AIDS AND THE IDEOLOGY OF EPIDEMIC SEXUALITY

By arguing that we must liberate “sexuality” from the Sexual Revolution’s construction of ‘sexuality’, Stephen Heath inevitably falls back on an essentialist notion of a “natural sexuality” which totally discredits his criticism of the contemporary elevation of the Sexual Revolution’s ‘sexuality’ as the totality of sexuality. Heath recognises that by continuing to work within the politics of the Sexual Revolution he limits himself theoretically, because by elevating a “natural sexuality” he prohibits the development of his desired aim of multiple sexualities. Published in 1982 and just pre-dating the widespread heterosexual recognition of A.I.D.S. (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, henceforth simply called AIDS), The Sexual Fix has been made theoretically obsolete by more recent theories and events. Heath’s study of sexuality ends where Linda Singer’s Erotic Welfare begins, at the time in the early nineteen-eighties when AIDS infected society with an epidemic fear of sexuality.

Singer argues in Erotic Welfare that the panic reaction to the AIDS virus H.I.V. (Human Immuno-deficiency Virus) has created a logic of sexual epidemic, of absolute implosive panic in the minds of Western individuals. Although the Sexual Revolution may have peaked during the nineteen sixties and seventies, its ideology remained influential in the nineteen eighties; indeed, the continued performance of the Sexual Revolutions’s proscribed promiscuity can be identified as playing a part in the world-wide spread of AIDS in the early nineteen-eighties. Singer’s reading of Michel Foucault’s analysis of sexuality and power establishes beyond Heath’s self-limiting analysis the problematic of assuming that sexuality has a liberating function. Like Foucault, Singer believes that sexuality comes into being with politics; for her, no “natural” sexuality pre-exists systems of power.

Singer argues that the discourse of Sexual Revolution functions within and not against hegemonic systems of power, which effectively contain any “real” liberation. She states in Erotic Welfare that the:

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4 Ibid., p. 150.
age of sexual epidemic demands a new sexual politics, and therefore, a rethinking of the relationship between bodies, pleasures, and powers beyond the call for liberation from repression.\textsuperscript{5}

The liberation from systems of power through sex is the primary fiction of the Sexual Revolution, a fiction that can no longer be believed.\textsuperscript{6} Singer argues that the Sexual Revolution’s “Politics of Ecstasy” has been disrupted and dislocated from its central position in the Western cultural imaginary by the arrival of AIDS, which can be read as the symbolic end to the “harmless” promiscuous pleasures enjoyed during the preceding decades. As a result of the epidemic panic of AIDS, Western perceptions of sexuality have been forced beyond the Sexual Revolution’s struggle between liberation and repression.\textsuperscript{7}

First viewed as a disease effecting only homosexual men, AIDS was generally overlooked by heterosexuals and by heterocentral institutions until it became overwhelmingly evident that “AIDS does not discriminate” and is a potential threat to the lives of heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. Heterosexuality, the sanctioned sexual expression of the Sexual Revolution, can no longer be privileged or taken for granted in the Western world as a “natural” or “safe” form of sexuality when the majority of AIDS infections world-wide now occur in heterosexuals.\textsuperscript{8} I have chosen to critically examine heterosexuality not to privilege it or to take it for granted, but to do the reverse; to discuss heterosexuality as merely one of many possible sexual identities. I will employ feminist and postmodern theories in order to critique contemporary heterosexuality for, as Linda Singer argues, both “have done much to reconfigure the Western cultural imaginary”\textsuperscript{9} alongside psycho-analytic discourse, which has significantly influenced the development of both feminism and postmodernism in twentieth-century culture.

It has become evident to cultural theorists in recent years that the AIDS-created discourse of sexual fear has had a significant effect on Western society, an effect perhaps greater than the disease itself. An example of this theory is expressed in \textit{The Plague Years}, an examination of the cultural impact of AIDS written in the mid nineteen-eighties. Its author, David Black, states that the:

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{8} Health Department of Western Australia “Travel Safe” HIV/AIDS Health Promotion Campaign, 1993.
\textsuperscript{9} Singer, op. cit., p. 196.
fear of AIDS - rather than AIDS itself - is part of the wave of reaction that is spreading across the western democracies, a retreat from the freedom - or... the licence - that overwhelmed us in the 1960s and early 1970s.\textsuperscript{10}

Black and other critics agree that the discourse of sexual panic has had a far greater impact on the Western cultural imaginary than the actual effect of AIDS;\textsuperscript{11} this panic has ruptured and displaced the Politics of Ecstasy from its central location in our culture, and replaced it with the logic of epidemic-inspired panic.\textsuperscript{12}

AIDS has terminally effected the politics of pleasure, which is no longer determined by the Sexual Revolution’s illusory liberty but by the sexual epidemic’s politics of life and death.\textsuperscript{13} Sexuality in the age of epidemic has become anything but productive - it is specifically non-productive - it destroys rather than creates. Sexuality has become (almost) totally divorced from biology; “sexuality” as such begins where the biological origins of sexuality become irrelevant.\textsuperscript{14} This “metasexuality”\textsuperscript{15} is a fractured, multiple simulation of sexuality, a refutation of the Sexual Revolution’s “real” sexuality. Considerations of contemporary sexuality can now be seen to evolve around AIDS as a metaphor of sexual chaos and disaster; AIDS has fueled a panic logic which has become the focal sexual ideology of the fin-de-millennium era, a logic that functions by reproducing the very phenomena it seeks to limit - sexual discourses.\textsuperscript{16}

AIDS can be read as representing a specifically postmodern form of sexuality. Charles E. Rosenberg in his essay “What Is an Epidemic?” argues that:

\begin{itemize}
  \item AIDS is postmodern in the self-conscious, reflexive and bureaucratically structured detachment with which we regard it. Countless social scientists and journalists watch us watch ourselves; that reflexive process has become a characteristic aspect of [western society’s] experience with AIDS.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{11} Singer, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{15} Michael Perkins, \textit{The Secret Record: Modern Erotic Literature}, William Morrow, New York, 1977, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{16} Singer \textit{op. cit.}, p. 9.
The cultural experience of AIDS is a postmodern phenomenon because, instead of focusing on the disease itself (although obviously we do focus on the disease directly, for example in medical science), we concentrate primarily on observing and narrating the social impact of the discourse of epidemic fear. AIDS constructs individuals in the world of sexual epidemic as voyeurs - we are always watching - watching sexuality being inscribed, discussed, performed - watching for symptoms of the epidemic and its consequential cultural panic.

**THE DISCOURSE OF POST-PORN/MODERNISM**

“Mother” in Angela Carter’s novel *The Passion of New Eve* states that sexuality is “manifested in different structures and it’s a hard thing, in these alienated times, to tell what [it] is and what [it] is not...” Jean Baudrillard echoes this belief, stating that “nothing today is less certain than sex, despite the liberation of its discourse.” An uncertainty is currently associated with sexuality, perhaps because we can no longer rely on an essentialist concept of a “natural” sexuality; the Sexual Revolution is what Jean-Francois Lyotard would call a “grand narrative” which has been epistemically dismantled and destabilised by the cultural impact of AIDS. We are at a turning point in Western sexual politics: what is at stake, if not liberation? Sexuality is surely to be explored simply because it is interesting; its study needs no further philosophical justification. We are witnessing a paradigmatic shift in Western sexual politics from those of the Sexual Revolution to those of Post-Porn/Modernism, a sexual ideology beyond the Politics of Ecstasy, where there is no single definitive sexual discourse, where we no longer accept a single “natural” definition of sexuality.

Singer argues that the “hegemony of sexual epidemic has redefined the site of struggle in the politics of pleasure”. The specific site of the struggle is the body, textual and physical, the

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21 The term “Post-Porn Modernist” was constructed by Annie Sprinkle, former ‘porno’ film star and contemporary “sexpert” - see the documentary film *Sacred Sex* directed by Cynthia Connop, and also the article “Sprinkle Sprinkle” in *Australian Women’s Forum*, February/March 1992, pp. 28-31. I have adopted the term because I feel firstly that it is pertinent, in that Sprinkle is a former porn star, hence the post-porn. Secondly, although it does not appear obvious from Sprinkle’s punctuation of the term, she implies a sense of postmodern plurality in her constructions of sexuality. I simply changed the punctuation to what I consider a more accurate representation of the term’s meaning. Post-Porn/Modernism, being post-porn, takes into account pornography’s terms of reference and its forms of representation, and similarly locates itself within contemporary discourses of postmodernity.
discursive framework of the epidemic, the stage on which the epidemic is performed. AIDS has installed the logic of epidemic as an “epistemic matrix for the... production of cultural knowledge about bodies”. 23 The epistemic matrix of epidemic sexuality can be read as the body itself; the sexual body is the textual framework of epidemic sexuality. The texts that most explicitly deal with the body and sexuality are pornographic. Singer argues that pornography constructs a sexual semiotics which is “an appropriate site for erotic investment in the age of sexual epidemic.” 24 The narratives of postmodern epidemic sexuality are by nature pornographic because they deal with sexualities that are pure representation, devoid of reference to (re)productivity. As simulations of pornographic texts, Post-Porn/Modern narratives are explicitly involved with the construction and deconstruction of the sexual body, and can be defined as texts which combine pornographic and postmodern concepts of sexuality to represent explicit, diffuse, multiple and parodic sexualities.

It is my thesis that the reading of sexual texts and the construction of sexual discourse has been irrevocably influenced by the politics of epidemic sexuality. A Post-Porn/Modernist reader position identifies plural definitions of sexuality and sexual identity in texts; sexualities have become fluid and multiple in contemporary discourse, resisting attempts to ‘fix’ or stabilise them. I plan to examine several sexual narratives from the theoretical perspective I have just outlined, which states that the ideology of the Sexual Revolution has been culturally displaced and replaced by the ideology of panic sexuality. The first Section of this dissertation will concentrate on the Sexual Revolution: I will critique representations of heterosexual sexuality in Georges Bataille’s Blue of Noon, Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange, Angela Carter’s The Passion of New Eve, John Fowles’ The Collector, Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Ian McEwan’s The Comfort of Strangers, and Blackeyes by Dennis Potter; novels that I read as containing definitive ideological elements of the Politics of Ecstasy.

Although each is unique, these narratives can be read as collectively reproducing the distinctive gender roles and stereotypes of the Sexual Revolution. For example, these narratives define men as sex-maniacs, whom I will call “Erotomaniacs”, and concentrate on the aggressive and sadistic sides of the masculine sexual psyche. A Post-Porn/Modernist reading of these texts reveals that they define spaces where the ideologies of Sexual Revolution and Post-Porn/Modernism collide; where the former is confronted by the latter. The Politics of Ecstasy is not infallible, and the female characters in these texts may be perceived as resisting the masculine authority which textually limits

23 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
24 Ibid., p. 38.
their sexuality and subjectivity. In the second Section I will explore some of the features of Post-Porn/Modern narratives which, arguably, resist, parody and deconstruct the “Politics of Ecstasy”, and in turn construct a new sexuality which accounts for and reflects the anxieties of sexual death, eroticises the fatal possibilities of contemporary sexuality, and offers the possibility of eroticising “safe sex”.

The texts to which I will refer in the second Section are Nicholson Baker’s *VOX*, Madonna’s *SEX*, and especially *The Butcher* by Alina Reyes; narratives which from my perspective exhibit aspects of the ideology of epidemic sexuality. The novels examined in the first Section will be referred to in the second Section as well because, while these narratives can be read as perpetuating patriarchal ideology, they also offer the thematic possibility of resistance to patriarchy. Ultimately, the texts which I define as Post-Porn/Modern resist and critique the Sexual Revolution because I choose to view them that way. Other readers may decide that the texts which I consider to be representative of an anti-patriarchal, anti-phallocentric sexuality are actually complicit with these ideologies. Helene Cixous’ construction of “feminine writing” or *écriture feminine* appears to me extremely useful in positioning my argument, as I will be arguing against many of the same phallocentric textual constructions of sexuality as Cixous.

Feminine sexuality is constructed by Cixous within postmodernism’s metaphorical/theoretical structure as plural or multiple, a sexuality not limited by sexual difference, while masculine sexuality is symbolic of phallocentrism; it “is unitary, based on the absolute polarity of masculine and feminine.”25 I believe that it is important to avoid sex/gender essentialism, and therefore the categories of gender distinction employed here are purely metaphorical (though the difference between textual and “real” sexual politics is at best problematic - the distinction between the two often collapses). According to Susan Hekman in *Gender and Knowledge*, the categories masculine and feminine “are not opposites, but elements that represent multiple differences”.26 Gender-metaphors can thus be used for other purposes than to bind women and men to narrowly defined roles - they can be used to explode traditional gender constructions. Although some deconstructions of sexuality remain caught up in a Lacanian circle of phallus and hole,27 ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ need not be limiting concepts.

Feminine writing, the expression of feminine sexuality, creates textual possibilities not available in phallocentric masculine writing, which reflects a monolithic masculine sexuality. These

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sexual constructions are critiqued by Linda Singer, who explains that “feminine writing differs not by virtue of the gender of the author”, but is “feminine” in the sense that it employs textual strategies which deconstruct authority and subvert the masculine discourse of sexual difference. 28 My dissertation will therefore be “feminised in a metaphorical sense through the replacement of oppositions with multiplicity”, 29 its goal to provide space for the examination of a plurality of sexual voices. 30 Deeply influenced by Singer’s Erotic Welfare, this dissertation is, as Singer describes her own text, “nothing if not intellectually promiscuous, an exercise in paradigmatic polymorphously perversity.” 31 To achieve this end, I endorse Cixous’ plan to:

“de-phallocentrice” the body, relieve man of his phallus, return him to an erogenous field and a libido that isn’t stupidly organized round that monument, but appears shifting, diffused... 32

Cixous expresses optimism about the future of sex/gender constructions by saying that readers “can sometimes find femininity in writings signed by men”; 33 optimism that the ways in which we perform and theorise sexuality will change and allow masculine writing to express sexual multiplicity. This new construction of sexuality, despite its optimism, is anti-utopian: sexuality cannot seriously be considered a liberatory experience in a world traumatised by epidemic panic. 34

In becoming aware of the plural sexual possibilities of feminine writing, men can no longer pretend that the Politics of Ecstasy represents the sum of sexuality, that they don’t know or understand what women want from heterosexual relationships. 35 Cixous argues that it is men’s ignorance of women’s sexuality - the very “mystery” of woman - which “leads man to keep overcoming, dominating, subduing” women. 36 Freud’s unanswered question, “What do women want?” 37 is, perhaps answered by ecriture feminine, which reveals some of the “mystery” of woman by explicitly writing feminine sexuality and by constructing new feminine subjectivities. This leads the

28 Singer, op. cit., p. 155.
29 Hekman, op. cit., p. 166.
30 Ibid., p. 169.
33 Ibid., p. 52.
36 Cixous, op. cit., p. 49.
reader to a radically new conceptualisation of sexuality; if men read feminine writing and begin to write as Cixous suggests, then they may abandon phallocentrism altogether. Stephen Heath asks us to suppose that there could be “something like an interminable plurality of sexes”.

He proposes that “there is just desire, multiple differences, possibilities...” This is a dream which cannot be realised in the world of the Sexual Revolution, but is realised in Post-Porn/Modernism, where multiple differences are inscribed and performed.

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39 Ibid., p. 154.