

PORNOGRAPHY AS A COMPONENT OF MASCULINITY IN LATE CAPITALIST  
SOCIETIES

by

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## Abstract

“Pornography” is a term possessing considerable weight in the context of contemporary society; however, it lacks a solid, singular definition. Though it is typically used when referring to videos and images depicting sexually explicit scenarios published on online streaming services such as *Pornhub* or image-hosting websites such as *DeviantArt*, a sort of grey area exists, featuring content in which sexually explicit scenarios occur, yet they are not typically described as pornography. This essay intervenes in feminist scholarly works on the interplay between pornography and masculinity by examining work positioned in this grey area. Video games such as the *Tomb Raider* franchise act as a solid example of this work. The protagonist of this video game is Lara Croft, a character described by some as a feminist icon and by others as a sexist stereotype due to her sexualized design. This game, the primary consumers of which are adolescent males and its position as a product of the free market, raises questions concerning the prevalence of pornography in the daily lives of younger members of contemporary society. This essay explores the role of pornography in the construction of masculinity in late capitalist societies. I argue that the objectification of women through the consumption of pornography available on the Internet parallels the process by which the Nazi party dehumanized the Jewish people as Hannah Arendt describes in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In making this claim, this essay contributes to feminist critiques of pornography by reinterpreting the violence featured in entertainment such as video games as pornography.

## Introduction

“Pornography” is a term possessing considerable weight in the context of contemporary society; however, it lacks a solid, singular definition. Though it is typically used when referring to videos and images depicting sexually explicit scenarios published on online streaming services such as *Pornhub* or image-hosting websites such as *DeviantArt*, a sort of grey area exists, featuring content in which sexually explicit scenarios occur, yet they are not typically described as pornography. Though the broadening of this definition heightens its inclusivity, it also allows for a significant grey area, one in which content featuring, but not explicitly highlighting, what could be considered as sexually explicit scenarios exists.

One example of this particular type of media is the popular *Tomb Raider* video game franchise. Following the first game, simply titled *Tomb Raider*, and released in 1996, each entry in the series features its protagonist Lara Croft throughout the world as she explores dangerous tombs and other ruins. Even at the time of the first game’s release, the presentation of the character of Lara Croft was immediately questionable, with her Barbie doll-esque figure leading many to claim her to be either “a feminist icon,” as she was one of the first playable female characters in the history of video games, or a “sexist stereotype,” as she was created by a man and is often depicted with unrealistic body proportions.<sup>1</sup> Evidence suggests that the latter was more accurate, with the game itself “[encouraging] objectification,” as the camera is often positioned on her rear end during gameplay.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the game itself, Lara’s reception in popular culture also echoed this sentiment, with her being one of the first few fictional characters

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<sup>1</sup> Eliana Dockterman, “Inside the Complicated History of Lara Croft and Tomb Raider,” in *Time* (Time, 19 March 2019), [time.com/5203607/tomb-raider-2018-alicia-vikander/](https://time.com/5203607/tomb-raider-2018-alicia-vikander/)

<sup>2</sup> Dockterman, “Lara Croft and Tomb Raider.”

featured in the pages of *Playboy* magazine, another form of media commonly identified in the cultural zeitgeist as pornography.

The history of this character does not end there, though. In 2013, Square Enix, the developers of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, released a new and revitalized entry in the series, and accompanying it was a version of Lara Croft that differed greatly from her initial depiction. This version of Lara wore much more conservative clothing and lacked the physique of her 1996 counterpart; however, gender violence, specifically femicide, is still present in the game. Each time a player fails to reach a particular objective, Lara is subjected to one of many horrible and violent deaths displayed in their entirety, including being impaled by a tree branch, crushed under the weight of several boulders, and choked by male enemies.<sup>3</sup> Though graphic, this video game is widely available and accessible to general consumers, with this particular entry and its sequel grossing a combined 18 million dollars as of March 2018.<sup>4</sup> While this content is not explicitly intended to arouse its players, as the content available on sites such as *Pornhub* or *DeviantArt* is, the sexualized figure of the game's protagonist Lara Croft and the violence the character experiences during gameplay may be consumed in a similar manner to content available on these same websites, that is for the purpose of sexual arousal and climax. This specific type of violence inflicted on the body of Lara Croft, a character depicted as female though not actually possessing a physical human body, as well as the medium of *Tomb Raider*, a video game in which players are able to control Lara's body, raise questions surrounding the status of this work as pornography and its role in the lives of those who play these games.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Brown, "Tomb Raider's Grisly Death Animations Are Outdated" in *Polygon* (Polygon, 23 October 2018), [www.polygon.com/2018/10/11/17961496/tomb-raider-death-animations](http://www.polygon.com/2018/10/11/17961496/tomb-raider-death-animations)

<sup>4</sup> Dockterman, "Lara Croft and Tomb Raider."

According to data published by the *Pew Research Center* in 2015, 84% of males, more specifically those between the ages of 13 and 17, play video games on a computer, game console, or cellphone.<sup>5</sup> This data contrasts sharply with the statistics concerning adolescent women, with only 59% of this demographic reporting that they play video games.<sup>6</sup> The prevalence of video games in general in the lives of adolescent males, partnered with the reality that a majority of sexual development occurs during the same age range depicted in the data set from *Pew*, demands a degree of investigation.

While not in direct response to the medium of video games in particular, but rather any and all media also existing the grey zone mentioned previously, antipornography feminist scholars Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon presented a model civil ordinance intended to criminalize the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography. In this ordinance, formulated at the behest of local legislators in cities across the United States, Dworkin and MacKinnon present a definition of pornography intended to differentiate material categorized as such from obscenity. This definition asserts pornography to be any type of media, whether that be in “pictures or words,” that presents women as “sexual objects.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, Dworkin and MacKinnon explicitly expand their definition of pornography as applicable to any type of media that presents women “in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, bleeding, [bruising], or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual, as sexual objects for domination, conquest, violation, exploitation, possession, or use, or through postures or positions of servility or submission or display.”<sup>8</sup> Dworkin and MacKinnon also note that, while women are

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<sup>5</sup> Amanda Lenhart, “Video Games, Teen Boys and Building Social Skills and Friendships” from *Pew Research Center* (*Pew Research Center*, 31 December 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/08/06/chapter-3-video-games-are-key-elements-in-friendships-for-many-boys/>

<sup>6</sup> Lenhart, “Video Games, Teen Boys.”

<sup>7</sup> Reginald Williams, “Feminism and Rape” in *Public Affairs Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2015), 422.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, “Feminism and Rape,” 422.

referenced explicitly in the proposed amendment itself, material meeting the criteria they outline featuring “men, children, or transsexuals” also qualifies as pornography according to the ordinance.

This definition differs greatly from what is typically found throughout work in the field of feminist theory, with most scholars typically citing the definition offered by Linda Williams in her 1989 work *Hard Core. Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible.”* In this work, Williams defines pornography as “the visual (and sometime aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers.”<sup>9</sup> Julie Lavigne, in her work concerning autopornography, claims William’s tenets as the “most basic and neutral definition of pornography.”<sup>10</sup>

While this definition is, just as Lavigne notes, useful due to its simplicity, it lacks the inclusivity of the definition presented by Dworkin and MacKinnon. According to the tenets of William’s definition, games in the *Tomb Raider* franchise do not qualify as works of pornography, despite the fact these pieces media depict a sexualized character in both literal and potentially sexually explicit scenarios. For this reason, the definition provided by Dworkin and MacKinnon in their proposed municipal ordinance will be used throughout this essay in order to evaluate material consumed by adolescent men on a regular basis and the role that this same material plays in the development of their masculinity.

While not directly concerned with the analysis or critique of pornography, political theorist Hannah Arendt offers a theoretical framework that makes it possible to analyze the oppression or *potential* oppression inflicted by one group in political power against another,

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<sup>9</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (University of California Press, 1999), 29-30.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Lavigne, *Autopornography and the struggle for the recognition of a sexual subjectivity: a theoretical analysis from Loree Erickson’s testimony in The Feminist Porn Book*, *Feminist Media Studies* (2017), 790.

politically weaker, group in her 1951 work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In this work, Arendt enumerates three steps necessary for the “total domination” of a people.<sup>11</sup> Arendt provides these steps in order to more adequately articulate the machinations of Nazi Germany against the Jewish people and the clarity of their attempt at total domination; however, I believe these steps can also be used as a framework to analyze and identify similar attempts at dehumanization of women and other feminized groups in the digital realm. More specifically, I believe this framework can be used to investigate whether or not the consumption of pornography in video games such as Tomb Raider, a factor contributing significantly to the formation of a dominant masculinity possessed by men in positions of political power, parallels any or perhaps all of the steps articulated by Arendt in her theory of total domination, albeit in the digital realm, thus deeming the systems responsible for the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography as mechanisms of dehumanization and commodification of women and members of other feminized groups.

With these things in mind, the primary research question explored in this essay makes itself apparent: What is the role of pornography in the construction of masculinity in late capitalist societies? Along with this question, others beg to be addressed, such as: How might a particular construction of masculinity informed by pornography affect women living in the same society? How do dominant constructions of masculinity impact democracy and the exercise of political rights of women and other feminized members of society? In order to properly address these questions, I draw from the fields of feminist theory, masculinity studies, critiques of late capitalism, and democratic theory.

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Franklin Classics, 2019), 454.



In this essay, I argue that masculinity informed by the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography that features high levels of extreme gender violence is responsible for the simultaneous dehumanization and commodification of women and other feminized groups inhabiting the same society. To support this claim, I first articulate the relationship between pornography and masculinity, exploring both traditional assumptions surrounding the development of masculinity and its relationship with femininity, attributes of the phallus typically emphasized in pornography, and the consumption of pornography as a type of sexual relation between the consumer and whomever is featured in the content. In the following section, I assert the importance of capitalism, specifically late capitalism, as the setting in which the formation of a masculinity informed by pornography occurs. I discuss concepts considered to be overwhelmingly present in late capitalist societies, such as the strong distinctions drawn between the public sphere and the private sphere, lordship as a cultural equating of power and ownership of property, and the influence of media on the ethical standards of the society. I then discuss potential connections to totalitarian capitalism, an emerging hegemonic stage of capitalism in contemporary societies. Following these two sections, I provide a more elaborate articulation of the three steps enumerated by Arendt, presenting the parallels between her theory of total domination and the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography such as *Tomb Raider*. This discussion will help me illustrate that attempts at total domination are commonly reproduced in the digital realm.

This work is significant because of how it intervenes in commonly held notions of both sexual actualization and sexual autonomy. Sexual difference, or the process of self-actualization in which an individual discovers their unique gender identity and sexual preference, is typically considered by gender and sexual theorists to occur during the adolescence of both men and women. At its conclusion, fully formed notions of masculinity and femininity arrive. In

contemporary society, one resting soundly in the context of late capitalism and the overwhelming pervasiveness of the Internet, it is very likely that the first time a heterosexual adolescent male will be exposed to female genitalia, contributing significantly to the development of his own masculinity, will be as it is displayed on a screen, as opposed to a physical and consensual sexual experience. In this way, depictions of feminized bodies are highly relevant to the development of the sexuality of these heterosexual adolescent males.

### **Pornography as a Component of Masculinity**

In conceptions of the gender binary, both men and women are seen as possessing qualities exclusive to each gender. The expression of these qualities is understood to be masculinity and femininity, respectively. Masculinity, because it is one of the primary subjects of this essay, will be discussed more heavily between the two, though discussing femininity will be important to developing a more solid understanding of how the two expressions interact.

Masculinity can be described as an “ideology comprised of systematically interrelated elements.”<sup>12</sup> While this definition may appear vague, it raises important points concerning how masculinity may be analyzed. To be sure, when examined more closely, this definition makes clear that masculinity is composed of multiple elements, rather than a single factor. The phrasing of this description, purposefully curated by Christine M. DiStefano in her work *Gender and political theory: masculinity as ideology in modern political thought*, establishes what will prove to be an essential piece of my argument, being that masculinity develops as a result of the influence of external factors, not as a result of any sort of natural disposition.

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<sup>12</sup> Christina M. DiStefano Di Stefano, Christine M., "Gender and political theory: masculinity as ideology in modern political thought," in *Doctoral Dissertations 1896 - February 2014* (1984), 79.

While individuals possessing the phallus are more likely to possess masculine characteristics than individuals who do not, as Gayle Rubin discusses in her reinterpretation of classic Freudian notions of masculinity, the presence of masculinity as a social construction is not directly dependent on these factors. Rubin's 1975 essay "The Traffic in Women" is notable in that the author positions her work in the context of Freudian conceptions of gender and sexuality, conceptions typically rejected by almost the entirety of the field of feminist theory. Rubin argues that a view of gender acquisition originating from the work of Freud has the potential to more deeply and thoroughly expose the ways in which the construction of gender is held captive and distorted by those who desire to repress any form of gender or sexual deviance in infants as they transition to adolescence and eventually adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

Following her defense of the work of Freud, though she does make necessary exclusions, Rubin articulates how a Freudian view of the phallus can contribute to a stronger understanding of the relationship between the phallus and masculinity. Rubin briefly outlines the immediate implications of possession of and the lack of the phallus, the recognition of which Freud and Freudian thinkers refer to as "penis envy," a term often scrutinized by feminist theorists in the twenty-first century. Dominance is conferred on the phallus inherently, though there are other means by which qualities can be assigned to the sexual organs unique to men and women.

When an adolescent possessing the phallus is exposed to media depicting sexually explicit scenarios, for example pornography, in which other individuals possessing the phallus are dominant over those who do not, the adolescent assigns those qualities to a perceived notion of a perfected masculinity, one in line with a similar perception of a "sexual value system," described by Rubin her 1984 essay "Thinking Sex." In this work, Rubin discusses the role of a

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<sup>13</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The traffic in women: Notes on the 'political economy' of sex," in *Toward an anthropology of women*, (New York: Monthly View Press, 1975), 184.

“hierarchical system of sexual value” of a society as individual members of that society grow and, in turn, become more sexually active.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, Rubin discusses those whose sexual practices differ from what is approved by the sexual value system, whom she refers to as “perverts,” “deviants,” or any variation of either of these terms. Rubin’s deployment of these terms is not intended to indicate any degree of “disapproval, disgust, and dislike,” as they may be interpreted to in other instances of their use; rather, she uses them to refer to those who practice any sexual act that deviates from the “sexual value system,” a system present in contemporary society meant to perpetuate the acceptance of “sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural.’”<sup>15</sup> According to the system, “good sexuality” typically denotes “heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial [expressions of sexuality].”<sup>16</sup> Though pornography, according to Rubin’s articulation of the sexual value system, qualifies as “bad sexuality,” alongside practices such as the use of objects or toys designed explicitly for sex and roles other than one male partner and one female partner, it may actually contribute to the perpetuation of “good sexuality,” as well as reinforce the formation of dominant masculinity. As the development of masculinity and femininity occur in tandem with one another, a dominant masculinity necessitates a submissive femininity to sustain the dominant position. As adolescent males observe those possessing the phallus in pornography and develop their own notions of a perfected masculinity and practices qualifying as “good sexuality,” they also develop notions of a corresponding perfected femininity, the tenets of which are fulfilled by *Tomb Raider*, in that the protagonist, possessing a feminized body, can be manipulated by the player and forced to

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<sup>14</sup> Gayle Rubin. "Thinking Sex: Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Culture, Society, and Sexuality*, (Routledge, 2006), 151.

<sup>15</sup> Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 151.

<sup>16</sup> Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 152.

participate in acts able to cause serious harm, including ongoing physical assault, recurring defeat, and death.

A necessary component of the relationship between pornography and masculinity is the ability of pornography to replicate a sexual experience. Catharine A. MacKinnon asserts that, although considerable distance exists between the subjects of pornography and the consumers of that same material, a sexual relationship may still exist between these two parties. She claims the consumer, in consuming pornography, is participating in “a real, actual, sexual act.”<sup>17</sup> One that, notably, lacks any sort of consent from the subject(s) despite the fact that consumers experience a similar degree of sexual pleasure as they would if they were engaging in a sexual act with a partner being physically present. This again contributes heavily to an adolescent male’s perception of “good sexuality,” in that the issue of consent is no longer a factor, as if individuals possessing the phallus deserve unlimited sexual gratification, and those possessing the phallus but unable to experience this same limitlessness are emasculated since they lack any qualities assigned to men by the ideology of masculinity. This conversation alone prompts more serious investigation of possessiveness itself as potentially emblematic of the influence of larger structures of power promoting certain values and discouraging others.

### **Late Capitalism as the Setting of the Development of Masculinity**

The setting of this formation of masculinity is of much import to larger conclusions surrounding the effects of the consumption of pornography on both men and women in contemporary society. Late capitalism is the water in which contemporary society swims, and its influence is immediately apparent. The *Tomb Raider* video game discussed previously is a

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<sup>17</sup> Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Pornography as Trafficking,” in *Michigan Journal of International Law*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2005), 994.

product of the free market, as are similar works in the grey zone. Just as is the case with pornography, late capitalism lacks a universal definition, though most scholars agree that is most commonly identified by growing forces of “automation, globalization, and wage stagnation.”<sup>18</sup> Philosopher Theodor Adorno, in his 1968 address to the 16th German Sociological Congress, articulates the role of late capitalism as “blunting the proletariat’s potential for revolution,” a critique built on the work of Marx. Most notably, Adorno claims the mere presence of late capitalism “continues to perpetuate domination over human beings.”<sup>19</sup>

This relationship between advancements in capitalism and domination over human beings is most clearly articulated in the work of Rita Laura Segato. Segato, in her 2016 work *Patriarchy From Margin to Center: Discipline, Territoriality and Cruelty in the Apocalyptic of Capital*, discusses the history of the “public sphere” and the “private sphere”<sup>20</sup> in her attempt to historicize the pervasiveness of gender violence, including femicide, in contemporary societies. According to Segato, in late capitalist societies, only men are permitted to access the public sphere, while women are confined to the private sphere. Politics, business, and war inhabit the public sphere, and worthwhile advancements in technology are thought to originate from it. These developments, if they benefit the functioning of the public sphere, are considered to be “of general interest and possess universal value.”<sup>21</sup>

As for the public sphere, masculinity expressed by the “public man” is often misconstrued as “typical” political behavior, as is critiqued by Terrell Carver in his work *Public*

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<sup>18</sup> Annie Lowrey, “Why the Phrase ‘Late Capitalism’ Is Suddenly Everywhere,” in *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, 3 August 2017), [www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/late-capitalism/524943/](http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/late-capitalism/524943/).

<sup>19</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? Opening Address to the 16th German Sociological Congress,” in *Frankfurt School: Late Capitalism or Industrial Society* (1968).

<sup>20</sup> Rita Laura Segato, “Patriarchy from Margin to Center: Discipline, Territoriality, and Cruelty in the Apocalyptic Phase of Capital,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 3 (1 July 2016), 616.

<sup>21</sup> Segato, “Patriarchy,” 617.

*Man" and the Critique of Masculinities.*<sup>22</sup> According to Carver, dominant, particularly authoritarian, behavior in the household is accepted when practiced in the political space.<sup>23</sup> Patriarchal political opinions and actions are accepted, Carver notes, by contemporary society.<sup>24</sup> So, according to the work of Carver, dominant masculinity also acts as a necessary tool for proper political participation, which further asserts the potential importance of pornography in the transition experienced by adolescent males from boyhood to manhood. If the future political participation of adolescent males is predicated on their sexual development, the presence of pornography in that development again results in political participation informed, though not entirely, by those pieces of pornography.

As technological advancements continue to develop in the public sphere, and the society becomes one further engrossed in late capitalism, Segato notes the increased presence of “lordship,” a cultural equating of power and ownership of property, in whatever form that property might take.<sup>25</sup> Lordship is cultural in that, according to Segato, it permeates both the public and the private spheres. Accompanying lordship, as it relates to the possession of women and their status as property in late capitalist societies is an “unprecedented level of feudal power” that is “exerted over bodies as exemplar and spectacular cruelty.”<sup>26</sup> If men possessing a dominant masculinity informed by pornography inhabit the public sphere, the source from which the political occurs and technological advancements originate, the products of this sphere will be influenced by similar conceptions of gender and sexuality promoted by pornography.

According to the work of Segato, technological developments initially appearing to benefit society are ultimately utilized to advance the interests of the patriarchy. Video games are

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<sup>22</sup> Terrell Carver, “Public Man’ and the Critique of Masculinities,” in *Political Theory*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1996), 681.

<sup>23</sup> Carver, “Public Man,” 682.

<sup>24</sup> Carver, “Public Man,” 682.

<sup>25</sup> Segato, “Patriarchy,” 621.

<sup>26</sup> Segato, “Patriarchy,” 621.

an example of this type of technological development. Segato herself also designates the 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange* as a type of technological advancement, a film, that expands accessibility to depictions of the degradation of women, with her describing the changing attitudes toward the violence depicted throughout the film's narrative, from horror to laughter over the span of forty years, as "an undeniable sign of the reduction of ethical standards promoted by late capitalism."<sup>27</sup> With this almost limitless access comes what Segato describes as a "limitless capacity for bodies and territories to be preyed upon and reduced to remains."<sup>28</sup> Catharine A. MacKinnon also contributes to discussions surrounding late capitalism. In the same work cited previously, she notes that what established the consumption of pornography as a staple of contemporary society are the technological advancements that accompany the development of capital and originate from the public sphere and directly attribute to the strength of patriarchal structures of power.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Robyn Marasco, in her 2018 work *There's a Fascist in the Family: Critical Theory and Antiauthoritarianism*, details the presence of patriarchal structures in the private sphere and their possible connections with authoritarianism, detailing that "the authoritarian family is organized according to a rigid hierarchy of sex."<sup>30</sup> Although families themselves are not only capable of promoting authoritarianism, as Marasco elaborates in her explanation of a theoretical "democratic" family, the presence of patriarchal structures, with the father acting as the dominant force in the home, is unavoidable.<sup>31</sup> This expression of masculinity in the home acts as a small overlap between the two spheres, directly influencing males in their infancy,

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<sup>27</sup> Segato, "Patriarchy," 624.

<sup>28</sup> Segato, "Patriarchy," 623.

<sup>29</sup> MacKinnon, "Trafficking," 1006.

<sup>30</sup> Marasco, Robyn. "There's a Fascist in the Family: Critical Theory and Antiauthoritarianism." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 117, no. 4 (1 Oct. 2018), 807.

<sup>31</sup> Marasco, "Fascist in the Family," 808.



adolescence, and adulthood, further asserting claims by Carver. Though pornography is typically consumed by adolescent males in the home, the cornerstone of the private sphere, its influence on formations of dominant masculinity gives the material a type of transcendent quality, with the notions of dominant masculinity it instills materializing in the public sphere which, in turn, dictates life in the private sphere.

The overwhelming availability of pornography and the ease of access to it as a direct result of the very presence of material such as video games, partnered with the relationship between pornography and the transition experienced by adolescent males between boyhood and manhood in both the private and public sphere, present an obvious disjunction. Due to the lack of any severe forms of restrictions set on material such as *Tomb Raider*, though it depicts graphic instances of extreme gender violence, the complicity of those responsible for potentially regulating it signifies a sort of approval of that material. For this reason, the pervasiveness of material such as *Tomb Raider*, in which the player can literally control the body of the protagonist, Lara Croft, the totalizing character of the values promoted by the material becomes immediately apparent.

### **Totalitarian Capitalism**

Though conceptions of late capitalism enable a critique of the role of masculinity and the public sphere by denoting their potential to cause direct harm to human bodies, I argue that the presence of material such as *Tomb Raider* suggests a transition to a new phase of capitalism, one in which possession of human bodies is no longer a feature but a cornerstone.

In an article published by George Monbiot, he describes the transition from what might simply be referred to as late capitalism to something more sinister. If the tenets of lordship, according to Segato, are met to such a degree that every sphere of society, including both the

public and private spheres discussed previously, are absolutely engrossed by the possessiveness emblematic of capitalist practices, a new stage of capitalism arrives, what Monbiot refers to as “totalitarian capitalism.”<sup>32</sup> Monbiot first used the term when discussing the push to map the human genome in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, specifically in how corporations might use the information collected as a result of this scientific endeavor as a means to assume more direct control over human lives. In this commentary, published by *The Guardian* in 2000, Monbiot defines the concept of totalitarian capitalism as “a political and economic system which, by seizing absolute control of fundamental resources, destitutes everyone it excludes.”<sup>33</sup> This definition is particularly useful because of its emphasis on absolute control, as opposed to partial control, and fundamental resources. Though Monbiot does not provide any specific insight into what exactly he means by fundamental resources, I am interpreting this to refer to those resources which are necessary for life.

This definition is important because it presents immediate similarities to the definition provided by Adorno of late capitalism and the heavy discussions surrounding lordship found in the work of Segato. The distinction between these two stages of capitalism, late capitalism and totalitarian capitalism is this: the absolute control of human life. It is important to recognize the presence of a new stage of capitalism when considering the possible real effects of digital works such as *Tomb Raider* and how these works shape the formation of dominant or hegemonic masculinity because sometimes the boundaries separating digital life from physical life collapse, impacting human life and human bodies.

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<sup>32</sup> George Monbiot, “This Is a War of All Worlds,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, June 29, 2000), <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2000/jun/29/genetics.comment>.

<sup>33</sup> Monbiot, “War of All Worlds.”

Though the possession of human life as a cornerstone of capitalist societies is a feasible interpretation of the work of Segato in particular, Monbiot posits a system predicated on control of the human body at all stages, even in the immediate moments following conception. In *Tomb Raider*, players have actual control over the body of Lara Croft at all times as they complete objectives. In the same way, the player might purposefully command Lara to fail to complete the objective, resulting in a graphic display of violence in which the character dies. Though Lara Croft does not possess a literal human body, the character simulates the body of a woman as closely as is technologically possible. Significantly, the players control the fate of Lara Croft, her moves, body, and, presumably, mind, and can purposefully direct her to fail her objectives resulting in her inevitable death in such grotesque ways that can be considered as representations of femicide in the physical realm because of the player's active role in prompting them. This degree of control, though it is control of a feminized body existing in the digital realm, echoes claims made by Monbiot on the emergence of a new stage of capitalism, one in which absolute control over the bodies of others is an undeniable feature.

This concept, totalitarian capitalism, relates to another concept concerning the presence of totality in spheres in which it did not previously appear: inverted totalitarianism. Introduced by Sheldon S. Wolin in his work *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, the term refers to the “political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry.”<sup>34</sup> Wolin encourages his reader to consider the influence of corporate power on the lives of individual members of society, a call almost identical to that presented by Monbiot. The two concepts differ in that Wolin also makes clear the relationship these corporations, amassing more power as late capitalism reaches the

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<sup>34</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (United States: Princeton University Press, 2017), x.

dawn of totalitarian capitalism, have with systems of political power. Wolin asserts that “power-holders” at the head of systems of inverted totalitarianism are “unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions.”<sup>35</sup> This same ignorance is made evident by the lack of regulation of material such as *Tomb Raider*. In a similar vein, one could argue that male adolescents who play the video game are completely unaware of the influence that the video game can have on how they perceive and relate to other subjects, especially women and members of other feminized groups.

As for how a late capitalist society actually transitions to one engrossed in totalitarian capitalism and structured according to a system of inverted totalitarianism, a framework originating in Hannah Arendt’s work concerning totalitarianism as the absolute control of a people group acts as a lens with which the potential presence of these system of dehumanization and oppression can be exposed. What I am suggesting is that an iteration of a late capitalist society, as is described by both Adorno and Segato, in which lordship is not only present, is all-encompassing to such a degree that it may be considered to be totalitarian. This new phase of capitalism, in turn, calls for innovative theoretical frameworks that help illuminate how totalitarian capitalism is, in turn, normalized and internalized through the production, distribution, and consumption of pornographic content featuring extreme gender violence.

### **Arendt’s Framework**

When considering the implications of a dominant masculinity influenced by representations of femicide committed in the digital realm and consumed by men inhabiting the public sphere of a totalitarian capitalist society, the status of women and other feminized groups

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<sup>35</sup> Wolin, “Inverted Totalitarianism,” x.

must be investigated. Because women and other feminized groups are almost totally confined to the private sphere, they are vulnerable to decisions concerning governance made in the public sphere. In this way, they are subjects of politics, not participants. This introduces the potential for considerable harm to be committed against these groups due to the tenets of perfected masculinity. As mentioned previously, perfected masculinity requires perfected femininity, an aspect of which is absolute submissiveness. Because they are positioned in the public sphere and are, in turn, the only group capable of making decisions concerning governance, and the submissiveness of women and other feminized groups is a determining factor in the degree of masculinity they achieve, men possessing dominant masculinity will use this access to politics to further assert total dominance over these same groups. Though, when considering the influence of *Tomb Raider*, total domination may only be explicitly present in the digital realm, its presence in any form raises concerns surrounding any sort of structure responsible for promoting totalitarianism. Hannah Arendt's theory of total domination presents the most salient means by which this particular issue, the potential dehumanization and commodification of women and other feminized groups, can be evaluated and critiqued.

In this section, Arendt's theory of total domination, specifically the three steps she enumerates as necessary to achieve it, acts as a framework that I use to analyze possible parallels between the steps she offers and the effects of dominant masculinity informed by pornography such as that depicted in the *Tomb Raider* video game. The theory of total domination was inspired by the atrocities of the Holocaust, and Arendt presents the three steps so that her reader can develop a more solid understanding of the extent to which the Nazis exercised total domination over the Jewish people. It may seem extreme to repurpose a framework originally intended to describe the process by which the Nazis dehumanized and murdered the Jewish

people. However, I believe that the three steps theorized by Arendt give considerable insight into other forms in which subjects equipped with a dominant masculinity informed by pornography might attempt to achieve total domination. Such an intellectual exercise can help clarify how decisions made by the Nazis before the construction of the concentration camp led to the eventual detainment, dehumanization, and ultimate erasure of the Jewish people. Before proceeding with such analysis, it is important to remind readers that the subject of this analysis is not pornography as a whole, but pornography featuring recurring instances of extreme gender violence such as *Tomb Raider*, a video game in which a feminized body, existing only in the digital realm, can be controlled to such a degree that the player can choose to directly harm and kill Lara Croft if they so choose. These instances of femicide, albeit committed in the digital realm, rehearse, if only in the slightest, actions taken in the physical realm by the Nazis against the Jewish people to achieve their total subjection. While I acknowledge that there is no point of comparison between the two events, the point of this exercise is to evaluate and critique some of the ways in which the ethos and aspiration of achieving total domination is kept alive. For this reason, I believe my inclusion of Arendt's theory of total domination and its references to the atrocities of the Holocaust are productive to my present analysis of dominant masculinity.

### *Death of the Juridical Person*

The first of the three steps necessary for total domination is the death of the "juridical person in man."<sup>36</sup> This step refers to the termination of the ability of members of a particular society to participate in the regular functioning of that society's legal system. In the case of Nazi Germany's treatment of the Jewish people, the "instrument of denationalization," by which Jews

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<sup>36</sup> Arendt, "Origins," 447.

lost the protections typically awarded to them as citizens of their respective nations, accomplished this first step, as well as did the position of the concentration camp “outside the normal penal system.”<sup>37</sup>

The legality of pornography such as *Tomb Raider*, specifically its production, distribution, and consumption, may meet the qualifications for this first stage of total domination in that the lack of any degree of criminality or restricted access to this material indicates a lack of protection of those vulnerable to the effects of dominant masculinity informed by that same material. In this way, the legal status of women is affected by acts of gender violence committed in the digital realm because the material depicting those instances of femicide stands unaffected. This inconsistency is what first prompted action from Dworkin and MacKinnon, the authors of the legal ordinance from which the definition of pornography I use in this essay originates.

The most prominent example of this inconsistency beyond the digital realm in which the events of *Tomb Raider* occur is the tolerance of instances of gender violence exposed by the #MeToo movement. The movement, which gained considerable traction following a call from actress Alyssa Milano, made in the form of a tweet, encouraged all women and members of other feminized groups to verbalize and make known their own experiences as survivors of gender violence.<sup>38</sup> This tweet and the movement it directed attention to made known the severity of the repression of the voices of these survivors. Unfortunately, the emergence of the #MeToo movement illustrates that sexual violence is pervasive in contemporary societies which continue to tolerate and normalize extreme gender violence. Such normalized gender violence is a central

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<sup>37</sup> Arendt, “Origins,” 437.

<sup>38</sup> Karen Kaplan, “After Alyssa Milano's #MeToo Tweet, Google Searches about Sexual Assault Hit Record High,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, December 21, 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-metoo-google-searches-20181221-story.html>.

feature of *Tomb Raider*. Despite this, as was previously noted, one year after Milano's tweet, published in October of 2017, the *Tomb Raider* reboot and its sequel celebrated sales of over 18 million copies.

The femicide occurring within the digital realm is positioned outside the normal penal system not simply because the events depicted in *Tomb Raider* are fictitious, but instead that consumption of the material lacks any sort of legal penalty. Those capable of making decisions that could affect the legal status of pornography such as *Tomb Raider* have not done so, with the complicity of the public sphere making clear an approval of the actions depicted. In this way, *Tomb Raider* acts as an instrument of denationalization. It normalizes gender violence, particularly in how the acts of femicide present within the digital realm also occur in the physical realm without any repercussions faced by those consuming the material and committing these same acts of femicide when they take control of the character of Lara Croft.

### *Death of the Moral Person*

Following this first step, the next involves the killing of "the moral person."<sup>39</sup> This step refers to a clouding of the people group's notion of right and wrong. Within the walls of the concentration camp, a conscience "[ceased] to be adequate" and to discern between right and wrong became "utterly impossible."<sup>40</sup> By placing Jews in positions of leadership within the concentration camp, the Germans consistently presented them with unavoidable moral dilemmas, typically involving a choice between "[sending] their friends to their death" or "[murdering] other men who happened to be strangers."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Arendt, "Origins," 451.

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, "Origins," 452.

<sup>41</sup> Arendt, "Origins," 452.



Standing alongside a masculinity informed by pornography such as *Tomb Raider*, featuring depictions of gender violence, is a perceived femininity informed by the same material. In this dynamic, a masculine individual must be dominant, while their complimentary feminine sexual partner is submissive. As was noted previously, notions of sexual difference imply a strong relationship between individual moments of sexual discovery with larger conceptions of the opposite sex. Pornography such as *Tomb Raider* not only exposes the bodies of women, but also typically depicts women in positions of submission and at the whim of their male counterparts. In the case of *Tomb Raider*, the body of Lara Croft is harmed as a direct result of the player's actions. She is, then, submissive to the whims of the player. Thus, adolescent males perceive the ideal woman as one with certain physical features celebrated by the material and, perhaps more pertinent, one that is submissive and willing to participate in whatever sexual activity their male sexual partner desires. The ideal man, then, is one that is dominant in sexual relations.

As for the actual women who participate in the production, consumption, and distribution of the material, a subject's willing participation, whether it actually is within the subject's capacity to consent to the events depicted in pornography or not, serves as an example of clouded moral judgement. If pornography such as *Tomb Raider* contributes to the means by which they are oppressed, not only in the digital realm but also in the physical one, it is logical to assume that women would choose not to participate in any step of its development; however, according to MacKinnon, any woman involved in pornography most likely "sees no escape, has no real alternative, was often sexually abused before as a child, may be addicted to drugs, is homeless, hopeless," and "is often trying to avoid being beaten or killed."<sup>42</sup> Along with actual

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<sup>42</sup> MacKinnon, "Trafficking," 995.

women on which the model for Lara Croft is based, it can be assumed that women also occupy positions on the teams responsible for actually producing the game, distributing it to retailers, and even marketing it directly to consumers. Women, then, may be implicated in the production, distribution, and consumption of dominant ideas of perfected femininity. In these conditions and facing the moral dilemma presented by participation in the production of pornography, the moral person inside the subject is compromised.

As for the role of the setting of totalitarian capitalism in the elimination of the moral person, the same subject's willing participation is typically prompted by the promise of some sort of monetary reward. Whether or not they actually receive that reward varies, but the promise of such motivates participation in the development of the material. Women who participate in the production, distribution, and consumption of this material are at the whim of capital, the promise of which may not be what was expected, if it even arrives at all.

### *Death of the Individual Person*

After these first two steps are complete, Arendt details a third and final step, the killing of "man's individuality."<sup>43</sup> Arendt defines this individuality as the "uniqueness shaped in equal parts by nature, will, and destiny."<sup>44</sup> The Nazi's methods of eliminating uniqueness from the human bodies of the Jewish people were numerous; however, Arendt does note the most immediately recognizable as attempts at removing any and all degrees of individuality from the human body as the "shaving of the head" and the donning of the "grotesque camp clothing," both occurring immediately upon arrival at the concentration camp.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Arendt, "Origins," 454.

<sup>44</sup> Arendt, "Origins," 454.

<sup>45</sup> Arendt, "Origins," 453.

Though numerous instances of femicide occur within the digital realm each and every single time Lara Croft fails to reach her objective, players are encouraged to ignore and even celebrate it. Consumers of the game are encouraged to dismiss the implications of events occurring in the digital realm. Though Lara Croft possesses a feminized body and is meant to replicate an actual human woman, the consistency of violence against her throughout gameplay simultaneously removes any resemblance to a real human person. She is an object. In the midst of the relentless violence depicted in *Tomb Raider*, Lara Croft is dehumanized and commodified. The game itself is not the product, instead it is the body of Lara Croft that is sold to consumers. A nonconsensual sexual relationship exists, then, between her and those who purchase the video game with the intent of experiencing sexual pleasure in response to the gender violence committed against her. In this consumption, endlessly multiplied by the growing number of consumers, Lara Croft is dehumanized and commodified.

In the case of Lara Croft, this is a totally fictitious character designed to be the mascot of a product of the free market. Her sexualized design is, if not the primary, a factor contributing strongly to the total success of the *Tomb Raider* franchise of video games. Lara Croft is designed to be a commodity, an apt example of the influence of a masculinity informed by pornography such as *Tomb Raider* on the public sphere responsible for producing the games and other products like it.

This exercise, exploring the parallels between the three steps of Hannah Arendt's theory of total domination and the implications of instances of femicide committed in the digital realm, is useful when partnered with my previous discussions of the presence of dominant masculinity because it commands more serious consideration of actions taken by those possessing this form of masculinity in any realm, whether that be in the public sphere, the private sphere, or the digital

realm. Total domination is occurring in the digital realm, with the blatant refusal of Lara Croft's individuality, though presumably she possesses human features, made evident in the player's ability to cause her harm. Dominant masculinity is capable of total domination in the digital realm, meaning that this process may be replicated elsewhere, perhaps even in the physical realm, in which dominated bodies do not belong to fictional characters but actual women and members of other feminized groups in situations of extreme vulnerability.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be seen that pornography, as a material consumed in late capitalist societies and witnessed in media such as the video game *Tomb Raider*, acts as a sort of tool utilized by men in order to generate and maintain patriarchal political power. This power is predicated on a dominant masculinity, the formation of which is influenced by pornography such as the video game *Tomb Raider* featuring instances of gender violence. This material reinforces notions of total domination enacted from within the public sphere on the bodies of women and other feminized groups confined to the private sphere. In this essay, I argued that the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography such as *Tomb Raider* closely parallels the steps for dominating as outlined by Arendt in her theory of total domination. Significantly, *Tomb Raider* constitutes a technological advancement characteristic of totalitarian capitalism where the aspiration of total domination is kept alive.

My argument contributes to each of the fields referenced in the introduction in distinct ways. As for the field of feminist theory and masculinity studies, my reintroduction of Freudian conceptions of gender and sexuality as a necessary aspect of understanding the actual role of pornography in the development of forms of dominant masculinity furthers arguments made by

Rubin on the same topic. Furthermore, my fusion of dominant formations of masculinity and the sexual value system, another concept introduced by Rubin, make clear how theoretical distinctions between good and bad sexuality indeed promote the formation of dominant masculinity. My suggestion of the emergence of a new stage of capitalism, totalitarian capitalism, builds on work done in critiques of late capitalism by rejecting any notions of stagnancy and instead makes clear a certain trajectory, one in which the continual growth of the strength of lordship held by the public sphere leads to a state of total domination of the private sphere. Finally, my invocation of parallels between femicide in the digital realm and the three steps of Hannah Arendt's theory of total domination contribute to the field of democratic theory in that I investigate how particular formations of masculinity affect political decisions capable of inflicting harm on women and other feminized groups.

As for possible solutions to this issue, the most easily identifiable one would be an increase in restrictions of material such as *Tomb Raider* and other similar pieces of media distributed through physical stores. Limiting access to media such as this has the potential to prevent the imposition of patriarchal structures described previously from entering the homes of adolescent males. As a result of this, the formations of masculinity may be influenced more directly by sources other than those that benefit the patriarchy through acts of violence.

Drag could act as one of these new sources of influence. An increase in the encouragement of the practice of drag, in which those who typically express either masculine or feminine attributes in their daily lives practice another form of gender expression, usually occurring in the form of a drag show or other similar event, could seriously affect larger notions of gender held in contemporary society. Positive attitudes toward drag would encourage positive attitudes toward gender fluidity as whole, resulting in the production of alternative non-dominant

masculinities. Similarly, positive attitudes toward gender fluidity would contribute to a larger effort of dismantling of the rigid walls surrounding the public and private spheres, lessening, in turn, the potential for dominant forms masculinity to seize control and conduct the steps necessary for total domination.

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