



**“Compulsory Heterosexuality: The Core of the Sex Toy Industry”**

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### Compulsory Heterosexuality: The Core of the Sex Toy Industry

In 1980, Adrienne Rich coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality,” which is the idea that “heterosexuality is presumed as a ‘sexual preference’ of ‘most women,’ either implicitly or explicitly,” and societal pressures compel women to “choose heterosexual coupling and marriage,” regardless of their innate desires and sexual orientation (Rich 633). In other words, heterosexuality becomes an obligatory learned behavior that women feel coerced into adopting. In contemporary society, this impacts heterosexual women who believe that their own pleasure during sex is unimportant, women and queer couples who have trouble pleasuring themselves because of phallogentric views of pleasure, and queer couples who try to fit heteronormative standards, resulting in constant dissatisfaction and disappointment. In modern society, this phenomenon is largely fueled by mass media because it portrays heterosexuality and heteronormativity as the norm, which hegemonic industries can then utilize to market their products to fit this perpetuated social construction. In “Great to Watch,” Maggie Nelson demonstrates this by discussing how hegemonies can utilize media to perpetuate social constructs that are created by presenting a restricted view of reality through the manipulation of boundaries. Paul B. Preciado’s “Pharmaco-pornographic Politics: Towards a New Gender

Ecology” outlines how hegemonies meticulously utilize boundaries to assert control over people, specifically addressing the pharmaco-pornographic regime, which is a system that involves the commercialization of pharmacon, the way people derive meaning from social signals, and how both can be used to mold how people perceive their own gender and how they perceive gender as a concept. The pharmaco-pornographic regime produces biological technologies that can be incorporated into the body, or soft-technologies, that cater to and perpetuate carefully conceived social constructs, and “control by transforming into ‘body,’” “[becoming] the stuff of subjectivity” (Preciado 110). This codification of behavior and thinking is reinforced and becomes more deeply embedded in the public consciousness through social norms, which can be dramatically shaped by mass media’s “ultra-fast information distribution” to further fuel consumption (Preciado 108).

The sex toy industry is a facet of this regime that follows this methodology to sell its soft-technologies. By taking advantage of the internal and social scripts depicting sex and sexuality as heteronormative that are promoted by mass media, this industry then creates products that further push individuals to subscribe to compulsory heterosexuality, which then deepens this idea within people’s minds, and further guarantees and increases profits for this industry. Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank’s article, “Adventures with the ‘Plastic Man’: Sex Toys, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and the Politics of Women’s Sexual Pleasure,” explores how sex toys perpetuate ideas that contribute to compulsory heterosexuality despite often functioning as tools of empowerment, how these ideas arise and alter the public’s internal and social scripts regarding sex, how corporations then utilize this to increase their profits, and how this consequently fuels heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, and restarts this cycle.

However, an increasingly dangerous threat to this feedback loop are those who intentionally dismantle the social constructs that this industry relies on, specifically queer people. Mark Greif's "On Repressive Sentimentalism" discusses how non-traditional relationships, especially those present during the original gay movement, are superior to the heteronormative structure of marriage in terms of satisfaction, but are discouraged because they challenge the foundation of marriage, a profitable and well established method of control. Thus, queer relationships have since been confined to fit this structure. The pharmaco-pornographic regime deliberately imposes compulsory heterosexuality through the profit-seeking sex toy industry by constructing heteronormative and phallogentric ideas. These ideas are presented as the norm, and psychologically inserted into the minds of their consumers through media in such a way that incentivizes women to buy these soft-technologies, which are designed to even further promote heteronormativity and impact how they view their sexual agency. Although this system is designed to maintain hegemonic control, queer people purposefully subvert the ideas that it is reliant upon, thus posing as a threat to the pharmaco-pornographic regime.

### **Penetrating the Mind: The Construction and Propagation of Internal and Social Scripts**

Heteronormative and phallogentric ideals are constructed using boundaries in a restrictive manner, which the sex toy industry can use to infiltrate the public's schemas of sex, sexuality, and pleasure by inserting these ideals into mass media. Preciado offers that concepts such as gender, sex, and sexuality have been reduced to simpler versions by corporations under the pharmaco-pornographic regime, and in reality these concepts are much more complex and neutral because nature has no truths or falsehoods, so any meaning that is perceived is a result of

social constructs (108). The simplified understandings of these concepts are perpetuated once there is an avenue for profit through selling hormones, sex toys, and other soft-technologies that claim to help consumers conform to these social constructs. Fahs and Swank's article illustrates how the sex toy industry does this by reconstructing how women view sex in a way that coerces them to buy their products. In order to manipulate understandings of sex and sexuality into these constructs, boundaries must be used. Nelson offers that "the function of the boundary [need not] be a constrictive or restrictive one," and their actual function is arbitrary (Nelson 306). In other words, boundaries do not have an objective on their own and do not give any information about what they differentiate. However, they can be made to imply meaning by corporations, resulting in social constructs. For instance, boundaries are used to create a system of "phallic imperialism," which keeps women controlled while securing male dominance by always having a phallus of some form involved in female sexuality (Fahs and Swank 670). This is done by creating false distinctions that reconstruct sex and sexuality to "produce sexual desires and therefore produce sexual subjects so that women construct their sexualities around the desires that best sell sex toys" (Fahs and Swank 671). The confined version of reality is presented to be the true version, which makes individuals more likely to unknowingly serve the agendas of hegemonies, such as that of the pharmaco-pornographic industry to coerce people to buy the soft-technologies, including sex toys, because they genuinely believe that the distinctions created by boundaries are inherent and true.

Mass media serves as a medium to distribute and normalize the social constructs that are used to promote phallic imperialism. These are then internalized and impact individuals' subjectivity and overall views on sex, sexuality, and pleasure. Media is an efficient mechanism

to spread narrowed views of reality, which Nelson illustrates within her condemnation of shocking and harsh media being used to intentionally manipulate how people see the world. “Rapid image flow, the distillation of long, complex stories and situations to 2-inch, four-minute snippets,” disseminates information quickly, but only gives a condensed and often biased perspective of an event or idea (Nelson 302). To contort collective understandings of sex and sexual identities, the sex toy industry takes advantage of the prevalence and influence of mass media in the minds of individuals with a wide demographic range. Paul Wright’s “Sexual Socialization Messages in Mainstream Entertainment Mass Media: A Review and Synthesis” demonstrates how media influences thoughts and perceptions of sex in adolescents. Media that is consumed by adolescents has been shown to contain consistent and strong themes about sexuality that lean towards heteronormativity and phallocentrism. For instance, “when female characters on teens’ favorite programs do deviate from the heterosexual script and initiate sexual behavior with males, they often experience disappointment, guilt and anxiety as a result of their sexual advances” (Wright 185). This reinforces compulsory heterosexuality by associating shame and dissatisfaction with women who challenge social norms by taking control of their sexual desires instead of surrendering their pleasure to men. As a result, social scripts and codifications that deter and discourage women from having agency over their pleasure can be imposed on teenagers.

### **The Penetrative Imperative: Power, Pleasure, and Profit**

The social construct that penetration equates to female pleasure is highly important to the sex toy industry, as it incorporates messages already strongly present in media and contributes to

phallic imperialism. This penetration-centric idea can then be used by the pharmaco-pornographic hegemony to compel women to buy dildos and phallic toys over toys that would be more effective in delivering pleasure by utilizing its power over internal and social discussions about sex, sexuality, and pleasure to attach shame to non-penetrative sex acts, as well as reinforce the idea that women do not have agency over their own pleasure. The “penetration imperative,” the idea that penetration is necessary for female pleasure, is produced as a result of a history of shaming women who do masturbate by claiming that “secure and mature women should primarily rely upon penises and penetration for sexual satisfaction and should avoid all clitoral stimulation” (Fahs and Swank 670). This narrative is pushed and believed to be true, despite the fact that in the case study, clitoral stimulation was unanimously favored over penetration. Because this masturbatory practice contradicts what is falsely assumed by the public to be healthy and normal, “several women described this behavior as deviant or shameful, as they believed ‘normal’ masturbation meant self-penetration,” which was amplified by the fact that “women do not typically discuss masturbation with each other and that socializing forces found in schools, media, and within women’s networks do not relay accurate information about how women masturbate” (Fahs and Swank 675).

In Jia Tolentino’s “Always Be Optimizing,” she discusses how women’s subjectivity is formed by capitalist entities such as the pharmaco-pornographic regime through the normalization of certain practices, such as the Barre class fad, and the consequential social codification of people’s behaviors and thoughts to promote that women should constantly strive to improve themselves, along with other hegemonic narratives similar to the penetration imperative. By chronicling her own experience with being subject to hegemonic codification, she

demonstrates the extent to which silencing, the avoidance of discussing certain topics and self-censoring one's behaviors around others, and self-silencing, the avoidance of thinking about certain topics and self-censoring one's behaviors alone, are used as effective means of control over women by the pharmaco-pornographic regime. A woman in her yoga class was queefing uncontrollably, and "[Tolentino's] emotions went fractal -- hysterical amusement and unplaceable panic combining and recombining in a kaleidoscopic blur... [She] wanted to land in a new life where everything -- bodies, ambitions -- would work seamlessly and efficiently (Tolentino 71). Her intense, visceral reaction to the woman's queefing displays the greater societal discomfort with the natural functions of the female body. Associating such acts with shame is purposely done by patriarchal hegemonies like the pharmaco-pornographic regime to control how things related to sexuality are socially perceived and discussed. It results in silencing and self-silencing, which then allows these hegemonies to have more control over narratives of sex, often by promoting messages through mass media. For instance, Sylvia, a subject in Fahs and Swank's study felt shame in using her small vibrator because she "believed that most women use larger (and more phallic) toys" (675). The penetration imperative ingrained itself into her idea of pleasure because there were no other competing narratives being discussed as a result of silencing around these topics that comes from embarrassment and taboo. This makes the link between shame and female sexuality highly important in bringing power to the patriarchal sex toy industry.

The way that sex toys are designed and how they function even further perpetuates the penetration imperative. The focus on penetration for pleasuring women compels them to purchase phallic sex toys to masturbate and discourages them from other methods through



psychological manipulation. By nature of their design and function, “sex toys may teach women not to touch their vaginas and vulvas with their own fingers and hands,” instead “[encouraging] them to use devices, rather than fingers, to give themselves pleasure” (Fahs and Swank 672).

This further supports the idea that masturbation is shameful by indirectly condemning digital stimulation and offers using sex toys as a more acceptable alternative. Presenting sex toys as the only acceptable means of achieving pleasure is a purposeful strategy utilized by the patriarchy and provides an incentive for people to purchase these goods. Being the liaison between a woman and her pleasure allows the patriarchal sex toy industry to control how women view sex and pleasure. For instance, sex toys perpetuate the idea that women do not have agency over their own pleasure and instead attributes that ability to the phallus, which is meant to represent men. On the contrary, sex toys can be a genuine source of sexual empowerment and can teach women that their pleasure is important, which Jackie Lam explains in “Dildo or Date? A Cost-Benefit Analysis.” As someone who enjoys penetration, she highlights the importance of being able to explore different techniques on her own rather than with a partner because “with a dildo, you know exactly what you’re getting. You can push your own buttons (to vibrate or not to vibrate?), add some accessories and be in control of your own pleasure” (Lam). Although the type of empowerment that she offers requires women to contribute to the sex toy industry’s power by purchasing their products, empowerment through experimenting with penetrative masturbation still allows women to better understand themselves “by [representing] a viable option for [them] to take pleasure into their own hands”, which could help improve partnered sexual activity (Fahs and Swank 668). However, this small feat for women over the pharmaco-pornographic hegemony by gaining agency over their own pleasure is not particularly

effective. This does not necessarily counteract the impact of the penetration imperative on how they view their sexuality and pleasure because they could still be ultimately attributing their pleasure to a masculinized object and may still not view clitoral stimulation as an acceptable way of masturbating.

### **The Ultimate Threat to the Sex Toy Industry**

The sex toy industry's power relies on narratives such as the penetration imperative, so any competing narratives pose as a threat. In an attempt to eliminate the competing narratives that exist in queer circles, the sex toy industry and similar hegemonic structures take part in imposing heteronormativity onto queerness. Greif discusses how relationship models, specifically queer ones, are shaped to follow heteronormative models by questioning the function of the institution of marriage. He comments on people's apparent need for a necessitarian framework, based on the ideology that there is exactly one eternal framework for things to exist, which serves as the best way to understand individuals' own experiences, despite this seldom being true. A large part of traditional society was only ready to accept homosexuality when it could be attributed "to brain chemistry, or a gay gene, and an eternal sexual identity that must be rigid and ineluctable...only in this restricted way could society understand homosexuality without gayness threatening to reveal more new choices" (Greif 1). Queerness is only accepted when it follows the established heteronormative idea of sexuality being rigid instead of fluid. This necessitarian framework is important to maintain the patriarchal, hegemonic structure because allowing only one way of existing allows for more efficient and streamline control ideas and concepts that then compel people to contribute those hegemonies by becoming consumers of

their goods or services. Queerness would not be accepted as a fluid concept because it challenges this framework, so they are instead coerced into following heteronormative ideas in exchange for acceptance.

Similarly, queerness threatens the sex toy industry by subverting phallic imperialism. In Fahs and Swank's study, the queer women were far more open towards experimenting with sex toys in a playful manner that even intentionally challenged phallic imperialism. For instance, one of the queer subjects explained that she "constructed the dildo [during sex] as a humorous foreplay device rather than the centerpiece of quintessentially phallic intercourse, thus stripping the dildo of its (masculinized) power to *deliver* pleasure" (Fahs and Swank 678). In doing this, she undermines the control that the industry relies on because men are no longer a requirement for female pleasure. Jeanne Hamming's "Dildonics, Dykes and the Detachable Masculine" elaborates on the ability for queer women to remove patriarchal power from the dildo by addressing the misconception that lesbians who use dildos are attempting to compensate for there being no man with a penis present. Hamming argues this by offering that dildos are post-gender, "technological, cyborgian [apparatuses]" that "[offer] the potential to subvert the power dynamics of heterosexuality, because the lesbian can, with considerable ease, transform her phallic absence into a phallic presence," and are inherently separate from penises and men; they only symbolize men when that meaning is socially introduced to them (Hamming 5, 7). This meaning is introduced because equating dildo use to a lesbian's desire for heterosexual sex and the penis is crucial to the structure of the pharmaco-pornographic sex toy industry. [The dildo] is constituted as a site of heterosexuality through its associations with the penis," allowing compulsory heterosexuality to have influence over an otherwise non-heterosexual relationship

(Hamming 5). This gendering of the phallus implies that female pleasure is only accessible by men, which fuels phallic imperialism and in turn, the sex toy industry. Without this implication, dildo use no longer signifies male dominance and men are no longer the sole bearers of female pleasure. So, queer women viewing dildos as post-gender objects that allow women to pleasure one another destroys the pillars on which the sex toy industry relies on to psychologically lure women to their products that are designed to promote phallic imperialist ideals.

By psychologically ingraining the penetration imperative, with the help of media, into both people's internal and social scripts regarding sex to impose phallic imperialism, the sex toy industry perpetuates compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormative ideals. This then motivates women to consume these oppressive soft-technologies made by big corporations as opposed to smaller, feminist sex toy shops whose products are not based around phallic ideals. Queer women threaten this strategy because instead of succumbing to the narratives of the penetration imperative and phallic imperialism that sex toys are designed to enforce, they deliberately subvert these ideas and often even empower women because they can now view pleasure as something that they can have agency over. So although queer women do purchase these toys, the sex toys lack the same power over queer women that they have over straight women. Despite this victory over the pharmaco-pornographic regime, is it enough for queer women to simply subvert the intended subliminal messages behind phallic sex toys? Perhaps, a more effective method of dismantling the regime is refusing to consume their products altogether and protesting media that propagates ideas of compulsory heterosexuality. Then, women may be more drawn towards sex toys and masturbatory practices that are actually conducive towards their sexual satisfaction, such as vibrators, without the influence of phallic imperialist ideals. So instead, people could

support feminist and queer sex toy businesses that have no agenda of promoting patriarchal ideas, rather promoting non-penetrative and non-heteronormative methods of sex and masturbation to begin framing genuine, mutual pleasure as the goal of sex.

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