his equal and not his play-thing. Helene Cixous' form of feminine writing or *écriture féminine*, as exemplified by such texts as *The Butcher* and *SEX*, is effecting a paradigmatic shift in the sexuality of literature and the literature of

¹ Erica Carter in her essay "Sexual Politics Revisited" proposes ending her piece of academic work on a note of frivolity, and I have followed this practice here with close reference to Douglas Adams. For the bits I've just appropriated, see *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, Pan, London, 1980, pp. 7-9. Carter's essay is in *Critical Quarterly*, Volume 31(3), Autumn 1989, pp. 3-10.

sexuality. Men can no longer simply play a dominant role in sex because women have partially displaced men from this position, and men have taken up new roles and identities. The re-definition of masculine sexuality according to Cixous' theory has been made possible by the feminine, Post-Porn/Modern text, which has established women's sexuality and subjectivity as entities in their own right, distinct and independent from patriarchal authority and which represents a form of masculine sexuality which is anti-phallogentric and open to multiple experiences and identities.

Jon Stratton in *The Virgin Text* argues that a feminist pornography cannot exist in a society which fetishises texts and sexualises reading. Stratton's theory that texts become fetish objects in our sexualised society is sustained by writers like Roland Barthes and remains a cogent argument, but his belief that all sexual texts are implicitly feminine allows only for a male author and a male reader, which is limiting to both women and men as readers and writers. Stratton does not believe that sexually explicit texts can speak to female readers, and he argues that women who say that they are attracted to pornography are not really relating to it, but are merely accepting a dominant male sexual ideology. Like Stephen Heath, Stratton identifies pornography as simply the repetition of phallogentric sexuality, and dismisses the possible existence of alternatives to the "dominant male sexual ideology" from which he works and which his work maintains.² However, Post-Porn/Modern texts create a pornography of representation which encourages the depiction of perverse and subversive sexual desires.

Stratton's argument that there is no such thing as female defined and constructed pornography disallows the feminine narrative voice and reader position created by authors like Angela Carter, Alina Reyes and Madonna, and excludes from textual criticism any concept of feminine agency, activity or subjectivity.³ Postmodern pornography functions by exploding the gender limitations of the Sexual Revolution, and represent sex as a performance, a constructed event and experience. Post-Porn/Modern texts propose that within the system of semiotic exchange representations of sexuality are bound primarily by the patterns of cultural anxiety concerning the transmission of the AIDS virus. In contemporary society, this epidemic panic has become a prolific discourse, infecting sexual subjects whether they risk becoming infected with the real virus or not. Post-Porn/Modern texts allow for and condone the expression of forbidden sexual tropes such as sadomasochism, necrophilia and voyeurism, and represent a feminine sexuality that has symbolically escaped masculine control.

² John Stratton, *The Virgin Text: Fiction, Sexuality and Ideology*, Harvester, Brighton, 1987, p. 99.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

AIDS, besides spreading an epidemic fear of sexuality throughout society, has also resulted in a fundamental restructuring of sexual politics, which may be partly attributed to the sexual frankness required to inform people of the potential consequences of their sexual behaviours. Baudrillard's closed system of narrative simulation allows for the expression of multiple sexual identities and experiences, many of which have been defined in the laws and literatures of western society as immoral, illegal, and politically incorrect. Heterosexual identity has been fractured by AIDS; heterosexuality has been dislocated from its position of centrality in the western cultural imaginary by the social recognition and validation of homosexuality in anti-discrimination and anti-vilification legislation. Heterosexuality can no longer be taken for granted; it is as much a constructed sexual identity as any other. The non-fiction collections of sexual fantasies compiled by Nancy Friday can be read as an example of the Post-Porn/Modern dislocation of the primacy of heterosexuality. While they are "non-fiction", many of their heterosexual authors understand their fictional, fantastical form and consciously construct their fantasies of gay and lesbian sex as texts in which sexual identity and subjectivity are fluid, flexible, and ultimately fictional constructions.

My elevation of Post-Porn/Modernism as the literary and cultural aesthetic of the early 1990's contains ideological presumptions of its own of which I am aware, and which may eventually undermine its theoretical validity, just as the promiscuity of the Sexual Revolution has made that discourse culturally unacceptable because of the threat of AIDS. It is deeply ironic that the sexual behaviour promoted by the Sexual Revolution's Politics of Ecstasy and the 1960's spirit of exploration has provided the best possible social environment for the rapid spread of the HIV virus in the following decades. The perception of sex as harmless erotic fun is being increasingly dismissed by society, and at the same time postmodern discourses and theories of sexuality have become increasingly relevant literary tools in the interpretation and analysis of the impact of AIDS on Western society.

The current preoccupation with AIDS can be read as the twentieth century's version of a more general fin-de-siecle obsession with chaos, decay and social implosion, similar to the apocalyptic discourses which circulated in Victorian England last century, and in France during the excesses of the Revolution the century before that. The current obsession with sexuality which, as I argued in my Introduction, developed over nearly a century may dissolve into other ideas; other obsessions may take the central place sexuality currently occupies in the cultural imaginary. In this final passage I will set out some of the possible future sexual scenarios as a nominal form of closure, for no neatly satisfying closure in relation to sexuality can be made here.

THE NEW SEXUALITIES

The future of Post-Porn/Modernism depends almost entirely on what happens to western society in relation to the AIDS epidemic. If a vaccination or cure for HIV and/or AIDS is found in the short term, then the panic logic will surely dissipate, perhaps to be replaced by a new permissiveness which would develop in the vacuum of sexual politics created by the end of the panic epidemic. If a cure is not found in the short term (say before the end of the decade/century/millennium), then the ideology of panic sexuality will no doubt continue to proliferate, and new textual responses may develop to express the subjective sexual experiences. In my Introduction I stated that the texts of Post-Porn/Modernism have not thus far eroticised “safe sex”. If no cure is found for AIDS, then I believe that this is the direction in which postmodern sexuality will develop. Some texts like Madonna’s *SEX* already are aware of and make explicit the location of AIDS in narratives of sexual fantasy, and allow for the representation of “safe sex” in fictional texts.

Similarly, Nicholson Baker’s *VOX* describes non-penetrative sexual practices where no bodily fluids are exchanged, symbolic of “safe sex” practices which characters may enjoy without fear of contagion.⁴ *VOX* also simulates current sexual relations and discourses with a level of realism rarely seen in postmodern texts. In *VOX*, Abby says in her conversation with Jim that “I get very moist when I’m aroused” (8), a very personal yet universal situation. The tone adopted by Baker is appropriately frank and conversational. Abby states that “I do unfortunately tend to get yeast complications from real sex, inside sex, the friction seems to cause them.” (126). Heterosexual intercourse, constructed as “real sex” penetrates and disrupts the postmodern sexual body. Post-Porn/Modern meta-sex however, being “un-real” or hyper-real, engages with the body in entirely different ways.

Abby shares with Jim her desire for non-penetrative sex, and her disappointment that “my offhand talk of yeast unnerved” (149) a previous male partner. Masculine sexuality, even in Post-Porn/Modern representations, remains uncertain and incomplete, for male characters have neither fully recognised or accepted their desires for plural and mutable sexual experiences, although some men like Colin in *The Comfort of Strangers* realise that there is more to heterosexual contact than

⁴ Nicholson Baker, *VOX*, Granta, London, 1992.

phallogocentric dominance, and yearn for a more diverse experience of sexuality and an identity which reflects this form of sexuality.

Fictional sexuality may expand in the naturalistic, conversational direction of *VOX*, spurning the sensationalism of Bataille's pornographic representations, the violence of *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Passion of New Eve*, and Madonna's and Nancy Friday's meta-fictional fantasies. However, as sexuality becomes more complicated due to AIDS and other social forces, the only surety the sexual subject has is that sexual discourse is the key to survival in a sex-obsessed world where sexuality itself is constantly changing. The advances of computer technology, for example, may represent the future for sexuality; virtual reality has been promised as the "next big thing" for sex. Perhaps soon, instead of a two-dimensional book, Madonna will be available to the consumer on CD-ROM in three-dimensional virtual reality - the ultimate postmodern body-as-text. Food for thought for the postmodern meta-voyeur indeed.