

# PORNOGRAPHY!

## ARE THE FEMINISTS RIGHT?

Are the feminists right about pornography? Many people would answer with an abrupt "No" based on a superficial understanding of the feminist analysis of pornography. In this article I shall attempt to give a basic explanation of some of the issues involved.

### WHAT IS 'PORN'?

The first question that we must address is 'what is pornography?'. Some feminists make a distinction between pornography and erotica. Gloria Steinem has defined the erotic as "a mutually pleasurable, sexual expression between people who have enough power to be there by positive choice". In contrast she argues that the pornographic has a message of "violence, dominance and conquest" and goes on to state, "Perhaps one could simply say that erotica is about sexuality, but pornography is about power and sex-as-a-weapon - in the same way we have come to understand that rape is about violence, and not really about violence, and not really about sexuality at all." This definition has also been supported by American lawyer Catherine MacKinnon. She suggested that pornography portrayed women as being physically abused in subordinate roles to men or dehumanised as sexual objects whilst erotica by contrast shows men and women in equal power relationships that are based on emotional attachment.

The Black feminist writer Audre Lorde has gone to the root of the word to find meaning:-

"(it) comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects....and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our

*dancing, our loving, our work, our lives."*

Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon went on to define pornography as the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes the presentation of women in one or more of the following ways:-

- a. as dehumanized sexual objects, things, or commodities;
- b. as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation;
- c. as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped;
- d. as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt;
- e. in postures of sexual submission or sexual servility, including inviting penetration;
- f. women's body parts - including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, and buttocks - are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts;
- g. as being whores by nature;
- h. being penetrated by objects or animals;
- i. in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual.

A number of people reject this definition for different reasons. David Webb of the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Act told an interviewer for Forum magazine:- "The word 'porn' is just flung around indiscriminately. All she's really saying is that they don't like that material because they're women and they think that it's men trying to put women down. In the first place, they are entitled not to look at it, but a lot of people do like it, but a lot of people do like it, so they can't ban it for that reason. It's certainly not men putting down women: I can just as easily make the case that that kind of material glamourises and ennobles women". From another perspective,

Joanna Russ has said, "Maybe Gloria Steinem can tell the difference between pornography and erotica at a single glance. I can't.". Paula Webster has made the interesting observations that " 'Erotica' became the code word for stimulation appropriate to a feminist consciousness, while 'pornography' was defined as exclusively male and therefore 'naturally' devoid of distinctions between sex and violence .....The implications of this neat dichotomization and sex-typing of desire reflect, unchanged, the Victorian ideology of innate differences in the nature of male and female libido and fantasy. Men we are to presume because of their 'excessive' drive, prefer the hard edge of pornography. Women, less driven by the 'beast' find erotica just their cup of tea".

Others have attacked the distinction between pornography and erotica on the basis that both treat women as objects (which in itself implies a power-relation). In *Ways of Seeing* for instance, John Berger writes:-

"Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object and most particularly an object of vision: a sight."

Woman as depicted in pornography and erotica is an object, a product. She is passive, soulless and as such incapable of autonomous activity. Such images have no place in a truly revolutionary framework of individuals of both sexes working together towards a better society

### FANTASY AND ACT

Few would argue as does David



Webb that pornography might be seen to "ennoble" women. To that extent there is a measure of consensus. The issue becomes more difficult when one puts the argument that there is a demonstrable link between pornography and sexual crime. Dr. Mike Baxter seemed in no doubt when he told the *New Scientist* of the 5th of May, 1990:-

*"The weight of evidence is accumulating that intensive exposure to soft core pornography desensitises mens attitude to rape, increases sexual callousness and shifts their preference towards hard core pornography. Similarly, the evidence is now strong that exposure to violent pornography increases mens acceptance of rape myths and of violence against women. It also increases mens tendencies to be aggressive towards women and is correlated with the reported incidence of rape. Many sex offenders claim they used pornography to stimulate themselves before committing their crimes."*

Deirdre English feels that there is a clear demarcation between fantasy and reality. She argues that, "the fact remains that no matter how disturbing violent fantasies are, so long as they stay within the world of pornography they are still only fantasies". Can such a clear line be drawn between fantasy and reality, however? Surely this viewpoint fails to recognize that fantasies do have an influence on perception and motivation. Or are all advertisers wasting their money? There have been many cases where rapists and sexual perverts have acted out the scenarios depicted in porn magazines. If pornography portrays women as degraded objects will this not lead to habits of thinking on the part of someone influenced by the themes which are projected? And if someone is already disturbed and has a negative image of women will not pornography tend to reinforce this? Even David Webb does not rule out this last possibility saying, "If there is a risk, it's a very tiny risk that damage is done to a seriously disturbed person. You must take these risks". In this context it is important to note that David Webb is not taking the risk. The risks are being taken by women. Women who might suffer an indecent assault, harassment from a sex-pest or rape.

It is a sad fact that most men derive their views of sexual relations initially either from pornographic material

directly or are indirectly influenced by a mass culture in which pornographic themes are evident. This distortion of male sexuality is itself an extremely negative aspect. Pornography is big business. Like any business it operates by identifying a target market from within the population and supplying material tailored to that market. It can of course be argued that many pornographic themes are simply reflections of ideas present in the minds of men. I believe that this is true. Yet there are also other conflicting ideas and interpretations of the male/female relationship. These ideas, however, do not have a multi-million pound industry to



The thrills are not so cheap

market them. Nor are the themes involved continually re-iterated in different forms so as to make a permanent impression, particularly on those whose actual experience is limited and who are seeking to identify what the common view is - what other more experienced people feel.

#### CENSORSHIP?

I believe that pornography can be extremely harmful in that it stresses themes which degrade women (and by so doing degrades those men influenced); that to varying degrees men are influenced to act out such negative fantasies and in the case of disturbed or otherwise susceptible individuals this may lead to sexual crime; that it provides men with a false and unrealistic set of beliefs about female/male relationships. This

does not, however, mean I am in favour of absolute censorship. I am certainly in favour of banning pornography supplied through telephone communications equipment - the 0898 numbers. There is no way to prevent children phoning these numbers. In addition they are widely advertised and local papers in some areas have become very dependant on revenue from this source. As technological services have developed there has not been a development of law in order to limit the mass impact and seeming acceptability that this has given to porn. It is also deeply immoral for a company such as British Telecom to take profits from such activities. BT share-owners please take note! Nor would many argue that child pornography should be permitted. Our community must be the arbiter of what expression is acceptable. Individual freedom (and I dislike using such a noble term to describe the 'right' of an individual to degrade himself) is not the sole standard. Our laws should reflect the fact that the community should have security and well-being. What about the right of parents to bring their children up surrounded by things that truly enoble their spirit? Surely, it is wrong to allow the worst elements of human nature to predominate. Those who cry for individual rights are asking us to abandon our right to exercise judgement.

Censorship alone will not be enough. It will also be necessary to counter balance the still available pornographic themes. This can only be done by a central moral force. In the modern era the Church has lost this role and the family is unequal to the task. The only authority with the resources to counter balance the morality of individualism and the market-place is the State. It is time to realise that laws are moral statements, that education has a strong value-orientation, that all our institutions reflect an outlook or ethos. The State for good or for evil is a moral force. The feminists who argue that porn is harmful are right. The feminists who argue that censorship is not enough are speaking the truth. Let us take the next step and say that the State itself must express a moral opinion, it must have a positive position as well as expressing a negative opinion through legal curtailment.