



# Stirring the porn possum

Catherine Lumby, *Bad Girls*, (1997) Allen & Unwin, ISBN 1 86448 076 9 192 pp.

As suggested by the arresting image on the cover, a central preoccupation of Catharine Lumby's *Bad Girls* is the issue of representations of women in the media. The book covers an expansive terrain, including Foucauldian theory, poststructuralist feminism, the history of censorship in Australia, and responses to tabloid media, popular culture and new media - reflecting the author's thesis that these debates are interconnected.

The feminist campaign against pornography and sexist media representations of women is, according to Lumby, no less than a 'betrayal of feminist ideals'. She does not seek to define what pornography is, but instead asks what feminism's interest in pornography is about.

Lumby's view is that the feminist critique of representations of women is laden with assumptions about the meaning of the images complained of and, in purporting to speak on behalf of all women, is paternalistic and intolerant of a diversity of views. It misses the point that images are capable of bearing multiple meanings and eliciting varying responses, and that this process is affected by a complex interplay of factors. In a media-literate age, people are adept at negotiating images and not merely passive recipients of a patriarchal agenda pushed by a notional, monolithic entity labelled 'the media'. The feminist critique also overlooks the fact that heterosexual men are not the sole consumers of pornography, and is out of step with contemporary understandings of sexuality.

Similarly, Lumby argues that there is more to representations of women in advertising than 'the oppositional model in which...women are reduced

to victims, commodities and consumers'. The media and advertising play a pivotal role in a consumer society. The desire to consume goes beyond products to the images themselves, which in turn feeds into the construction of social identity. Therefore, Lumby argues, 'we consume ourselves', a phenomenon that affects everyone.

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Lumby also suggests that the feminist critique, by insisting on interpretations that objectify and render women passive victims of male power, may serve to reinforce the very patriarchal values it opposes. Why not, she asks, 'encourage women to make creative readings of images and to appropriate and reinvent female stereotypes to their own advantage'?

There is also the danger that anti-pornography feminists are effectively joining forces with social conservatives pursuing a 'family values' agenda that in most other respects is incompatible with the aims of feminism. Laws against pornography may prove to be a poisoned chalice, as demonstrated in Canada, where they have been used against works by lesbians, gays and radical feminists.

Foucault's analysis of power, knowledge and sexuality underpins much of Lumby's argument. Thus it is asserted that speaking about pornography and consuming it are both aspects of the production of pornogra-

phy, with each group involved organising the boundaries to suit their own agenda. Chapter 5, provocatively entitled 'Why feminists need porn', suggests that 'feminists need to ask what kind of investment they have in the social institutions and practices they oppose' - is the feminist critique of pornography actually part of the production of pornography, a source of power and pleasure in the Foucauldian sense?

Lumby also examines the gulf between public policy feminists and theoretical feminists influenced by poststructuralism, arguing that the latter have much to offer and urging feminists to engage in the debate about new media and technology in a more positive way.

*Bad Girls* presents an accessible and timely account of the challenges that theories of meaning, representation and sexuality pose to the anti-pornography feminist critique. The position that there is no objective knowledge or meaning, only points of view, is a place of exciting possibilities to some, but a bleak landscape of futility to others. I share many of Lumby's criticisms of the anti-pornography positions, but I wonder whether some strands of her argument - for example, that a magazine cover of a naked woman wearing a dog collar represents 'a self-conscious, crass spoof of male desire, albeit one which simultaneously feeds the desires it mocks, or that the tabloidisation of the media is a positive development, because it blurs the boundaries between the public sphere (symbolically represented by quality journalism) and the private sphere - give too much credit where credit is not due.□

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