

## SEXUALITY AND SOCIETY

Discourses of sexuality occupy a contested and sometimes controversial site in contemporary Western late-capitalist society. In this dissertation I will argue that constructions of sexuality are a definitive characteristic of this society, which can be identified primarily by its obsession with the sexual.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental centrality of sexuality in the Western world was established by medical and psychological research in the late nineteenth century, particularly by the psycho-analytic “discoveries” of Sigmund Freud. Sexual discourse increasingly circulated during the twentieth century, perpetuating its position as the prevalent discourse of the Western world. This proliferation of sexual discourse has resulted in what can be described as the cultural saturation of sexuality. We currently live in a world where “sexuality is the most important aspect of existence”.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Heath in his critical essay *The Sexual Fix* identifies contemporary society as being intensely involved in the production and reproduction of the sexual through discourse and narrative. He states that:

A characteristic of the kind of society in which we live is the mass production of fictions: stories, romances, novels, photo-novels, radio serials, films, television plays and series - fictions everywhere, all-pervasive...<sup>3</sup>

A society ruled by “all-pervasive” narratives is a society ruled by all-pervasive sexualities, for if the texts which Heath describes are produced in a sex-obsessed society, then these texts will automatically function by constructing sexual desires and ideologies; they will reproduce the sexual above all other themes and concerns.

Constructions of sexuality in twentieth-century Western society have supported a “Politics of Ecstasy”,<sup>4</sup> which defines the sexual expression of the individual as a form of, or a means toward achieving, sexual (in both a physical and psychological sense) liberation from the repressions of sexuality perpetuated by political institutions. The Politics of Ecstasy implicitly associates sexuality

<sup>1</sup> For example, the advertising of consumer products from cars to kitchens in the media (television, radio, print publications, etc...) to which we are constantly exposed relies on images and slogans with definite sexual connotations. The media is saturated with representations of sexuality - consumer capitalism fetishises every object.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Perkins, *The Secret Record: Modern Erotic Literature*, William Morrow, New York, 1977, p. 202.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, Macmillan, London, 1982, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Singer's term as used in *Erotic Welfare*, Routledge, New York, 1993. This use of the term “Politics of Ecstasy” should not be confused with a similar if not identical term employed by Timothy Leary in his discussions of the use of LSD and other drugs.

with subjectivity; sexologists since Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing have described people as “sexual types”, relying on concepts of sexuality to define individual identities.<sup>5</sup> The Politics of Ecstasy culminated in the “Sexual Revolution” of the nineteen sixties and seventies, and in the fictions of the Sexual Revolution “the equation of personal with sexual development is... strongly produced”.<sup>6</sup> Fictive subjectivity since the Sexual Revolution has been defined in relation to concepts of sexuality and sexual identity - the individual’s sexual identity now effectively constitutes the entirety of their subjectivity.

In theory, the Politics of Ecstasy promotes a tolerance for and an acceptance of various forms of sexual expression and identity. However, it also constructs a system of binary sexual oppositions which privileges men over women and heterosexuals over bisexuals, lesbians and homosexuals. The ideology of the Sexual Revolution is phallogentric because while it proscribes sexual freedom for heterosexual men, it simultaneously reproduces discrimination and violence against heterosexual women, lesbians and gay men, and does not provide textual space for the expression of sexualities located outside the boundaries of the “Revolution”. The Politics of Ecstasy defines sexuality as excess, as sexual performance not necessarily for reproduction.<sup>7</sup> The erotic utopia offered by the Politics of Ecstasy is false and misleading; it supports patriarchal sexual institutions and perpetuates a masculine, phallogentric conceptualisation of sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

Heath in *The Sexual Fix* is extremely critical of the ideology of the Sexual Revolution, believing it to be “the definition of a new mode of conformity”.<sup>9</sup> He identifies the ideology of the Sexual Revolution as a discourse which limits the conceptualisation of sexuality; ‘sexuality’ as Heath views it is a phallogentric construction which focuses narrowly on the achievement of orgasm and on the ‘fixing’ of men’s and women’s social and sexual roles through the established patriarchal system of sex/gender difference: the male/masculine - female/feminine opposition.<sup>10</sup> He criticises the Sexual Revolution’s construction of ‘sexuality’ for being merely a fabrication of sexuality and not the complete representation of sexuality that it claims to be.<sup>11</sup> The ‘fixing’ of sexuality as a single definite

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Marshall, “Picturing Deviancy” in Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta (eds.), *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, Rivers Oram Press, London, pp. 19-36, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> The Sexual Revolution and “The Politics of Ecstasy” as I have described them remain ideological constructions and cannot simply be accepted as an objective reading of the sexual history of the twentieth century. Some critics have suggested that not only did the Sexual Revolution fail to occur for women, but that men, both heterosexual and homosexual, did not profit from it sexually as some feminist critics have claimed.

<sup>9</sup> Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

event or identity is for Heath a misrepresentation of what sexuality is or may be. He states that “there is no natural sex or sexuality”, arguing instead that “sexuality” as such exists only through varying representations of sexuality.<sup>12</sup> This theoretical perspective is the basis of this dissertation, which will forward the belief that no form of sexual identity is morally or esthetically superior to any other, and that sexual roles and performances are socially constructed.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.