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Gender Society 2003; 17; 691

DOI: 10.1177/0891243203255604

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MEN ARE MUCH HARDER Gendered Viewing of Nude Images

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Drawing on 45 interviews, this article addresses how heterosexual men and women respond to and discuss opposite and same-sex nude images in distinctive ways. Viewing both female and male nudes provides an opportunity to observe the sexual and gender identity work men and women perform when confronted with this cultural object. Both men and women have access to shared, readily available cultural scripts for interpreting and responding to female nude images. Neither men nor women are culturally adept at the interpretation and use of nude male images, particularly the man in the soft porn frame. Men respond to this male nude with overt rejection and stated disinterest. Women are more likely to reject the seductive advance or welcome it with attached feelings of guilt.

Keywords: *body; nude; pornography; images; gender*

Recent scholarship in the sociology of culture has paid a lot of attention to issues of audience interpretation or the construction of meaning (Griswold 1987; Liebes and Katz 1990; Shivley 1992). The issue of cultural use has similarly garnered attention (Beisel 1992; Corse 1997; Griswold 1987; Long 1986; Radway 1984, especially chap. 4). The two literatures obviously intertwine since what people use culture for influences their interpretations of it. Little of this research, however, has seriously considered systematic differences in how men and women both interpret and use cultural works. I investigate both how men and women interpret nude images through highly patterned, gendered lenses and, simultaneously, how the process of interpretation allows men and women to construct their sexual identities.

Through focused interviews with 45 people, I demonstrate that heterosexual men and women respond to and discuss opposite- and same-sex nude images publicly (i.e., in the presence of an unknown researcher) in distinctive ways. Both men

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1997 International Visual Sociology Association meetings in Boston. For their comments on an earlier draft of this article, the author wishes to thank Jill Fuller, Sharon Hays, James Davison Hunter, Karin Peterson, Bess Rothenberg, and Saundra Westervelt. For their assistance on later versions of this article, the author wishes to thank Sarah Corse, Shari Dworkin, Fletcher Linder, and the anonymous reviewers at Gender & Society.*

GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 17 No. 5, October 2003 691-710
DOI: 10.1177/0891243203255604
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and women have access to shared, readily available cultural scripts for interpreting and responding to female nude images (it is part of the “cultural toolkit”) (see Swidler 1986), although there are gendered differences in those interpretations and responses. Neither men nor women, however, are culturally adept at the interpretation and use of nude male images; they have particular difficulty commenting on the male in the soft porn pose. Thus, some images of male nudes require more “work” by individual viewers because cultural scripts are less readily available. The process of viewing nudes provides a clear opportunity to observe the sexual and gender identity work men and women perform when confronted with this cultural object.

The research presented here is an extension of an earlier study that investigated the significance of the frame in one’s reception of nude images (Eck 2001). That project asserted that there are three frames that help one understand nude images—art, pornography, and information (e.g., medical texts). In addition, the commodified frame of advertising provides an increasingly important fourth frame. In that earlier work, I argued that frames come to adhere to images. The content of an image is important, but the meaning of the content is importantly aided by the context. For example, one female nude (Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*) is recognized as art because of the conceptual frame that surrounds her: the old-looking paint that conveys her body and position, her body shape that suggests a model from a past time, and her pose that harkens back to a particular period of art. These cues frame her and instruct respondents on how to understand her: She is to be revered, admired, kept in the sacred realm of art, where the bodies are not presented for sexual pleasure. Thus, the context and content of nude images exist in a dialectical relationship.

My earlier work, then, was concerned with how people apply a variety of frames to nude images. I now ask, what other resources, in particular gender, do people draw on when making sense of these images? What do men and women do differently when they look at images of nude men and women? How do these different ways of seeing simultaneously allow for the mobilization and elaboration of identity work?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historical prevalence of female nude images cannot be denied (Berger 1977; Bordo 1993; Callaghan 1994; Clark 1985; Nead 1992; Pollock 1988). The availability of these nudes has affected how men and women receive them. Both understand that the female nude is there to be looked at, an active process by the assumed male viewer (De Lauretis 1987; Gamman and Marshment 1989; Metz 1982; Modleski 1982; Mulvey 1975) and that she invites the gaze, the passive position of being viewed (Berger 1977).

Looking at the nude is an interactive process, one that calls on individuals to “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987)—to “reflect or express” who they are. For

men, gazing at images of nude females helps to remind them of their masculinity (Dines 1992; Kimmel 1990). For women, gazing at these same images offers them lessons on how “women” look. However, the viewing experience for women is more complicated than it is for men. As Betterton (1987, 3) suggested, “Women have an ambiguous relationship to the nude visual image. This is because they are represented so frequently within images yet their role as makers and viewers of images is rarely acknowledged.”

Understanding the viewer/viewed experience as outlined above has come under criticism from Bordo (1999). She noted that “passive” does not describe what is going on when one is the object of the gaze. “Inviting, receiving, responding . . . are active behaviors” (p. 190). Furthermore, attention to appearance involves a lot of hard work and is about more than “sexual allure”; it also indicates one is disciplined and has “the right stuff” (p. 221).

While female nude images are prevalent in society (though their positioning as active or passive may be disputed), the opposite is true of male nudes. These images are less common and less available for objectification (Coward 1985; Davis 1991; Saunders 1989). However, Bordo noted the recent increase in images of nude and scantily clad men, particularly in fashion advertising. She argued this increase is not a response to heterosexual female pleas for more naked men but a product of the gay male aesthetic—gay photographers “eroticizing the male body, male sensuousness, and male potency”—as well as the buying power of gay men (Bordo 1999, 183). While Betterton (1987, 11) asserted that when women are given the opportunity to view nude males that “power and control are not so easily reversible” as who “has the power to look is embedded in cultural forms,” Bordo suggested the same uneasiness for men. “For many men,” Bordo (1999, 172) stated, “both gay and straight, to be so passively dependent on the gaze of another person for one’s sense of self-worth is incompatible with being a real man.” A similar assertion has also been made by Coward (1985) and Davis (1991), who argued this is because men have controlled who looks at whom.

In fact, looking at nude men can call into question men’s own heterosexuality. For example, Pronger’s (1990) examination of heterosexual and homosexual men in sport suggests that all men, gay or straight, look at one another in locker rooms. However, the men he interviewed said that they were taught early on that one should not get caught looking lest he be thought a “fag.” If he looks too long or likes looking, it raises serious questions about his sexual identity and, hence, his masculinity. Similarly, Kimmel (1994, 133) stated, “The fear—sometimes conscious, sometimes not—that others might perceive [men] as homosexual propels [them] to enact all manner of exaggerated masculine behaviors and attitudes to make sure that no one could possibly get the wrong idea about [them].”

For women, looking at men is complicated as well. Disch and Kane (1996) noted there can be ramifications associated with “peeking excessively” at naked men. To look critically at men goes against the feminine role and disrupts the power relationship. Everyone seems more comfortable when a woman gives up her authoritative position and assumes a docile one.¹

Bordo (1999, 177) noted that women “are not used to seeing naked men frankly portrayed as ‘objects’ of a sexual gaze.” Women are just learning to be voyeurs. Although women may be more accustomed to seeing male bodies, they are not as accustomed to having those bodies “offered” to them.

In short, the literature suggests that men and women have a certain facility with viewing images of nude women but lack the same vocabulary and comfort level looking at men. What happens, then, when men and women confront the male nude image in a public setting?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study involved in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 45 people collected through snowball sampling. Given the potentially “delicate” nature of the research, I found it useful to be introduced to potential interviewees by acquaintances or previous interviewees. This method also allowed for purposive selection of respondents to ensure appropriate distribution across gender, age, and education. My sample included 23 men and 22 women (see Table 1). Most of the respondents were non-Hispanic white, with 2 African Americans, 1 Mexican American, and 1 Korean American in the sample. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 65 and were roughly divided between those younger than 35 and those older. The interviews took place in various locations including New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, California, Virginia, and the District of Columbia where a snowball sample was started in each.² Half of my respondents held a high school diploma as their highest degree, and half held at least a bachelor’s degree, with a significant minority holding advanced degrees at the time of the interview. I interviewed the majority of my respondents individually but also interviewed 5 couples to explore the effect of gendered interaction on the interpretive work I was asking interviewees to do. The interviews averaged 1.5 hours.

I presented the respondents with 23 images of the nude drawn from four contexts—medical texts (information frame), “adult entertainment” magazines (pornographic frame), mainstream magazines (commodified frame), and art books (art frame) (see the appendix for a list of images). I arranged the images in sets of two to four, grouped by similarity of pose and subject matter.³ The selection of the images was both purposive and exploratory. That is, I wanted to ensure some similarity of pose as the initial project was focused on the importance of contextual cues, and I wanted to be sure the images came from a variety of sources; however, I was not concerned with including particular periods of art or specific magazine titles. I selected images with attention to poses, positions, and mediums. For example, I selected an “artistic” image of a pregnant woman to juxtapose against the commercially stylized photograph of Demi Moore nude and pregnant on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine. Each image was color xeroxed to a similar size, pasted onto a neutral background, and laminated. During the interviews, I passed each set of images

TABLE 1: Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Women (n = 22)	Men (n = 23)
Mean age	37 years	38 years
Education		
High school	12	11
B.A.	4	3
M.A./M.S.	3	5
Ph.D.	3	0
M.D.	0	2
J.D.	0	2
Religion/spirituality		
Religious	10	8
Spiritual	7	6
Both	2	2
Neither	3	7
Political affiliation		
Conservative	4	8
Moderate	8	9
Liberal	7	3
Libertarian	0	2
Socialist	1	0
None	2	1

to the interviewees so that the respondents controlled the length of time they viewed each image.

The larger study, within which this research is located, was focused on complicating the simplistic public discussions that revolve around publicly funded art. Those discussions frequently focused on the "types" of people in the debate, classifying those who defend Robert Mapplethorpe's work as "art," for example, as "pedophiles" and those who do not as "Christians" (Eck 1995). Missing from those discussions was the important role context plays in the interpretation process. Hence, the focus of the interview asked respondents to identify and discuss the origin of each image and its social meaning. In most cases, viewers knew the correct origin (e.g., images from *National Geographic* and *Penthouse* were easily identified as were images from "art books"). Other times, respondents guessed (e.g., the Calvin Klein ad was thought by some to be a photograph taken during the depression). The following gender analysis exists within that interview framework (see Eck [2001] for an examination of context on the interpretation process). The initial questions and discussion of context were followed by (1) a discussion of art and pornography (e.g., How does one define each of these concepts?), (2) the respondent's cultural consumption habits (e.g., Does one read a newspaper? How much does one watch television?), and (3) questions about the respondent's religious and political orientation as well as his or her positions on a variety of social issues (e.g.,

homosexual parenting, condom availability in public schools). The original design was set up to see if “types” of people and their interpretations of nudes could be so easily classified. I did not ask respondents about their sexual orientations. Only two men, a couple, volunteered to me that they were homosexual. This couple had been together for five years, and both of the men were physicians. Their reactions to the body are complicated by the confluence of these two factors, and so in this article I only focus on assumed heterosexual responses.⁴ An examination of homosexual responses is certainly warranted by another study.⁵

There are some limitations to this study. Because of the small sample size, I hesitate to make generalizations about how men and women view nudes, and I cannot make any claims about nonwhite respondents as a group. The sample is mostly white and heterosexual, and so the important work of intersecting gender with nonwhite racial and ethnic cultures (and the corresponding standards of beauty and ways of looking) is not done here. Within this study, the responses of nonwhite respondents did not vary from those of the white respondents. It should also be noted that most of the subjects in the images were white, with the exception of a Robert Mapplethorpe photograph (*Thomas*) and the two images from *National Geographic* (for some discussion about race within the images, see Eck [2001]). Furthermore, a retrospective view from this inductive analysis suggests that there are surely more pointed questions that could be asked. However, this exploratory work does begin to shed light on how heterosexual men and women understand and, hence, interact with images of nudity, particularly male nudity.

I first turn to a discussion of how heterosexual men and women view female nudes. Because of the existing research on the viewing of female nudes, my summary is relatively brief. The bulk of my discussion focuses on the less studied topic of both genders viewing male nudes.

LOOKING AT WOMEN

The first set of images that respondents in this study see contains four bodies, all photographed. Cindy Crawford poses on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, arms crossed over her bare breasts. The image is cropped at midthigh, and a piece of fabric covers her pubic area. Calvin Klein model Kate Moss faces the camera in an ad, cropped at the waist, one bare breast exposed. There is also a black-and-white photograph of former bodybuilder Lisa Lyon taken by Robert Mapplethorpe. She is coming out of the water fully nude. Finally, the set includes a heavy-set woman photographed by Hattie Hartigan. She is seated, her nude body three-quarters exposed to us. The second set of female images that respondents view includes reclining nudes—Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, a *Penthouse* nude, and a black-and-white photograph of Demi Moore from *Vanity Fair* magazine.

Men, as previous researchers have demonstrated, view the female body with a sense of ownership (Berger 1977). They interpret female nudes as objects of pleasure

or derision and by so doing reproduce and sustain heterosexual masculinity on a daily basis. Men's status as "men" is reaffirmed every time they encounter and pass judgment on the female form. Consider the following comments from men about Cindy Crawford, Lisa Lyon, and Kate Moss. "I think she's beautiful physically. Personally I think she is attractive." "I like that. That's what we dream about." From an older man, "She's a good-lookin' girl." One man repeatedly told me that Cindy Crawford is a "professionally sexy, good-looking woman." Conversely, men's responses to the Hartigan nude dismiss her as a potential candidate for desire, quickly labeling the image as "art"—an antiseptic term that removes the body from potential erotic pleasure (Nead 1992). When men look at these images, they reveal no sense of embarrassment or self-consciousness in rendering an opinion on these models. They assume a culturally conferred right to evaluate the female nude—as do the female respondents.

The Cindy Crawford and Lisa Lyon images elicit these comments from women: "I wish I had a body like that," or "She's an attractive woman. I'd love to look like that." Many women echoed this response from 26-year-old Sophie:

If I'm waiting in a doctor's office I'll open up a *Glamour* or a *Mirabella* or something but I really don't buy them. I think it's more, just the portrayal of these thin models and I just get depressed. . . . I'm very hard on myself, wanting to be that way.

Like the men, the women I interviewed look at the female nude with an evaluative eye. Unlike the men, their eyes were simultaneously on their own appearances. Women viewers use female nudes to reflect on their own bodies and whether these bodies are acceptable to themselves and others. Because the definition of the "ideal" female body is partly imposed from the outside (e.g., the media, other women, and men), evaluating, judging, and even obsessing about the body are part of being female. In viewing the image of the heavier woman, women, like men, first define her as art. About one-half of them then use pejorative terms such as *repulsive*, *unattractive*, or *ugly* to describe her. Finally, and importantly, they often identify with her. For example,

Oh this is what I'm going to look like in 10 years. (Rachel, 56, newspaper editor)

Well, this is unfortunate because I am disgusted by it because she is fat, but I'm also, it's right after Christmas and I need to lose about 10 pounds so it's a sensitive issue. (Roxanne, 29, legal assistant)

I don't necessarily find her body that attractive. She is overweight. Her stomach looks like mine (*laughing*). (Lori, 31, lobbyist)

I don't think this is done in good taste. . . . Americans [*sic*] now it's showin' us that thin is the way. And thin is healthy and I've lost 60 some pounds myself lately because I'm getting into my 40s and it's all in how you carry yourself and what you feel about yourself. (Paula, 38, short-order cook)

For women, female nudes are objects to be studied, viewed, judged, and, above all, used as a comparison for the self—"her stomach looks like mine," and "I need to lose 10 pounds myself." Women both view the image and respond as if the image represents a part of themselves being viewed. Becky, a 42-year-old librarian, is a little heavier than the other women in my sample. She identifies fully with the Hartigan nude, but her negative reaction is not toward the image itself but toward how society evaluates that image. "I always say I was born in the wrong century. I need to go back to a time when men appreciated women like this." She indicates that it is men who would not appreciate a body like this, a body like hers. Women judge other women based on what they have learned makes the female form pleasing to men. Furthermore, women's expertise on female forms raises no alarms or challenges to female heterosexuality. Only one respondent made it a point to tell me she was not a lesbian. Tammy noted,

I think that women are beautiful creatures. And, maybe I think that just because I am a woman, I am not really sure. I don't have sexual tendencies toward my same sex so I don't want that point to come across, but I think women are beautiful. I really think God knew what he was doing when he made us.

Both men and women in this study easily find a language with which to discuss the naked female image. For men, this everyday practice of viewing allows them to enact their heterosexuality and their power; for women in my sample, this practice is more complicated, suggesting a sensitivity toward and even passive acceptance of external definitions of female beauty and desirability. Both genders, however, talk freely about female nudes in a way that they cannot do when confronted with the male nude.⁶

LOOKING AT MEN

Viewing male nudes in classical Western art allows for a separation, a physical distancing between the viewer and the viewed. Thus, when asked to comment on a fifth-century B.C. sculpture of a sleeping satyr, respondents have little to say past "it's art." It does not seem imposing, threatening, or particularly relevant. Viewing contemporary male nudes, however, is another matter.

My respondents look at two sets of the male nude. The first set includes three images of frontal poses including a fifth-century B.C. sleeping satyr sculpture, a twentieth-century painting by Lucian Freud, and an image from *Playgirl*. All of these men are sitting/reclining with legs apart and one hand behind their heads. The second set includes a side-view photograph by Mapplethorpe of a man leaning on a podium (*Thomas*), a photograph titled *The Boxer* in which the shading all but conceals the genitals, and a photograph of Sylvester Stallone posed as Rodin's *Thinker* from the cover of *Vanity Fair*. The images are handed to the respondents stacked in this order.

Although the respondents in my sample have the opportunity to comment on six images of men, the image that receives the most reaction is the *Playgirl* nude. This is unlike viewing images of women in which comparable time is given to each. They comment on the other images primarily as they relate to this soft porn pose. For men, this is apparent as they are viewing the images. For example, Jamie, 31, looks through the first set of images and comments,

My initial reaction is of course less positive because I am less interested in looking at nude males than nude females. This looks like it came right out of *Playgirl* or I don't know what they call the equivalent women's magazine.

All of the images are not as pleasing to look at as the images of women are, but the *Playgirl* image is the one that he will use to talk about the others; it is the one he is drawn to first. Similarly, Gary, 32, notes on being handed the first set of images, "Hmm. Men are much harder. This one is definitely out of a porno." This practice of commenting on the *Playgirl* image first occurred for one-half (12) of the men in my sample, the half who laid out all the images first rather than discuss them in order. Interestingly, this ordering of responses happened with only six women. Most of the female respondents were like Rachel who laid out the images and said, "This is the high end [sculpture], this is in the middle [painting], and this is totally exploitative [*Playgirl*]." Women's use of the *Playgirl* image to talk about the others came out later in the interview, when images were discussed more generally and respondents were asked about their level of comfort looking at images. Men also used this time as an opportunity to return to the image.

The male response to the *Playgirl* image is more uniform than the female response. A couple in their late 20s offers an illustrative case. They sit at the dining room table of their Cleveland apartment mulling over the first set of male images presented to them. In the following interview excerpt, they are discussing the first set of male nudes.

Brian: I have no feeling about any of these pieces.

Holly: What do you mean?

Brian: I have no response. I have no response at all. Big deal. I don't know what to say. So what?

Holly: You know I think he's a good-looking guy [*Playgirl*] but I would rather just see him like that (*she covers up the bottom half of the photo with her hand*). That kind of turns me off a little bit.

Brian: I don't care for any of them. I have no feelings on it. . . . I can't comment much on the male body because I have a male body.

Holly: Why? I commented on the female.

Brian: Yeah. But it's different for a guy. It's different.

Holly: No it's not.

Brian: Guy looks at another guy and goes "so what." I bet you look at another girl and go "so what."

Holly: I actually don't. I pick her apart like crazy.

Brian: Really? It's different between guys. Big deal. That's a guy. So what.

Holly: Alright. If you say so.

Three key points are illuminated by this exchange. First, Holly mistakenly assumes that when Brian views men he will mimic her response to women and “pick [them] apart like crazy.” She is surprised when she finds that he does not and that he has no other way to discuss them. Second, Holly covers up the lower half of the image from *Playgirl* because she is uncomfortable with exposed male genitalia (at least in front of a stranger). She says that it “turns her off.” Third, Brian mentions several times that he is a “guy” and as such has “no response.” Both Brian and Holly are reciting bits of the social script. For Holly, her female identity involves her ability to judge, evaluate, and compare herself to female images. It also involves a certain caution about looking at naked men. Brian must be careful too. Whereas Holly seems repulsed and maybe embarrassed, Brian suggests there is something troubling about one man looking at a nude image of a man. These three themes reverberate through the responses in this study. I now turn to a broader discussion of men viewing male nudes.

“I Like Women”

Heterosexual men respond to male nudes in two ways—with overt rejection and with stated disinterest. Both responses construct a hypermasculinity, with more than one-half of the men in this sample implicitly distancing themselves from homosexuality. They also indicate that because they “don’t go looking” for images of men, viewing them is just not something they are used to doing. Their responses suggest that when men look at both women and men they affirm their heterosexual masculinity—in the first case by gazing and evaluating and in the second by not gazing and evaluating. Looking at male nudes involves more elaborate responses than those responses directed toward female nudes. Only two men in my sample noted that they had the same level of comfort looking at nude men as they do nude women. Gary, a 32-year-old floral arranger, had told me that “men are much harder” when looking at the *Playgirl* nude, but when I asked him if he had a different level of comfort looking at same-sex versus opposite-sex images he said, “It doesn’t matter. Really.” Sid, a 58-year-old stockbroker, noted, “I mean that doesn’t particularly bother me. I don’t see very much of the same sex.” What these men note is not a preference for male images but a stated indifference to them. Most men, however, were like Jorge, who stated, “Definitely I like to look at women.” When asked if this meant he was uncomfortable looking at men, he said, “No. I just like women.”

Interestingly, men do not identify with naked male images the way women identify with naked female images. For example, the sample of male images contains well-defined bodies as well as one overweight individual. Only one male remarked, with reference to the heavy male, “That’ll be me in 50 years.”⁷ And only two men in my study identified with the well-built men. For example, Arthur, a 38-year-old professional manager who defined himself as a “stick-up-the-ass-preppie-type,” noted, “This is a stud. I would love to look like him.” But it is Arthur’s subsequent discussion of male nudes that speaks to viewing as a means of affirming his

masculine heterosexuality. Being interviewed along with his wife Cassie, a college professor, gives him some freedom to admire the male body without fear of being seen as a homosexual. But he can further assert his machismo through his language.

Arthur's response below is to an image from *Playgirl*, and it provides a useful illustration of his efforts to maintain a "manly front" (Kimmel 1994).

You have to be careful with nudity. So looking at Demi Moore for sort of 10 seconds is okay, but looking at this guy's balls for more than 5 seconds might be a bit much. I mean, you look at that and someone's going to say, "What color are his eyes?" Fuck if I know. But "How many testicles does he have?" Two. "Is he circumcised?" Yeah.
(Arthur)

Here, Arthur is trying to distance himself from the sexually seductive male in the photograph. He cannot help but notice "this guy's balls," but he has to be "careful" about doing so. He is not overt in his identification with the model the way most women were in their discussions of female nudes. He does not talk of fear or hope for himself when encountering this image. Rather, Arthur, along with the other men in my sample, speaks awkwardly about the image and in doing so reflects his discomfort and perhaps disassociation with man as object. More important, the chance to state the way he receives this image provides a site where his own heterosexual masculinity can be demonstrated. This masculinity precludes looking "for more than 5 seconds."

Similarly, let's return to Holly and Brian and listen to Brian: I ask them if they have a different level of comfort looking at same-sex versus opposite-sex images. Holly, like most (16) of the women in my sample, would rather view women and so would Brian, like all but two male respondents (again these exceptions did not prefer looking at men but simply did not have one preference over another). Now remember that Brian stated that he could not really comment on men because he is a man. He told me later in the interview, "Yeah, I'd rather look at the opposite sex. I would rather look at a picture of a girl than a guy." I reminded him that when he looked at the pictures of men he set them aside and announced he had no reaction to those. I asked him what he meant by that. Holly interjected, "Are you afraid that if you look at it too long we'll think you're gay?" Brian laughed in response to this, "I just don't care for this. He's a man. I have what he has and as far as the pornographic issue, it does nothing for me. Big deal. Big deal. I'd rather see this" he said, stabbing the image of Lisa Lyon with his finger.

This exchange highlights how heterosexual men respond to images of male nudes. Brian begins by noting, "He's a man. I have what he has." This is a quick acknowledgment that he sees some of himself in the image. Unlike women's compulsive self-reflexivity in viewing female nudes, however, with attendant comments about themselves and how they compare, Brian brushes quickly past a similar opportunity for comparison. He moves on to stress that it does "nothing" for him. The male as the object of the picture is meant to sexually titillate. Men are not used to viewing other men in this position and refuse the opportunity for doing so.

In fact, more than half of the men I talked with stated they were virtually unable to comment on the male form. Two stated their heterosexual orientation explicitly, as if that explained their inability to comment. Others made implicit reference to their sexual preference by noting how they were raised or that they "like women" as a way of justifying their lack of response to the male nudes. One man noted,

Well, that one don't turn me on. . . . And if I had to exercise my imagination and say where did it come from for somebody who painted something like this I would say that maybe it is someone who is part of the gay community.

This comment explicitly connects the nude male positioned for display as only accessible through the homosexual gaze. This is stated even more emphatically by Arthur:

OK, I am a product of society and guys who take too much interest in guy's anatomy are voyeurs at best and gay at worst and in a lot of the world which I have to occupy, for better or worse, gayness is not a highly regarded lifestyle. And I do find, yeah, I do have a different level of comfort. I would not say that I recoil at men's naked bodies but to sit here and gaze at it for too long would make someone suspect my character.

That men reactively construct their heterosexuality through a disavowal of interest in male nudes can be further illustrated. Jack is 60 years old. Retired from the Navy, he now works as a benefits counselor for the service. I ask him if he has a different level of comfort looking at same-sex images versus opposite-sex images. He says,

I think so. I'm more comfortable looking at a woman's picture. But I think that's part of your makeup. My belief is that human beings come in every possible degree of totally heterosexual all the way down to homosexual and all the way back up the other side again. Some people are asexual. So I think, I don't find myself uncomfortable but I would think that if I found that the male pictures were more attractive then I would have to wonder about my own sexuality which I don't normally do.

Other men also allude to not having to wonder about their sexuality when they note that nude males are "less appealing" than women, that they "don't do anything for them," and that naked men make them "less comfortable."

Hank's comments illustrate this point. Hank is a native Virginian. He is retired from the food service industry. He told me that we have always seen naked women because "it's reality. It's the way it is." He told me that he "actually stumbled into a bar in New Orleans about 30 years ago with a buddy" of his, and indeed there were paintings of naked men there. I asked him if he stayed.

No. I didn't care for it because I figured it was either a queer bar or a transvestite bar and that's what it turned out to be and I was with a good friend from high school and he said something like "let's get the hell out of here and go see some women," and I said, "Yeah. I don't think we want to stay here too long."

Hank makes it quite clear that real men should not want to be in bars where naked male images are displayed. Those places could never be associated with a heterosexual environment, one with “real men.”

Older men are not the only ones to speak uneasily about the male nude. Matt, 32, admits that I really threw him when I introduced the pictures of men: “It was like wow! Am I going to see old people next?” For Matt, images of naked males and naked “old people” occupy the same space in the margins—unusual and inappropriate objects for viewing.

The male voice is concerned, perhaps even alarmed, that his viewing of the male will be misconstrued. Male viewers fear that looking at or thinking about male nudes may say something inaccurate about the kind of men they are. Jamie, 31, states this even more explicitly than Jack, Matt, or Hank. Jamie and I sat at his kitchen table in New Hampshire to discuss the images:

I don't want to look at any contemporary pictures of a nude male. . . . I'm just a bit uncomfortable looking at a man who is trying to be looked at kind of sexually and so I find it mildly uncomfortable staring at it for too long. (Jamie)

With that, Jamie's mouth gave way to a slight smile, and he covered up the image from *Playgirl* with a female image.

If looking at men forces these men to actively, and even defensively, construct their heterosexuality in elaborated ways, what does it ask of women?

The Tables Turned

Unlike the fairly uniform responses men gave to the sexually available male nude, women's responses are more complicated. I find that women respond in three ways—a few welcome the advance, some are attracted but with feelings of guilt, and some reject the seductive image altogether.

Three women in my sample said that looking at images of naked men is or could be stimulating.

Am I blushing? Yes. Um, is it done in bad taste because the genitals are showing? He has a nice body. I would definitely say pornography. . . . He has a fantastic body (*laughs*) and the genitals are not bad either (*laughs*). . . . Yeah, he's attractive; I guess you can say your pulse is elevated. (Paula, 38)

As far as when you get into *Playgirl*, *Playboy* and all of that, sure I can look at the pictures and get physically turned on, stimulated anyway, and I can read the nasty articles and realize that it's garbage, but the trick is working. I've read this a lot, totally nasty, scummy articles and I've felt bad. I've felt perverted because I was being stimulated but then I really tried to just let it go because I don't see it as a bad thing. (Zoe, 26)

I'm more uncomfortable looking at the male image because I am a woman and I know my body and it's uncomfortable in that yes, I find an attraction or I'm excited to see the male part so maybe it makes me uncomfortable. (Sophie, 28)

While Zoe and Sophie can be stimulated by images of nude males, they still must work out their feelings of shame. The three women are anomalous, however, as most of the women I interviewed were not accustomed to looking at images of men in terms of arousal and found the idea "absurd." For example:

Well, it's like Chippendale dancers and these women, I said, gosh, I don't. That doesn't do anything for me. I don't see how anyone can get excited about that. I don't know. I guess maybe I'm weird. (Diane, 46)

I just think it's absurd. . . . I just can't imagine this would arouse any woman. I think they would look at it and laugh. . . . I had this friend in college who used to get it [*Playgirl*] and I think a lot of times women will get it for the shock value. I don't know. I've never heard of anybody getting it because they really enjoy it, although maybe they do and they are embarrassed to say. I don't know. But I had a friend who had a few of them in college and I had never seen them in my life and almost died and then one day someone brought one in here [workplace], I can't remember which one, and it was just really ridiculous (*laughs*). . . . We were all laughing. I mean, it's ironic because I assume they sell quite a few magazines. I can't imagine why. There's no appeal whatsoever. So, I would imagine people buy it as a joke. (Roxanne, 29)

Debbie said the same about *Playgirl* when she noted that her brother bought a subscription for her when she was in college, as a joke, and all the girls would run down the hall to her room to see the forbidden. She continues,

I see the purpose of *Playgirl* being the same as *Penthouse*, but maybe women aren't as desperate as men. I think *Penthouse* subscribers are really lonely old men or teenage boys who really haven't figured out how to get girls yet. Maybe very lonely and ugly (*laughs*) 20- and 30-year-olds and maybe that's not true but I see sort of *Penthouse* is desperate. *Playgirl* is sort of harmless but not really serious in any way. I don't think *Playgirl* has the subscription rate and there is only one of them and that sort of tells you something right there. There's only one magazine that exploits men for women and yet there are all these [magazines that exploit women for men], there are a lot of them. (Debbie, 34)

While *Playgirl* might be adult entertainment for women, these two women suspect that few women take it seriously—or even know what to do with it. This comes across in the responses from other women. Women, like men in my sample, lack the tools to speak about these images of men, particularly the *Playgirl* male. They speak of the offensiveness of male genitalia and the comparative comfort they feel looking at nude female images. The women in my sample also acknowledge that if they saw images of men more often than they might come to view them as easily as they view female images. As Debbie puts it,

I think I'm just more used to looking at nude women than nude men because that's what we're barraged with. I think we're sort of indifferent, well, maybe not indifferent but it's much more acceptable to go out and see a nude woman than a nude man just because everywhere we turn there are images of nude women. We're taken to museums and we're told, "Well, it's OK that she is naked because she's art."

As a woman it is OK to look at nude women because “everywhere we turn” there they are. In fact, many are even taken by the hand to museums and instructed on the appropriateness of looking at naked women. Debbie notes how extensive this education is by bringing up *National Geographic*.

As long as they were dark brown it was okay to see naked women. *National Geographic* is a very standard middle-class magazine. We had it; all of our friends had it in their homes. There were never naked men. So we grew up with that idea, that it's OK to look at naked women and not naked men.⁸

By omitting or de-emphasizing images of nude men, high culture and popular culture inform women—and men—of who is the appropriate object. Peggy, 51, an administrative assistant in a university town in Ohio, makes the same statement: “I'm more comfortable probably looking at women rather than men. I think that I'm shy. And just a cultural thing. It's OK to look at women but it's not OK to look at men.” In this context, it is not “OK,” and perhaps not desirable, for women to assume the role of actor/aggressor/maker in this relationship.⁹

Men and women are both uncomfortable viewing male nudes, but their discomfort is different. Diane, a 44-year-old legal secretary from Cleveland, states,

Well, as much as I hate to admit this, I don't much like any of these. That's my personal feeling. Of course, I feel that the male body is not real attractive to look at (*laughing*). That's really sexist, but other than muscle form it does nothing for me.

Diane notes the male form “does nothing for her.” She does not mean this in the same way the men mean it when they look at women. Not one man said that the female body is “not attractive.” Heterosexual men in my sample evaluate all kinds of women in terms of sexual arousal—whether a particular woman does anything for them. Diane's statement is a blanket one—“I don't much like any of these.” Any of these. The male body, male genitalia in particular, is offensive to her. As Becky notes, “I don't know. I'm just not into men's genitalia. . . . It's just not something I enjoy looking at. . . . It's like, excuse me, I would rather you didn't point at me.” For men and for the women who feel ashamed or embarrassed, then, looking at the male nudes raises fears about identity and sexuality. But the fears are different. Men fear too long a gaze will suggest a homoerotic interest and thus a homosexual identity. For women, the fear is that the active subject who captures the nude male in her gaze is not a properly heterosexual, “feminine” subject.

From the responses above, it appears that the men and women in my sample demonstrate the inadequacy of the scripts available to them. Men, over and over again, reject the seductive advance. While some women welcome the advance, most feel a combination of shame, guilt, or repulsion in interacting with the image—or, at least, in doing so publicly. It is worth noting that this response spans age categories. Younger women in the sample are not any more adept at viewing these images. Furthermore, it appears that these women have been socialized to find

the naked male body unattractive, perhaps by men themselves as Coward (1985) suggested. At the same time, they acknowledge that if they saw the male body more often they would be more comfortable in their role as the viewer here.

CONCLUSION

There is a dialectical experience in viewing nudes. Gender informs how one looks, and how one looks informs gender, particularly as it is linked to sexual identity. Individuals use nudes to comment on the acceptability of a sexual advance. When women view the seductive pose of the female nude, they do not believe she is "coming on to" them. They know she is there to arouse men. Thus, they do not have to work at rejecting an unwanted advance. It is not for them. They look at her and respond to her with longing ("I wish I looked like that") and fear ("I can't look like that"). The casual way that men respond to female nudes suggests that the assumptions of male heterosexual judgments prevail without much question. Women may resent these images, they may uneasily identify with them, but they are also accustomed to the mundane practice of viewing them and accepting them. The way men assume the active subject in this relationship and all that it entails barely warrant comment. The man reaffirms his masculinity by conferring judgment as well as his heterosexuality by showing that he is, as one respondent said, "headed in the right direction."

Nude male images are more difficult. Because viewing male nudes, particularly in seductive poses, is still unusual, the respondents stumble through their responses (with laughter, embarrassment, and even disinterest). Their very hesitations and embarrassment indicate the incomplete and fragmented cultural scripts on which they are relying. Because these men are used to being the subject in the viewer-viewed relationship, they reactively construct a hypermasculine heterosexuality when the viewed object is male. The male viewer must distance himself from the male object, speak about his own sexuality to reassert his privilege, and stress that "men don't interest me." Even though they know that *Playgirl* is an "adult entertainment magazine for women," these men cannot dismiss the seductive pose of the male nude the way women can in the reverse case.

Women, in my sample, are unaccustomed to taking on the role of subject in the viewing experience. However, whether they are repulsed, indifferent, or intrigued, women are active viewers. These women are working to evaluate and assess images as well as actively producing their own responses. The produced response is of a "feminine" sexuality—hesitant, shy, disinterested.

If certain frames come to adhere to images making the content and context one, then it appears from examining gendered responses to the *Playgirl* nude that this is one subject that does not fit the frame. The pornographic frame (context) is presumed to encompass the female body (content). With the *Playgirl* image, the pose is right, the look is clear, but the genitalia are all wrong. Female respondents in this study suggest that they might be aroused by the male in the soft porn pose if they

were more familiar with it. Only then would this image fit the frame for them. However, it is not clear from this research that men are on their way to blending the two. What is desirable is constructed in and reflective of the dynamics of power (MacKinnon 1987). Examining how men and women view nude images guides our attention to how desire is structured, how sexuality and identity are linked, and how object-subject relations are still gendered.

APPENDIX

List of Images

Set 1: Female frontal

1. Cindy Crawford [C], cover of *Rolling Stone*, 23 December 1993 to 6 January 1994
2. Kate Moss [C], Calvin Klein ad, inside cover of *Elle Magazine*, August 1994
3. Lisa Lyon [A], 1990 (Kardon, Janet, ed. 1994. *Robert Mapplethorpe: The perfect moment*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania Press)
4. Photograph by Harriette Hartigan [A], 1993 (Haldeman Martz, Sandra, ed. 1994. *I am becoming the woman I've wanted*. Watsonville, CA: Papier-Mache Press)

Set 2: Female reclining

5. *The Venus of Urbino* [A], Titian, 1536 (Bohm-Duchen, M. 1992. *The nude*. London: Scala Publications)
6. Female reclining [P] in *Penthouse*, September 1994
7. Demi Moore [C], black and white, inside *Vanity Fair*, 1992

Set 3: Male reclining

8. "Sleeping Satyr" [A], plate 157a (Sismondo Ridgway, Brunilde. 1990. *Hellenistic sculpture I: The styles of ca. 331-200 b.c.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press)
9. Male reclining [P], *Playgirl*, September 1994
10. Male reclining [A] (Lampert, Catherine. 1993. *Lucian Freud: Recent work*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery)

Set 4: Male focus on musculature

11. Sylvester Stallone [C], cover of *Vanity Fair*, November 1993
12. *The Boxer* [A], by James A. Fox (Weiermair, Peter. 1988. *The hidden image: Photographs of the male nude in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)
13. *Thomas* [A], by Robert Mapplethorpe (Weiermair, Peter. 1988. *The hidden image: Photographs of the male nude in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)

Set 5: Anatomy

14. Anatomy diagram of woman [I] (Boston Women's Health Book Collective. 1984. *The new our bodies/ourselves*. London: Touchstone)
15. Anatomy diagram of man [I] (Anson, Barry J. 1992. *Morris' human anatomy*. 12th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill)

Set 6: Nursing females

16. Woman breastfeeding [I], photograph (Launois, John. 1972. "Stone age caveman of Mindanao," *National Geographic* 142 (2): 244)
17. Woman breastfeeding [C], cover of *Life* magazine, December 1993

Set 7: Pregnant females

18. "Pregnant Nude" [A], by Imogene Cunningham, 1959 (Ewing, William A. 1994. *The body*. San Francisco: Chronicle)
19. Demi Moore [C], cover of *Vanity Fair*, August 1991

Set 8: Children

20. Boys playing soccer [I], photograph (Conger, Dean. 1971. "Java: Eden in transition," *National Geographic* 139 (1): 34)
21. "Jessie McBride" [A], by Robert Mapplethorpe (Kardon, Janet, ed. 1994. *Robert Mapplethorpe: The perfect moment*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania Press)
22. "Virginia at 4" [A] (Mann, Sally. 1992. *Immediate family*. Carson, CA: Treville)
23. "Virginia at 3" [A] (Mann, Sally. 1992. *Immediate family*. Carson, CA: Treville)

NOTE: [A]= art frame; [P]= pornographic frame; [I] = informational frame; [C] = commodified frame, as designated by the author in selecting the images.

NOTES

1. In Disch and Kane's (1996) analysis of an incident involving female sports reporter Lisa Olson, the authors noted how many female sports reporters play by the rules of the locker-room game. They are expected to look at the naked men parading about them but not for long. If, like Olson, they do, they may be called "dick-watching bitches."

2. A lack of resources limited my research sites to places I traveled to visit friends and/or attend conferences.

3. The respondents viewed the sets of images in the following order: female frontal, female reclining, male reclining, male with a focus on musculature, pregnant female, nursing female, anatomy diagrams, and images of children.

4. For example, in viewing the *Playgirl* nude, Thad noted, "I've seen three *Playgirls* in my life and all the men have long hair like Fabio. And it also it looks like [looking at genitals], does he shave? Probably shaves." Kevin responded, "Or at least plucks." Thad goes on to say, "Interesting that his left testicle hangs lower than his right and it's usually the other way around. I remember that from anatomy." Kevin replies, "I don't think you're right." Thad looks at the genitals again and agrees, "Oh, you're right. His is correct." While the first part of this exchange may reflect a gay male aesthetic, the rest of the exchange reflects their experience as physicians. This type of responding happened on at least four other occasions during the interview.

5. In doing this project, I had to take into account my own status characteristics as a researcher. I am a female, and at the time of the research I was in my early 30s and unmarried; hence, I wore no marital badges. I was conscious of both my physical appearance and my body language during the interviews and kept the environment as formal as possible. Doing the interviews in cold weather environments allowed me to wear turtlenecks, slacks, and blazers to all interviews. Only one respondent, a male, openly appeared to flirt with me. In a conversation about the female images, he said, "Men like to fantasize. I could have a fantasy about you."

6. I do not discuss responses to the female reclining nudes in this article. An examination of the responses to the *Penthouse* nude can be found in Eck (2001). In short, men and women discuss the *Penthouse* nude with more ease than they do the *Playgirl* nude discussed within this article. Most of the discussions about the image revolve around issues of context. Also, unlike the *Playgirl* image, the *Penthouse* nude does not garner significantly more attention from the respondents than other female nudes they are shown.

7. The overweight male is painted. It is possible men and women would have commented more on this image if it had been a photograph. However, women did comment more than men on this painting and stated that the man in the picture "looks sad." The comments by both men and women were rarely about size but about his circumstances: "Why are his sheets on the floor?" "He looks poor." "Is he in a mental hospital?" This line of commentary and lack of focus on his size suggest that "fatness" is gendered.

8. See Lutz and Collins (1993) for an examination of the dark female nude in *National Geographic*.

9. Segal (1994) noted that many women even admit that they change themselves into men when engaging in sexual fantasy. Sometimes they read homoerotic literature or construct homosexual stories that allow women to identify with both characters—the person who desires and the person being desired.

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