



The Watchful Eye

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Economic Disaster, Environmental Disaster And the Sexualization of Girls

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Americans have had many causes for anger and concern in the last two to three years— causes so dramatic as to make an issue like the sexualization of girls seem to some people almost to be “a luxury sort of social problem.” People are both worried and enraged by the economic meltdown and the housing crisis that accompanied it; the bailouts of the big banks and the automobile companies while many small “main street” businesses went bankrupt; the recovery of some of those big players, such as Goldman Sachs, so that the people who caused the problem seem to be the only ones not still suffering from it, and now the enormous tragedy of the Gulf Oil Spill.

Furthermore, following these events have been the ongoing reports of malfeasance among the government officials employed to prevent the various disasters that have overtaken the country. News sources have published that internal investigations show that Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) workers—senior workers who were drawing salaries of \$99,000 to \$223,000 annually—spent literally hours at work each week using government computers to watch pornography, and their watching seems to have gone up as the economy tanked. The online blog “Politicsdaily” reported cases like: “One unnamed regional staff accountant tried to access pornographic websites nearly 1,800 times in a two-week period, the IG report said. Another unnamed worker, a senior attorney, admitted to downloading porn for up to eight hours a day -- so much that ‘he exhausted the available space on the computer hard drive and downloaded pornography to CDs or DVDs that he accumulated in boxes in his office,’ the Inspector General’s report said.” <http://www.politicsdaily.com/category/scandal/>) The *New York Daily News* reported that “An accountant was blocked more than 16,000 times in a single month from visiting ‘sex’ or ‘pornography’ sites, but still managed to amass a collection of ‘very graphic’ material by using Google to bypass the SEC’s internal filter. He wound up with a 2-week suspension” (Istandora@nydailynews.com). Similarly, Jake Sherman of *Politico* revealed that employees of the Minerals Management Service, the people who were supposed to monitor Gulf oil drilling, were engaged in garnering large personal favors from the companies they were supposed to be regulating, doing drugs on government time, and exchanging some 300 e-mails with links to pornographic sites (<http://www.politico.com/index.html>, 5-25-10).

With the United States and the world facing both severe crises and the failure of elected officials to do their duty, what can justify giving attention right now to the sexualization of girls? The answer is that these crises, these truly monstrous events, are not unrelated to the ongoing social practice of the sexualization of girls.

The answer was pointed to some years ago in a prescient essay by Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic,” in her collection *Sister Outsider* (1984). What all these events have in common is that they are linked by a prevalent and pervasive *misuse* of the erotic in our culture. Lorde (1984: 54) argues that we have as a culture have misunderstood and misdefined the erotic, limiting it to experiences around genital sexuality: “The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation” and “confused . . . with its opposite, the pornographic.” But the erotic for Lorde is much larger than sexuality, which is one form it may take. The erotic is about the way we experience a life happening; it is, she writes, “an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having exercised the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (1984: 54). This internal sense of satisfaction can come to us in many ways—gardening, cooking, writing, swimming, singing and also, in an ideal world, doing our daily jobs. The essence of the erotic is that we lose ourself in the doing, we blend fully with the experience, we flow, we feel as actress Maria Schell said of peace, “that time does not matter as it passes by.”

In Lorde’s argument, that is just the reason that a world defined by an ever-expanding quest for profit resists this full sense of the erotic and wishes to package it to people as existing only in sexual encounters or their sham in pornographic viewing. Because if people are really in touch with the full meaning of the erotic in their lives, as a fullness in the moment, they will want that experience in all aspects of their life—in their work, in their education, in their civic encounters, in their leisure, in their experience of art—and that demand will make them unsatisfied with bureaucratic time-serving and work done not for its own sake but purely for profit.

The sexualization of girls is one part of a larger cultural pattern that seeks to buy people off as cheaply as possible, to deny them the erotic and to give them instead the pornographic. The government employees who failed the country were caught up in a system that sells sexual (mis)adventure or pleasure as the reward of work and denies one the real reward which is pleasure in the doing. But the erotic is not a reward; it is the thing itself. Resisting the sexualization of girls is one step in resisting a corruption that urges us constantly to see what we can get away with rather than what we can aspire to. That millions of citizens, that the wildlife and sea life of the Gulf and beyond have now had their fate determined in part by a bunch of sad men staring at a computer screen, hoping the pornographic can give them the erotic, should make us all care about the issue of the sexualization of girls. The sexualization of girls is tied to a larger cultural pattern that diminishes us all by denying the ultimate worth of immediate daily life, of doing our jobs well, and insists that to prove ourselves successful we must seek cheap, illicit thrills—like watching porn at work.

We need to remember that we have the right—and the duty—to find fulfillment in our everyday life. And if we live in a culture that denies that, we need to think about changing that culture.