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What I heard about sexualisation[†]: or, conversations with my inner Barbie

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(Thinkpiece for Gender and Education Journal Special Issue on sexualisation)

Over the last few years I've spent a fair bit of time listening to people talking about sexualisation – in seminars, in conversations with friends and colleagues, in the media, for research. Some of what I've heard has made me angry, which at least offers me the comfort of certainty, of knowing what my response is. But other things have unsettled me, puzzled me, lingered on in my mind; writing this piece provided an opportunity to see where they might take me.

Let's begin in November 2010, at a seminar on the pornification of culture. A speaker is outlining her doctoral research on the activists (of which she is also one) involved in Object, which campaigns against 'sex object culture'. Their stories fall into a familiar narrative pattern: 'coming to consciousness'; the search for like-minded people; the risks, thrills and creativity of their direct actions. Her face lights up, she radiates admiration for these women, inviting us to share it. And I'm troubled, because my reactions are so different... But I'll come back to that.

A year before that, and I'm in a children's hairdressing salon in Glasgow, running a focus group for our research on 'sexualised goods aimed at children' (Buckingham et al, 2010). We'd sought out this venue because its 'pamper parties' for girls had figured in Scottish media debates about the death of childhood. It was sexualisation incarnate, then, and I'd known exactly what it would be like. Cloying pink décor, a bunch of permatanned, thirty-something women with blonde highlights, low cut tops, white skinny jeans and high heels. All worried about ageing and projecting their anxieties onto their daughters. You know the sort. *Women who diet*.

So I'm surprised to find that I like the stylish salon, with its gender-neutral colours and car-shaped chairs (boys come here too). I think: I could even bring my own daughter here! (And indeed I do, later, just to make the point). I also like the women, who are dressed-down and of varying ages and body sizes. They are redescribing the 'pamper parties'. Make-up? *Not so different from face painting*. Alcoholism-promoting 'champagne'? *Just fizzy fruit juice ... the girls prefer plain anyway*. Overall a bit of *feel-good fun*, a bit like the 'slap' their mums put on at weekends when they go out with the girls for a laugh; but safe, surveilled. And I believe them. (Later, a canny journal reviewer will note how I drop my critical guard about these bits of data specifically. Too right: *I want it to be true, for someone*).

I'm puzzled to hear the owner explaining that her adult children are successfully married and employed; and her customers, that their children are doing well at school. Why do they think we need this evidence of good character and 'respectability'? - Much later, it dawns on me: well, how else do you defend yourself against the charge of killing childhood? 'Sexualisation' as a concept and a political strategy is stigmatising. It asserts there are 'bad' sexualised, and 'good / better / healthy', attitudes, relationships, individuals, thereby encouraging alignment with the latter. But a 'good' defined primarily as '*not-them/that*' is always going to be a moveable feast – and in practice, likely to converge around some fairly conventional, mainstream mores.

But what of those denied the shield of the normative? - The question strikes me with some force during the trial of the man accused of killing Milly Dowler, when I hear how her father was forced to admit his interest in 'extreme' bondage and fetishism¹. Did the scenario proposed by the defence lawyers - that Milly ran away and was murdered by someone else, as a result of finding one of his porn magazines – rely for its intelligibility on some unspoken understanding that such deviance

[†] With apologies to Eliot Weinberger's *What I Heard About Iraq* (2005 London: Verso)

would indeed merit the severest penalty imaginable? Yes, Max Mosley can publically 'own' perversity, but his example suggests we need privilege, masculinity and power to do so. Instead of pronouncing on 'what sex should be', as I heard another Object activist do, shouldn't we be asking, as did Feona Attwood then in her gentle but perspicacious response: *who says sex should be anything?*

Back to the salon, where I hear the group passing critical judgement on others: the mother (absent) who bought Bratz shoes for her seven-year-old daughter, bad brand, heels just that little bit too high, not like those from New Look that the daughter of *this* mother (present) wears, although never for too long at a time. Popular debate makes out that choosing allegedly 'sexualised' products is ignorant and irresponsible ('blame the moronic mothers' as a contributor to the *Sun's* online forum so charmingly puts it), so it's important to appreciate that these mothers are reflective, have moral and practical concerns, just like anyone else. But it seems there's always an 'other', someone whose inferior taste and worse choices reassure you that your own are ok.

As I said, I like these women: in fact I warm to pretty much everyone I meet through the research. The parents are thoughtful, self-effacing, often wry about the contradictions they're caught up in. Although this isn't in-depth research, I hear much that moves me, at the time or later, as I put clues together. There's pleasure in the enigma of children, who're grown up before you know it. The woman who realises the gaggle of screaming, drunken girls she's frowning at include ... her own daughter. Defiance in the voice of someone describing herself as a 'full-time home-maker'. This mother's first baby was stillborn; this mother was raped as a teenager; a neighbour abused another's children. There's divorce, bereavement, illness, ageing, the struggle to get by on benefits. Here's a mother who collects erotic art; this one sings in a nightclub; has this one actually *been* a sex worker...? Students we talk to tell us: my mum wants me to be a model. A dancer.

Mostly, the parents are impeccably liberal (*it's up to the individual, I have no right to impose my taste on anyone else, if they want to do that that's their choice*). There are odd moments, however, in our research as elsewhere, when something 'breaks through'. Talk of clothes 'for *the child prostitute*'; short skirts, 12-year-old girls, '*it's like you're in the red light district*'. Tanith Carey in *The Guardian* spits about 'a *tarty* Bratz doll'. And two mothers of sons spell it out: *I don't want my son going out with that sort of girl*. Is this the dark heart of the 'sexualisation' debates, I wonder, some atavistic terror of a wrong, bad, excessive sexuality, of bad blood in the family, that must be violently expelled? - I'm detached, though: I've long since processed my bourgeois fear of the proletarian 'other'.

In schools, teachers run the classroom exercises we've devised. I'm drawn to a group of four 13-year-old girls, whose 'leader' has bleached hair, black eye liner and a lip piercing - she's cute, sharp, witty, bright as a button. She describes herself as a bimbo - 'like, the stupid people but the funny stupid'. '*But cool*', specify her friends loyally, though she's not having any of that: '*I'm just a retard!*'. When students have to evaluate different statements about sexualisation, she opts to supplement the ones we've provided: under 'agree' she writes '*teenagers should be able to wear what they want and wear how much make-up they want because they know the risks about looking older*'. Then for 'disagree': '*we disagree with girls packing themselves in make-up to get boys*'. It's entirely consistent, in one way (outsiders shouldn't interfere, insiders can say what they like), but in the focus group afterwards, I ask her about it anyway. She giggles. But *those* girls, she explains, they're Barbies: 'proper Barbie plastic doll ... their fake tans are always streaking and they think it's nice and perfect'. *They* are doing it for boys, you can tell by the way they run off to check the mirror whenever one comes near. Here's distinction, again, as with the salon mothers - that finely-tuned awareness of differences invisible to uninterested observers. However, I'm too distracted (*but she's not dumb!*) to grasp what the difference is actually about.

Fast forward to BBC Radio's *Woman's Hour* in June 2011, where our co-investigator Rachel Russell is pitted against Tanith Carey, author of *Where has my little girl gone?* (Now, I know I said

this piece wasn't about anger, but while I'm here: that title, puh-lease! Why not have the total irony bypass and go for *Won't somebody please think of the children?* Rachel is clever, thoughtful and tries to engage with Tanith, who is however impervious and delivers her lines in an unstoppable stream. Her analogy is the candy cigarettes sold to children 30 years ago; today we think 'sexualisation' is similarly harmless, but will eventually realise its cancerous consequences. So a complex phenomenon with multiple, contested manifestations is the equivalent of a packet of novelty sweets? Is that all you have to say about popular culture? Thirty-odd years ago, punk was teaching me to be slightly less racist than my parents, and Poly Styrene knew how to deal with your little girl nonsense: *Oh bondage, up yours.*

But it's not just that we need to make her views, rather than what girls do/wear/play with, the problem – although we do. It's the way mothers are positioned as the solution here. Her book blurb promises we can 'Screen out damaging messages about body image and sex ...' and 'Say the right things at the right time so she is inoculated against the worst influences of the X-rated society'. In an online article, she incites us to become 'more aware' parents and promises that 'In the two minutes you take to show your daughter how an image of an ultra-skinny model has been airbrushed, you've taught her not to try and live up to an image of perfection that doesn't exist'. *Surely you care enough to spend two minutes saving your child?*

Tanith Carey has also written Russell Brand's biography, and a book for busy working mothers featuring 'five-minute beauty tips'. She brings to my mind the exquisitely groomed Linda Papadopoulous, celebrity psychologist with her own skincare range ('lp skin therapy'), who in her *Sexualisation of Young People Review* expresses the hope that 'my little girl, indeed, all girls and boys' will 'grow up confident about who they are and about finding and expressing their individuality and sexuality but not through imposed gender stereotypes or in a way that objectifies the body or commodifies their burgeoning sexuality'.

Now, it's not that I think these women are hypocritical or insincere in their desire to make things better for their daughters. It's just that they don't reflect on how they too (meaning *all* of us) are caught up in the cultural processes they decry. Like much parenting advice issued these days, their strategies assume that parents' emotions are invested in their children, but that they are otherwise rationally detached, the neutral channels through which expertise such as theirs can flow uninterruptedly. As though parents have no complicated histories, experiences and inner lives, of the kinds I've been hearing about. How do these disrupt those positive messages you are meant to communicate to your child? Who's been looking after *your* self-esteem all this time, mummy? Is it irrational to think that your body, or your daughter's, may be a better route to a livelihood than a call-centre job in a depressed, post-industrialised, small Scottish town? And if you are truly free of any such awkward baggage, does that make you a better parent... or just a *luckier* one?

I understand this better than I once did, perhaps. Not long after my daughter was born, I was diagnosed with a brain tumour, and the operation that followed a year later destroyed my balance, my hearing and my facial nerve on one side. Along with them went any kind of symmetry, the *sine qua non* of beauty, as everyone knows. On the affected half of my face, the limited recovery of movement I've had since then can't fill out my wasted cheek, lift the corner of my mouth from its permanent sour grimace; it resembles the sunken death mask of my still-mobile other side. These days, photographs of myself make me double up and howl in pain. Every image of a beaming mother embracing her child(ren) stabs me through the heart, because it feels as if those rows of exposed teeth are the measure of maternal love, pride and joy against which I shall forever fall short. (*But I used to smile at my baby with such delight, all the time, every day: if you only knew.*) I experience my deformity as shame, humiliation and outrage. I've been bereaved, I know grief; but I do not know how mourning for a smile, for the shape of a face - losses for which I am the only one to cry - will ever end.

It is of course unseemly to care so much about this. To *admit* to caring so much. You think you'd do better? Certainly friends do. '*It's your attitude not your face that's the problem*'. '*We're all ageing and losing our looks, it's just like you've got there 20 years earlier. Be our role model*'. Hostage to fortune: '*but you always thought you were ugly anyway, so what's changed really?*'. Post-operative classic: '*at least you've lost weight*' (!).

Whatever. I'm certainly in no position now to lecture my daughter about self-esteem, beauty lies within, blah blah. Probably I never was anyway, but at least before my operation I could believe I was a model of feminist unconcernedness about ageing. I was enjoying getting old (well, I was enjoying being happy at last, and that had been some time coming). I relished the 'invisibility' of the older woman, felt it let me choose whether to engage people through eye contact and conversation. Oh sure, I wore make up, I bought the moisturisers and crevice-fillers, but I wasn't serious, it was a *game*. I was *playing* at being a certain kind of mid-life professional woman, for whom it's just what you do; a way to pass the time at the airport or in Boots on a Saturday afternoon.

But now, it turns out, I care more about my appearance than I ever imagined. And what does that make me? – Barbie. Not just any Barbie, but the Barbie that's distinct from a bimbo, because I think I've finally twigged what she meant, that savvy schoolgirl. Barbie thinks it really matters what you look like; Barbie thinks beauty's more than skin-deep; Barbie thinks they fool you; Barbie cares about the other; Barbie is on duty all the time. Bimbos are detached, they have a layer of conscious, mocking knowingness that asserts superiority (you can't be a retard if you say you are). They know it's an act, they perform, but not all the time; at the weekends maybe, like those mothers I believed.

Go back to what I expected the salon mothers would be like (and weren't); don't they sound like Barbies too? So, was I actually setting out to meet ... myself, that part of myself I never even really knew I had, let alone that I'd disowned? And if I'm not as immune as I thought to the processes I identified in others – since for me too 'sexualisation' stood in for something I didn't want to examine in myself – is that true for anyone else here? Are other women too more Barbie than they'd like to admit?

Smart readers may have spotted already how my Barbie-bimbo distinction lines up (rather too) neatly with a modern-postmodern one: depth, sincerity and seriousness versus a game of surfaces, irony and play, 'real beauty' versus drag and artifice... Dammit, I'm on the wrong – uncool, nerdy – side as usual. Of course: I paid attention in my A-Level French literature classes, took notes when the teacher explained that a character's acne symbolised their inner moral decay. (What sadist deemed that Catholic bigot François Mauriac suitable for teenagers?) You're not still blaming the media, are you? – Fie! No, to elevate the notion that appearance reflects the true state of our souls into a universal and absolute principle of moral justice, you need a centuries-old institution like the Church that can weave it into the fabric of our thinking and being, atheist or not; add enough of the state to pedagogise it into syllabus; label it knowledge, mix with essence of distinction, and spoon it into the trusting mouths of babes. *At 50 everyone has the face he deserves*. George Orwell, my socialist hero – *et tu?*

If I can't *be* postmodern, though, I can still learn from it.

Let's go back to my starting point, the presentation about Object. What did I hear? I heard that few people share the understanding and outlook of anti-sexualisation campaigners. (So, you must cleave to the group, because beyond that enlightened circle you're on your own. *But where does that leave your freedom to dissent within it?*) I heard that what they see everywhere around them is shocking and outrageous. (So, your daily experience is one of alienation, both from the way the world is and from the other people who tolerate what you cannot; your only hope, that others come round to your way of thinking. *But isn't politics the art of finding common ground, of compromise*

across differences?). I was hearing about myself. Years ago, I condemned ‘violent’ horror films as sexist and misogynistic and refused to watch them: looking back I see how I thereby redirected some of the rage I felt towards my parents for dying when I was a teenager; temporarily quelled the terror that I was myself responsible for that catastrophe; and avoided confronting the shame of my own uncontrollable outbursts. Marginalised by grief, I was driven to re-find liminality in the external world – in lesbian/feminist/socialist politics, in low-paid, part-time work.

Then one day, Carol Clover took me by the hand... (I like to tell this as a romance, even if it doesn't leave much room for my therapist or my PhD supervisor). And suggested that perhaps the world was more interesting than everywhere-always the same-old story of patriarchal domination, especially if approached in a spirit of curiosity and compassion rather than moral judgement. That perhaps men could identify with victimhood – and that knowing this could give me power (still) over them, but also allow me to recognise what we might share: vulnerability *and* anger, both of which contribute to creativity. As my certainties dissolved, my isolation gradually yielded to a sense of connection to the world, a world now reconceived as messy, ordinary, manageable rather than alienating. I became ordinary too, which was blissful; it meant I could relate to others. *Last night a feminist saved my life.*

Struggling to articulate this at the seminar, I probably appeared to suggest that all Object activists need counselling. (Sorry). I wanted to say that politics and ethics – meaning, here, an orientation towards ‘the other’, how we are encouraged to relate to other people and to different parts of ourselves – are inherent in our analysis and our strategies for action. Individuals will have their own reasons for being attracted to one approach rather than another, as did I, but mainly that's a matter for them. My concerns are with what's built into the shared, public, discourses.

All of this brings me to a final question. Since disfigurement and disability have put me back in a place where I cannot see, much of the time, how to manage getting through the rest of my days, it has a certain urgency for me, although I like to think maybe I'm also speaking on behalf of other imperfect beings, with shambolic lives and leaking unconscious processes, Barbies, bimbos everywhere; and I'm putting it to myself as well, even though I could do with a bit more hand-holding right now. All of you who're talking, thinking, writing, campaigning about sexualisation: *What do your arguments mean for who we are supposed to be, for how we are supposed to live our lives?*

References

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ⁱ In June 2011, Levi Bellfield was convicted of the murder of British teenager Milly Dowler. On questions put to her father in court, see for instance <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/may/16/milly-dowler-murder-trial-levi-bellfield> (downloaded 27/11/2011)