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Through the Looking Glass? Sexual Agency and Subjectification Online

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Discourses of sexual agency have been seen as central to the development of new femininities, part of a broader shift in which older markers of femininity such as homemaking skills and maternal instincts have been joined by those of image creation, body work and sexual desire. This chapter examines debates about women's sexual oppression and agency, with particular reference to their objectification and subjectification in popular cultural forms. It considers how useful these debates are in the contemporary Western context where media and communication technologies are developing very rapidly, offering women unprecedented access to new forms of cultural production, most obviously online in blogs, chat rooms and communities. It situates these technologies in the broader cultural context of sexualization and shifts in the way visibility and celebrity, sexual display and agency are conceived. It asks how these developments impact on the representation of women's sexuality and what opportunities they provide for women to become involved in constructing and presenting their sexual selves. Focusing particularly on alternative pornography, it asks how we can develop an understanding of sexual agency in this context and how cultural and technological developments potentially make space for the representation of new constructions of sexuality and femininity.

Agency – 'as if'

A concern with women's objectification has long been central to feminist debates about representation and is probably even more central to popular perceptions of feminism where it is taken to indicate both anti-sexism and a presumption of feminist distaste for sex and bodily display. However, beyond the assertion that objectification turns female subjects into objects of sight and that this involves a power relation in which women are subordinated, there has been comparatively little in the way of a sustained theoretical discussion of objectification. Although the real focus of debates about objectification has been the genre of pornography, it is Laura Mulvey's

groundbreaking work on narrative cinema that remains the most coherent articulation of this position. Mulvey argues that here, in the playing out of male fears and desires, women are made to '*connote to-be-looked-at-ness*' (1989, p. 19), 'turned...into objects of display... Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all.' They are 'simply the scenery on to which men project their own fantasies' (1987, p. 131).

Mulvey's theory and the kind of textual analysis which supports it remains a useful and interesting explanation of cultural anxieties around women's bodies, though it becomes less persuasive the more widely it is applied. Certainly, it remains the case that women's bodies are over-exposed in the representational systems of modern and late modern cultures, and this requires explanation. Claims that women are encouraged to internalize the gaze of real or imagined observers (Berger, 1972) are also persuasive. However, explaining bodily display merely as an index of male fantasy or of female discomfort is too simplistic to be of real use.

This is particularly so in a context in which the exposure of the body – male and female – seems to be increasingly central to forms of popular representation and to individual self-expression. The question of bodily display and objectification needs further investigation, and following a period during which earlier feminist critiques became deeply unfashionable, the debate about women's sexual objectification has been revived by some feminist theorists. For some, the objectification of women has acquired new significance, becoming a means of recruiting women to an acceptance of their continued objectified status in popular culture.

According to Rosalind Gill, this involves a '*deliberate re-sexualisation and re-commodification of bodies*' which, although it relies on depictions of women as 'knowing, active and desiring', actually marks a shift from '*an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze*' (2003, p. 104). This form of 'sexual subjectification' is 'objectification in new and even more pernicious guise' (2003, p. 105). It is part of the development of a post-feminist sensibility 'organized around notions of choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and sexual difference, and articulated in an ironic and knowing register' (2007b, p. 271). The 'possession of a "sexy body" ...is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity' (2007b, p. 255), in line with a broader sexualization of culture, the reassertion of sexual difference and the use of irony and knowingness to express 'sexist or homophobic sentiments' (2007b, p. 267).

In Gill's formulation, the kind of agency promised by the display of the sexy body only appears to offer a strong and positive subject position to women, whilst actually positioning them as an object for others, and indeed, for themselves. In the process, women are reduced to their bodies and subjected to impossible standards of acceptability which are likely to cause enormous anxiety and stimulate endless self-monitoring. Here 'agency' involves an injunction to constantly remake the self in ways which