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Animals, Women, and Weapons: Blurred Sexual Boundaries in the Discourse of Sport Hunting

ABSTRACT

The furor and public outrage surrounding the release of a fictionalized video in which naked women are hunted down and shot with paintball guns (“Hunting for Bambi”) inspired this paper. Arguing that distressing representations of hunting as a sexually charged activity are resilient popular culture images, this paper examines the theoretical framework that links hunting with sex and women with animals and the empirical evidence of such linkages in the hunting discourse of a popular newsstand periodical. Contemporary feminist theory often connects hunting with sex and women with animals. This paper details clear evidence of the juxtaposition of hunting, sex, women, and animals in the photographs, narratives, and advertisements of a random sampling of *Traditional Bowhunter* magazines (1992-2003). Particularly prominent in the magazines’ hunting discourse is the sexualization of animals, women, and weapons, as if the three are interchangeable sexual bodies in narratives of traditional masculinity. This paper concludes that moral outrage at the degradation of women might be targeted best at widely read newsstand periodicals that serve as popular culture precursors to videos that celebrate hunting naked women.

venery (ven’arē) *n.* Archaic. 1. the gratification of sexual desire. 2. the practice or sport of hunting; the chase.

Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary (1996)

While sex long has been tethered to hunting in human culture, the sexual dimension of hunting recently captured substantial attention in the release of the video, "Hunting for Bambi." Proudly hailed by the producers as "one of the sickest and most shocking videos ever made" (huntingforbambi.com), viewers watch naked women hunted down and shot with paintball guns on DVD or VHS. The video caused quite a sensation during the summer of 2003, with reports of "real live" Bambi hunts finally dismissed as a hoax amid public outcry and moral outrage at the shocking degradation of women.

We argue, however, that numerous popular culture products link hunting with sex and women with animals. It is not difficult to establish that the erotic hunt has substantial "cultural currency" (Mallory, 2001, p. 79). Distressing representations of sex and violence and women and animals have been documented in many easily obtained and widely consumed cultural venues—pornography, music videos, prime time-television, feature-length films, magazine advertisements, and narratives of black slavery (Adams, 1990; Kappeler, 1986; Kalof, 1993; Kilbourne, 1987; & Williams, 1993). One key cultural commodity that so far has escaped the scrutiny of researchers studying the hunting-sex link is the hunting periodical.

The paucity of information on sexuality in hunting periodicals is even more noteworthy, given the well-established theoretical tradition of connecting hunting with sex.² Feminist theorists have used numerous sexual narratives to elucidate their readings of the contemporary hunting discourse—erotic heterosexual predation (Luke, 1998), sadomasochism (Collard, 1989), restraint for aggressive sexual energy (Kheel, 1995), and allied with the abuse of women (Adams, 1990, 1994). Even pro-hunting primitivists such as Ortega y Gasset and Paul Shepard drew parallels in their writings between the predation of animals and the sexual predation of women (King, 1991).

Although these signs of the hunting-sex connection are provocative in theory, there has been no systematic investigation of the empirical evidence of a hunting-sex-women-animals linkage in the discourse of mainstream hunting periodicals. Our study begins to fill that void. We examine the intersection of hunting with sex and women with animals in the narrative and visual texts in a random sampling (1992-2003) of *Traditional Bowhunter*, a popular hunting magazine.

Background

A narrative or visual text (a photograph, letter to the editor, advertisement, or magazine fiction) is multilayered, complex, and framed by cultural history and ideology. The project of decoding cultural texts is intended to identify, interpret, and critique the ideas, values, and myths embedded in the text content (Hopkins, 2000, p. 36). Although multi-faceted, cultural texts also contain the “dominant cultural meanings in any historical moment” (Denzin, 1992, p. 137), and they construct and reproduce relations of domination in society.

In the U.S. cultural landscape, the language of hunting is a discourse of patriarchy. Hunters’ attitudes and actions toward social and natural objects (weapons or hunted prey) are constructed by a combination of experiences and absorbed cultural messages that validate and exacerbate white male dominance and power (Strychacz, 1993). Further, the cultural construction of hunting as rooted in a symbolic system that values predation and dominance conjoins hunting and sex with women and animals. In Collard’s (1989) words:

However innocuous the language may sound—we hunt everything from houses to jobs to heads—it reveals a cultural mentality so accustomed to predation that it [rarely] horrifies . . . Underlying all this hunting is a mechanism that identifies/names the prey, stalks it, competes for it, and is intent on getting the first shot at it. This is blatantly done when the prey is named woman, animal, or land . . . (p. 46)

Indeed, feminist theory has been particularly articulate in noting the connections between hunting, sex, women and animals.

Feminist Theory, Hunting, and Sex

Although “romance” is the most commonly used image associated with hunting in traditional hunting discourse (Luke, 1998), feminists use stronger words to describe sport hunting, such as “sexual, predatory, phallic, dominating”, and “abusive.” Luke argued that the seduction and romance of hunting comes from the hunter’s ability to wield power over life and death. Both hunting and “predatory heterosexuality are instances of romance because each is simultaneously sexual and an expression of power” (Luke, p. 630). Further,

in patriarchal societies, finding sexual pleasure in dominating and destroying living organisms “is a normal part of men’s fulfillment” (Luke, p. 631).

Adams (1994) also focused on the pivotal role of dominance in the hunting discourse. In her theoretical formulation of the linked oppression of animals and women, Adams used popular hunting narratives to illustrate similarities between sport hunting and the abuse of women. A “logic of domination” (Warren, 1990) underscores the contemporary hunting discourse in which hunters (like batterers and rapists) are widely considered not responsible for their actions, and hunted animals and abused women participate in (and thus agree to) their exploitation (Adams, p. 132). Kheel’s (1995) work also emphasized the sexual undertones of hunting. She argued that hunting provides a way to direct the drive for erotic aggression toward acceptable targets (animals) and away from humans.

Weapons, Hunting, and Sex

Hunting weaponry frequently invoke sexual and gendered imagery. Bows and arrows are particularly important in this regard, with the arrow often described as a phallic symbol (Biedermann, 1909; Cooper, 1978). Further, bowhunting (often considered a natural, primeval display of masculine power and prowess) allows for a more intimate relationship with the hunted animal. Luke (1998) quotes a hunter:

... (he) felt that bow hunting made him superior to those who killed by looking through the sights of a powerful rifle. “What did they know,” he had said to his girlfriend . . . “What intimacy did they feel with the animal?” (p. 628)

Bowhunting is manly, exciting, intimate, and—above all—*sexual*. Luke (1998, p. 635) argued that rockstar Ted Nugent’s reported bowhunting experience revealed the typical characteristics of male sexuality: anticipation, desire, pursuit, excitement, climax, and satiation. Following this logic of a connection between eroticism and weaponry, we consider bowhunting periodicals a valuable popular culture resource to examine empirically the intersection of hunting with sex and women with animals in the discourse of sport hunting.

Method

Our data came from a random sample of 15 issues of *Traditional Bowhunter*, a 12-year-old sport magazine with a distribution of 60,000 in 7 countries.³ The magazines were read from cover to cover, and we recorded every occurrence of a sexual representation (depiction, illustration, message, theme, passage) in the magazines' narrative texts (editorials, letters, and feature articles); visual texts (photographs, drawings); and the combined narrative and visual texts (primarily advertisements).⁴

Two women of the same race, ethnicity, academic background, and approximate age coded the data.⁵ Interested in the frequency of occurrence of sexual representations, we coded each individual depiction of sexuality and observed a total of 128 representations of sexuality in the magazines' content.⁶ Our study was intended to be not an exhaustive review of the content of *Traditional Bowhunter*, but an analysis of the sexual representations in the magazines to uncover possible linkages between hunting, sex, women, and animals.

Results

Sex was a major frame of reference in the discourse of hunting as conveyed in the 15 magazines in our sample. Some of the most obvious links to sex were found in the words used to describe the hunters' engagement with hunting and killing. The death of an animal was called a "climax" (Kamstra, 2000, p. 40). A victorious killing was called a "score" (Andersohn, 1996, p. 31). Hunting was described as "hot and heavy action" (Blake, 2001, p. 35). Although the use of sexualized language was common in the magazines, we found that the complex representations of sexuality provided the most compelling evidence of the link between hunting and sex.

There were striking parallels between references to the (hetero)sexualization of animals, women and weapons—as if the three were interchangeable sexual bodies. The following passage was a good illustration of the permeable sexual boundary between women and animals in the hunting discourse:

Developing my sense of smell had one unexpected consequence, particularly while I was in college. I would return to campus after several days of

camping and hunting to find that the scent of those college girls was, to say the least, an added distraction from my studies. The experience gave me insight into the state of mind of a buck deer during the rutting season. Just the sight and sound of coy young does everywhere is enough to cause madness but add their scent and it might be enough to cause a bull to run to the nearest hunter and say, "Just shoot me"! (Herrin, 1998, p. 58)

Sexualized representations of women and animals often drew on stereotypical feminine characteristics, heterosexual love affairs, and patriarchal versions of romance. We observed that turkeys were "redheads"; a decoy, a "Barbie Hen" (Buchanan, 2003, p. 25), and deer antlers were "big'uns" (Clyncke, 2002, p. 33). Some representations were asexualized stereotypes of unattractive or aging women. We found references to "an old dry doe" (Chinn, 1999, p. 20), a "five-year-old dry nanny" (Craig, 1992, p. 14), "homely cows" (Wensel, 1992, p. 36), and "blind dates that snort . . . grunt or gobble (You need a place to hide . . . You'll want a place to hide)" (Double Bull Archery, 2001, p. 73). The extension of heterosexual patriarchal relationships to animals was also common: male animals had "lady friends" (Kirk, 1997, p. 107), a "coy doe had a lovestruck paramour" (Hutter, 1998, p. 43), and a buck "had a new girl to chase" (Andersohn, 1998, p. 22).

In the hunters' discourse, the chase is critical to the thrill of hunting and is enhanced by stalking, watching, and waiting for prey. The following excerpt is one of numerous analogies drawn between the eroticization of the pursuit of desirable animals and the pursuit of desirable women: "One year, during college spring break, a group of us decided on a week of varmint calling along the Texas-Mexico border in lieu of the traditional bikini-beach-ogling thing" (Marlow, 1999, p. 49).

"For me, trying to pick a most memorable bow kill is about like asking a sixteen-year old boy to pick a most memorable Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader: they all seem pretty damn memorable" (Borland, 1998, p. 20). "It [the hunt] doesn't get any better than that, although we are still waiting for the Swedish bikini team to show up." (Pridgeon, 1992, p. 45).

These narratives of stereotyped male sexuality also included references to autoeroticism and inappropriate sexual display. An advertisement for hunting blinds warned, "Mother said you'd go blind!!!" (Double Bull Archery,

1998, p. 92), and “I stalked in downwind of them while Eldon exposed himself (you’ve got a dirty mind!) upwind.” (Wensel, 1992, p. 36).

There were explicit parallels drawn between human male sexuality and the sexuality of male animals, such as references to a “hot and single gobbler” (Torges, 1997a, p. 43) and “hot-to-trot teenage bucks” (Kirk, 1997, p. 107). The following passage stands as good testimony to this kind of anthropomorphism:

I began bugling at the bull, and I could tell that his responses were becoming increasingly ferocious. Whenever I bugled, he immediately responded. This tactic especially seemed to irritate him. After one particular bugle, the bull turned and stared in my direction. His ears were laid back, his nostrils flared and his eyes blazed red with anger. Was I about to accomplish the near impossible task of calling an enraged herd bull away from his cows? I then emitted an almost nonstop series of four bugles. The herd bull glanced back at his cows for a second, as if to say, “Wait here girls, while I get rid of this guy!” (Lapinski, 1992, p. 32)

In addition, some narratives invoked violent sexualized imagery, which came as no surprise given the permeable border between sex and violence in our culture and the violent nature of hunting. One turkey hunter wrote, “she was so close I was about half tempted to reach out and grab her by her neck” (Conrads, 2003, p. 29). Another proclaimed, “antelope hunting is a love-hate relationship, with emphasis on the ‘hate’” (Andersohn, 2000, p. 25). We also read rape imagery in advertisements for arrowheads, such as the announcement that “It’ll Rip You a New One” (Ballistic Archery Inc., 2001, p. 90) and the suggestion to “Take ‘em with Wood!” (SRC&K Traditional Archery, 1997, p. 14). Arrows often were described as an extension or embodiment of the bodily essence of the hunter, as in an advertisement for the book, *Become the arrow* (Target Communications, 1997, p. 47).

Anthropomorphizing weapons also included blurred sexual boundaries. One striking example was found in a hunter’s description of his bow: “Nothing but smoothness showed in her lines as she arced to compass, from her broad and abundant hips to her narrow and pleasant tips” (Torges, 1997b, p. 39).

In addition, there were numerous sexualized references to the bow's "sweet spot," which we read as heterosexual imagery of the hugely popular discourse on a woman's "G spot":

When a bow and owner are in harmony things happen as if they were magic. I've always referred to finding out that a bow is matched to you as discovering the "sweet spot." [When perfectly matched] . . . the bow and hunter become one functional unit. (Cochran, 1997, p. 60)

Ascribing feminine characteristics to weapons was a common advertising strategy in the magazines' content. In one advertisement, a beautiful young woman (photographed in profile to accentuate her large breasts, small waist and tight low-riding jeans) smiled at the camera holding a bow in one hand and the thumb of the other hand provocatively hooked in the pocket of her jeans. The advertisement announced a clear connection between the woman and the weapon: "Irresistible Craftsmanship . . . the responsiveness of this model is unparalleled." (Martin Archery, 2003, p. 35)

Anthropomorphized weaponry was most obvious in the tendency for hunters to ascribe feelings, emotions and relationships to their bows and arrows. An advertisement narrative reported the following:

People are a lot like bows; that is, some are louder than others; some are faster; some are prettier; some are rock steady and comfortable to engage, while others send vibrations up your spine. (Cole, 2002, p. 8)

Finally, hunters often gave their bows feminine names, such as Little Sister, and the naming was often coupled with undesirable feminine characteristics, such as Shady Lady or Fat Lady. In the following passage, a hunter described the transformation of his bow from beautiful and exciting to asexual and uninteresting:

. . . he expressed doubts about the Fat Lady's tiller and concerns that she was deteriorating and might be short lived. Such are the emotional joys and hazards of making your own equipment. You work for that one perfect bow-balanced, quiet, quick, smooth and reliable. Excitement grows as a beautiful lady takes form and promises you everything. And then, soon after the honeymoon, you come to discover she is either a vegetarian or wears crème facials and hair curlers at night. (Torges, 1997b, p. 38)

Discussion

The fusion of hunting with sexuality and women with animals occupies a prominent place in contemporary feminist theory, and we found evidence of a hunting-sex-women-animals link in the hunting discourse of a random sample of a popular hunting periodical, *Traditional Bowhunter*. Sex was a major frame of reference in the hunting discourse in the magazines. Sexual words and phrases, such as “climax” and “hot and heavy action” were used to describe hunters’ hunting experiences and encounters with killing animals.

Although sexualized language was common in the magazines, more complex representations of sexuality provided evidence of parallels between references to the sexualization of animals, women, and weapons in the hunting discourse. These representations were symbolic of a permeable sexual boundary between women, animals, and weapons, as if the three were interchangeable sexual bodies. Animals’ physical attributes were described using stereotypical feminine characteristics of physical appearance (such as “big ‘uns”), and animals were sexualized using feminine and masculine attributes of sexual behavior, often based on age, such as “old, dry, coy” and “hot-to-trot teenage bucks.” The extension of heterosexual relationships to animals often included references to the sexual frustrations of male animals and the hunters’ enjoyment of their involvement in animals’ mating rituals. These findings support Doniger’s (1995) argument that humans express their sexual ambivalences by using animal metaphors.

Sexualized references connecting women to hunting and animals were also observed in visual images to market hunting equipment, in narratives that eroticized, and the link between the pursuit of desirable animals and the pursuit of desirable women, and in the anthropomorphization of weaponry, which often consisted of ascribing heterosexual feelings, emotions, and relationships to bows and arrows. Although the active, projectile arrow was imbued with stereotypically male characteristics and depicted as an extension or embodiment of the (male) hunter, the bow was feminized and sexualized, often described as beautiful, smooth, and dependable. We read this as a feminization of the “instrumental” bow, noting that even the implements of the hunt (like the victims of it) cannot escape the patriarchal nature of the culture from which they are constructed.

There is more evidence that the hunting discourse reifies weaponry and anthropomorphizes guns and rifles. Kalof and Fitzgerald (2003) found a pattern of interchanging humans with weapons in the visual display of trophy animals. In that study, there was little anthropomorphism of animals in the trophy photographs, except when humans were absent and weapons substituted for humans in the display (Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003). But in our examination of the sexualized connection between animals, women, and weapons, the anthropomorphization of animals was central to our findings.

We argue that the explanation is likely related to the corporeal: When alive and being chased in the sport of hunting, animals are given human characteristics (primarily feminine), but when dead and displayed as a trophy, anthropomorphism is no longer necessary, humans are distanced from the animal, and the animal is simply dead. This pattern deserves further study in attempts to elucidate our relationship with other animals.

Although our readings of the narratives and images in *Traditional Bowhunter* revealed that women, weapons, and animals are all sexualized in strikingly similar ways, we do not claim that our interpretations of the texts are the only possible interpretations. We acknowledge that media discourse is an open text that embraces competing constructions of reality (Gamson, 1992). Subjective experiences position consumers (and researchers) to interpret text meanings, often in opposition to the dominant ideology embedded in the imagery (Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003; Lerner & Kalof, 1999). Thus, a text is a site of multiple interpretations (Denzin, 1992, p. 53). However, we did attempt to mitigate some potential differences in interpretation by using coders matched on important social characteristics, such as gender, race, age, and education.

Finally, widely read hunting periodicals with messages blending sex with hunting and women with animals do not generate the horror and outrage caused by the *Hunting for Bambi* (2003) video. Of course, our experiences as gender (and gendered) scholars may have brought the imagery to our attention. But we offer another argument first proposed by Adams (1990, p. 42): Violence against animals and women is linked by a theory of “overlapping but absent referents” that institutionalizes patriarchal values.

According to Adams (1990), animals often are the absent referents in actions and phrases that actually are about women—and women often are the absent referents for animals. The murder of a family dog is common in domestic

violence; in such cases, the absent referent is the abused woman (Adams, p. 45). In the staged Bambi Hunts, animals were the absent referents. In our reading of the contemporary hunting discourse, women often were the absent referents. Explicating the parallel objectifications of women and animals makes the absent referents more visible.

In the end, we agree with Mallory (2001) who noted that feminists have argued convincingly that the real problem is with the degree to which men act out their cultural conditioning into a masculine, patriarchal culture in which masculinity is defined as aggressive, powerful, and violent. Unfortunately, unlike the staged hunts for women in the Hunting for Bambi video, the underlying messages of the sexualization of women, animals, and weapons in *Traditional Bowhunter* cannot be dismissed simply as a hoax. They are resilient popular culture images that celebrate and glorify weapons, killing, and violence, laying the groundwork for the perpetuation of attitudes of domination, power, and control over others.

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Notes

- 1 Correspondence should be sent to Linda Kalof, Department of Sociology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, (517) 353-1653, e-mail: lkalof@msu.edu.
- 2 There also is a literary tradition of connecting hunting with sex. Hunting was often described as phallic and sexual in Hemingway's work (Strychacz, 1993), Shakespeare used blood sport to evoke sexual pleasure (Kane, 2000), and Arthur Conan Doyle linked hunting with predatory sexuality in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Luke, 1998).
- 3 The publication dates for the 15 issues of *Traditional Bowhunter* used in this study were:
Fall 1992
February/March 1993
December/January 1994
October/November 1995
August/September 1996
June/July 1997
October/November 1997
February/March 1998
April/May 1998
December/January 1999

February/March 1999

June/July 2000

June/July 2001

October/November 2002

April/May 2003

- ⁴ Although not analyzed in depth in this essay, we also recorded information on gendered messages (such as male bonding, male role modeling, hunters as bearers of male tradition, and other aspects of what we consider to be examples of “hypermasculinity”) and instances of violence not combined with sexuality (of which there were surprisingly very few—only 16 occurrences in the entire sample).
- ⁵ A reliability check of approximately 10% of the magazines in the sample revealed that 74% of the text was read similarly by both coders. Thus, there was substantial agreement on the reading of the magazine content, particularly given the highly subjective nature of interpreting cultural materials.
- ⁶ Thus, it was possible to obtain a frequency of 6 sexual representations in one feature article that contained four instances of sexual innuendo, a sexual photographic image, and one blatant reference to sexual intercourse.

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