

MARK BALDRIDGE

Objectification built in to sex act

It seems important to recognize without prejudice the differences between the sexes.

I suspect that a great many of those differences are socialized at an early age, which makes them differences nonetheless. Differences to be dealt with and — within reason — accepted.

But when you're talking about large numbers of people — gender groups, for instance — some pretty obvious trends seem to emerge. And we can assume that these are not socialized but natural differences — whatever that distinction means.

Take as an example the feminist criticism of male-oriented society, and of men in general, that they tend to objectify women's bodies — a specifically gender-based observation.

What it means is: Men tend to exalt the object that is a woman's body above the woman herself. They literally make objects out of people.

That has all kinds of effects. Pornography, prostitution and fashions in standards of physical beauty can be traced partly to this objectifying tendency in men.

And once you become aware of objectification, you can see it going on constantly in all mediums.

Music, photography, literature, everything that passes for art in the advertising world, they all contribute to the idea of woman, and draw our attention away from real, individual women.

This criticism of male-oriented society seems clear-headed to me, and true. But I think it's largely misunderstood.

I would like — if such a thing were possible — to defend the objectification of women's bodies by men. Or, if I find that really is impossible, to explain it. Or diffuse the issue that surrounds it.

The reason for the phenomenon lies, I suspect, at least partly with the male experience of the sex act.

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objectification.

In order for coitus to even happen, a man must achieve an erection.

The erection: a magical object. Now you see it, now you don't.

An erection is largely an act of imagination made tangible. Men feel strongly about erections, as they would about their personal creations.

And they don't face the loss of an erection with equanimity.

An erection is an object that is itself already three-quarters idea. It's subject to mood, to stray thoughts, to state of health ... and men know it.

The objectification process begins with men's own bodies. Many men treat their own penises as if they were separate entities. They give them names, talk about them in the third person and regard them as rollicking friends or traitorous devils.

Because, for men, so much depends on imagination in the sex act — both in achieving and maintaining erections — the act of imagination becomes central to the experience.

This requires that men divorce themselves from the moment, one part of the body from another, their feelings about a woman from the act of sex with that woman.

Because, as men know, giving oneself over to the feelings of the moment may result in one of two ends: Either nothing happens or everything happens too quickly.

Men learn to make an internal separation to avoid those possibilities. Or they fail to make the separation and suffer for it one way or the other.

Either way men tend to make fetishes of these newly created objects. They exalt the idea of the erection over any actual flaccid state. And if

they're successful, everyone is happier.

Of course there are drawbacks, there are dangers. The temporary suspension can become permanent, and men lose contact with the person they have sex with — even their own bodies.

Because they have learned the art of divorcing themselves from the actual moment, they may never master the art of being present in it. Intimacy, aside from the sex act, becomes threatening and difficult.

And women, historically, feel the effects of men's troubles.

Rather than cherishing persons, men come to cherish bodies and parts of bodies. It gets so some men can't see the woman for the hips, or the breasts, or some combination of traits.

Everyone can see the nature of the problem, but the nature of the cause is occluded. And remember, this internal partitioning is necessary, inescapable by the nature of the act and men's bodies.

Anything that is human can be the source of evil, social or personal. And in the realm of sex all forces are multiplied — until a dilemma that begins in the private heart of a man emerges as violence, abuse and exploitation.

Any act of internal separation is an act, to some degree, of violence.

The key is control of those violent forces because they can't be simply done away with.

The male sexual experience is perennial. It will be with us forever.

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