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A very British carnival: women, sex and transgression in Fiesta magazine

ATTWOOD, F.

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**A very British carnival: women, sex and transgression in
Fiesta magazine**

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Abstract

This article addresses the claim that pornography's theme is 'male power' and the recent counter-claim that pornography may embody transgressive potential. It pursues the apparent contradictions in these claims by focussing on a specific pornographic text, the British downmarket softcore magazine, *Fiesta*, and locating it in relation to other forms of sexual and non-sexual representation. In considering the text's relation to other 'mass' and 'low' texts, 'bawdy' and 'carnavalesque' sensibilities, it becomes possible to establish its particularly British and vulgar representation of sexuality which relies not only on its sexual content, but on a 'dirty style' in which notions of sexual propriety are self-consciously transgressed. The analysis of *Fiesta* plays particular attention to the role of women's bodies and a mode of 'dirty talk' as key elements in its representation of sexuality which illuminate the rather abstract claims made about pornography's structures of dominance and transgression.

Key Words

Pornography, British, transgression, carnivalesque, objectification, *Fiesta* magazine, representation of women, low texts, bawdy, dirty talk

Vulgar Pleasures

Despite an extensive and ongoing debate about pornography, surprisingly few analyses of individual pornographic texts exist. Questions of regulation, harm, and 'effects' have tended to outweigh those of generic composition; pornography is most often discussed as a social and political problem rather than a mode of sexual representation. Those textual analyses which have been undertaken have tended to focus on pornography's visual content as the chief indicator of its significance; content which, as many feminist writers have noted, positions women as sexual objects or 'things' for men (Griffin 1982, Dworkin 1999, Kuhn 1985). 'The major theme of pornography', writes Andrea Dworkin, '...is male power' (Dworkin, 1999:24), figured in its insistent portrayal of woman as an object, 'used until she knows only that she is a thing to be used' (Dworkin, 1999:128). However, in some recent studies the

notion that pornography expresses relations of male dominance and female submission has been challenged, its potential for the transgression of sexual norms emphasised and questions of pornographic style and sensibility foregrounded (Kipnis 1996, Penley 1997). While each of these approaches have stimulated valuable debate, both tend to conceptualise pornography in rather abstract terms. There is clearly a need for new work which attempts to remedy this kind of abstraction by contextualising various types of pornographic texts in relation to forms of production, distribution and consumption, but this paper attempts something rather more modest, the examination of a single issue of *Fiesta*, as an example of a popular pornographic sub-genre, the British downmarket softcore magazine. My aim is to examine the magazine's style and content in the light of those accounts which stress pornography's 'dominant' or normative characteristics, and of those which stress its 'transgressive' features. In this way, I hope to accomplish three things: to locate this text in terms of its cultural status and its relation to existing forms and traditions, to examine the text as a mode of sexual representation, drawing attention not only to its status as a 'problem', but to its regimes of visual imagery, linguistic features and ways of 'speaking sex', and to investigate the extent to which the influential notions that pornography is *either* oppressive *or* transgressive are of use in making sense of such a text.

The question of sensibility is an important one in the attempt to understand pornography as a transgressive form, and to situate it as a mode of sexual representation which can be related to other cultural forms. While pornography's sensibility has attracted little critical attention, it is often this which is implicitly evoked as the sign of its offensiveness. Attempts to distinguish between pornography and art, or pornography and erotica may be complicated by their similar content. They may be equally 'sexual' and equally 'explicit', in these cases, a style which is held to suggest an 'intention to arouse' enables the act of categorisation to take place. The low quality attributed to pornographic, as opposed to artistic or erotic, sensibility is clearly signified by the soubriquets, 'dirty magazine', or, 'mucky book', which refer not only to the genre's visualisation of the body as disordered and grotesque or to its smutty and explicit language, but to its provision of cheap thrills to an audience portrayed as 'brutish' and 'voracious' (Kipnis, 1996:175). Porn texts are texts whose pages are stuck together, a 'realm of the profane and mass culture where sensual desires are stimulated and gratified' (Nead, 1992:85). But while pornography can be located at the very bottom of a cultural hierarchy, beneath 'tabloid TV, the *National Enquirer*, Elvis paintings on velvet', the lowest of low class things (Kipnis, 1996:174), it also

shares the status traditionally ascribed to forms of mass entertainment which are imagined to offer 'satisfaction at the lowest level' (Leavis & Thompson, 1964:3) and a low style found, and denigrated, in other cultural texts and forms of entertainment. For example, its attempt to 'move the body', like 'the weepie and the thriller, and also low or vulgar comedy', relates it to other socially reviled popular genres (Dyer, 1992:121), while its emphasis on and eliciting of vulgar pleasures can also be found in forms of entertainment such as the pantomime and fun fair (Carter, 1995, 1982).

It can be argued that it is the vulgarity of such pleasures, lacking in 'class', concerned with physicality and sensation, spurning sophistication and intellect for excess, thrills and fun, which marks the distinction between dominant and popular aesthetics, high and low cultural forms. As Angela Carter notes, the separation of this kind of 'fun' from the more 'obscure', 'swooning' and 'elevated' delights of erotic pleasure seems to depend on the association of the former with cheap thrills and with 'the working class, as defined from outside that class' (Carter, 1982:110-113). The vulgar pleasures of 'the straightforwardly sexual' (Carter, 1982:113) which pornography purveys most directly have led some theorists to categorise it as a transgressive or carnivalesque form. Laura Kipnis identifies a number of carnivalesque elements in porn; an obsession with excess, an inversion of established oppositions and of official hierarchies, and a fascination with a body which is 'insistently material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal' (Kipnis, 1996:132), while Constance Penley notes that what connects porn with other American vulgar texts is its 'lumpen bawdiness', 'based in a kind of humor that features attacks on...middle-class ideas about sexuality, trickster women with a hearty appetite for sex, and foolish men with their penises all in a twist, when those penises work at all' (Penley, 1997:99). Leon Hunt traces a similar bawdy tradition in Britain, recycled in seaside postcard art, music hall and the work of comedians such as Benny Hill (Hunt, 1998); a British tradition, according to publicity for the sex comedy, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner*, of 'good, naughty laughter' (quoted in Hunt, 1998:118). In her discussion of the Carry On films, Marion Jordan identifies some characteristics of this 'tradition of English working-class humour'; a 'grotesque exaggeration and repetition' of stereotypes, rude puns, a 'masculine view of the world', an anti-work, anti-middle-class, anti-education stance, a 'resistance to 'refinement' and an 'insistence on sexuality, physicality, fun' (Jordan, 1983:312-327). In texts like these, anxieties about male sexuality surface, despite their masculine viewpoint. As Penley and Dyer note, men are often depicted as foolish and impotent, caught

between the 'female sexual energy' of the 'harridan' and the uncontrollably arousing 'busty blonde' (Dyer, 1985:34-35).

A recognition that pornography's bad reputation can be connected not only to its sexism, but through its relation to these mass and crass traditions of bawdy is a useful starting point for considering the contradictory nature of pornographic texts. Pornography and other bawdy traditions may embody a masculine view of the world, but they may also mock and undermine it. What is more, the perceived lowness of porn may derive in part from its association with the working classes, its celebration of the physical and its determined upending of social and cultural values, in particular those of social refinement and cerebral endeavour. These features, it is argued, appear to signal some kind of transgressive potential. The notion that pornography transgresses social and cultural norms sits uneasily with feminist analyses which stress its conformity to dominant ideologies of sex and gender, however, and it is this apparent contradiction which I want to pursue in relation to *Fiesta* magazine. In order to do this, it will be necessary to locate *Fiesta* in relation to the categories of pornography and bawdy more precisely, and to describe its particular brand of carnivalesque transgression.

The Bawdy World of *Fiesta*

Textual analysis is particularly useful in debates about pornography, not only as a means of reading specific texts, but in isolating features of style and content which are shared with other forms of representation. At the same time, this kind of analysis directs attention to the variety within the pornographic genre. Sweeping statements about pornography's relentless objectification of women or its embodiment of patriarchal structures of dominance and submission cannot be borne out by a detailed examination of the many different types of pornography which exist. Equally, and despite the links made between porn and low cultural forms above, not all pornographies will be transgressive, carnivalesque or even bawdy. Two examples given by Jennifer Wicke in her discussion of the pornographic genre's 'internal divisions and distinctions' clearly illustrate this. Whereas 'the intricate confessional medical mode of a publication like *Forum*' which 'builds verbal fantasy worlds out of middle-class managerial and professional milieux, interlaced with a vocabulary of the aesthetically upscale' cannot really be located within the sort of bawdy tradition which I describe above, magazines dedicated to the depiction of enormous breasts which 'are caught up primarily in extending the genre of the sexual pun...related to a working-class British tradition of pun and rhyme melded to sexual content',

clearly can (Wicke, 1993:68). A similar contrast can be drawn between a British 'upmarket' porn magazine such as *Mayfair* which packages sex and women as glossy, classy commodities and its 'downmarket' counterpart, *Fiesta*, which revels in a dirtier, bawdier 'cheap and cheerful' celebration of the physical (McNair, 1996:120). Distinctions may also be drawn between downmarket texts; a comparison of *Fiesta* with its American counterpart, *Hustler*, reveals it to be far less overtly political, less antagonistic, less 'gross' and less sexually explicit than *Hustler* is.

Such comparisons are useful in situating *Fiesta's* brand of carnival in relation to a variety of traditions and sensibilities, and show it to be not only a 'mass', 'low', 'bawdy' 'carnavalesque' 'transgressive' or 'pornographic' text, but a form of textual carnival associated with a particular nexus of British, downmarket texts concerned with fun, 'naughty laughter', ordinary everyday life and the working class. In particular, it can be noted that while general similarities exist between texts categorised as pornographic or bawdy, variations in emphasis, focus and style can also be found within differing cultural contexts. What emerges, even from this brief overview, is the difficulty of generalising about what pornography 'is' and the necessity of specifying what elements typify a particular sexual representation. In the case of *Fiesta*, the tendency to articulate the desire for transgression in a rather playful, awkward and self-conscious manner and to contain that within an imaginary 'everyday' world is one of the elements by which it can be located within a British bawdy tradition which encompasses both mainstream and pornographic texts. The precise extent to which British and American bawdy traditions differ in relation to this characteristic is clearly beyond the scope of this paper; however, this difference is certainly borne out in a comparison of downmarket pornographic magazines such as *Hustler* and *Fiesta*. While *Hustler's* political satire, its anti-clericalism, its attacks on privilege and its obsession with the pleasures of the polymorphous and abject body give it a prominent and scandalous position within American culture, *Fiesta* attracts little public attention. Its concerns are with everyday pleasures rather than public affairs and its portrayal of these is far more closely related to other British mainstream representations of sex, the body and of women than *Hustler* is to its mainstream counterparts. Thus, while Kipnis' depiction of pornography as an 'outlaw' or outrageous cultural form is clearly borne out by a publication like *Hustler*, the idea that pornography per se is transgressive must be more precisely established in relation to *Fiesta* magazine. The self-conscious 'rudeness' which *Fiesta* displays is a characteristic which Hunt describes as a '*not-meant-to-be-*

seen' quality (Hunt, 1998:93), absent from a text like *Hustler*, though endlessly recycled in many British representations of sex, particularly in sexploitation films, sex comedies, seaside postcard humour, and in the *Carry On* and *Confessions* films. In all of these, sex is a vulgar and naughty pleasure to be pursued in the context of ordinary, everyday life, but one in which 'the promise...of sexual freedom' is signposted as 'a fleeting aberration' (Jordan, 1983:317); a carnival paradoxically represented as common place and forbidden territory.

Fiesta magazine announces its particular brand of sexual carnival through the visual style of its cover page, which is eye-wateringly bright and garish. A half-dressed female model displaying the 'come-on' look traditionally associated with soft-core pornographic address is set against a pulsating background of fierce red, yellow and blue. There are no subtle, erotic overtones here; standing at the gateway to a world of treats and greedy consumption, she invites the reader to 'Go on, Give your trousers a treat' and 'Slaver over FOOD & SEX'. Inside, the treats of soft-core photosets, reviews of sex shows and interviews with porn stars are set alongside more mainstream magazine fare; book and music reviews, cartoons, jokes, competitions, a horoscope and crossword. 'Reader input' is prominent in the form of letters and pictures of 'Readers Wives'. The combination of mainstream editorial categories and sexual content creates an overall effect of a 'bawdy world', an effect heightened by Fiesta's downmarket, light-hearted and vulgar 'comic-book' tone (Hardy, 1998:52). While the fantasy world of many magazines, pornographic and non-pornographic, is constructed as a world of exotic, affluent celebrity, Fiesta's realm is one of resolutely 'ordinary', accessible, physical, everyday pleasures. Outside or inside, models are displayed in the most mundane settings; living rooms, bedrooms, front drives, amongst road sweeping equipment. Readers are introduced to other 'Reader's Wives' who are 'thrusting their bums up From Glasgow to Sidcup' (Fiesta, p.3). Sex takes place within the routines of work, domestic and social life, at office parties, in the suburban home, at friends' houses. If this is a carnivalesque scenario where every encounter leads to messy, rude, noisy pleasure and where every body gapes, squirms, pounds and gushes, it is a carnival with its feet firmly on the ground. Peopled by 'bored housewives' and handymen, Fiesta displays surprising common ground with other popular fictions which stress the ordinary transfigured; with the paperback romance whose characters are 'in a constant state of potential sexuality' (Snitow, 1995:191), and with the pantomime where 'everyday discourse...has been dipped in the infinite riches of a dirty mind.' (Carter, 1995:384). This is a particular brand of carnival in which ordinary life becomes a fiesta because of

the endless opportunities which can be filched from the routines of life for physical pleasure - for sex and laughs - a utopian and vulgar practice of everyday life.

Although it is possible to locate Fiesta's version of carnival in terms of its ordinary, everyday, working class and British characteristics, its frame of reference is not contemporary British life, but the British bawdy tradition itself. 'Real' and fictional low worlds collide throughout the magazine; the Assistant Editor greets a reader's account of the sexual encounters of plumbers with the cry, 'Fuck me, it's Robin Asquith!' References to the Seventies' star of the Confessions films, to mothers-in-law, 'cracking birds' bored at home, their 'hubbies' at work 'on the rigs' and to 'nookie' give the Fiesta world a curiously outdated, backward looking, nostalgic feel. Many of its cartoons and jokes reproduce the conventions of the seaside postcard, though they are more explicit, and photosets are framed by text dripping with word-play, puns, and dirty jokes which call to mind an older tradition of British comedy, with its slightly anxious, robustly chauvinistic, naughty tone. Here is an account of a meeting with photoset model, 'Justine'.

'We met at the shoot, got on like a house on fire, and went for a little romantic wander prior to her sodding off forever. One thing led to another and, before you know it, we were getting intimate in a way I'd hardly ever experienced without paying for the privilege.

"Tell me, Julie," I said, in my most seductive voice, "how do you like the feel of a real man's cock?" "It's Justine," she said. "Well it's as far in as it'll go, love," I replied, "so you'll have to make do." (Fiesta, p.105)

This tone of voice, like the dirty jokes it recycles, betrays a view of the male body forever in search of pleasure, but forever foolish and failing to deliver (Dyer, 1985:36). Despite this, it persists in its mockery of other sexual styles of presentation; of the romantic, the beautiful and the erotic. The Fiesta investigation into 'splashing', the practice of combining food and sex, makes this so clear that it is worth quoting at length.

'To some there is a gentle, delicate relationship between sex and food. The divinely suggestive vulva-like appearance of mussels and the phallic impudence of asparagus tips dripping with white sauce fuel flights of fantasy. Erotically-charged foods pre-empt long evenings of languid seduction. Not in *Fiesta*. The closest we get is having a woman in a butcher's shop taking a chopper to an over-sized salami or giving a frankfurter a gob-job. You see, when it comes to sex and food, there is another school of thought to all that sublimated psycho-symbolism gubbins. In short it goes something like this: get a gorgeous girl, any

female come to that, dress her up in a butcher's smock, or as a dinner lady, or don't bother dressing her up at all, cover her tits with whipped cream, smear jelly in her juicy bits, baked beans in the gusset, have a bun fight and fill her cleavage with raspberry jam.' (Fiesta, p.23)

Fiesta's carnival style is constructed within a frame of reference which encompasses an existing repertoire of British low culture texts and through the rejection of other sexual styles and sensibilities. The effect is to bring sex down to earth, make it basic, cheap, ordinary, easily available - not mussels and flights of fantasy, but baked beans in the gusset. Yet its transgressiveness has clear limits; it is not so crude and excessive as to down tools and have a real holiday and while it asserts its vision of sexual utopia as one which is so self-evidently base as to be 'real' and 'true' about sex, its self-conscious naughtiness and obvious anxieties about female pleasure hardly suggest repression cast aside. If this is a fantasy of fun, it is one in which 'half the fun of the thing is the guilt' (Carter, 1982:111) and in which even carnival, even sexual utopia, cannot secure pleasure for women. 'Justine' is still left to 'make do'.

'You make my pants damp': Women and Sex in Fiesta

Many feminist accounts of women's representation in pornography emphasize their 'graphic depiction' as 'vile whores' (Dworkin, 1999:200) and the obsessive spectacularisation of their difference and sexual pleasure (Kuhn 1985, Williams 1990). In downmarket porn texts, the representation of woman as whore and as sexual object has a specific significance, upending the convention of woman as beautiful object and the repository of domestic value. Downmarket porn like Fiesta overturns idealized views of women as asexual and refined, wiping these out through a fascination with a female body composed of 'leaky' orifices rather than 'laminated' surfaces (Nead 1992, Kipnis 1996), and through their portrayal as sexually insatiable. In Fiesta, the figure of the 'Reader's Wife' is particularly significant in this respect. Far from connoting women's maternal, familial and domestic significance, the Reader's Wife represents the sexualizing of these roles and the sexualizing of all possible relationships with, and indeed between, women. Age, occupation and kinship are no obstacle to women's inclusion in Fiesta's world; 'Wives, mistresses, girlfriends, aunties, grannies, even the mother-in-law - they're all in the wonderful Readers' Wives' (Fiesta, p.123). Professional or amateur, celebrity porn star or girl next door, whore or virgin, the place of women in Fiesta is always and only ever sexual.

This erasure of differences between good and bad women, so crucial to many other mainstream representations of femininity, clearly and transgressively turns all women into sexual spectacle; 'all social constraints...deliciously sacrificed, dissolved by sex' (Snitow, 1995:195). Notions of sexual ownership of individual women or of marital fidelity are also undermined; the Reader's Wife is clearly for sharing, as the captions, 'This is your wife' and 'Readers' Wives Striptease' indicate. The conventional significance of the heterosexual couple is overturned; its 'private' and exclusive sexual relationship becomes promiscuous, public and accessible within the world of the magazine. These transgressive elements do not simply work to upend ideals of domesticity and romance, but also appear to enact a fantasy of sexual equivalence. The depiction of Fiesta women shows them to be as sexually eager and active as their male counterparts, represented visually in a desire to 'show off' to readers, and through their narration of explicit stories of sexual adventure. While Fiesta's imagery may be understood in terms of the convention of woman as spectacle and of a fascination with sexual difference (Kuhn, 1985), the narratives set out in the form of readers' letters work rather differently. Whether attributed to male or female authors, these feature roughly the same number of male and female narrators, the same number of male and female sexual performers, and tell virtually the same story. Fiesta narratives appear to demonstrate male and female sexual similarity; indeed it can be argued that a key feature of the Fiesta fantasy is the insistence that women's sexual desires are *the same as men's*.

Andrea Dworkin's description of the pornographic portrayal of women as 'vile whores' is interesting in this context. Clearly, the 'dirty', 'filthy' 'cunts', 'bitches' and 'sluts' figured in Fiesta's advertising and the 'lovely lasses' of its photosets embody an insistence that all women are whores, yet the fantasy of promiscuous sexual equivalence and the absence of clear positions of male dominance and female submission within the text undercut any sense of the objectification and degradation of women for men which writers like Dworkin and Kuhn identify. What is more striking is the use of women's bodies and voices to personify a carnival world which celebrates the vulgarity and lowness of bodies, relationships, sex and pleasure. This world is also characterised by a type of 'dissolved' utopianism which Linda Williams identifies in some hardcore porn films, achieved through women's sexual agency and insatiability, through endless sex, through the 'banishment of the ill effects of power in pursuit of cheerful pleasure' (Williams, 1990:178). All the same, as the figure of 'Justine' indicates, all is not well in this Paradise. This sexual utopia where desire appears to be satisfied

without complication, envy, disappointment or failure is shot through with anxieties which surface, predictably, in Fiesta's jokes and cartoons. The joke, 'Why is a blow-job like a plate of lobster thermidor? They're both very nice, but you don't often get them at home', draws attention to the 'fleeting aberration' of Fiesta's sexual carnival, while images of an old man unable to perform sexually and of a 'young brickie' who 'cemented his prick' in a wall offer an interesting contrast to the sexual abundance and success celebrated elsewhere. Men's pricks are 'all in a twist' after all. In another cartoon, 'Nobbem Hall', a young couple is attacked in a wood by a pack of sexually voracious 'dogs'; hairy, scrawny, muscular harridans with huge biting mouths - an image which seems to cry out for an analysis using the 'psycho-symbolism gubbins' which Fiesta mocks.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Fiesta's depiction of women is the way in which they are used to represent its utopian *and* dystopian fantasies, to stand for sexual difference *and* equivalence, and to embody convention *and* its overturning by carnival. 'Woman' becomes a sign of pleasure-seeking, release from the constraints of domesticity and respectability, bodily celebration *and* of fearfulness and distaste. The concept of objectification still pertains here, not particularly in the sense of woman as an object to be sexually abused by man, but in the broader sense of woman as an 'object' which stands for sex. This use of women as representational currency appears to extend to the whole range of sexual practices referred to in Fiesta, from the 'soft' sexual display of the photosets, through the narrated accounts of group sex and 'lesbian' sex, to the adverts which offer kinkier, more perverse pleasures. Differences between sexual practices become erased in the sense that women are used to represent them all; to stand for desire, the body, pleasure, sex itself in all its variety. An advert for phone sex sums up the elasticity which women's bodies appear to possess representationally for their male viewers; 'We will perform every sex act imaginable. Wank with us as we live out your fantasy' (Fiesta, p.46).

Talking Dirty

As I have indicated, the representation of sexuality within a magazine like Fiesta depends not only on its sexual content but on the representational style employed, an element generally overlooked in discussions of pornography. An examination of Fiesta's 'dirty', 'naughty' style is crucial in terms of locating its carnivalesque sensibility and in making sense of its representation of sexuality and gender. Fiesta's dirty style depends heavily on a self-conscious notion of propriety transgressed; the

debasement of romantic, aesthetic and domestic ideals, the transfiguration of the ordinary and everyday, a commitment to the pleasures of the body and a sense of submerged guilt and anxiety. It is expressed in the downmarket 'home-made' presentation of women's bodies in everyday settings, in the visual language of garish colour and cartoon, and also in the linguistic features of the magazine. Fiesta's linguistic features, its narrative structures and styles and its mode of dirty talk are particularly interesting for their construction of a very specific bawdy sensibility.

The 'porn narrative' has been characterized both as an absence which simply provides 'as many opportunities as possible for the sexual act to take place' (Carter, 1979:13) and as the goal directed narrative par excellence (Dyer, 1992:127), a structure in which narrative 'climax' is overwhelmingly important. Much of Fiesta's speaking of sex may be understood in terms of a journey towards climax, most economically in the narrative structure of advertising which exhorts its readers to 'Phone, Wank, Spurt' and at a more leisurely pace in readers' stories which amplify that journey through the orchestration of a variety of partners, sexual positions and orgasms. The notion of 'narrative as goal' is dependent to some extent on the visual depiction of women's bodies as the landscape for the journey taken by the male subject, yet the use of female narrators and the presentation of women as active subjects in pursuit of their own pleasure works to undercut any clear association of masculinity, subjectivity and dominance. Moreover, while the spectacle of women's bodies throughout the magazine appears to employ the notion of woman as a necessary object for the achievement of male pleasure, the particular linguistic low style of dirty talk used in Fiesta may undercut what is often seen as the dominant specularly of pornography - its emphasis on visual distance between an active male surveyor and passive female object - through an attempt to represent 'what sex feels like' on a visceral level.

Fiesta's dirty talk is characterized paradoxically by an apparent transparency of sexual style which relates it to a notion of 'hardcore' or 'real' sex and a heavy reliance on the innuendo, double entendre and cultural references which link it to a British bawdy tradition. Its transgressiveness is inflected in both of these directions. The use of a transparent style composed of plain and vivid terms emphasizes the dirtiness, hardness, immediacy and vitality of sex in marked contrast to the languid, hazy prose of erotica. This reinforces a sense of sex as overwhelmingly physical and straightforward, appearing to strip away 'meaning' and 'emotion' from act and sensation and evoking sex as a tactile and noisy practice firmly rooted in flesh. It is a kind of carnivalesque poetry of

the body which celebrates its rudeness, its gushing, slurping, grunting and panting, and which relates Fiesta's carnival to the 'Rabelaisian transgression' which Laura Kipnis identifies in Hustler (Kipnis, 1996:133), and perhaps also to the desire to embody what a sexual utopia of energy, abundance, intensity and transparency 'would feel like' (Dyer, 1992:17-34). The journey towards climax is fragmented and short-circuited through the repetition of dirty words and phrases, overwhelmed and interrupted with moments of 'premature', incoherent pleasure. This dirty talk is also crucial in overcoming the severe legal limitations surrounding the production of British pornographic imagery. In Fiesta, crude and explicit language functions to incorporate a sense of 'hardcore' or 'real' sex into a visual regime which necessarily depends on softcore images of female sexual display, however 'downmarket'. It is sex talk which comes to signify real sex and sex-as-transgression. Advertising text becomes the repository of the sexual 'perversions' which literally cannot be depicted and the prevalence of adverts for phone sex underlines the limited pleasures of visual representation which can be offered within the magazine itself. Indeed, the magazine offers itself as a bridge between the reader and the really dirty sex he is imagined to desire; the 'dirty talk' of phone sex is 'guaranteed' to do what the magazine's visual imagery cannot. In this move, aural sex becomes the 'real thing' in which, as one ad puts it, 'Hearing is Believing'.

Dirty talk may be understood in terms of its transgressive, sexualizing function, but in Fiesta, that talk also depends on linguistic cues which relate it back to a British carnivalesque sensibility which is always mindful of the taboos it appears to be breaking. Comic innuendo and double-entendre serve as a kind of verbal striptease in which the crudity of sex is endlessly revealed and obscured, marking off what is apparently celebrated as straightforwardly sexual as actually improper, comical, naughty, guilt-ridden. This insistent signposting of the magazine's textual 'dirtiness' plays a major part in drawing attention to its own transgressive status and in constructing the '*not-meant-to-be-seen*' quality of this type of pornography. Seen, but not-meant-to-be, spoken, but not-meant-to-be, sex is recuperated both as a straightforward pleasure and a source of distaste and guilt. In particular, it is women's bodies and voices which are made to signify in this contradictory and self-conscious way. Fiesta's women hold out the promise of pleasures which are always marked as dirty and always somehow 'elsewhere'. Its sexual carnival is offered as a 'fleeting aberration', real and fantastic, accessible and out of reach, everyday life and outlaw country.

Readers' Wives

Throughout this discussion, I have tried to emphasize the contradictory nature of Fiesta which is expressed through the very particular kind of carnival world it constructs. Although the text is clearly marked by a desire to transgress all manner of social and sexual norms, my reading of Fiesta suggests a great deal of ambivalence about that desire. Indeed, the more Fiesta revels in its transgression of social and cultural values; sophistication, intellect, sexual propriety, domesticity, sexual difference, the more it reveals an anxious awareness of the boundaries it appears to be breaking, and an inability to imagine this as more than a fleeting moment of naughtiness. Women's bodies and voices become crucial signifiers of this ambivalence - of bodily pleasure and a squeamishness about the body, of cheerful transgression and its anxious recognition, of an insistence on speaking sex plainly and on the unspeakability of sex.

For Fiesta, the figure of the Reader's Wife bears the particular burden of this ambivalent signification as its principal object and its representative subject, the point at which the carnival is apparently anchored in real life. Here, women appear to be incorporated as real participants in the carnival they represent, not only as visual objects, but as subjects asserting the right to speak sex. The transgressive potential of this downmarket strategy is clear, yet its main function seems to be, as Simon Hardy notes, to provide men with imaginary access to women, 'both in the conventionally understood sense of objectifying the female body through the image and in the generally overlooked sense of representing the subjective aspects of female sexuality through the text' (Hardy, 1998:69). It is the framing of women's sexual speech which perhaps betrays the real limits of Fiesta's transgressiveness and the tremendous anxieties which underpin its construction of a sexual carnival. For while the magazine appears to enact a fantasy of equivalence in which both men and women celebrate the body and its pleasures, its incorporation of readers' voices tells a different story. Readers' letters are segregated by sex; men's letters provide a point of 'Interchange', while women's letters occupy a space titled 'I Confess'. This marking of men's talk as plain speech and women's talk as confessional currency is further emphasised in the magazine's appeal to women to provide 'your raunchiest confessions' for a phonenumber aimed at 'our readers'. In contrast, male readers are invited to 'Listen...as they confess the sordid details of their most outrageous sexual encounters...' (Fiesta, pp.123-129). This dual address both frames and underscores the ambivalent and contradictory nature of Fiesta's carnival, its insistence on pleasure as guilty and in particular, on women's

pleasure as outrageous. This is not merely the 'methodological defect' of porn written by and for men, 'a manual of navigation written by and for landlubbers' (Carter, 1979:15), but a sleight of hand in which Fiesta's apparent celebration of female sexuality is recast as sordid detail and the female subject is transformed into subject matter. It is also, finally, in this positioning of its carnival in the marketplace, that Fiesta maps out its relation to women, to readers and to the real.

As Linda Williams points out, 'the modern age's compulsion to make sex speak' (Williams, 1990:30) has a long history, yet elsewhere in contemporary culture, 'the mere fact' of women speaking desire 'is not enough to sustain a story' (Williams, 1990:31) any longer. In Fiesta, despite the marking of sex *talk* as the 'real thing', the intersection of a magazine fantasy of sex and a real sexual fiesta beyond its pages, it is ultimately men's talk which is framed as real speech about real sex - male readers' letters are 'real alright' (Fiesta, p.11). In contrast, the reader is advised to approach the women's letters with caution, 'Just how true they are is something you'll have to decide for yourself' (Fiesta, p.95). In this very British carnival it is women's bodies, stories and voices which are required to 'speak desire', yet despite their visibility they are not meant to be seen, and despite their verbosity they are not meant to be believed. As 'reader's wives', women are transformed into fantastic creatures telling fabulous tales. The 'mere fact' of female sexual desire is only a dirty joke after all.

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