

On Objectification

During the late-eighties, while I was in college, I became aware of the feminist clarion call against the objectification of women. One major focus of this contrariness was pornography. Pornography, as it is made for the pleasure of men, does indeed objectify women. Feminists called for pornography to be banned. However, the anti-objectificationists did not want to stop there. They wanted all of society to stop objectifying women, and to stop objectifying human beings in general, it seemed. I have a strong suspicion that anti-objectification has its roots in Kant's imperative that it is wrong to use people as tools. As the feminists seemed to mean it, people should apprehend each other as full, complete human beings, replete with feelings, histories, psyches, and minds. Interestingly, however, they should not have a public sexuality or a public religiosity.

If one denies the complete humanity of other human beings, treating them as if they were only made up of one small part of themselves—their breasts, for example—then one cuts both the other person and oneself off from full humanity. Furthermore, when men do it to women, as they are wont to do, it functions as a tool of oppression every bit as powerful as a white man's whipping a black slave. So the argument goes. Unfortunately, the argument is absurd.

We need only observe a feminist and her friend hailing a cab. They crawl into the backseat at point A and tell the driver where point B is to be. They are not the least bit interested in hearing about the driver's problems, his wife and children, his feelings about America, his homesickness, or his thoughts on politics. They focus exclusively on getting from point A to point B by the fastest and cheapest route. The driver is nothing to them but a tool to accomplish their goal, and indeed, they continue to converse with one another about the latest trends in feminism, ignoring the driver, who ignores them.

Does anyone want to hear about the inspirational novel the cashier at the grocery store is working on in his spare time? Does anyone want to hear that the cashier makes minimum wage, and that he has to choose between shoes for his daughter and food for their table? Clearly not. We want him to ring up our groceries correctly and make change quickly, that's all.

Even the salesman at the appliance store, who smiles and asks us about ourselves and shares personal thoughts, is only seeking entrée to sell us the highest-priced microwave oven in the store. He's paid on commission. He pretends to warm up to us, and we may or may not be taken in by his charms, but in any event, all this warmth only conceals the crassness of the encounter. One might observe that it is capitalism that forces us to objectify one another, and that may be true. However, can we imagine a society that isn't capitalist but still has taxicabs, grocery stores, and appliance salesmen, in which people don't routinely objectify one another?

Imagine going to the auto mechanic. You greet him, and ask him if he's having a good day. He tells you that his wife is divorcing him for cheating on her, but he still loves her. Then he tells you about his son, who is abusing drugs. He's pulled in two directions—problems with his wife, problems with his son. To make matters worse, his parts supplier just raised its prices, and he's having trouble passing the cost on

to consumers. You tell him all about your life, and your problems and feelings and thoughts. An hour and a half later he asks you if you'd like to have your car repaired.

We could not function at all if we had to treat every human being we came across as a whole, complete human being. Using human beings as tools, much of the time, is inextricable from collective living. This does not mean that we should treat other people shabbily. Before the sixties, there was a term for treating human beings with consideration; it was *politeness*. Certainly, feminists do not merely mean that we should be polite to one another. And I don't think Kant did either. Nor do feminists mean that we should treat women *as if* they were complete, full human beings. There is nothing about a man's gazing at a woman's breasts that treats her *as if* she were no more than a pair of breasts, any more than the feminist's using the cab driver as a tool treated him *as if* he were no more than an automaton. Clearly, the Kantian and feminist admonition that we should never treat another human being as an object is nonsense.

It may be argued that feminism mostly seeks to combat *sexual* objectification of women, and by extension, men. The contemporary efforts to cleanse the public sphere (workplaces, schools, subways, etc.) of sexual harassment are brilliant. In my old job, there was a certain straight male supervisor who was distractingly attractive to me. Everyone knew I was homosexual. I contemplated making a comment or two, possibly publicly, about the supervisor. I decided against it. I thought, *You don't shit where you eat*. Especially in places where there is a stratification of power (workplaces, schools), sexual come-ons, even sexual relationships in general, are completely inappropriate. People don't go to their workplace or school because they choose to be there; they go there because they *have* to be there. Sexual behavior that I may deem appropriate for a bar or even on the street has no

place in a workplace or school. Obviously, something very good came of feminist anti-objectification.

Sexual objectification in the sex lives of Americans, however, did not go quietly away the way sexual harassment in the workplace did. Amid the picketing of pornographic establishments, Larry Flynt published his June 1978 issue of *Hustler* magazine. The issue featured a cover with a picture of a meat grinder, a pair of women's legs sticking out of the top, and ground meat coming out the end. He had always been a foil for the feminists, but the extremely controversial cover escalated the fight. What is so powerfully evident is the raw misogyny of the image. He chose to celebrate sexual objectification at a murderous extreme. Clearly, the feminists enraged him. On the other hand, the cover simply states visually that women are meat.

Apparently, women do not *like* to think of themselves as meat. Here's where my argument threatens to derail. I don't know anything whatsoever about female sexuality. I am not a woman, nor am I interested in women sexually. Judging by things like feminist talk and writing, and so-called chick flicks, women do not like to be objectified. Nevertheless, I cannot legitimately write anything about what women want or don't want sexually. However, I am a man who has sex with other men, and I have devoted much time and study to male sexuality (primarily by engaging the men I fucked with, watching pornography of all sorts, and carefully observing straight men). *Male sexuality is all about objectification.*

I have gone home with men who wanted to smoke pot and talk about their feelings over ice cream. Perhaps these men thought we were having sex, but as much as I indulged them, they were tiny exceptions that proved the rule. The vast majority of men focused on armpits, tits, dick, ass, or sometimes feet. Usually I was a body of earthly delights, a combination of these things, and I looked at them that way

too. I like men with meaty cocks—rippled shafts, veins bulging. I think of them as slabs of meat. One of my favorite names for dick is *tubesteak*. I am not alone. I have been in countless group scenes where men salivated over dicks or asses. “Nice cock, dude,” or “Nice hairy ass, dude,” they hollered. I viewed these men as street thugs, hicks, twinks, daddies, businessmen, mechanics, feminine black men, angry Hispanic men, artists, hippies, potheads, weight lifters, or any one of dozens of *types* I had in my fantasies. What they were in real life and their completeness as human beings were totally irrelevant to me; as who I was, was to them. They were tools to me, and I to them, just like the cabbie was to the feminists going from point A to point B. We weren’t abusive to each other, unless one of us was in the mood. We liked each other’s bodies and images. We acted out our roles to please each other, to satisfy each other. Ninety-five percent of the men I’ve had sex with liked objectifying me, and they liked being objectified. These were happy and polite transactions. But they were lustful transactions, and as such, we were mutually uninterested in apprehending one another’s fullness.

Our sexual selves lie very close to the center of our *souls*. I’ve had far more *intimacy* with a street thug with whom I had a twenty-minute encounter than I *ever* had with someone in my workplace. I was more *myself* with the street thug than I could ever hope to be with most anyone else. Hence, particularly passionate encounters might lead to more encounters with the same man to test the waters. In short order, we’re talking to one another, having a beer or a meal at a diner. At that point, I notice that I have strong feelings for this other man. How could I not? Sexual encounters are psychologically traumatic and emotionally powerful. Whenever I had several successful encounters with the same man, I began to develop love for him.

This love was not *romantic*. I was not, nor would I in most cases ever be, interested in setting up house, baking cookies, gazing into one another's eyes, or adopting children with him. But it was love. And it was love that was born out of sexual objectification through our mutual lust. Interestingly, we found our way to each other's souls by using one another as tools. It was second only to my connection to my partner, my best friends, or my psychiatrist. So much for feminist objections to sexual objectification.

One has to feel sorry for straight men. I strongly suspect my observations of gay men apply also to straight men. My suspicion gains still more credence when I consider literature, film, and pornography involving straight men. Straight men seem to scrutinize women exactly the same way gay men scrutinize one another across the room at a sex club. However, women are aliens from another planet. Almost always, their gaze seems to mean something completely different. What that is, I cannot entirely say, but judging by the trouble Christian had with Anastasia in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, this means that straight men have all sorts of problems gay men simply don't have.

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