

Unveiling patriarchal power structures, from ancient tradition to modern erotica: an exploration into misogyny, pornography and ritual.

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Unveiling patriarchal power structures, from ancient tradition to modern erotica: an exploration into misogyny, pornography and ritual.

Despite initially seeming disconnected, the words ‘pornography’, ‘misogyny’, and ‘ritual’ play significant roles in perpetuating a patriarchal power structure and reinforcing systematic inequalities in our society. In this exploration into these themes, I will investigate these words and their relevance both contemporarily and historically at greater depth by analysing the works of Megumi Igarashi, whose artwork sparked controversy in Japan, shedding light on themes of censorship within Japanese culture and how these contrast within society’s perception of rituals, such as the Japanese tradition of nyotaimori.

I will be making comparisons between ritualistic practices observed within the European witch trials and contemporary events such as bachelor parties. To do this, I will investigate the literature of Laura Bates who explores misogynistic internet rituals, and Shulamite Firestone’s controversial yet informative philosophy *The Dialect of Sex*. I will be examining how pornography has major influence on the above themes, referring the work of Picasso as well as the erotica, *Playboy*. I aim to explore this influence from multiple perspectives.

Misogyny is defined as the dislike of women. It encompasses attitudes and behaviours that oppress and devalue women, often leading to discrimination and violence directed at women. Pornography is defined as the depiction of explicit sexual content, in various forms of media created with the intention of arousing the consumer. Ritual is defined as a set of actions performed in a prescribed order, often with symbolic significance. Rituals serve various purposes and can be religious, cultural or social and often involve symbolic gesture. Rituals hold profound significance in human societies, acting as a symbolic expression of both cultural beliefs and societal norms.

Whilst rituals play a role within most societies and cultures, create a sense of community and can be used to celebrate, they also share a role in regulating behavioural norms and holding onto historical values. Therefore, many argue that they can often be inherently misogynistic when normalising traditional values that dehumanise women (*Federici, 2004*). An example of this is the ancient tradition of nyotaimori, commonly known as body sushi.

Nyotaimori (*Figure 1*) translates from Japanese to female body presentation and is considered an artform involving the serving of sushi on a naked woman’s body and transforming the simple act of dining into a ritualistic performance (*Ransom, 2016*) whilst simultaneously dehumanising the woman by depicting her as a plate.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Despite the normalisation of this ritual, cultural taboos in Japan state that depictions of female nudity or sexuality may be considered inappropriate. (*Jimmy Chiashin Hsu, 2022*) Censorship laws in east Asia can be explained using the artwork and following controversy of Megumi Igarashi. Igarashi is a Japanese sculptor and illustrator known for her disputed sculpture *Vagina Kayak* (*Figure 2*) which is literal to the name and features a bright yellow functional plastic kayak: a 3D mould of the artists vulva, which ultimately led to the artists' arrest. Courts stated that whilst the art piece itself was legal, the sharing of it sparked controversy and could arouse viewers which made it pornographic and therefore illegal (*CNN, 2016*)

To expand on this comparison, I am going to use Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory which targets Hollywood movies but remains evident here. Mulvey's gaze theory states that visual media, such as film, often depict women from a heterosexual male perspective, objectifying and sexualizing them for the pleasure of the male viewer. (*Mulvey 1975*)

This theory can help explain the ingrained misogyny present in the societal acceptance of nyotaimori compared to the censorship faced by Megumi Igarashi's vagina-themed artwork. Nyotaimori caters to the male gaze by presenting women's bodies as objects of consumption and eroticization, aligning with patriarchal norms that prioritize male desire and control. In contrast, Igarashi's artwork challenges these norms by reclaiming female sexuality and celebrating the diversity and beauty of the female body, which were Igarashi's intentions, but it was met with censorship and legal consequences due to its "taboo" themes.

Another instance of the portrayal of the vulva in a different context is the Sheela Na Gig, a type of architectural sculpture predominantly found in medieval European churches, notably in the UK and Ireland (*Figure 3*). These sculptures depict a woman displaying an exaggerated vulva and are typically interpreted with ritualistic significance, acting as symbols of fertility, protection or as wards against evil spirits (*Kelly, 1996*) Unlike the censorship faced by Igarashi, the Sheela Na Gig has historically been embraced within the context of religious and cultural symbolism.

However, the acceptance of the Sheela Na Gig, within church architecture, a traditionally male dominated domain (*Daly, 1968*), stands in contrast to the censorship and legal repercussions faced by feminist artists like Igarashi. The discrepancy highlights the selective acceptance of representations of the vulva based on cultural contexts and patriarchal power structures. While the Sheela Na Gig is afforded ritualistic and religious significance within patriarchal institutions, feminist artwork like *Vagina Kayak* often is met with resistance and condemnation, despite its intentions of empowerment. This underscores the challenges faced within advocacy for equal representation and freedom of expression.



Figure 3

The influence of the male gaze and entrenched misogyny allows for rituals such as nyotaimori, which degrades the female body and holds on to patriarchal values in the name of tradition and as a means of control. Symbolism like the Sheela na gig is also present, with mimicking imagery to Igarashi's art, and is accepted by wider society because of historical significance, but Igarashi's *Vagina Kayak* acts as a defiance of the patriarchal power dynamic, exerting control over the female anatomy and therefore does not meet the narrative of subservient appetible femininity, which must cater to the sexual appetite or traditional passivity accepted in womanhood. An essay on women in Japanese literature explains the two common female characters found in books written by men, which can help us in understanding stereotypes ingrained into wider society.

Once again female characters of idealized beauty are used to please the male fantasy. Taeko is reduced to a woman driven by purely animalistic instincts ... Yukiko on the other hand is the perfect image of the subservient young maiden.

Martina Barth *Women in Japanese literature*. 1996

Whilst you could argue that nyotaimori, as a ritual stands as an artform that could warrant preservation, it's important to recognize the inherent misogyny present, especially in its western adaptation, particularly in the context of the western bachelor party. By examining the similarities between the European witch trials and ritualistic, misogynistic and often pornographic activity that takes place during bachelor parties and the literature of Shulamith Firestone we can further this exploration.

The height of persecution in the witch trials that took place in England, among other countries was the 1600s, in this time women were forced to endure a massive range of torture in order to dictate whether they were witches (*Federici 2004*). The hysteria that caused these trials spawned from several things including misogyny and a means to exert control as well as classism, superstition and economic instability. To summarise a few methods of torture against women, the rituals included strip searches, virginity testing and sexualised interrogations as well as 'trial by water' which included the act of plummeting a woman into a body of water to dictate whether she would float. This imitated the act of a baptism, or purification seen within places of worship among many religions.

The artwork by Thomas H Matteson 1853, *The Examination of a Witch* (figure 4) - depicts a scene in 1652 of the Salem witch trials which we can use as an example of a strip



Figure 4

search, a common method of dictating whether a woman was a witch, across Europe as well as North America (*Federici 2004*).

In this depiction, we observe a judicial scene where a group of people gather around a central figure, presumably the woman accused. Through the use of religious symbolism and the portrayal of a man fainting, the artist, Matteson captures the hysteria of the moment. The woman at the centre of the image wears a long gown with exposed shoulders, evoking the idea of a strip search. Among the chaos, a nun is also visible, adding to the tense atmosphere, and as a symbol of the power of religion. This image illustrates how the fates of women targeted in the witch trials were determined. This depiction serves as a reminder of how patriarchal power structures have been upheld historically through ritual and underscores the pervasive control exerted by male-dominated institutions such as the judiciary, over the lives of women.

Women's bodies have been the main targets, the privileged sites, for the deployment of power techniques and power relations.

Silvia Federici, 2004

The witch trials, viewed in a broader context, serve as an extreme manifestation of the patriarchal control over women's bodies and their sexuality, like the exploitation of women in pornography. Shulamith Firestone's feminist literature, *The Dialect of Sex* expands on this notion by highlighting how women's oppression stems from biological differences, particularly in reproductive differences between men and women. According to Firestone, the traditional family structure perpetrates male dominance by regulating women to subordinate roles, emphasising control over female sexuality (Firestone 1970).

In the context of the witch trials, Firestone's philosophy elucidates the extreme persecution and misogynistic rationale behind the torture of women who departed societal norms and challenged traditional power dynamics that asserted dominance over women. While the witch trials may appear as a relic of the past, their underlying themes of chauvinism and control persist in modern society, manifesting in rituals like bachelor parties. These modern practices act as continuations of perpetrating patriarchal norms, the objectification and exploitation of women's bodies for male entertainment.

Bachelor parties and the witch trials may seem like extremely different occurrences, but they share commonality that clarifies broader patterns of misogyny and patriarchal control in a modern context as bachelor parties are often infused in tradition and ritual, with certain activities and customs considered to be customary, these events include heavy drinking, testosterone fueled pranks and challenges and often strippers and

symbolism relating to female sexuality as a symbol of the grooms diminishing bachelorhood, ergo manhood as he transitions into married life (Bates 2020). Whilst these events are often happy events intended on celebration and bonding, I will talk about a key activity that the ritualistic activities of the witch trials and a bachelor party share.

In Matteson's painting depicting the witch trials, we witness a woman being stripped of her clothes in front of a male audience. This parallels the ritualistic activity often seen during bachelor parties, known as the 'strip tease' where a woman undresses for the entertainment of men. The act of stripping holds significance in a broader context as it reflects the historical and ongoing exploitation of women's bodies for the pleasure and validation of men (Chateauvert 2015). In both scenarios, the woman's nudity is commodified and used as a form of entertainment, reinforcing gendered power dynamics that perpetrate subjugation of women.

In the context of the witch trials, stripping was utilized as a means of humiliation and control, serving to assert dominance over woman's bodies. Conversely, in a bachelor party setting, stripping is often framed as "entertainment for men" echoing the slogan of *Playboy Magazine*.

Despite the complexities of the intertwinement of these themes, both witch hunts and bachelor parties contribute and have historically contributed to the normalisation of exploitation and often violence against women. Pornography plays a major role in this contemporary evaluation. Picassos renowned brothel painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* 1907 (Figure 5) serves as a vivid example of how ritualised depictions of sexuality can contribute to the perpetration of misogyny, and how the female from inherently becomes a pornographic object under the male gaze, just as rituals enforce these ideologies, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* illustrates how iconic artwork can too.

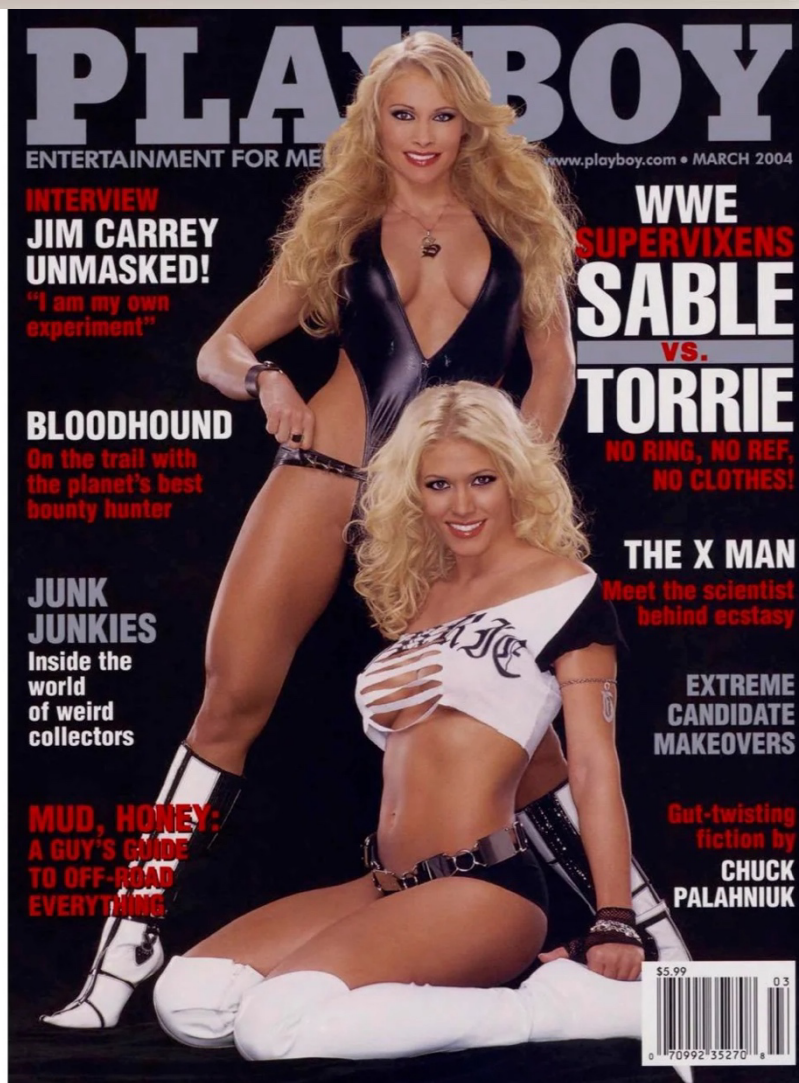
Picassos *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* depicts five nude female figures in a brothel setting, each rendered with angular and fragmented forms that challenge conventional notions of beauty. This departure from artistic conventions sparked controversy in the early twentieth century, highlighting themes of sexuality and exploitation within the context of the brothel. Critics interpretations of the painting vary, with some seeing it as revolutionary and empowering whilst others view it as a reflection of Picasso's conflicted attitudes toward women and sexuality (Lloyd 2019)

Similarly, *Playboy Magazine*, marketed as 'Entertainment for Men', elicits diverse responses. By analysing a 2004 playboy cover (Figure 6) through the lenses of Laura bates' feminist literature and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, we can compare the impact of these cultural artifacts. Despite differing mediums and contexts, both *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* and *Playboy* share commodities.

Figure 5



Figure 6



The cover of playboy depicts two provocatively posed female WWE fighters in revealing leather attire, accompanied by the text 'no ref, no clothes!' amongst a collection of advertisements. Mulvey's male gaze theory remains relevant, revealing how both the painting and the magazine present women as objects of desire, perpetrating exploitative attitudes. This normalisation of the male gaze contributes to upholding patriarchal power structures and reinforces the objectification of women in all contexts.

By examining Bates' exploration of misogyny and inequality alongside Mulvey's theory, we gain insight into the societal attitudes reflected in both art and media. The portrayal of the female form, often influenced by societal norms, takes on pornographic qualities, and perpetrates misogynistic attitudes through the male gaze. This process of objectification becomes ritualised, reinforcing expectations and contributing to the normalisation of exploitative behaviours. Whilst different in theory, Mulvey's male gaze theory remains relevant in both contexts, in presenting women as objects of desire. Mulvey's theory helps illuminate how both *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *Playboy* contribute to the normalisation of exploitative attitudes towards women, framing them within a male centric narrative that prioritizes pleasure.

Bates exploration of misogyny and inequality in *Men Who Hate Women* provides insight into the societal attitudes in both art and media. Through Bates' lens, both pieces act as a reflection of these power structures, reinforced in different contexts. Whilst some may interpret Picassos work as revolutionary, through this lens we can see the patterns of male fantasies normalised by the commodity of these types of images.

In conclusion, the exploration of the interconnected themes of pornography, misogyny and ritual underscore the pervasive influence of patriarchal power structures and systematic inequalities in society. Through the analysis of artworks, structures and literature, we have explored how these themes manifest both historically and contemporarily, and their profound impact on perceptions of women's bodies and societal norms.

From Megumi Igarashi controversial vulva artwork, the representation of the Sheela Na Gig and the ritualistic practice of nyotaimori we can see the influence of patriarchal value on cultural expressions. Similarly, the examination of *Playboy Magazine* and Picassos *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* highlights how the portrayals of the female form often becomes pornographic, reinforcing misogynistic attitudes through the male gaze.

By drawing on Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and Laura Bates exploration of misogyny, we have gained insight into the societal attitudes reflected in both art and media. These perspectives have illuminated the normalization of exploitative behaviours and objectification of women perpetrating gendered power dynamics brought to attention by Firestones philosophy. Rituals like bachelor parties and historical tragedies such as the witch trials act as stark reminders of the enduring

impact of misogyny and the ways patriarchal values continue to shape behaviours through media and ritual.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of misogyny, pornography and ritual and through the examination of both contemporary and historic art, religion, ritual and literature we are confronted with the question: Can the female form exist within a patriarchal society without being reduced to objects of fetishistic and pornographic gaze?

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