

Naked Ambitions: Pornography, Taste and the Problem of the Middlebrow

Mark Jancovich, University of Nottingham, UK

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, pornography was generally positioned as an object of criticism by feminism. A great deal of feminist work was devoted to analysing it as an almost pure expression of patriarchal ideology and power. Although these assumptions were never fully accepted, even within feminism, they did none the less have an almost taken-for-granted status, which meant that those who called for a more complex understanding of this area were largely marginalised. Whether drawing on classic works of popular feminism (see, for example, Dworkin, 1979; Lederer, 1980; Griffin, 1981) or on the more theoretical critiques of "woman as image" (see for example, Mulvey 1975; Pollock, 1977; Kappeler, 1986), this work assumed that pornography addressed male sexuality and was generally based on a violent subjugation of female sexuality and subjectivity.

While there is not room in this article for a full review of either feminism or its engagement with pornography, the criticisms of pornography discussed above have never gone uncontested, and even within feminism many have been at pains to point out the dangers that are inherent in this work (see for example, Willis, 1989; Merck, 1987; Rodgerson and Wilson, 1991). For example, they have stressed that these criticisms of pornography tend to present it as the cause, rather than an effect, of sexual inequality (Rodgerson and Wilson, 1991). They have also taken issue with the assumption, in many criticism of pornography, that women who enjoy pornography or even penetrative sex are necessarily complicit in their own subjugation (Segal, 1994). As Willis has pointed out, for example, this kind of work not only ends up reproducing very familiar conservative notions of female sexuality, but also essentialises them in the process (Willis, 1989).

As Linda Williams has pointed out, criticisms of pornography (feminist criticisms included) frequently involve an implicit or even explicit distinction between pornography as the product of some perverse sexuality or sexualities, and a normative sexuality to which it is opposed (Williams, 1993a). It reproduces the notion that there can ever be a healthy, natural and authentic sexuality that exists outside of social power relations. As Williams puts it: "If phallic sexuality is contaminated by power, this tactic seems to say, if it is essentially violent and perverse, then female sexuality shall be defined as its opposite: as non-violent and not-perverse - a pure and natural pleasure uncontaminated by power." (Williams, 1990: 20)

However, the problem here is not just one of essentialism, but rather that this essentialism is actually normative; that it acts to marginalise and subjugate those women whose sexuality does not conform to this supposedly "natural" female sexuality (Willis, 1989). It has therefore produced a feminism that has led many women either to feel guilt about their sexualities or to reject feminism as "not for the likes of us" (Segal, 1994)

Others have also pointed out that this critique of pornography often reproduces very familiar cultural distinctions (Nead, 1992). Indeed, in his study of taste, Bourdieu argues that the

aesthetic disposition is precisely based on an ability to perceive objects "as if the emphasis on form could only be achieved by a neutralization of any kind of affective or ethical interest in the object of representation" (Bourdieu, 1984: 44). Aesthetics is therefore founded on its disinterestedness in the object of representation, whereas pornography is specifically defined by its interest in that object and in its function as a means of exciting sexual arousal. However, as Bourdieu suggests, distinctions between art and pornography are not defined by the contents of these categories but, on the contrary, on the ways in which particular texts are consumed.

The meaning of any text is not eternally inscribed within its form but changes, as it is positioned or repositioned in different categories, as they are consumed according to different competences and dispositions. A picture may be read "aesthetically" in terms of its form, or "pornographically" as a depiction of a naked body that excites desire in the viewer. But such readings are not simply individual choices. On the contrary, as Bourdieu argues, they correspond to specific taste formations that are, in turn, tied to the situation of specific social classes.

Debates over pornography therefore need to be understood not simply as political struggles over gender relations, but also as political struggles between these different taste formations. Critiques of pornography are often the product of one class's visceral intolerance to the sexual taste of another class. As Laura Kipnis has pointed out, the moral outrage at pornographic forms can often be seen as "the desire to distance [oneself] from and if possible banish from existence the cause of [one's] distress - the sexual expression of people unlike [oneself]" (Kipnis, 1992: 377).

However, while recent work has begun to challenge the assumptions about pornography that dominated the feminist movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, much of this work continues to operate around a series of cultural distinctions that are highly problematic. The following article will therefore concentrate on those writers who have tried to defend, and even champion certain types of pornography, and it will argue that they do so through a concentration of "transgressive" pornographies, a strategy that has a very specific class politics. In other words, it will argue that this strategy actually works to reproduce cultural distinctions through an Othering of lower middle class taste. In contrast, the article will then move on to try to re-evaluate the sexual tastes of this class and the power relations within which it operates.

Aesthetics, Transgression and Pornography

As a result, even when pornography is not the Other of legitimate culture, cultural distinctions are usually clearly in evidence. For example, Sontag's formative essay, "The Pornographic Imagination", is less a defence of pornography itself, than of the right of "pure taste" to appropriate whatever materials that it deems necessary for the production of "art". As Sontag puts it, "art (and art-making) is a form of consciousness; the materials of art are the variety of forms of consciousness. By no aesthetic principle can this notion of the materials of art be construed as excluding even the extreme forms of consciousness that transcend social personality and psychological individuality" (Sontag, 1969; 44), the very qualities which she identifies as central to those forms of pornography which she champions.

Thus, she assumes that there is a general "consensus" on "the diagnosis of pornography" (38), of which she considers herself to be a part, that defines it as the product of "a deplorable

arrest in normal adult sexual development" (37) and one that "can be a crutch for the psychologically deformed and a brutalization of the morally innocent." (71) For this reason, she condemns as "depressing the fact that a whole library of pornographic reading materials has been made, at least within the last few years, so easily available in paperback form to the very young" (71). However, she does distance herself from those who seek to repress and censor these materials, but only to the extent that she argues that their "apprehension is justified but may not be in scale" (71). For Sontag, what is really at stake is not pornography but its "uses". As she puts it:

There's a sense in which all knowledge is dangerous, the reason being that not everyone is in the same condition as knowers or potential knowers. Perhaps most people don't need a "wider scale of experience." It may be that, without subtle and extensive psychic preparation, any widening of experience and consciousness is destructive for most people ... Except perhaps in a small circle of writer-intellectuals in France, pornography is an inglorious and mostly despised department of the imagination. Its mean status is the very anti-thesis of the considerable spiritual prestige enjoyed by many items which are far more noxious. (71-2)

For Sontag, it is specific modes of consumption that are the problem, not pornography itself. To those with a pure gaze, pornography can be rewarding and significant, and to these people, she argues, "the question is not whether pornography, but the quality of the pornography." (Paul Goodman, quoted in Sontag, 1969: 72)

Sontag's article is therefore an outright critique of those who are unable to read aesthetically or through the pure gaze, and she starts out from a critique of the social sciences:

From the standpoint of social and psychological phenomena, all pornographic texts have the same status; they are documents. But from the standpoint of art, some of these texts may well become something else. (36)

From this standpoint, they may be art. The problem with the social sciences is therefore their inability to distinguish between texts aesthetically, and this is because they apply the wrong criteria to the judgement of texts. Unlike the pure gaze of critics such as Sontag, they make pornography the "locus of moral concern" (38) and are unable to see that, as Bourdieu has argued, the pure gaze depends on the "neutralization of any kind of ... ethical interest" (Bourdieu, 1984: 44). As Sontag puts it, "the 'human scale' or humanistic standard proper to ordinary life and conduct seems misplaced when applied to art." (Sontag, 1969: 44-5)

If Sontag does defend certain forms of pornography, these are therefore defined in opposition to "ordinary" pornography and identified with an avant-garde literary tradition. These forms qualify as art specifically because they move beyond mere pleasure and into *jouissance*. They reject the banalities of the beautiful in favour of the terrors of the sublime. Instead of the comforting pleasures of "ordinary" pornography, Sontag champions the unsettling powers of the obscene, which moves beyond *eros* and into death:

One reason that *Histoire de l'Oeil* and *Madame Edwarda* make such a strong and unsettling impression is that Bataille understood more clearly than any other writer I know of that what pornography is really about, ultimately, isn't sex but death. I am not suggesting that every pornographic work speaks, either

overtly or covertly, of death. Only works dealing with that specific and sharpest inflection of the themes of lust, "the obscene," do. It's toward the gratifications of death, succeeding and surpassing those of eros, that every truly obscene quest tends. (60)

The pornography which Sontag celebrates is a pornography of transgression in which that which is "transgressed" is the "ordinary" moral and emotional universe. While most "people try to outwit their own feelings" and "to be receptive to pleasure but [to] keep 'horror' at a distance", Bataille is praised for seeing this strategy as both "foolish" and limiting (61).

As a result, Sontag does not see this form of pornography as involving a "neutralization of any kind of affective ... interest" (Bourdieu, 1984: 44), and denies that "the purported aim or effect, whether it is intentional or not, of such books to excite the reader sexually [is] a defect." (Sontag, 1969: 47) However, not only is this sexual excitement distinguished from the mundane excitements of "common" rather than transgressive sexualities, but she also points out that "sexual arousal doesn't appear to be the sole function" of these works (40). The language of this pornography does not play a "debased, merely instrumental role" (39) of provoking desire, but uses desire to disorientate and unsettle the reader (47). Even the supposedly "unrealistic", "artificial" and "conventional" nature of pornography is, in these texts, seen to have aesthetic effects: it draws attention to the literary form and makes "the reader think of, mainly, other pornographic books rather than sex unmediated" (49).

In a similar way, even though recent work has begun to challenge the assumptions about pornography held by certain sections of the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s - in which pornography was simply a monolithic form of male domination - much of this recent work still continues to employ cultural distinctions that need to be questioned. If much contemporary writing does not accept the simple claim that "pornography is violence against women", or that if "porn is the theory [then] rape is the practice", it is still the case that much of this work is organised around a defence of "transgressive" forms of pornography in ways that depend upon a highly problematic construction of, and opposition to, "ordinary" pornography.

For example, while Linda Williams' study of hard core pornography does not privilege a literary high cultural pornography in the way that Sontag does, as Jennifer Wicke contends:

The problem is not that Williams or others have hopes for a utopian overcoming of politically rigid gender identities, but that the hope rests on a fairly hidden assumption that mass culture is a degraded form within which embryonic avant-garde progressive texts are struggling to get out. (Wicke, 1993: 177)

In Williams' account, sadomasochistic pornography is privileged because its performative and theatrical qualities can be made compatible with contemporary avant-garde theories and art-practices.

A similar strategy is evident in the numerous articles on Annie Sprinkle, whose performances are seen as questioning the political implications of "drawing a firm line between obscene pornography on the one hand and legitimate art on the other." (Williams, 1993b: 177) However, while Sprinkle's performances supposedly question, challenge or "deconstruct" this distinction between art and pornography, this act of questioning, challenging or

"deconstructing" still assumes, and indeed requires, a stable pornographic Other against which to define its transgressiveness as an act.

For example, Williams makes an implicit distinction between Sprinkle's "one woman show entitled Post-Porn Porn Modernist, [in which] she performs a parodic show-and-tell of her life as a sexual performer" and "the live sex shows" in which she had performed previously (Williams, 1993b: 176). Implicitly, one is parodic and not a sex show, while the other is a sex show and not parodic. This distinction is emphasised still further through the suggestion that the "one woman show" was genuinely challenging and transgressive, whereas the other was not, a feature which is supposedly evidenced by the claim that

In 1990, while she was giving this performance in Cleveland, the municipal vice squad forced her to omit the speculum component of her act. It is a fascinating comment on American culture that when Annie Sprinkle performed live sex shows in the same city she was never visited by the vice squad. (Williams, 1993b: 176)

The pornographic performance is conventional, if marginalized, but the performance art is supposed to be really threatening to American culture. This is not to imply that legal action is irrelevant, but simply that live sex shows are not immune to legal action, and that the conditions that provoke legal action - or might account for its absence - are far more complex than Williams' rhetoric implies.

Transgression and its Distinctions

However, rather than simply challenging cultural hierarchies, as these accounts suggest, "transgression" is a strategy for producing distinctions and conferring authority. As Bourdieu puts it,

the easiest, and so the most frequent and most spectacular way to "shock (epater) the bourgeois" by proving the extent of one's power to confer aesthetic status is to transgress ever more radically the ethical censorships (e.g. in matters of sex) which the other classes accept even within the area which the dominant disposition defines as aesthetic. (Bourdieu, 1984: 47)

However, the term "bourgeois" needs some unpacking here, as it refers not to the class in its totality but rather positions within that group. After all, the transgressive artists and their audiences are themselves primarily bourgeois in composition (see Appendix One).

For this reason, Bourdieu makes a distinction between the dominant and the dominated sections of the bourgeoisie, or rather between the economic bourgeoisie and the cultural bourgeoisie; and as his study reveals, there is an inverse relationship within the bourgeoisie as a class, between the possession of economic capital on the one hand and cultural capital on the other (260). Those richest in economic capital tend to be poorest in cultural capital and vice versa. When the cultural bourgeoisie therefore set out to "shock (epater) the bourgeois", they are often implicitly attacking those sections of the bourgeoisie by which they feel dominated. At times, these shocks, attacks and criticisms are directed at those sections that have most power economically, but more often than not the enemy is identified as the lower middle class or petite bourgeois, i.e., those sections who are low in cultural capital but also

subordinate economically. This group is therefore doubly damned and hence highly vulnerable to attack.

While the lower middle class or petite bourgeois has traditionally had to work hard to distinguish itself from the working class by emphasising its respectability, it is precisely this aspect at which the aesthetics of transgression is targeted. As Bourdieu argues, the "commitment to symbolic transgression, which is often combined with political neutrality or revolutionary aestheticism, is the almost perfect antithesis of petite-bourgeois moralism or what Sartre used to call the revolutionary's 'seriousness'" (48). Indeed, aesthetic hostility to the petite bourgeoisie is so great that one frequently finds a privileging of popular taste over that of the middlebrow.

This preference for the popular rather than the middlebrow is partly a result of the fact that "aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of groups closest in social space, with whom competition is most direct and most immediate" (60). However, it is also due to the fact that the middlebrow threatens the authority of the cultured elite more directly than the popular, which is therefore easier to patronise, in both sense of the term. As Bourdieu puts it, the cultural bourgeoisie "prefers naivety to 'pretentiousness'. The essential merit of the 'common people' is that they have none of the pretensions to art (or power) which inspire the ambitions of the 'petite bourgeois'." (62) In short, popular taste knows its place, whereas the middlebrow does not.

As a result, as Leon Hunt has argued, "it is the 'middlebrow' - arguably always the real set of easy pleasures, in Bourdieu's terms - which has been recast as the low and indefensible" (Hunt, 1998: 160). The term "recast" implies that this is a relatively recent development, but it can in fact be traced back well into the nineteenth century, and is clearly relevant to Flaubert's presentation of the Bovarys and their milieu.

In debates over pornography, this privileging of the popular over the middlebrow can clearly be seen in Kipnis' account of *Hustler* magazine. In this discussion, she juxtaposes the image of Robin Morgan in the anti-pornography documentary, *Not a Love Story*, with a letter published in *Hustler*. This juxtaposition is claimed to "offer a route towards a consideration of the relation between discourses on sexuality and the social division of labor, between sexual representation and class." (Kipnis, 1992: 373. See also Kipnis 1993 and 1996)

Kipnis' point is not only that "feminism, a discourse whose object is the organisation of gendered oppression, may in fact not be the most appropriate or adequate discourse to address sexuality," (374) but also that sexuality is, at least in part, organised in relation to class, a category "which has been routinely undertheorized and undetermined within the anti-porn movement in favour of a totalizing theory of misogyny." (374) As a result, as she argues, it is important to remember that "not all women do experience male pornography in the same way" (380), and this is not just as a result of "false consciousness" on their part. This concern with the class dimension of sexuality leads her to privilege *Hustler* over Morgan to the extent that she argues: "Like Morgan's radical feminism, [*Hustler*] offers an explicitly political and counter-hegemonic analysis of power and the body; unlike Morgan it is also explicit about its own class location." (373) Kipnis even goes as far as to claim that, as a result, anti-porn feminism is founded upon "a theory and politics of the body on the wrong side of struggles against bourgeois hegemony, and ultimately complicit in its enforcement." (374)

For Kipnis, *Hustler's* explicit class position offers a "low theory" of sexuality, but it is one that she defines as radical precisely through its opposition to the "petite-bourgeois moralism or ... revolutionary's 'seriousness'" (Bourdieu, 1984: 48) displayed by radical feminists such as Morgan on the one hand, and the "airbrushed" and "sanitised" pornography of *Playboy* on the other. As Kipnis puts it:

The *Hustler* body is an unromanticized body no vaselined lenses or soft focus; this is neither the airbrushed top-heavy fantasy body of *Playboy*, nor the ersatz opulence, the lingered and sensitive crotch shots of *Penthouse*, transforming female genitals into objet d'art. It's a body, not a surface or suntan: insistently material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal. In fact, the *Hustler* body is often a gaseous, fluid-emitting, embarrassing body, one continually defying the strictures of bourgeois manners and mores and instead governed by its lower intestinal tract a body threatening to erupt at any moment. *Hustler's* favorite joke is someone accidentally defecating in a church. (Kipnis, 1992: 374)

In this way, Kipnis presents the grotesque body of *Hustler* as a refusal and transgression of the classical bourgeois body of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. However, by lumping these two publications together, she therefore ignores the significant differences between them. Rather than a simple opposition between two poles of a binary opposition, these three publications have all been very concerned to distinguish themselves from one another.

Once again, however, the definition of the term "bourgeois" is ambiguous. While Kipnis does refer to Bakhtin and others who associated the classical body with the "formation and consolidation of bourgeois subjectivity and bourgeois political hegemony" in the early modern period (377), there is little sense of how matters might have changed by the latter half of the twentieth century. The bourgeoisie is largely defined by, and criticised for, its cultural attitudes rather than the methods by which it economically exploits other classes. There is little acknowledgement that having attained political hegemony, the bourgeoisie as a class is under less pressure to protect and privilege the classical body.

Indeed, the celebration of the grotesque body has become an integral aspect of bourgeois aesthetics from modernism onwards and, as has been argued, the target of such transgressive aesthetics is the petite-bourgeois. It is this class who are predominantly associated with the classical body and its obsession with respectability and hygiene, and this is because it is the class who are condemned to repeat the strategies of "formation and consolidation" which were practised by the bourgeoisie in the early modern period. As Bourdieu puts it,

Having succeeded in escaping from the proletariat, their past, and aspiring to enter the bourgeoisie, its future, in order to achieve the accumulation necessary for this rise they must somewhere find the resources to make up for the absence of capital ... The rising petite bourgeoisie endlessly remakes the history of the origins of capitalism; and to do so, like the Puritans, it can only count on its asceticism. (Bourdieu, 1984: 333)

As a result, Kipnis privileges *Hustler* specifically because it can be made to conform to an avant-garde aesthetic, and present a challenge to petite bourgeois taste.

Like sadomasochistic porn and the performances of Annie Sprinkle, *Hustler* is presented as a "deconstructive" form of porn that is defined against the Other of "ordinary" pornography.

For example, as Kipnis argues: "again a case where *Hustler* seems to be deconstructing the codes of the men's magazine: where *Playboy* creates a fetish of the breast, and whose *raison d'être* is, in fact, very much the cultural obsession with them, *Hustler* perversely points out that they are, after all, materially, merely tissue another limb." (Kipnis, 1992: 379) In the end, Kipnis' account repeats the familiar distinction between mainstream culture and its radical Others that can be traced back to the mass culture critics of the 1950s and beyond.

Re-examining the Middlebrow

In these accounts, the mainstream is defined against an authentic folk culture on the one hand and a radical avant-garde on the other. However, as Sarah Thornton has shown, while this construction of the middlebrow is necessary in order to provide a sense of cultural authority and can be identified in a whole series of aesthetic theories which "uncritically replay these beliefs" (Thornton, 1995: 96), this position of opposition to, or difference from, the "mainstream" eventually proves entirely contradictory. As she argues, "inconsistent fantasies of the mainstream are rampant" in cultural theory, and this is why critics can either "find pockets of symbolic resistance wherever they look" (93) or see everything as having already been incorporated into the mainstream.

As a result, there are a number of problems with accepting this opposition between the mainstream and the "alternative", particularly as it applies to pornography. For a start, such oppositions work not only to produce a difference between the two categories, but also in the process, to repress differences and struggles within these categories. For example, *Playboy* is not only subject to attack from the "low" and "avant-garde" but also from the radical right, and it remains a highly contested object of political debate within what is often presented as an entirely homogeneous and undifferentiated mainstream. Furthermore, since its beginnings, *Playboy* has clearly articulated its own critique of a "sexual" mainstream and its conformity, and has self-consciously defined itself as a sexually dissident publication. As a result, it is necessary to question whether the mainstream can ever be thought as a stable entity, or whether it is instead simply a mobile construct that is continually defined and redefined through the struggles for distinction between different social groups.

Furthermore, constructions of the mainstream tend to present it as an entirely passive object which is only ever associated with conservatism, and hence as a place where nothing interesting ever happens. This position also suggests a sense of over-familiarity in which the mainstream is supposedly not worthy of examination because it is presumed to be all too well known and obvious. In debates over pornography, as we have seen, interest is almost always in the "transgressive" because mainstream pornography is assumed to be an essentially known entity which does not change. In contrast, however, it could well be argued that the supposed subject of that mainstream - the white, middle-class, heterosexual male - may be far more complex and contradictory than is often acknowledged. Rather than a stable, unchanging, homogeneous and known entity, this category itself may act to repress and contain the heterogeneity and contradictions involved within it. In other words, accounts of this figure rarely bother to subject this category to detailed analysis, but merely rely on, and reproduce, taken for granted assumptions instead.

If the cultural bourgeoisie's distaste for the middlebrow is founded on the threat that it poses to their cultural authority, this threat is entirely unintentional. Rather than an intentional challenge, the petite bourgeoisie become a threat precisely because of their reverence for legitimate culture, not their hostility to it. Aspiring to enter the bourgeoisie proper, they

display an admiration for legitimate culture that is founded on their sense of exclusion from it. If they threaten to blur distinctions between high and low culture and so undermine the authority of the cultural bourgeoisie, it is because they are too eager to become a part of legitimate culture, a culture to which they are alien (Bourdieu, 1984: 321) As Bourdieu puts it, "this petite bourgeoisie of consumers [is one] which means to acquire on credit, i.e., before its due time, the attributes of the legitimate life-style" (365).

The petite bourgeoisie, then, is a class whose intermediate status - it is neither proletariat nor bourgeois but somewhere in the middle - means that its identity is entirely formed through its negation. As a result, it is a class filled with self-loathing and self-denial in so far as it desires to be other than it is. It distinguishes itself from the working class but is not yet what it aspires to be - i.e. bourgeois. It is therefore engaged in what Bourdieu calls, "a sort of dream of social flying, a desperate attempt to defy the gravity of the social field." (370) To put it another way, it is a class which displays a desperate resistance to being classified or classed.

Living in a constant fear of being judged, it therefore develops what Mike Featherstone has called "a learning mode to life" in which the petite bourgeois individual "is consciously educating himself in the field of taste, style, life-style." (Featherstone, 1991a: 91) The petite bourgeois individual is in a perpetual state of anxiety. They long to "like what it is better to like" and try to acquire the ability to do so: to learn what it is right to like and how to appreciate it. However, they are also terrified by the possibility of being caught out, of showing that they are "not what it is right to be" because they do not know what is right to like or else lack the proper means of appreciating it (see Brunson, 1997).

It is this situation which accounts for the oft-cited shift from character to personality, or what David Riesman referred to as the move from the inner-directed individual to the outer-directed individual (Riesman, 1961). For the petite bourgeois identity becomes a matter of performance. As Bourdieu claims, the petite bourgeois "reduces social being to perceived being, to seeming" (Bourdieu, 1984: 483).

However, despite these features the petite bourgeois is itself a divided class. The old or declining petite bourgeoisie is largely made up of "craftsmen and small shopkeepers" while the new petite bourgeoisie "comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services." (359) The difference between the old and the new petite bourgeoisie is therefore immense, despite the fact that it emerges from a similar position of anxiety. The old petite bourgeoisie tried to avoid being judged through a tactic of respectability and restraint through which they hoped to pass unnoticed, but the new petite bourgeoisie, on the other hand, tries to avoid judgment by rejecting the values of the old petite bourgeoisie. In an attempt to avoid being identified as petite bourgeois, it rejects the ethic of respectability and restraint and defines this ethic as "outmoded" and "fuddy-duddy". In its place, it therefore adopts an ethic of fun, which is defined as "modern" and sophisticated in opposition to the tastes of the old petite bourgeoisie.

It is this tactic which accounts for the "calculated hedonism" which Featherstone identifies with contemporary consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991b: 171), and it is a feature which clearly registers the anxious relationship of the new petite bourgeoisie to their bodies. If the new petite bourgeoisie rejects the restraint of the old petite bourgeoisie, this is not to say that it gives in to wild abandon. On the contrary, it simultaneously tries to liberate and educate the body. On the one hand, as Bourdieu argues, "it treats the body as the psychoanalyst treats the

soul, bending its ear to 'listen' to a body which has to be 'unknotted', liberated or, more simply, rediscovered and accepted ('feeling at home')." (Bourdieu, 1984: 368) On the other, however, this relation to the body "is inseparable from an exaltation of self, but a self which truly fulfils itself ('growth', 'awareness', 'responsiveness') only when 'relating' to others" (368). As a result, the body is therefore also "treated as a sign" rather than through the classical bourgeois conception of the body as an "instrument" or property, a relation which, as Bourdieu notes, creates a whole new "politics of the 'alienated body'." (368) It is this new petite bourgeoisie, then, that is the class most directly related to the rise of the therapeutic society with its "corps of professionals" who claim "a monopoly of the legitimate definition of legitimate pedagogic and sexual competence." (369)

Thus, when John D'Emilo and Estelle Freedman claim that "sexual liberalism spoke most directly to the middle class", it was not simply because, as they claim, it was this class "whose incomes, socialisation, and style of living made possible the intense focus on the privatized couple in the companionate ideal." (D'Emilo and Freedman, 1988: 273) Instead it was due to the intense importance which sexuality acquired for the new petite bourgeoisie as a result of their anxious relationship to their bodies. Indeed it is worth noting the centrality of the concern with sexuality to the extraordinary commercial success of best-selling life-style guides such as Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (1946) and Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948. See Appendix Two).

Furthermore, it was often precisely in the field of sexuality that the new petite bourgeoisie not only distinguished itself from the old, but also actually succeeded in pathologizing them. As Bourdieu puts it,

Invoking the prestige of the false science of sexual behaviour to naturalise a conception and an experience of "sexuality" - a very recent historical invention which depends on social conditions of possibility that are very unequally distributed - it consigns to the pathology of "sexual poverty", i.e., to the attentions of the psychoanalyst and sexologist, sole arbiters of legitimate sexual competence, all those whom the old morality would have consigned to the inferno of "natural" sexuality. These "barbarians" who have not caught up with the "sexual revolution" are once again the victims of a universalization of the definition of competence not accompanied by a universalization of the conditions of acquisition. (367-8)

The new petite bourgeoisie displays its distinction from the old through its "liberated" sexuality, but it is a "liberation" that is only ever achieved through education, discipline and intense self-surveillance. The "liberation" of the body from its "repression" is therefore experienced simultaneously as the rediscovery of a natural self and as the enactment of a carefully controlled performance. It is both a liberation from alienation and a whole new mode of alienation.

As a result, underlying the new petite bourgeoisie is a fundamental irony: in their attempt to avoid being judged and classified, they try to present themselves as unclassifiable and "yet all their practices ... speak of classification", if only in "the mode of denial" (370). To put it another way, the desperate refusal of classification that distinguishes this class results in an identity that is defined purely through the negation of other identities and positions. The new petite bourgeoisie is not only driven to life-style guides and self-help books, but to a whole series of political movements and practices which are defined as alternative or oppositional: hence the tendency for them to be associated with movements such as alternative medicines and political positions referred to as, for example, anti-nuclear, anti-racist or non-sexist.

Conclusion

In this situation, then, sexual behavior became overtly politicized because it so clearly distinguished the attitudes of the new petite bourgeoisie from those of the old and, in the process, so did pornography. The study of pornography therefore requires us to acknowledge that sexual tastes are not just gendered but also classed and that, as Bourdieu argues in relation to the aesthetic disposition more generally, sexual tastes are not only amongst the most "classifying" of social differences, but also have "the privilege of appearing the most natural" (56).

However, it also requires us to acknowledge that the struggles over sexual tastes are far more complex than the current debates often suggest. It is not just the anti-pornographers who cannot tolerate the tastes of others, as I have demonstrated through a discussion of the cultural politics of the aesthetics of transgression. While this article is in no sense a defense of the anti-pornographers of either the left or the right (whatever those terms mean in this context), it is none the less a reminder of the extent to which the anti-anti-pornography position can, in certain incarnations, be seen as "a claim to legitimate superiority over those who ... remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies" (56). In other words, we must be careful not to ignore the social and cultural conditions that not only provoke the anti-pornographers but also enable a sense of distance and distinction from them.

Appendices

Appendix One: References to Bourdieu in other national contexts are usually greeted with the question of whether his findings are applicable outside France where his study was conducted. However, while Bourdieu himself acknowledges that France "has no counterpart elsewhere, at least for the arrogance of its cultural judgements" (Bourdieu 1984: xi), this is not to claim that other nations such as the United States and Britain do not share similar distinctions between high and low culture. On the contrary, as the discussion of Sontag makes clear, the distinction between the pure gaze and popular taste is clearly present within American intellectual life. This is further illustrated by Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Levine, 1988), which provides a brilliant historical account of the social production of these cultural distinctions within late nineteenth century America. Indeed, Levine's notion of the "sacralization of culture" is remarkably close to Bourdieu's notion of the pure gaze.

This is not to deny the national or historical specificity of these distinctions, or of the class relations that underpin and structure them. Indeed, while Bourdieu suggests that the new bourgeoisie and new petite bourgeois become a significant force within French cultural life in the 1960s, I have argued elsewhere that they became a significant force within America at least a decade earlier, when they became one of the central objects of social and cultural debate, and were known variously as the New Class or "the postwar managerial class" (see Jancovich, 2000 and Ehrenreich, 1989).

Appendix Two: Of course, Kinsey's report was not intended as a life-style guide, but its immense commercial success and influence was due to the fact that it was appropriated in this way. In other words, Kinsey's study was taken as a critique of existing sexual mores, and as evidence of their repressiveness. Nor was this entirely surprising. As Paul Robinson has pointed out, Kinsey clearly presented himself as a scientist in the Enlightenment mould, whose job it was to distinguish a rational basis for human behaviour from the dangers of

superstition, and hence presented the book as a full-blown critique of existing sexual norms (1976). It is true that this critique was often misunderstood: Kinsey valued function rather than style in sex and saw the upper classes' aestheticisation of sex as mere "dillydallying", a distraction from the "real business at hand" or as the product of sexual "superstition" (See Packard, 1959: 296). None the less, Kinsey's account of the discrepancy between social norms and sexual behaviour was seen as a critique of the first and hence as a justification of, or even incitement to, sexual experimentation.

References:

Assiter, Alison (1989) *Pornography, Feminism and the Individual*. London: Pluto.

Berger, John (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Betterton, Rosemary (ed.) (1987) *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*. London: Pandora.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

Brunsdon, Charlotte (1997) *Screen Tastes: from soap opera to satellite dishes*. London: Routledge.

Burnstyn, Varda (ed.) (1985) *Women Against Censorship*. Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre.

Chester, Gail and Julianne Dickey (eds.) (1988) *Feminism and Censorship*. Bridport: Prism.

D'Emilio John, and Freedman, Estelle B. (1998) *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Harper & Row: New York.

Dworkin, Andrea (1979) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. London: The Women's Press.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs (1986) *Re-Making Love: The Feminization of Sex*. New York: Anchor.

Ehrenreich, Barbara (1989) *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*. New York: HarperCollins.

Featherstone, Mike (1991a) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage.

Featherstone, Mike (1991b) The Body in Consumer Culture, in Mike Featherstone et al., (eds.), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage.

Feminist Review, (eds.) (1987) *Sexuality: A Reader*. London: Virago.

Gibson, Pamela Church, and Roma Gibson (eds.). (1993) *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, London: British Film Institute.

- Griffin, Susan (1981) *Pornography and Silence*. London: The Women's Press.
- Hunt, Leon (1998) *British Low Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Jancovich, Mark (2000) Othering Conformity in Post-War America: Intellectuals, the New Middle Classes and the Problem of Cultural Distinctions, in Nathan Abrams and Julie Hughes, eds., *Containing America*, Birmingham University Press.
- Kappeler, Susan (1986) *The Pornography of Representation* Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Kendrick, Walter (1987) *The Secret Museum: Pornography and Modern Culture*, New York: Viking Press.
- Kinsey, Alfred, et al. (1948) *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*, Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders.
- Kipnis, Laura (1992) (Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading Hustler, in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge.
- Kipnis, Laura (1993) *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender and Aesthetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kipnis, Laura (1996) *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*, New York: Grove Press.
- Kuhn, Annette (1982) *Women's Pictures: Feminism and the Cinema* London: Routledge and Kagen Paul.
- Lederer, Laura (1980) *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, New York: Bantam.
- Levine, Lawrence W. (1988) *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Merck, Mandy (1987) Pornography, in Rosemary Betterton (ed.) *Looking On*.
- Mulvey, Laura (1975) Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, in *Screen* 16: 3, 6-18.
- Nead, Lynda, (1992) *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* London: Routledge.
- Packard, Vance (1959) *The Status Seekers: An Exploration of Class Behaviour in America*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Pollock, Griselda (1977) What's Wrong with Images of Women?, *Screen Education* 24. pp. 25-33.
- Riesman, David (1961) *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Robinson, Paul (1976) *The Modernization of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson*, New York: Harpers and Row.
- Rodgers, Gillian and Wilson, Elizabeth (eds.) (1991) *Pornography and Feminism*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Ross, Andrew (1989) The Popularity of Pornography, in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Segal, Lynne (1994) *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*. London: Virago.
- Segal, Lynne and McIntosh, Mary (eds.) (1992), *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, London: Virago.
- Snitow, Ann, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, eds. (1986) *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. London: Virago.
- Sontag, Susan (1969) The Pornographic Imagination, in *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Dell.
- Spock, Benjamin (1946) *Baby and Child Care*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce.
- Thornton, Sara (1995) *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Oxford, Blackwells.
- Vance, Carole S. ed. (1984) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Watney, Simon (1987) *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*. London: Methuen.
- Wicke, Jennifer (1993) Through a Gaze Darkly: Pornography's Academic Market, in Gibson and Gibson, (eds.), *Dirty Looks*.
- Williams, Linda (1990) *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*. London: Pandora, 1990.
- Williams, Linda (1993a) Second Thoughts on Hard Core: American Obscenity Law and the Scapegoating of Deviance, in Gibson and Gibson, (eds.), *Dirty Looks*.
- Williams, Linda (1993b) A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle, in Gibson and Gibson, (eds.), *Dirty Looks*.
- Willis, Ellen (1989) Sexual Politics, in Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (eds.), *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*. New York: Routledge.
- Wilson, Elizabeth (1983) *What is to be Done about Violence Against Women?* Harmondsworth: Penguin.