Carlson, Cindy L., Mazzola, Robert L. and Susan M. Bernardo (eds). ***Gender Reconstructions - Pornography and Perversion in Literature and Culture.*** **Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.**

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1 "There are no dirty words. Ever!" Leonard Cohen stated when, before a recording of a reading of his poems in 1965, a sound engineer told him that "dirty words" would be deleted from the tape. The volume *Gender Reconstructions - Pornography and Perversion in Literature and Culture* [edited by Cindy L. Carlson, Robert L. Mazzola and Susan M. Bernardo] suggests that Cohen's statement is not just the incensed exclamation of an artist faced with the mutilation of his work but also holds true generally for art that represents the pornographic and|or the perverse. The eleven essays published in this volume offer a wide range of voices expressing ideas and perspectives on the current debate on pornography and its relation to power structures and questions of identity. As the title suggests, pornography and perversion are discussed especially with an emphasis on the ability to challenge and break up phallogocentric structures and discourses to re|construct (concepts of) gender. The authors do not only discuss the aesthetics of perversion and pornography in various types of media (such as texts, paintings and installations) but also how, on different levels, a work of art can be connected to these aesthetics: from the content level on the one hand (essays dealing with explicitly "perverse" and "pornographic" art) to a structural level on the other (essays applying a theory of "perversion" to art that isn't necessarily "pornographic" in itself).

2 Deborah Caslav Covino's article on the painting "The Artist and His Mother" by the Armenian-American expressionist Arshile Gorky is one of the essays that - on first sight - does not seem to deal with an object of art directly related to questions of pornography|perversion. She focuses on the mother-son relation that is expressed in the painting and underlines the "perversion" of this structure within a Freudian discourse while simultaneously emphasizing its power to break up and rearrange constellations and dogmas of Freudian psychoanalysis. Covino draws on an earlier reading of the painting by Jack Ben-Levi in which Ben-Levi identifies the father as the boy's lost object, and rearranges the psychic and family constellations: in her interpretation the mother is the object of desire, but this "mother-longing," she argues, "Freud would have considered [...] 'perversion'" (80) because "[d]esire for the mother means exile from the community of men, a form of social emasculation" (81). The bodies in Gorky's painting are read as symptoms of the "psychic rupture" of the "post-Oedipal (heterosexual) male" who "must abject woman only in order to

love her a gain" (85). To revise these Freudian "unfavorable characterizations" (86) of female sex|uality and subjectivity, Covino discusses Kristeva's theory of abjection but concludes that it does not fully disallow the reading of sons and mothers that Freud enfranchises and thus warns that without abandoning "the heterosexual decree that males reject the feminine [...] male-to-female sexuality will remain an alternative kind of perversion: an ineffectual effort to love the refused other" (88).

3 In contrast to Covino's essay, Ann Bomberger's article "The Efficacy of Shock for Feminist Politics" deals with a more openly pornographic subject. It discusses the question whether postmodern shock tactics - such as the depiction of sexually explicit material in perverse and pornographic fashion - still have the ability to initialize political change or whether they are immediately co-opted by late capitalism and thus only reinforce long-held and established beliefs and power structures. She contrasts two texts that react differently to the challenge of a readership that is "beyond shock": Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* and Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*. Bomberger argues that Acker's novel challenges the politics behind writing by challenging the structure of writing: although the effect is based on a "conventional" notion of shock she regards Acker's work to be more successful in rupturing readers' expectations and in making them reconsider cultural - and especially heterosexual - norms and values than Barthelme's. Acker tries to shock by "connecting the perverse [...] with the dominant norm, that is, heterosexual adult relationship" (191). The perverse - in Acker's case - serves as the disturbing element in the smoothly running machine of late capitalism that - with its ceaseless production of texts - has co-opted the language of political attack and at the same time emptied it of all signification. For Bomberger it is especially the young age of the protagonist of *Blood and Guts in High School* (the little girl is only ten years old) and the sexual involvement with her father that creates a shocking effect and she concludes that "sexuality [...] in its most degraded and perverse form can be a potentially rebellious political act" (193). Barthelme's writing differs from Acker's decisively, not only in the way that perversion and pornography are used but especially in the function they fulfill within the novel and the subversive potential Bomberger ascribes to them. According to her, Barthelme is a "dissident postmodernist" (198) who uses gender and female sexuality as a platform to criticize capitalism and language, but in contrast to Acker he "creates a world where no one can be shocked by anything [...] and one where the predominating emotion is boredom" (199). She presents Barthelme's *Snow White* as being centered on "perverting one of the most sacred films of American popular culture" (198) and underlines the pornographic elements that have been added to turn the Disney version into a

postmodern fairy tale that serves as a serious critique "of the ability to write about anything at all with passion" (200). However, Bomberger concludes that *Snow White* does not challenge the prevailing norms - although it "parodies the objectification of women" - because Barthelme is "less successful at keeping his parody from re-inscribing the stereotypes than Acker is" (198).

4 In probably the most controversial essay of the volume, Gregory L. Rubinson goes even a step further in discussing pornographic writing as a tool for - rather than against - the deconstruction of phallic misogynistic writing. In his analysis of Angela Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve*, he draws on the notion of the "moral pornographer" - a concept developed by Carter in *The Sadeian Woman* - to show how pornography might be used "as a critique of current relations between the sexes" (126). Carter uses this oxymoron (which - as one could argue - is in itself a 'perverse' term) to denote "pornography's potential to be critical of gender relations" (126) and rejects the idea that pornography automatically implies an exploitive and misogynistic authorship. As Rubinson points out, she hints at the danger of assuming such a "natural" connection and instead focuses on the culturally constructed gender archetypes that pornography reinforces but also has the power to deconstruct: Carter reads Sade's perverted writings as a challenge to the archetypical models of femaleness by upsetting "the bourgeois ideal of women as demure drawing-room objects" and by asserting "their right to be part of the culture of 'fucking' - the society of activity - and shape history in the active sense" (127). For Rubinson, *The Passion of New Eve* is Carter's attempt to write a novel that uses the weapon of moral pornography aimed at initiating "a conceptual change in pornography as a genre" and "demonstrating the real problems of life as a woman in a male-dominated society and culture" (144).

5 These are just three examples of the variety of opinions that *Gender Reconstructions* offers and of how the articles acknowledge - if not embrace - the potential that pornographic and especially perverse writing and structures can have to deconstruct gender stereotypes and expectations: this is not a book that the antiporn movement will like. It may not be politically correct to approach pornography from a consciously amoral angle, but it is the only way to realize the subversiveness it can develop. Or - to speak with Acker's protagonist - "every position of desire [...] is capable of putting to question the established order of a society" (193). There are no dirty words. Ever? Unfortunately the volume does not leave the reader with that kind of certainty: the subtitle "pornography and perversion in literature and culture" is somewhat misleading, since the essays only cover the rather thin cultural sphere of "high art" - for lack of a better term. Whether any random page of *The Hustler* might have the same

subversiveness and ability to deconstruct and challenge gender expectations, concepts and norms as a novel by Acker, or Carter, or a painting by Gorky still needs to be discussed.