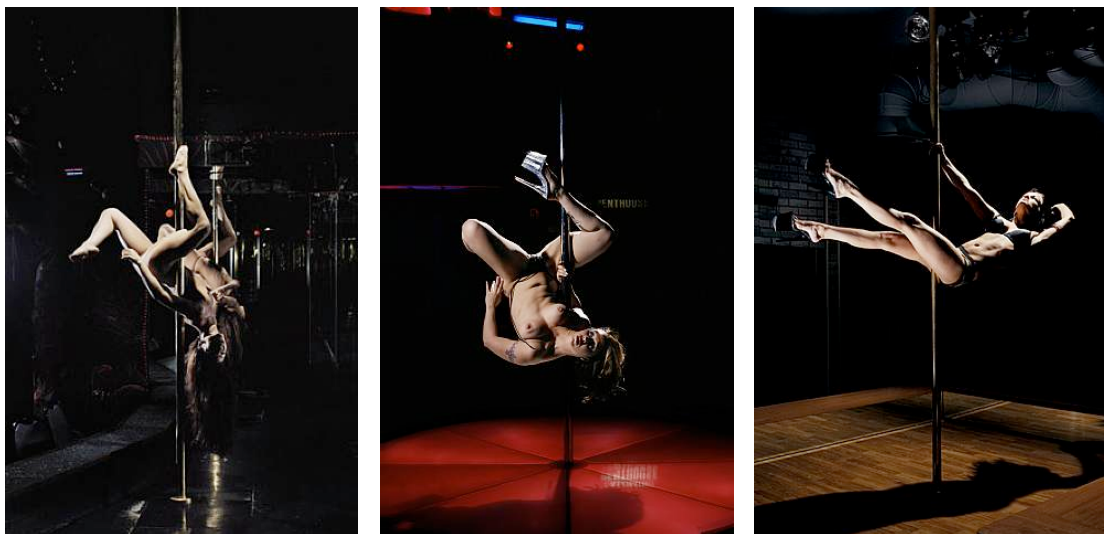


## Pornography is empowering

Pornography, erotica and art are all closely linked words, and sometime sit can be hard to decide which category a photograph or photojournalism fall into. Because of his images of naked women Nobuyoshi is often considered a pornographer, yet the images of nudes by Diana Arbus are considered photojournalism. One factor that is in pornography and not photojournalism is staging, as the former is set up specifically for one purpose and that is sexual excitement. Within photography there're certain categories of images, staged or natural, although it is possible to also consider a third category of voyeurism. Henri Cartier-Bresson is one of the legendary photojournalists who established the Magnum Agency, based on the principle of the decisive moment. That is that when you are photographing a real event there're certain moments that define what is happening and once you miss that moment it is gone forever. In other words it exists within natural photojournalism. This type of photography can't be considered pornography, as any nudity is part of the decisive moment and not for sexual arousal or are they?

Opposed in content and form to Cartier-Bresson are many modern photographers who take staged images in order to make some sort of social comment, such as Philip Lorca diCorcia. His photographs of nude exotic dancers hanging from a stripper pole are an example of staged images of nudes. However this does not make them pornography as Lorca diCorcia's images are not designed to create sexual excitement but rather to evoke an emotional response from the audience about the strippers coiled around the pole.

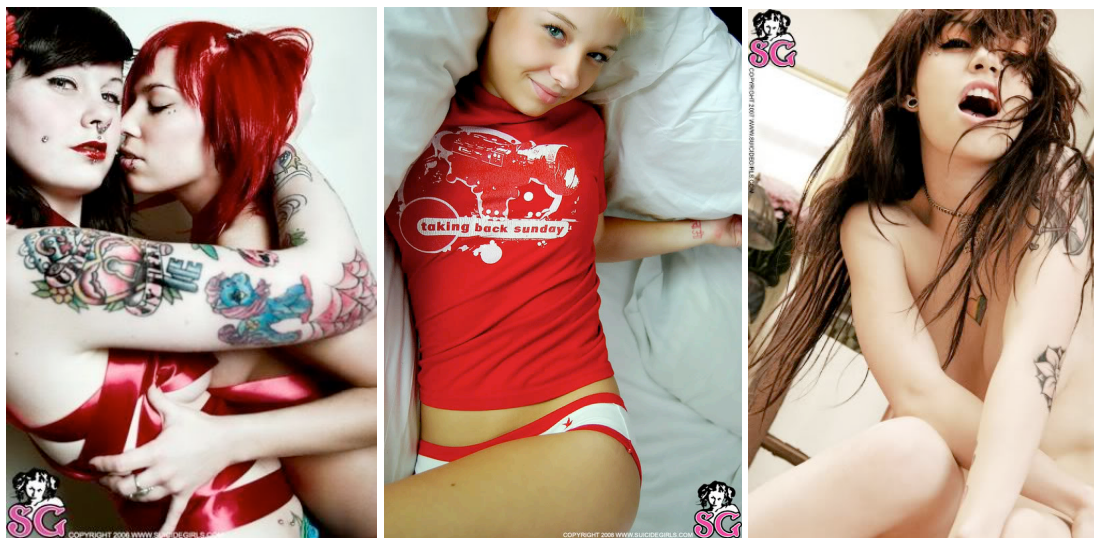


The issue of nudity in photographs, some of which blur into the category of pornography is based around socially acceptable forms of gender. Even in our post-modern society there're still certain expectations and limitations to the male and female genders. Women are still seen as vulnerable, as mothers, wives and daughters. It is perhaps for this reason that female sexuality is still a controversial issue. Although it may sound rather out-dated, women are still expected to be less sexually active and less aggressive sexually than men, they're expected to be sexually responsible. However, this is changing slowly in the West with women in the media and popular culture constantly wearing more revealing clothing and expressing their sexuality through TV, film and music. But there's still a social tendency to judge women harsher for promiscuity, which could be down to the gender being seen as more innocent making their exposure to the lurid more shocking.

For many years feminist activists have been protesting against pornography, which is seen as exploitive and degrading to women. But what exactly counts as porn, surely not all nudity is pornographic otherwise many of the great works of art that enrich our culture should be banned from public display. There's a very thin, and almost impossible to define, line between pornography and art or photojournalism, and it is this line that makes it a very difficult subject. For many people the distinction is a personal opinion. What this writer might consider art, or even photojournalism where the nudity of the subject is in some way expressive either of the individual's story or a statement about culture or society, someone else might consider pornography with the nudity being unnecessary and simply for sexual excitement.

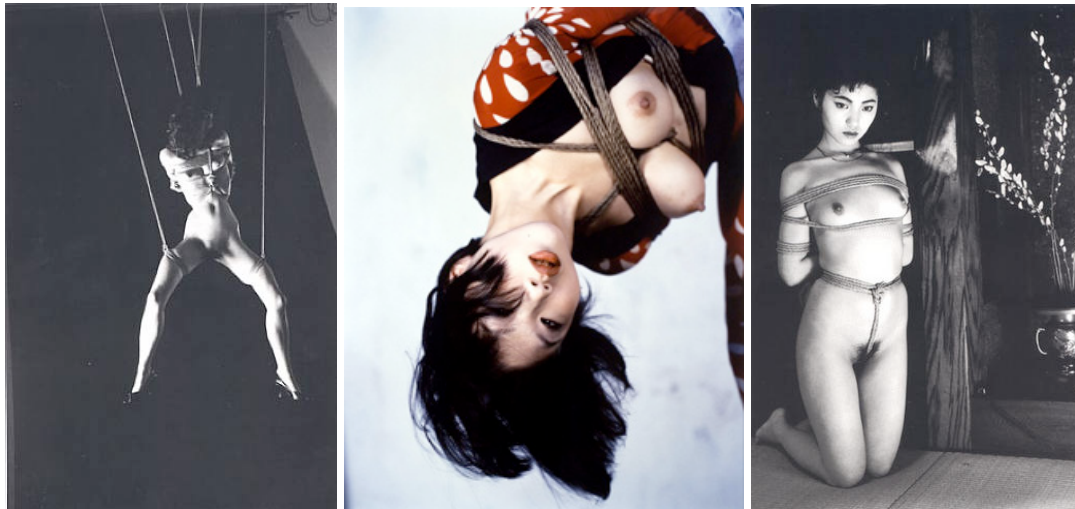
Suicide Girls is a company that has always been balancing on that line, with some seeing it falling to one side or the other. It was set up in 2001, with the reputation of being 'porn even feminists could love'. This was because the alternative, tattooed and pierced models were said to be able to pick and choose which photo shoots they did and how much they revealed. However in 2005 these ideals came under question, when several models left the company claiming it was exploitative and dominant by the male co-founder Sean Suhl. Since then however Suicide Girls has continued to be popular and is still a very interesting example of pornographic art. The company only employs female models, meaning none of the pictures depict women being degraded or dominated by males. Although this does often mean that photographs containing more than one subject have a lesbian theme. Suicide Girls also stands out from other porn websites because it is interactive, with all the models keeping blogs. This means they aren't just genitals and pretty faces they are people that users connect with. In many of the photographs on the website the girls still have

on underwear or are covering at least part, of their genitalia in some way. However the staged nature of the photography means it's designed to be sexually explicit, it isn't capturing a decisive moment or real event, but purely expressing female sexuality. It is for these reason that Suicide Girls balances on the line between art and porn, between statement and sexual arousal. And it is because the women from the site are shown as dominate in the photographs, of taking control of their sexuality and choosing to express it that it is viewed as empowering. Ironically they all look like catwalk models to me, perhaps Suicide Girls should consider employing some Dove soap ladies, 'real beauty', then it would be true empowerment 'that even feminists could love'.



But the expectations and differences between gender roles get even greater in other parts of the world, such as Japan where the photographer Nobuyoshi Araki works. In Japan women have a very different role to women in the West. Almost all women in Japan 'retire' from work when they have children and many do so when they get married. Although Japanese women have a lot of power within the home, making most of the important decisions and controlling the finances, publicly they're the inferior gender. The photography of Araki is often described as 'pornography' as his naked photographs of women, and couples are explicit. Just like with Suicide Girls, most of Araki's images are staged either in a studio or another location. Often he will photograph naked women tied up, or hanging from the ceiling. Many people from the West, especially feminist activists, view this as disrespectful and offensive.. But are the photographs of Araki empowering or are they degrading? The dominations and helplessness of the women in his images evoke a feeling of shock and disrespect, because rather than being shown as strong and in control of their sexuality the women in his photos appear weak. Yet he doesn't have to hire models for his shoots

as women come up to him in the streets, where he is seen as a superstar, and beg him to take their pictures. The ability to be photographed by such an influential and respected man, as well as the chance to expose their bodies and express their sexuality is a very appealing opportunity for many women. While some may see the ropes as degrading and showing weakness others would consider bondage elements to be an expression of sexual fantasies and desire representing empowerment.



But it's not just the expression of sexuality in front of the lens where gender differences exist. Within photojournalism there exists two types, the photojournalist and the female photojournalist. This difference seems to be made simply because photojournalism is a male dominated industry, although at the end of the day the only real difference should be a good photojournalism and a bad one. Over the years there's been some highly talented female photojournalists, the likes of Dorethea Lange, Eve Arnold and Diane Arbus. Yet they have all struggled within their career and been put into a different category than the males of the industry, including equally as talented photojournalists such as Jeff Wall, Martin Parr or Robert Cappa.

Dorethea Lange gained most of her fame from her photographs of the great depression during the 1930's. In particular her images of women and children, many of which were very intimate. One of these images, of a woman surrounded by several children, was especially shocking for the 1930's as her top is pulled down on the right hand side of the picture, almost revealing her breast. This sort of female exposure was not allowed at the time, making the image rather controversial and adding to the appearance of vulnerability. The image was staged in order to create feelings of sympathy from the audience, in order to motivate change for the migrant workers who were in such despair. Many would argue that this devalue the image, but if the

purpose of a picture is to provoke a certain emotional response then the image is just doing its job. Can it really be considered a lie? The situation is real, and the despair the women photographed is feeling is real, those are really her children, the image has just been staged to exaggerate the emotions effectively.



Eve Arnold was one of the few women at the Magnum Agency in the 1950's. Some of her most famous work includes pictures of celebrities like Marilyn Monroe. Arnold's photographs of Marilyn are very intimate, with the star being covered by nothing more than a sheet. For the society at the time this was very risqué, and just as with Lange's photo of the destitute women, the exposure exaggerates the vulnerability of the subject. Arnold also photographed the veiled women of the Middle East and during apartheid in South Africa, all women who were inferior and struggling in their culture. Just as many female photojournalists struggle to make it in a male dominated industry.



Diane Arbus explored sexuality in her photography, taking pictures of nudists and drag queens. She was very interested in the concept of identity, who am I and who

are you? A photograph Arbus took of a drag queen nude with make up and his genitalia tucked between his legs, giving the illusion of female genitalia is very powerful, and really makes the audience question the idea of sexuality and gender roles. But as with the other female photojournalists, Arbus's pictures convey a sense of intimacy, vulnerability but in a gentle privileged way rather making the audience feel like they were intruding. It is the female photojournalists ability to convey a tenderness when photographic the vulnerable and exposed, especially women and children that separates their photography from that of male photojournalists.



The female photojournalists are so important because they're perceived as innocent and gentle natured due to their gender role as women. This enables them to show nudity in a way that seems more empowering, or descriptive of that situation or story of the image. This in itself is gender stereotyping, assuming the women are being respectful and kind, where the males would be intrusive and exploitative. Gender should not influence the way an image is viewed, but it does, and the two genders do broadly have different strengths. This can be seen as an empowering thing, as female photographers are not competing so directly with males, because of their ability to take a completely different, more sensitive image of a situation, also because they are perceived to be gentler women can get access to people and places a male photojournalist would not.

Pornography is based on acceptable forms of gender within society, and it is still controversial to take women out of their role of the innocent carer into the lurid world of pornography and sexual gratification. However if the nudity is intended to create an emotional reaction from the audience by highlighting a social event, or even by highlighting the taboo of nudity it can't be considered pornography. It is empowering to women to be able to express them self, both in front of and behind the camera, because it is their choice, and because they are making the audience think. This

audience member must admit she is drawn more to the work of Diane Arbus than Suicide Girls, as the later doesn't tell a real story or feature 'real' people, instead focusing on airbrushed Barbie...with tattoos. Suicide Girls photography has more in common with Play Boy than with art. Perhaps the women in Araki's photographs are most daring of all as they cause such shock and horror among an accepting and progressive Western society, when all they are doing is exploring sexuality and desire in a very visual way. Having said that don't expect to see photographs of me hanging from a warehouse ceiling naked any time soon, as a Western women I am far too body conscious, maybe if I looked more like one of the Suicide Girls. Perhaps that is the real empowerment, breaking through modern social conditioning and showing off your body, even if it isn't super model thin.

**WORD COUNT: 2,100**

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