

Hunting and Pornography

There is a growing body of literature on the subject of the relationship between violence against animals and the violent treatment of other subjugated categories of individuals. I'm thinking, for example, of the collection *Animals and Women* or Marjorie Speigal's *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*. People are speaking out on this topic with the sensitive insightfulness of those who know what it means live and grow within a system of violence, of being pulled, moved, shaped, and pushed, or even prodded, poked slapped, grabbed, and spit at by the (often impersonal yet so personally meaningful) forces of sexism, or racism, or classism, or homophobia. When I read some of these publications I feel like these people are finally articulating for us the kind of broken-down, buried intuitions that have been silenced under a chokehold for so long. But when people point out that men who abuse their wives also abuse their pets, or that animal relationships in the animal-food production complex are destroyed as were those between US slaves, what is it that their insights serve to do?

They are not necessarily going to create a concern for animals in people who are not yet concerned, if that is what they are trying to do. Nor are they necessarily going to inspire a concern for social justice. This is because writing about the experiential connections between non-human and human minorities doesn't necessarily entail an explanation of why all parties are morally considerable, i.e. deserving of moral concern. But I think this line of thinking can demonstrate to people who are already sensitive to racism and sexism and the many various modes of subjugation how, in kind of mechanical terms, this subjugation is carried out through specific types of treatment, and

then to show how these mechanisms of violence reach beyond the margins of humanity to animals. This can help people like African Americans and women who are alert to racism and sexism identify with animals as victims of the same types of pain. And people who can empathize (but not fully identify) will also be better able to share their understanding with non-humans. I'm writing this essay on hunting and pornography with the goal of showing those of us who flinch at the sight of a pornographized woman that hunted animals are violated in a strikingly similar way.

Real Woman

Flat
glossy
full of holes and
one dimensional
you fake a pulse
with your hungry lips
and ecstatic absent eyes

your knees never touch
never kiss each other out of
self respect

you are full of bullets
shot down
and pinned up

you bleed
you know it

you bat a black eyelash

A few months ago I was talking with my friend Keara and attempting to put into words a growing feeling that, on a symbolic level, there are so many similarities between hunting a wild animal and sexually exposing the body of a woman in a magazine like *Penthouse*, *Hustler*, or *Playboy*. I was describing the act of the hunt, trying to map out

the similarities between the process of hunting and killing an animal and the process of pornographizing a woman. The act of hunting goes something like this: the hunter enters the woods or forest and the hunt commences when he spies a member of the species he is hunting.¹ Presumably, the hunter is more likely to be able to kill the animal if the animal does not notice him and particularly if the animal is engaged in some activity. So, as Keara pointed out, in the ideal hunting scenario, the hunter sneaks up on the animal while the animal is eating, for example, or drinking from a stream--in short, while he or she is engaged in the happenings of daily life.

This means that the hunter enters the animal's world. He creeps in from the margins, while the animal is not looking, and captures the animal, traps the animal, in the course of his or her private life (in order for the animal's daily life to be "private" in this context it is enough that it be exclusive of human's invasive company and activity.) So in the onset of the hunt the hunter invades the privacy of the animal.

There is no doubt that pornography is, at the very least, an invasion of privacy. If it were not, it would lose its potency, its excitement. The woman is stripped nude, and the man can see parts of her that he is not normally allowed to see. Even if the woman in the photograph does not seem particularly unwilling (or even indifferent) to being photographed (though these women often do seem unwilling or indifferent), it is the fact that one cannot see these things in ordinary public life that makes it an invasion of privacy. Because the woman depicted is practically anonymous, she is not a personality but rather a female body, and her body becomes a symbol of the (universal) female. The

¹ I'm using the masculine pronoun here because most hunters are in fact male (and white, at an average of 42 years old.) See "Should Kids Hunt?" from *Time*, November 30th, 1998, p. 102.

invasion of pornography, then, is profoundly the invasion of female privacy and subjectivity.

Marti Kheel insightfully notes that this precursory witnessing or spying on the animal of prey seems to have sexual meaning for some hunters. She quotes hunter Richard Nelson as he writes, “I am the hunter hovering near his prey and a watcher craving inhuman love, torn between the deepest impulses, hot and shallow-breathed and seething with unreconciled intent...I am consumed with a sense of her perfect elegance in the brilliant light.”²

So, continuing to trace the steps of the hunt: First the hunter spies the animal obviously lost in its own world. But the hunter doesn’t shoot right then. Maybe just because at this point there is too much distance between the hunter and the animal. The hunter is reciting the old maxim “Don’t shoot ‘till you see the whites of their eyes.” The maxim basically says “Get close to your victim, look him or her in the eyes, and then shoot.” That’s a pretty disturbing maxim, to me at least. Maybe it’s really an old war dictum, but I’m sure it’s applicable in any shooting scenario. A recent *Time* article describes the moments before a boy shoots a deer:

Cedric aims his father’s .44 Ruger. Hesitates. His father has always told him to wait until the deer turns, so that he can have a clear shot at the side, through the heart and lungs just behind the foreleg. The buck senses their presence. Cedric swears the buck looks right at him. His father whispers, “Shoot! Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!”³

² Nelson, Richard quoted in Kheel, Marti “License to Kill: An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunter’s Discourse” in Adams, Carol and Donovan, Josephine (eds.) *Animals and Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 90.

³ Also from “Should Kids Hunt?” in *Time*, November 30th, 1998, p. 106.

It is important to look the victim in the eyes because this allows the hunter to know that he is really killing someone, an animate individual, someone with a life to take, instead of just some already lifeless material or matter. This is what makes the killing a killing. In pornography, the woman's subjectivity is recognized--she might be looking into the camera, or she might be in a weaker sense just engaged in the private activities of her own relationships or her own life (so this aspect of pornographizing might blend with the first.)

The final step of the hunt is, obviously, to shoot the animal. The animal, standing paralyzed in unbreathable fear, is torn by a bullet, and the body collapses, becomes a corpse and no longer a feeling being, the subject of a life.

The sexualized nude woman is shot not by a gun but by a camera. There seems to be a dramatic difference between these two kinds of "shots", but I don't know if there is much of a difference as far as the viewer is concerned. The living, experiencing, feeling woman, in all of her complexity, is transformed into a simple, static, frozen, and overall *dead* image. She is reduced to a thin piece of printed paper. She is immobilized, she doesn't breathe, she cannot speak. She's one of the dead. She is "shot down and pinned up" (like I wrote in that poem from high school printed above). The sexualized nude woman, then, is "shot" like an animal--over and over throughout the photo shoot. It is, symbolically, an act of killing – the transformation of the living into the dead.⁴

⁴ But, there are many obstacles to seeing pornography as a transformation of the living into the dead. As John Stoltenberg has beautifully argued in *Refusing to Be a Man*, if all we see is the final product of pornography – the image – and not the act of pornography, it is difficult to remember that it even involves real people who experience the process of their own reduction. The fact that the English language holds no verb for the act of making someone into a pornographic image (what I'm calling "pornographizing") shows that we have difficulty seeing the transformative aspect of pornography.

So these are the three respects in which the act of hunting parallels the act of pornography--the invasion of privacy, the recognition of the subjectivity of the victim, and the killing of the subject. Even pornographers recognize and exploit this symbolic link--one magazine even prints a regular photo feature called 'Beaver Hunt'. (And women and their body parts are even called by the names of hunted animals--beaver, fox, bunny.) The two acts of violence--killing wild animals and objectifying women--are symbolically one and the same.