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Porn *Suck*-s: The Transformation of Germaine Greer?

Introduction

In a 1984 *New York Times* interview, Germaine Greer discussed the quite different views that have surrounded her supposed attitude towards sex. As she put it: “People seem to think I’m Hugh Hefner and that the reason women started having sex is because I told them to” (cited in De Lacy). This view had, however, shifted by the 1980s. As she told reporter Justine De Lacy: “Now they are saying that I’m against sex.”

In this article, I tease out Greer’s remarks about the supposed transformation of her political persona. I do so with reference to her work on *Suck Magazine*, which was billed by its editors as “The First European Sex Paper,” and which was first published in 1969 (cited in Gleeson, 86). The article has two key aims. The first is to demonstrate that Greer has not (as it might seem) transformed from a sexual revolutionary to an anti-sex ideologue. This view is too simplistic. The article’s second aim is to explore Greer’s significant but under-acknowledged contribution to feminist debates about pornography. Far from being strictly anti- or pro-porn, Greer’s work on *Suck* actually aligns with both of these positions, and it appeared before the feminist porn debates really gained traction.

Germaine Greer as sexual revolutionary and/or anti-sex ideologue?

The apparent political transformation that Greer mentioned in 1984 has been particularly apparent since the 1990s. Since that decade, she has criticised pornography on several occasions. For example, in her book *The Whole Woman* (1999), Greer argued: “Pornography is the flight from woman, men’s denial of sex as a medium of communication ...” (181). In an article published in *The Guardian* in 2000, Greer wrote: “Can [pornography] go too far? No, it can’t. As far as male sexual fantasy is concerned there is no too far.” In a 2012 episode of the Australian current affairs program *Q&A*, Greer argued: “Pornography is the advertisement of prostitution.”

Greer’s stance on pornography, and particularly her invocation of female sexual subordination, might seem to represent a radical shift from the political persona that she cultivated during the 1960s and 70s. During that earlier period, Greer was arguing for female sexual empowerment. She posed nude for *Suck*. In 1971, the US magazine *Life* described Greer as a “saucy feminist that even men like” (cited in Wallace, unpaginated photograph).

There is nothing “saucy” about her more recent anti-porn posture; this posture is not concerned with “empowerment” in any obvious way.

Yet I would suggest that Greer at least anticipated this posture in her work on *Suck*. In that magazine, she did not frame sex as being entirely emancipatory. Rather, Greer argued for sexual liberation (particularly for women), but (in doing so) she also invoked the hierarchical gender roles that would later be invoked in anti-porn feminist arguments. Examining some of Greer’s contributions to *Suck* will make clear the important contribution that she has made to feminist debates about pornography. These are debates which she not generally been associated with, or at least not to the extent that Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon (both US feminists who have very publicly remonstrated against porn) have (see Dworkin; MacKinnon and Dworkin).

The feminist porn debates gained ascendance during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and seem to have been liveliest in North America (see Bronstein; Duggan and Hunter; MacKinnon and Dworkin). These debates are significant because of what they say about the truly complex and contentious relationship between sex, gender, power, and representation. The feminist porn debates have been broad-ranging (Sullivan and McKee, 10), though they tend to have been framed as polarised conflicts between anti-pornography feminists and “sex-positive”/“anti-censorship” feminists. For anti-pornography feminists, pornography always symptomatises and perpetuates gender hierarchy. Andrea Dworkin famously defined “pornography” as

the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures and/or words that also includes women presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; or women presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or women presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or women presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or women presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility, or display; or women’s body parts—including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, buttocks—exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or women presented as whores by nature ... (xxxiii).

Conversely, sex-positive/anti-censorship feminists tend to assess pornography “on a case by case basis”; porn can range from woman-hating to politically progressive (McKee, Albury and Lumby, 22). For these feminists, attempts to legislate against pornography (for example,

via the anti-porn ordinance drawn up in the US during the 1980s by Dworkin and MacKinnon) amount to censorship, and are not in the interest of women, feminism or sexual liberation (Duggan and Hunter, 29-39; and see also MacKinnon and Dworkin).

Among the most striking aspects of Greer's work on *Suck* is that it actually mobilises aspects of *both* these (loosely-defined) feminist positions, and appeared almost a decade before pornography became an issue of contention amongst feminists. This work was published not in North America, but in Europe; the Australian-born Greer was living in the United Kingdom at the time of that magazine's publication, and indeed she has been described as "Britain's ... most well-known feminist" (Taylor, 759; and see also Gleeson).

Does porn *Suck*?

Greer co-founded *Suck* in 1969, the year before *The Female Eunuch* was published. Greer had already established a minor public profile through her journalistic contributions to the London-based *Oz Magazine*. Several of those contributions were written under the guise of "Dr G—the only groupie with a Ph.D in captivity", and featured references to "groupiedom" and "cunt power" (cited in Gleeson, 86). *Suck* was published in Amsterdam to circumvent "British censorship laws" (Wallace, 15). The magazine was very much a product of the then-current sexual revolution, as suggested by the following passage from a 1971 editorial: "Our cause is sexual liberation. Our tactic is the defiance of censorship." *Suck* comprised sexually-explicit imagery (for example, nudity and shots of (hetero)sexual penetration) and similarly explicit articles. These articles are furnished with the vivid, deliberately provocative prose for which Greer is renowned.

In some articles, Greer argues that women's acceptance of their bodies constitutes a rebellion against patriarchy. In a 1971 article, she writes: "Primitive man feared the vagina ... as the most magical of magical orifices of the body." The title of this piece is "Lady Love Your Cunt", and indicates Greer's view that patriarchal fears—or, as she puts it, the fears of "primitive man"—have contributed to stigma that has surrounded the vagina. Greer concludes thus: "Why not send a photograph of your own cunt, with your names labelled on?" (Whether any readers responded to this invitation remains unclear). In "Bounce Titty Bounce", she describes a "Mafia that controls the shapes of [women's] bodies." This control is particularly evident in the brassiere, which Greer calls "a muzzle, a mask, binding joys and desires with wire and rubber and nylon and clips and cotton."

In a 1970 article entitled “Ladies get on top for better orgasms”, Greer opens with the statement: “The prevalence of the missionary position of fucking in the Western World [sic] seems to mean a widespread unfairness in sex.” She elaborates:

Even if women were not ... slighter than men, the missionary position would have little to commend it. The hands of the man are not free to play with his lover’s breasts or clitoris ... because he must support himself, at least partially by them ... The male ismin [sic] full control.

Greer concedes that the “female on top position is perhaps the least popular of the alternatives to the missionary position.” The “female on top” position does, however, have advantages for women, one being that a woman “can arrive at a position to accept the cock without having to take her weight on her hands.”

Greer’s best-known contribution to *Suck* is a selection of nude photographs that were published in a 1971 edition. In one shot, Greer is lying on her back, her legs behind her ears, her anus directly in front of the camera. In another shot, she is positioned in the same manner, although her anus and vagina are more central within the frame. In both shots, Greer is gazing directly into the camera and smiling.

On one level, the textual and photographic examples described above—and, in fact, the very publication of *Suck*—suggest a rebellion against sexual repression. This rebellion was characteristic of the sexual revolution (Gleeson, 86). Yet, in advocating female sexual empowerment, Greer distanced herself from the masculine bias of that movement. In her 1984 *New York Times* interview, Greer was quoted as saying that “...the sexual revolution never happened. Permissiveness happened, and that’s no better than repressiveness, because women are still being manipulated by men” (cited in De Lacy). Here, she anticipates arguments (e.g. Jeffreys) that the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s actually sanctioned (heterosexual) male desire and men’s sexual access to women.

In *Suck*, then, Greer argued that women need to liberate themselves sexually, and not only be seen as instruments for male sexual liberation. Greer did pose nude, but in doing so, she stared back into the camera\at the spectator—thus returning the gaze, rather than being objectified by this gaze (Mulvey). Greer has described her shots thus: “Face, pubes and anus, nothing decorative about it. Nothing sexy about it either. Confrontation was the name of the game” (cited in Gleeson 86). In 2013, Greer wrote of that photo shoot: “Women’s bodies were merchandised. Each week we saw a little more: nipples, then pussy... drip-feeding the

masturbation fantasies of a [male] generation. My gesture aimed to short-circuit that process.” She has also been quoted as saying that she envisioned *Suck* as an “antidote to the exploitative papers like *Screw* and *Hustler*,” by “developing a new kind of erotic art, away from the tits ‘n’ ass and the peep show syndrome” (cited in Gleeson, 86).

Thus, Greer’s *Suck* contributions seem to foreshadow the “sex-positive” feminism that would emerge later in the 1970s in North America (e.g. Duggan and Hunter). Her work would also anticipate feminist uses of porn to explore female sexuality from specifically female and feminist perspectives (see Taormino et al.). A closer examination of these contributions, however, suggests a more complex picture. Witness Greer’s reference to the popularity of “missionary sex” as a reason for “widespread unfairness in sex”, or her description of a (presumably) male-dominated “Mafia” who control women’s bodies (for example, via the bra). In a newspaper interview that was published around the time of *The Female Eunuch*’s 1970 publication, Greer argued that sex needs to be “rescued” from the patriarchy by feminists. This is because sex under patriarchy has been characterised by the dichotomised positions of “powerful and powerless, masterful and mastered.” In this scenario, women are the ones who are “powerless” and “mastered”. The title of that interview is “Author Attacks Dominating Male”.

The above statements suggest a sexual landscape characterised by “potentially violent, dominant men and subordinated, silenced women” (Duggan and Hunter, 7). In this landscape, sex is a site of gender inequality; and even something as apparently innocuous as underwear is used by men to control women. The pervasive sense of patriarchy invoked here would (as scholars such as Duggan and Hunter have argued) be invoked in much anti-pornography feminist writing. And Greer would go on to concur with the anti-porn stance, as the three pronouncements cited at the beginning of this article attest. (In *Suck*, Greer does not attempt to define “pornography”, and nor does she classify her contributions as being “pornography” or “anti-pornography”).

Conclusion

I have argued that it is useful to revisit some of Germaine Greer’s contributions to *Suck Magazine* in order to reassess her apparent transformation from sexual revolutionary to anti-sex ideologue. These contributions (which include articles and photographs) are celebrations of female sexual empowerment *and* critiques of what Greer sees as a pervasive gender hierarchy. I have argued that this work is also useful in that it anticipates the feminist debates

about pornography that would gain ascendance in North America almost a decade after *Suck*'s publication. Greer articulates arguments that would come to be aligned with both "sex-positive" and "anti-pornography" feminist discourses. To this extent, she has made an important and thus far largely unacknowledged contribution to these highly polarised feminist debates.

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