THE IDEOLOGY OF EPIDEMIC SEXUALITY

Jeffrey Weeks argues that in contemporary society sexuality produces a panic reaction, and a sense of acute anxiety, a combination of “fear and loathing” in the minds of many individuals. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker in Body Invaders: Panic Sex in America assimilate Weeks' theories into their own, and argue that a sense of impending doom, a “violent and frenzied implosion” of sexuality is being discussed and celebrated in contemporary sexual texts. The Krokers believe that “we have reached a fateful turning-point in contemporary culture when human sexuality is a killing zone”, when “the pleasure of catastrophe is what drives ultramodern culture onwards...” I will argue that this fatal turning point in the literary exploration of sexuality has been reached with the arrival of the AIDS epidemic, which appears to be responsible for creating the cultural fear, uncertainty and fatalism described by Weeks and the Krokers.

Panic sexuality has a number of features that I will examine in detail in this Section. Firstly, the relationship between language and sexuality will be discussed. In postmodern texts, sexual relations can be understood as relations expressed through language. Postmodern sexuality, divorced from reproduction, is performed through language, the medium through which sexual desires are communicated. Communication in turn implies a situation in which sexual partners mutually express desires and fantasies, allowing individuals to involve themselves in relationships which offer multiple sexual activities independent of the predetermined sex-roles of masculine domination and feminine submission. A new sexual politics and poetics may develop where sexual discourse is used by the subject not to disempower the object/Other but to communicate multiple desires between partners. This sexual politics will not operate outside relations of power for, as Michel Foucault argues, the idea of power-free relationships will never be more that a utopian fantasy. However, this new sexual politics will critique the power exchanges inherent in sexual relations instead of ignoring them.

This sexual language can be considered perverse because it defines sexual desire and pleasure as multiple and constructs the reader as a “meta-voyeur”, a scopophiliac who enjoys watching sex as much as performing it. I have deliberately defined the texts of postmodern sexuality as “Post-Porn/Modern” because, secondly, they are consciously pornographic texts which present

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2 Ibid., p. 4 - with apologies to Dr. Hunter S. Thompson!
pervasive sexual tropes such as sadomasochism and necrophilia to the reader while ignoring the conventional reproductive symbolism of sex. Post-Porn/Modern texts function both as critical postmodern constructions and as arousing, entertaining, and amusing sexual narratives. The two texts which best exemplify this duality are *The Butcher* by Alina Reyes and *SEX* by Madonna.

Thirdly, Post-Porn/Modern texts construct an epistemic matrix around the debased sexual body, which functions as the site of erotic engagement and communication between contagious sexual subjects. The body has become a site of pleasure and danger - it is the epistemic matrix of the sexual epidemic. Linda Singer argues in *Erotic Welfare* that most contemporary sexual discourse is not “sexy” because of the fear of sexual contagion, but she does not take into account the erotic thrill of the forbidden and the dangerous. In *The Comfort of Strangers* Caroline eroticises her own abuse, so too in the world of epidemic sexuality we eroticise the dangers and fears of being infected with AIDS; we encode the epistemic matrix of the sexual body with images of flesh, danger, and death; signs which define perverse sexual tropes such as necrophilia. The metaphors of death and meat are used in Post-Porn/Modern texts to define the state of the sexual body in epidemic society.

The texts which will be critically examined in this Section employ similar imagery to those of the last Section, and for this reason may be read as simply continuing the phallocentric sexual politics examined there. The ideology of the Sexual Revolution encodes masculine domination of feminine sexuality as death, yet sexual death for women in relation to epidemic ideology reads as a wilful act of defiance, a freely chosen sexual performance which denies the death-symbolism of patriarchy. *The Butcher* by Alina Reyes and Madonna's *SEX* can be read as examples of écriture féminine, texts which express a feminine sexual and subjective independence by resisting the phallocentrism of constructing sexuality from a masculine perspective. By expressing a sexuality which is plural or polymorphously perversive and distinctly feminine in its point of view, Madonna and Reyes symbolically refute the masculine determination of feminine sexuality and subjectivity.

**PERVERSE LANGUAGE AND THE READER-VOEUR**

Stephen Heath states in *The Sexual Fix* that “sexual relations are relations through language”. Post-Porn/Modern texts take it as read that sexuality is a part and function of language,

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that sexuality does not exist outside systems of representation. Sexuality in the world of epidemic panic is a product of society and language.\(^7\) Heath believes that:

To know something about sexuality is... to listen to individuals, to their stories... to follow the process of their development as desiring beings. Sexuality is in consequence of the symbolic, of the relations of the sexual in the history of the individual, in his or her complex subjectivity, to patterns of meaning, terms of representation.\(^8\)

Sexuality is thus "about" representation, not reproduction. The story of the sexual subject has become in our society overpowering narrative.\(^9\) Nancy Friday in her collections of "real" sexual fantasies shows that sexual fantasies dominate and define people's lives. These real-life fantasies have become sexual texts, sexual fictions in their own right, and define a new literary genre of "the sexual life-testimony",\(^10\) wherein people "narrate themselves as sexual experience".\(^11\) The desire to communicate fantasies is what motivates the sexual subject for, as Singer argues, "we take pleasure in reproducing ourselves as sexual subjects... in sustaining the demand for the production of sexual discourse."\(^12\) In sustaining the production of sexual discourse we sustain the narration of our subjectivity and the representation of our lives.

The representation of sexuality as it is performed through language is made explicit in the relationship of Colin and Mary in *The Comfort of Strangers*, who:

clung to each other, in talk as in sex. In the shower they joked about handcuffing themselves together and throwing away the key. The idea aroused them. They took to muttering in each other's ear as they made love, stories that came from nowhere, out of the dark, stories that produced moans and giggles of hopeless abandon, that won from the spellbound listener consent to a lifetime of subjection and humiliation. Mary muttered her intention of hiring a surgeon to amputate Colin's arms and legs. She would keep him in a room in her house, and use him exclusively for sex, sometimes lending him out to friends.\(^13\)

Sexuality as such does not exist in purely biological or genital situations; it exists in representations through language of what have traditionally been constructed as perverse sexual desires - in the combination of pleasure and pain, in fantasy and imagination - desires antithetical to basic physical

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\(^7\) Weeks, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
\(^8\) Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
sex reactions. Perversions are sexual acts or desires which conflict with heterosexual “vanilla” sex, epitomised by “wham bam, thank-you ma’am” intercourse in the “missionary position.” The reader position defined by Post-Porn/Modernism inscribes meaning to sexualities previously ignored and misunderstood, such as feminine sexual desire. The sexual arousal of the girl who narrates Alina Reyes' *The Butcher* for example is constructed as a forbidden language, one that expresses taboo thoughts. Perverse texts function by disrupting and refuting the Sexual Revolution's ideological constructions of sexual politics and performance. Male masochism, for example, is perverse in this context because it contradicts the phallocentric demand that men always play a dominant role in sex.

Post-Porn/Modern texts use the language of sexuality to establish communication-based relationships between partners, where neither partner can monopolise the discourse of sexuality and hence cannot manipulate each other. The epidemic refiguration of sexual semiotics opens texts, allowing for the inscription of difference and sexual tropes such as sado-masochism and sexual objectification from a feminine point of view. Sexual texts are being reconstructed so that they express feminine rather than masculine fantasies. The text which makes this point most clearly is *The Butcher* by Alina Reyes, a novel which explores the coming to sexual maturity of a teenage girl who adventurously narrates her sexual desires and experiences. The girl has a sexual relationship with her employer, a butcher, and the dialogue between the girl and the butcher becomes the focal point of their intense relationship. The girl is aroused by, or “gets off” on “nothing but words...” - the words the butcher utters, which constitute the material substance or body of his desire for her. *The Butcher* will be examined in detail at the end of this Section, but this example is given here because it demonstrates the theory that sexual contact between two people occurs not between bodies per se, but is communicated by the language of sexuality through the epistemic matrix of the body.

In the analogous relationship of language and sex, malapropisms are to grammatically correct language what perversions are to heterosexual “vanilla” sex. Perversity has been read in the past as the misrepresentation of the language of sexuality, as the unintelligible use of sexual language:

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16 Grosz, op. cit., p. 182.
19 Motte, op. cit., p. 53.
Perversions... do not simply inflict mayhem on the grammatical rules [of sexual discourse]. If they are talk, they are strange talk, in a sense unintelligible talk. Yet they are not quite... gibberish.\textsuperscript{20}

However, if the reader accepts that in this Post-Porn/Modern era sexuality has far more to do with representation than reproduction, then perversions are not sexual gibberish at all but the validation of a previously marginalised sexual semiotics. Perverse texts therefore represent not so much the aberration of language but an intensification of its logic and grammar.\textsuperscript{21} Texts which narrate sexuality are perverse because they inscribe and reproduce sexual pleasure despite the epidemic fear this sexuality creates.

Stephen Heath problematises the reading of sexual texts which resist phallocentrism, and cannot conceive of an alternative to the phallocentric reading of texts.\textsuperscript{22} Heath's sexually inhibited, patriarchal interpretation of sexual narratives cannot deconstruct perverse postmodern sexuality; Post-Porn/Modern texts require the reader to develop a perverse identity and reader position which has the necessary analytical tools and perverse vocabulary to decode the “strange talk” of Post-Porn/Modernism.

Roland Barthes in \textit{The Pleasure of the Text} defines perversion as the realm of textual pleasure.\textsuperscript{23} Barthes argues that there are two kinds of texts: those of pleasure and those of bliss. Texts of pleasure offer us contentment and simple pleasure, while the texts of bliss unsettle and disturb us.\textsuperscript{24} When the subject can see both pleasure and bliss in one text, they indulge in hedonism, and become doubly perverse.\textsuperscript{25} Post-Porn/Modern texts multiple the pleasurable, and hence perverse, possibilities of sexuality. As a reader, Barthes says “I observe clandestinely the pleasure of others, I enter perversion... the doubled, the trebled, the infinite perversity of... the reader.”\textsuperscript{26} Post-Porn/Modern texts establish the reader as a sexual subject and implicate the reader in the sexual pleasures represented by every text.

Fictional characters that spy on others are voyeurs. These voyeurs are in turn are spied on by the reader, who is constructed by Post-Porn/Modern texts as a meta-voyeur, someone who observes the sexual observations of others. The voyeuristic reader position has traditionally been preserved.

\textsuperscript{21} Singer, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{22} Heath, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 134.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 14.
for men, but the panic of epidemic sexuality in establishing women as sexual subjects has redefined everyone as voyeurs. In becoming voyeurs women further define themselves as sexual subjects, not just objects, and in the process sometimes make men the sexual objects of their gaze, totally reversing phallocentric gender roles. Caroline in The Comfort of Strangers for example, resists the sexual construction of herself as object by spying on Colin and Mary as they sleep.\textsuperscript{27} As subject/voyer, Caroline redefines the voyeuristic reader position, disrupting the patriarchal discourse of masculine activity and feminine passivity by locating herself in position of power relative to Colin's passive vulnerability.

THE PORNOGRAPHY OF REPRESENTATION\textsuperscript{28}

The voyeuristic reader position of Post-Porn/Modernism is intrinsically tied up with notions of the pornographic. Voyeurism is akin to scopophilia, the pleasure of observing sexuality instead of performing it, which is precisely the position the Post-Porn/Modern reader occupies in relation to sexual texts. Pornography makes voyeurs of us all, men and women alike.\textsuperscript{29} Heath defines pornography as "the repetition of the penis-phallus,"\textsuperscript{30} but pornography, once representative of phallic masculine sexuality, now also symbolizes a metaphorically feminine plural sexuality and speaks from and to many different sexual subject positions. A "pornographic" text in a Post-Porn/Modern context is simply a text that is sexually explicit, a text which produces sexuality.\textsuperscript{31} In a society that constructs reading as a sexual practice and the text a sexual fetish object, literature

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{27} McEwan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{28} I have deliberately borrowed the title of Susanne Kappeler's \textit{The Pornography of Representation} because it is an appropriate phrase to apply here, but I in no way imply that the ideas in this Section compliment her arguments, considering that she forwards an anti-porn perspective. See \textit{The Pornography of Representation}, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986.
\textsuperscript{30} Heath, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{31} Pornography has been defined by anti-pornography activists as textualising violence against women and exploiting those it depicts. I do not refute that pornographic texts which are produced and marketed illegally, for example those containing representations of "real" violent sexual acts, or the sexual exploitation and abuse of children, are immoral and offensive. However, this type of pornography is not freely available, is not representative of the majority of sexually explicit texts, and is definitely not included in what I call postmodern pornography. I believe that the majority of sexually explicit material which is legally for sale is simply sexually explicit material, and while I call it pornographic, I do this without the negative connotations that the word "pornography" usually has. The difference between pornographic literature and erotica, or sexually explicit texts which are viewed as politically correct, is breaking down. Indeed, the term "erotica" is really just a euphemism for pornography, as Alan Soble argues in \textit{Pornography}, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986.
inevitably becomes pornographic.\textsuperscript{32} Pornography is basically a phenomenon of literacy;\textsuperscript{33} the result of the sexualising of the practice of reading.\textsuperscript{34} Heath argues that “pornography does not exist outside of - and thus comes into being with - the production of the sexual as a general social... concern.”\textsuperscript{35} He states that the pornographic text “as writing, written material, loses its importance as a separate enclosed area...[and] is no longer marginal...” The proliferation of perverse discourse has led to the “diffusion of the pornographic in writing”.\textsuperscript{36} Pornographic sexuality has entered and become central to the contemporary novel.

Nicholson Baker’s novel VOX deals with pornography as text, and is itself a pornographic narrative. VOX consists of a telephone conversation between a man, Jim, and a woman, Abby, who have never met in the flesh. Through their dialogue, Jim and Abby share their sexual fantasies, likes, dislikes, opinions, political viewpoints and experiences. Their dialogue is engaging and adsorbing; it draws the voyeuristic reader into the text.\textsuperscript{37} Jim in VOX reads pornographic magazines, views X-rated movies and also rents X-rated video tapes. He is “enthusiastically pro-pornography”\textsuperscript{38} and defends his use and enjoyment of it:

I wanted women... to see why X-rated films were so wonderful... I wanted to reassure [women] that it was okay, people like me were showing up at this theater, nonviolent normal intelligent men, it wasn't the end of civilisation...\textsuperscript{39}

Jim argues that it is not the act of representing sexual pleasure itself that phallocentric or socially threatening, but the way in which that sexuality is defined and expressed. He believes that pornography is simply the textualisation of the sexual fantasies of the individual, and should not be limited by the politics of patriarchy which does not take into account the identity of the reader or viewer, assuming it to be male. Jim acknowledges that within most commercial pornographic

\textsuperscript{33} Singer, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{34} Stratton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{35} Heath, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 105
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., pp. 109-110.
\textsuperscript{37} Nicholson Baker, VOX, Granta, London, 1992. VOX functions differently from most of the sexual narratives discussed here, for although it places the reader in a world where sex is the dominant discourse and it contains explicit sexuality like other narratives, its effect is calming compared to the surreal qualities of, for example, \textit{A Clockwork Orange} or \textit{The Passion of New Eve}. VOX normalises sexuality and constructs a level of realism rarely associated with sexual narratives, which from \textit{The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom} to \textit{The Passion of New Eve} have relied on existing genres such as the gothic to locate sexual activity.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 33.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 115.
movies, the sex displayed is stereotyped and aimed primarily at a male audience. He says that it's "still a rarity to see a woman really come on a video, as opposed to thrashing around." 40

Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which is not One* is concerned about the representation of feminine sexual pleasure, and asks if women's pleasure is an issue in these stereotyped representations of sexuality where women's pleasure is merely simulated for the voyeuristic pleasure of the male viewers. The feigned orgasms of 'porno' movies make it clear that what is really being represented is the man's ability to make his partner come, which is an enactment of masculine power rather than the communication of pleasure, and only incidentally a depiction of female pleasure. Irigaray establishes the politics of defining a feminine sexual subjectivity, and argues that just because a woman is seen to express an orgasm in pornographic representations of sexuality, that women is not necessarily receiving pleasure from her pleasure. 41 The representation of women's sexual pleasure in the videos which Jim discusses is replayed for male pleasure, not for the pleasure of the woman represented. Jim is interested in changing pornography so that it reflects multiple subject positions and various sexual performances, representing both women's and men's pleasure.

Abby, the woman Jim speaks to over a phone-sex line, watches X-rated tapes too. Abby shows that pornography exists for women as it does for men; that women do enjoy and respond to representations of explicit sexuality. Abby is selective in her choice of viewing pleasure, and describes in the video-tapes the "spots I'll want to skip because they're... violent or boring or somehow irrelevant." 42 She appropriates what was an exclusively masculine form of sexual representation and makes it her own, resisting the phallocentric sexual violence of traditional pornography by defining what could be called the ecriture feminine of pornography. Just as Helene Cixous' metaphorically feminine writing makes obvious and problematises phallocentric contempt for the feminine, 43 so women's pornography problematises phallocentric sexuality and replaces it with representations of a diffuse feminine sexuality. Candida Royalle, a former "adult" movie star, who now owns her own X-rated movie company, produces pornographic movies designed specifically to appeal to women. 44 Her sexual texts redefine feminine sexual pleasure, or jouissance, and offer viewers a more realistic simulation (or a better simulated reality) of women's enjoyment

40 Ibid., p. 119.
42 Baker, op. cit., p. 77.
43 Singer, op. cit., p. 156.
of sex. These texts also represent a form of masculine sexual subjectivity which does not seek to limit women's sexuality or subjectivity.

Abby in VOX distinguishes between visual and written forms of pornography, and states that:

I think I am slowly starting to understand why in general people would prefer written porn... I guess insofar as verbal pornography records thoughts rather than exclusively images, or at least surrounds all images with thoughts, or something, it can be the hottest medium of all... But I still honestly need the images.\(^{45}\)

Abby is representative of many women who feel free to express their sexuality through and with the aid of pornography. Twenty-one year old Betsy, quoted in Nancy Friday's *Women on Top*, echoes Abby in saying "I enjoy X-rated movies and reading about sex. I think I'm a voyeur at heart."\(^{46}\) Betsy makes explicit the link between pornography and voyeurism. Like Betsy, Abby in VOX adopts an active, voyeuristic subject position in relation to sexuality, and in so doing makes the language of perverse sexuality her own.

This appropriation of pornographic representation is perhaps even more explicitly exemplified by Madonna's mostly pictorial book *SEX*, which is a symbolically feminine pornographic text because, instead of focusing primarily on genital sex like phallocentric pornography, it deals many different sexual fantasies, performances and situations. Madonna states in the introduction to *SEX* that her fantasies "take place in a perfect world, a place without AIDS."\(^{47}\) She believes that AIDS has substantially effected contemporary sexuality, and consequently constructs sex as simulation separated from reality, as a performance which avoids the potential fatality of penetrative sex. Madonna says that:

everything you are about to see is a fantasy, a dream, pretend... any similarity between characters and events depicted in this book and real persons and events is not only purely coincidental, it's ridiculous. Nothing in this book is true. I made it all up.\(^{48}\)

Madonna's construction of sexuality relies on simulation and intertextuality.

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45 Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
48 Ibid., Introduction.
Like *VOX*, Madonna’s *SEX* toys with conventional notions of what constitutes pornography. *SEX* has been deliberately constructed as a pornographic text partly shaped by the discourses of commercial pornography, erotic “art” photography (referencing the work of Helmut Newton), and film. In one section of *SEX* for example, the clothing and persona of Isabella Rossellini represents a simulation of Mick Jagger's character in the film *Performance*. Madonna also simulates other texts in her sexual performances; in the film *In Bed with Madonna* the performance of the song “Keep it Together” references *A Clockwork Orange*; her music-video for the song “Express Yourself” references the silent film classic *Metropolis*; and the music-video for “Material Girl” references Marilyn Monroe's performance of “Diamonds are a girl's best friend”. *SEX* is thus a typical Madonna-text which locates sexuality entirely within a textual world of semiotic exchange.

Madonna's self-representation in *SEX* is definitive of the postmodern construction of sexuality and sexual identity. Madonna uses the persona of Dita Parlo, a “good-time girl”, to fictionalise her sexual fantasies which are identified as narratives divorced from her “real” personality or identity. Madonna creates a polymorphously perverse sexual subject who resists the identification of sexuality with phallocentrism and the ideology of sexual difference. The “Madonna” we see is a fluid postmodern persona who constructs a new sexual identity and subjectivity in each fantasy, each text. She performs hetero-sex, lesbian sex, group sex; she is active, passive, voyeur, exhibitionist, sadist, masochist, dominant, submissive; she masturbates and constructs men as sex objects for her viewing pleasure. Madonna is sexual excess.

Madonna doesn't privilege heterosexuality over other sexual identities or performances; instead she sees heterosexuality as one of many sexual possibilities, and recognises that heterosexuality is a performance, a representation of an identity rather than an identity in itself. As she says in a *Vanity Fair* interview, “I have a lot of sexual fantasies about women, but I’m mostly fulfilled by being with a man.” Through her performance in *SEX*, Madonna is able to experience sexualities which she does not consider part of her “real” identity. Pornographic texts allow the individual who practices hetero-sex and/or who identifies as heterosexual to experience vicariously multiple sexual performances and identities, such as gay or lesbian sex, sado-masochism, bondage and discipline and other sexual fantasies. Madonna in adopting sado-masochism for example is speaking from a premeditated position of erotic blasphemy. She expresses her belief that sexual objectification is merely a form of symbolic representation, and is not necessarily exploitative or

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49 Segall and McIntosh, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
physically violent. The symbolic violence of sado-masochism in SEX represents not the power of patriarchy, but the sexual possibilities offered by ecriture feminine. Madonna resists both patriarchal and anti-porn feminist ideologies which limit the possibilities of feminine sexual expression.

Madonna is constructed by some feminists as an archetypal postmodern feminine sexual subject. Debbie Rodan in “Madonna: postmodern/provocative/political” sees Madonna's performances as the definitive postmodern expression of female sexuality. Madonna “writes female sexuality as more than reproduction”; she has “power and control over her own female sexuality.” Madonna is “woman as sexual being”, she “is sexual pleasure.” Nancy Friday also sees Madonna as emblematic of feminine sexual self-determination: she states “There stands Madonna, hand on crotch, preaching to her sisters: Masturbate. Madonna is... a sex symbol/model for other women.”

For these writers, Madonna represents more than a commercially-minded media star; she is the living example of a feminist ideal. At the same time though, Madonna has been heavily criticised for objectifying herself in SEX and her music-videos. In SEX Madonna willingly exhibits herself to the reader, whom she constructs as voyeur. By deliberately defining herself as an exhibitionist, Madonna knows that the reader/voyer is watching her, deconstructing her, and gaining pleasure from her body/text. But Madonna does not simply define herself as a passive object to be gazed upon by the reader because she is simultaneously a voyeur in relation to the other characters in the text. She displaces the reader from the position of primary voyeur by assuming it herself, relocating the reader to the position of meta-voyer, watching her watching others, watching her watching herself - knowing all the time that Madonna has created this situation so she can watch the reader...

**MEAT AS METAPHOR: THE DEATH AND DECONSTRUCTION OF THE BODY**

Roland Barthes in The Pleasure of the Text argues that the sexual text is a fetish object, and that the sexualised text takes the shape of our erotic body. Bodies are texts - texts are bodies:

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54 Friday, op. cit., p. 12.
56 Barthes, op. cit., p. 27.
the two terms are interchangeable in Post-Porn/Modern discourse. As subjects/readers, we relate to individuals and texts in the same way; we interpret meaning in both through the language of sexuality. Sigmund Freud's theory of the debasement of the sexual body, explained in the previous Section, is limited by his phallocentric sexual politics; but seen outside this system, we can still identify the sexual body - the text inscribed with sexual codes and connotations - as being necessarily debased by and for the performance and enactment of perverse sexual desires. The debased sexual body is the epistemic matrix of Post-Porn/Modernism.

Jean Baudrillard argues that in pornography, the reader's interest lies more in the metaphysical than the sexual. The reader's fascination with pornographic narratives is focused on the representation and performance of sexuality rather than on the perception of a "natural" sexuality.\(^{58}\) Simulations of sexuality rather than any perceived "reality" of sexuality are fundamentally what concern the reader. Linda Singer states that pornography is the appropriate textual site of erotic exploration in the age of epidemic sexuality because it creates a semiotic sexuality, a sexuality without "real" bodies.\(^{59}\) The discourse of panic sexuality deconstructs the sexualised body of the subject and reconstructs it as anonymous meat, as a simulation.\(^{60}\) The body, defined as the epistemic matrix of epidemic sexuality, is not limited by the restrictions of normal physical existence, and functions as an open text wherein all the fantasies that it is possible to imagine are inscribed.

The discourse of pornography, of perverse sexuality, functions within a closed system. As Baudrillard argues, the textual signs of violence and death are reproduced by a "euphoria of simulation" and are protected from the referential, the outside world and real death by this system of representation.\(^{61}\) It is not my intention to romanticise or trivialise sexual violence in the real world, but to deconstruct it in the world of narrative. In the politics of the Sexual Revolution, death functions as a metaphor of the ways in which phallic masculinity defines and controls feminine subjectivity. For example, Miranda says that Clegg in *The Collector* has "always abused me. From the very beginning... He hates me, he wants to defile and break me and destroy me. He wants me to hate myself so much that I destroy myself."\(^{62}\) Caroline in *The Comfort of Strangers* says almost incidentally of her sexual destruction that, "of course, I wanted to be destroyed."\(^{63}\) Her subjectivity is almost entirely consumed by death, by Robert's construction of her sexual experience.

\(^{59}\) Singer, op. cit., p. 38.
\(^{60}\) *Ibid.*, p. 27.
\(^{63}\) McEwan, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
Baudrillard opposes this representation of sexual relations, and argues that for sexual beings represented within postmodern pornographic narratives, death is "simply the mode of reproduction anterior to the sexual." In a world of meta-sexuality, where the possibility of reproduction occurring as the result of sexual intercourse has been marginalised or even extinguished, death becomes a primary metaphor for the ways in which sexuality is performed and simulated. The highly ritualised violent imagery portrayed in texts such as The Butcher is not dependent on a patriarchal sexual politics, and is not necessarily inflicted on the actual bodies of characters but exists only in their imaginations, in a world of fantasy and hyper-reality. Death in the age of epidemic sexuality is read as a metaphor in representations of feminine as well as masculine sexuality. Death, the ultimate objectification of the sexual body, has been refigured by the feminine subject to represent feminine sexual pleasure. Women's sexual self-objectification allows for the representation which objectification entails without limiting either women's sexuality or subjectivity.

The narrator of The Butcher is aroused by the association of flesh, alive and dead, with sex. The radical objectification of human flesh in the novel defines us all, male and female alike, as meat. She says that "the sickly smell of raw meat hit my nostrils... it was bright red, beautifully nauseating." In another instance, she explains her fascination:

The flesh of the bull before me was the same as that of the beast in the field, except that the blood had left it... And the butcher who talked to me about sex all day long was made of the same flesh, only warm, sometimes soft sometimes hard; the butcher had his good and inferior cuts; exacting and eager to burn out their life, to transform themselves into meat. And my flesh was the same...

The girl associates the sexual body to sadistic images of flesh and blood, totally contradicting the construction of feminine sexuality as passive. In her text, the girl expresses the explicit sexual desires which define her sexual subjectivity. She assumes a traditionally male subject position by defining her sexuality as object related, and makes this position feminine, her own: "I watched the butcher, and I desired him. He was ugly, granted, with his fat belly snug in his bloodstained apron. But his flesh was lovable." She loves him for his flesh, fucks his flesh, appreciates that he has

64 Baudrillard, op. cit., p. 145.
65 Motte, op. cit., p. 52.
66 Reyes, op. cit., p. 4.
67 Ibid., pp. 4-5.
68 Ibid., p. 30.
helped her to realise aspects of her own sexuality, but at the same time totally objectifies him, and allows no one but herself to determine her sexual identity.

The narrator of *The Butcher* shares with the reader her experience of sex as effected by the ideology of eroticised flesh: "My sex became a channelled surface from which pleasure streamed, the world disappeared, I was no more than this raw flesh..."69 Flesh is the performance space where fantastic sexuality is enacted. The girl's identification as flesh allows her to experience jouissance. As Angela Carter says, "Flesh is a function of enchantment. It uncreates the world."70 Flesh, any flesh, is sexualised and worshipped with the same earnestness as the warm body of a lover, as the young narrator explains:

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In *The Butcher*, the explicit meat-body connection is made in the mind of the girl, in the imaginary realm of sexual fantasy, and what is exhibited is the importance of the fantastic in sexual texts. It is this element of fantasy, and an appreciation of the surreal which makes contemporary depictions of sexuality in novels like *The Butcher* so challenging and compelling to the reader.

The girl is curious about sex, and does not hesitate to experiment sexually. She develops voyeuristic behaviour as she becomes increasingly involved in the butcher's sexualised world:

One day when the boss was away the butcher and the butcher-woman had locked themselves in the freezer. After a moment or two I had succumbed to the desire to open the door. Between the rows of hanging carcasses of sheep and calves the butcher-woman was grabbing hold of two thick iron hooks above her head... hanging like a carcass and the butcher pushing his excrescence into her in the middle of a forest of meat.72

The girl likes watching, looking: she indulges in scopophilia, the pleasure of looking, and realises that the butcher experiences a similar pleasure in looking:

71 Reyes, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.
I watched him contemplating those [women's] bodies in their summer dresses with scarcely disguised desire; and I saw him all hands and sex, all fulfillment and desire. The fulfillment was the contact with cold meat, with death.\(^{73}\)

The girl acts as meta-voyeur: she watches the butcher watching women, and shows that a voyeuristic reader-position can be appropriated by anyone, regardless of their sex or gender identity. The reader also acts as meta-voyeur in this instance, one step removed from the narrator, one step further into Barthes’ perverse textual world. In Madonna’s \textit{SEX} the meta-voyeur watches Madonna watching others; in \textit{The Butcher} we watch the girl watching the butcher watching his female customers. The perversity of the reader multiplies with every representation.

Exhibitionism and voyeurism are essential partners in the process of becoming flesh, for the pleasure of being represented as a body, a sexual object, is defined by the necessity of being seen by others as flesh, and by seeing the lover/Other as flesh. Whereas in phallocentric representations of sexuality the Other is always female and the subject male, in Post-Porn/Modern texts men and women are both able to identify as subject and as object/Other. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre sees sexuality as a form of interpersonal communication with the body as medium;\(^{74}\) the body/text is used to narrate sex from one partner to another. Sartre says that:

\begin{quote}
I make myself flesh in order to impel the Other to realize for herself and for me her own flesh, and my caresses cause my flesh to be born for me in so far as it is for the Other...\(^{75}\)
\end{quote}

In choosing to become flesh for the sake of sexual pleasure, characters involve themselves in pluralistic sexual behaviour and deny the limitations of heterosexual intercourse as defined in phallocentric texts. The girl in \textit{The Butcher} identifies bodies as exhibitionistic, as active objects which gain pleasure from being observed: “The rabbits were hung behind the glass pane, pink, quartered, their stomachs opened to reveal their fat livers - exhibitionists, crucified martyrs...”\(^{76}\) The animal carcasses are described in human terms, and humans are described as pieces of meat. The animals wait to be devoured, as does the girl.

As her relationship with the butcher develops, the girl in \textit{The Butcher} becomes more daring:

\(^{72}\) \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 19-20.
\(^{75}\) Jean-Paul Sartre quoted in Ross, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 165.
\(^{76}\) Reyes, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 5.
Post-Porn/Modernism: Section Two

I had him undress and stretch out on his back on the ground... I tied his arms to the foot of the bed, his legs to those of the table... His body pleased me like that, full of exposed imprisoned flesh, burst open...  

Her fantasies culminate in the extinction of the boundary between body and carcass, the life and death of flesh. Angela Carter says that in "flesh, nothing human remains; it aspires to the condition of the sacramental meal." The girl in *The Butcher* realises this concept in her sexual fantasies, where she and the butcher would both:

be hanging from an iron hook face to face in a red fridge, hooked by the top of the skull or the ankles, head down, legs spread, our flesh face to face, rendered powerless to the knife of our sexes burning like red-hot irons, brandished, open. We would... scream ourselves to death under the tyranny of our sexes...

Reyes expands the possibilities of textualising women's sexual fantasies in a similar way to Nancy Friday in her collections of women's sexual fantasies and experiences. Hannah in *Women on Top* states that she likes:

to be out of control, to be deliriously pleasured and abused, hair pulled, ass slapped, tits pinched, cunt punched and fucked in every opening until I was a dripping, uncontrollable bitch who was still looking for more...

Destructive sexuality allows Hannah to be “uncontrollable” and to fulfill her desires. In the realm of fantasy no one can limit her sexuality or manipulate her subjective experience of sex. 

Women in the world of epidemic panic construct their sexual fulfillment in terms of the metaphorical death of their subjective identity which, as I argued in relation to Henri Troppmann in *Blue of Noon* in Section One, exaggerates the conscious, lived experience of the sexual subject. The girl in *The Butcher* writes in a letter to an old boyfriend, "I love you do you hear? That means I want you... I eat you, I swallow you, I take you whole, I destroy myself, I drive you into me, I stave myself in with you to death..." She wants to be annihilated by sex, to make sex lethal, to devour the object of her sexual attraction and gratification until she dies. She wishes to sacrifice her body to

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79 Reyes, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.
80 Friday, *op. cit.*, p. 337.
the pleasures of the flesh; her passion is so intense it's lethal. All pre-established ideas about the role of women sexually, of the sexual imagination and the power of sexual fantasy need to be erased. Sexual subjects like the girl in *The Butcher* realise that they are sometimes no more than bodies, and appreciate that there are no greater pleasures to be tasted than those of the flesh. Reproduction does not come into her mind - sex for this girl is a celebration of her own subjectivity.

The girl fantasises that her body is penetrated at multiple points by an apocalyptic sexuality, which echoes Singer's theory that the ideology of epidemic sexuality allows for multiple points of access to the body. 82 This symbolises the possible ways of becoming infected with the HIV virus; through vaginal or anal intercourse or the transfer of infected blood in shared needles which can penetrate the body at any point. The sexual desire represented in *The Butcher* establishes the sexual body as a pleasure palace and a torture chamber which can be penetrated at any point by epidemic desire and is open to infection. 83 By becoming flesh, characters employ their whole bodies as sexual organs, rather than being limited by the phallocentric elevation of genital sexuality, but in so doing risk dying from pleasure. The danger of HIV infection is eroticised in *The Butcher*, an archetypal Post-Porn/Modern narrative which constructs the sexual body as a debased object, a text which employs the semiotics of AIDS - blood, penetration, danger - to define contemporary heterosexual relations. *The Butcher* is also definitive ecriture feminine; it elevates perverse language as the medium of sexual exchange between subjects, and is "very close to the flesh of language". 84

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82 Singer, *op. cit.*, p. 150.