

## **THEORY & REVIEW**

### **THE CENSORSHIP OF PORNOGRAPHY: Catharsis or Learning?**

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*Contemporary research on pornography reveals an impasse between the models of catharsis and learning. Preference for the latter by a recent government report is based on ideological rather than scientific considerations. The breakdown in the liberal tradition, current pornography research based on behaviorism, and two major theoretical problems are discussed. The interface among psychology, sociology, and literary criticism is suggested as a positive direction for understanding pornography; censorship, however, may obstruct research and fail to advance feminist goals.*

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No one expected that the final report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography—the Meese Commission—would please civil libertarians; it was, from its very inception, the product of a law-and-order mentality and the neoconservative ambience of American politics in the 1980s (*U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1986*). The ink was scarcely dry on the report before the media called the Commission “pornhounds” (*Nation, 1986*), “sex busters” (*Stengel, 1986*) and “Big Boobs” (*Hertzberg, 1986*). A searing dissent was written by two women members of the Commission, Judith Becker and Ellen Levine (*1986*). In addition, a serious misuse of statistics by the Commission has been implied by Smith (*1987*). But the public concern about pornography is not unique to the United States;

similar inquiries have taken place in Britain (*Williams, 1979*) and Canada (*1985*) in the past few years. Together they reflect a broader trend in cultural life, a more conservative one which coincides with, and is probably linked to, conservative economic policies being pursued in these countries as well.

This new combination of deregulating the economy and regulating morality is sometimes interpreted as part of an economic crisis. More often it is seen as an ideological backlash to a liberal era, to the “sexual revolution,” to sixties hedonism and “permissiveness;” that is, as a response to a movement which seemed to have gone dangerously out of control. If one accepts a cyclical theory of social history, the pendulum will eventually swing back to a pe-

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riod of greater cultural tolerance and freedom of expression.

But so far as the movement against pornography is concerned, several things argue against this interpretation; some significant differences in the present situation distinguish it from earlier periods. First, feminists have formed an unlikely coalition with conservative elements in the campaign against pornography (*Brownmiller, 1975; Griffin, 1981; Morgan, 1978*). Both author Andrea Dworkin and attorney Catherine MacKinnon testified as friendly witnesses before the Meese Commission; others, like Gloria Steinem (*1978*), the former editor of *Ms*, have expressed themselves strongly on pornography and have disassociated themselves from a civil libertarian opposition to cultural censorship. Robin Morgan's famous phrase, "Pornography is the theory; rape is the practice" has been widely adopted by women activists across the political spectrum, and, as I shall indicate later, has set a research agenda (*Morgan, 1978*). Feminists who support some kind of censorship—and there are many who do not (*Blakely, 1985; Burstyn, 1985; Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force, et al., 1985; Vance, 1984*)—generally make assumptions about sexuality that are different from those of their right wing allies, especially with respect to homosexuality; but, and this is one of the ironies of social movements, some of the conservative women have begun to coopt the more radical and liberationist language of feminists. There is, then, a convergence of convenience here that would not have been found in earlier times.

The second difference lies in the research that is cited to justify censorship. Almost two decades ago, a special Presidential commission on obscenity and pornography carried out an extensive number of studies (*U.S. Government, 1970*). Psychologists, sociologists, and criminologists, using a variety of methods—experimental, clinical, cross-cultural—concluded that pornography, however unattractive or

in bad taste, was relatively harmless, a victimless crime. Exposure to pornography could create a short-term arousal but did not contribute to a higher incidence of deviant or antisocial sexual behavior. Moreover, persons convicted of sexual offenses did not use pornography to any significant degree. Finally, it was concluded that the use of pornography was often a stage in sexual maturation; as adolescents acquired more experience and sexual confidence, as young adults settled down into stable sexual relations, the "need" or gratification of pornography would fade. Life would be more interesting than art. In countries like Denmark, where all legal restrictions on pornography had been removed, there was a decline in the number of reported sexual assaults, including rape (*Kutchinsky, 1985, 1987*).

Much of this research became known as supporting a catharsis hypothesis although, strictly speaking, it was not directed toward that end. Catharsis refers to the reduction of an aggressive drive through the vicarious experience of symbolic systems, e.g., art. The art could be highbrow, middlebrow, or lowbrow, but the audience would be less prone to act out some antisocial form of behavior if its drives were defused through the interactive experience with the movie, play, novel, comic book, newspaper story, drawing, etc.

The current research, which is almost exclusively psychological, draws on a different theoretical perspective—behaviorism—and arrives at diametrically opposite conclusions: exposure to pornography under experimental conditions can lead to acts of sexual aggression; people imitate what they see or, at the very least, persons who are regularly exposed to pornography become desensitized to sexual violence against women. In addition, some questions have been raised about the Danish data (*Giglio, 1985*). The statistical differences in these studies are small (indeed, the samples are small) but they point in the same direction



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so that they must be accorded respect. If they are correct and earlier studies false, then the public apathy toward pornography, the benign neglect by civil libertarians and others, is more difficult to defend. Further, if it can be shown empirically that rape is a probable outcome, or that consumers of pornography do not themselves commit rape but become more callous toward rape victims, or that pornography reinforces an acceptable rationalization for rape ("she asked for it"), it follows that some kind of regulation or control is called for. No civil libertarian, especially a woman, can confront that kind of evidence and fail to reconsider the more general philosophy of civil liberties and First Amendment rights.

Finally, there is a shift in the philosophy of the judiciary. The view of the Meese Commission is that laws should not be changed because they are no longer effective or enforceable, for to change or repeal them is to send out a more powerful message than one might wish. "To undo makes a statement much stronger than that made by not doing" (*U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1986, vol. I, p. 356*). Leaving bad laws in place might be preferable to removing them.

But the new conservative judicial theory has borrowed from recent postliberal thought. In discussing harm, for example, the Meese Commission Report comments on the difficulty of specifying harm. It takes as an example environmental problems in which it is difficult to establish a concrete causal relationship between a pollutant and an illness. Thus, if one cannot exclude acts from the Criminal Code just because there is no persuasive evidence of cause and effect, a more diffuse notion of harm is applicable. Indeed, according to the report, some things have to be taken on faith alone. Evoking human rights legislation, the report says there are times when we must, with no evidence and on the basis of conscience alone, pass judgment and, presumably, laws. There are "acts that must be

condemned" the report says, "not because the evils of the world will thereby be eliminated, but because conscience demands it" (*U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1986, vol. I, p. 303*).

In short, the current debates on the social effects of pornography and policies of censorship are symptomatic of a profound change in our thinking and the adoption of a different intellectual discourse. The political alignments, the research findings and theory, and the judicial philosophy have all changed so that traditional liberal arguments no longer have the same resonance and credibility in this new environment.

In the comments that follow, I want to look primarily at the research and to raise some questions about the current studies based on behaviorism (*McCormack, 1985*). I am going to suggest that the case for the behavioristic perspective is more ideological than scientific. In doing so, however, I also want to indicate the limitations of the earlier approach based on catharsis (*Eagle, 1987*). A new and different theoretical approach is needed, one that is based on a cultural theory of pornography and a more complex set of assumptions about the cognitive and sociological competence of human behavior than either of the two paradigms—catharsis or learning—allows.

To put the research in a proper context, I want first to discuss the broader liberal intellectual and political tradition, and the way it has changed in the interim between the reports of 1970 and 1986. For practical purposes, the focus is limited to four key ideas that are particularly relevant to the discussion.

#### THE LIBERAL TRADITION *Thought and Action*

In the liberal tradition a distinction has always been made between thought and action (or behavior). The corresponding political proposition is that in a free society we control behavior, not thought, however repugnant the latter might be. This is the philosophy of Articles 18 and 19 of the



Declaration of Human Rights, of the First Amendment of the American Bill of Rights, and of Section 2(b) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and it is embedded in British Common Law. Freedom of expression is not absolute, but the burden of proof is on those who would abridge it to demonstrate that abridgement is necessary.

Freedom of expression is the test of the freedom of the state. But pornography and the hate literature with which it is often linked are not genuine forms of dissent; they do not constitute a radical critique of a power structure nor do they advocate the confiscation of private property, a redistribution of wealth, or any form of civil disobedience. Instead, they are expressions of prejudice and, as such, they test the tolerance of a society.

Modern democracies, especially since the rise of European totalitarianism, have struggled with the distinction between state and society. Intuitively, we know that an authoritarian culture is a potential threat to a democratic state; nevertheless, we have seen them co-exist, and this has led many to claim that legislation against pornography or racist ideologies would not infringe upon basic liberties. Indeed, many conservative theorists today argue that it is a prerequisite for a free society (Berns, 1971).

#### *Motivations of the Censor*

The separation of sexual pleasure and guilt, a form of consciousness which owes much to modern psychiatry and psychoanalytic thought, has been central to modernist thinking on sexuality. Conservative moralists and traditionalists have never accepted such a separation and they yearn for a return to earlier attitudes and to less complex societies. However, the distinction between guilt and sexual pleasure has become a part of orthodox professional thought in all of the social sciences. It remains one of the best indicators we have of attitudes toward pornography and censorship: people

who score high on sex-guilt tend to define texts as "pornographic" more often than those who score low (Fisher & Bryne, 1978).

The legacy of Freudian theory goes further, for it has shifted attention away from the ordinary person enjoying normal sexual fantasies and toward the censors. What drives people to lead crusades for decency? What is the motivation that lies behind "smut" scares? Are such people so ashamed, so overwhelmed by guilt that they cannot deal with it except by public acts of denial? In the psychoanalytic tradition, these people hide their "unclean" thoughts and the pleasure they find in them by proclaiming their own virtue, hoping to exorcise the secret fantasies that alternately torment and please them (McCormack, 1980). Thus, for the past half-century we have been examining the conflict, the dynamics of sexual repression which energize the public attitudes and activities of the censor. As Eagle (1987) has suggested, that model is no longer the most compelling one within the psychoanalytic movement where the emphasis has shifted to external factors. Perhaps reality is closer to Sodom and Gomorrah than most of us realize.

#### *Developing Emotional Maturity*

A major function of the socialization and formal education of children in the liberal democratic society has been to instill in them tolerance and self-direction. In many ways this outlook owes more to John Stuart Mill than to John Dewey, but the two shared a liberal ideology with respect to education; namely, the importance of developing independent, critical minds that would, in Mill's terms, resist the "tyranny of the majority." Education, they held, should expose children to the diversity of opinions, train them to deal with ideas contrary to their own. Personality development, the domain of parents, should refrain from overprotecting children and concentrate instead on teaching them to handle their own anti-



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social impulses and feelings. Children should also, of course, be taught tolerance toward those who think differently, speak another language, and have different cultural norms.

Thus, in this tradition, the classroom and the home are microcosms of the state and society. To impose unnecessary restrictions leads to conformity and dependency which in turn require more regulations. Such a curriculum would be pedagogically more dogmatic; children would have fewer individual choices; the gray areas of truth would be sacrificed for the extremes; such pseudosciences as Creationism would have the same status as the theory of evolution. The psychopolitical insight here was that controls beget more controls as citizens lose the will and interest to participate in public life.

#### *New Values*

Finally, there is the relationship between knowledge and morality in the evaluation of knowledge and the arts. The struggle to endorse value-free knowledge in the cultural domain began in this country shortly after World War I when new cultural elites challenged and displaced the older ones. The new intellectuals, mainly academics and critics, who insisted on setting the standards for literary and artistic excellence were behind the big test-cases on the First Amendment. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* became accessible to the educated public on the grounds that these works had artistic merit in the eyes of discerning critics. Having won their battle on behalf of knowledge and modernism in the arts and having established their own status, however, the intellectuals became less active and less concerned with lowbrow culture, and found it convenient to distinguish between pornography and erotic art (McCormack, 1983; Kronhausen & Kronhausen, 1964; Rembar, 1968).

Later, middlebrow entertainment that was sexually explicit, theatre pieces like *O Calcutta* and films like *Last Tango in Paris*, put that distinction to the test. The new, sexually explicit entertainment reflected the tastes of a different class, the high-school educated white-collar groups in the middle ranks of the new and expanding bureaucracies. What they wanted was a validation of themselves through their taste and a differentiation of themselves from the old entrepreneurial *petite bourgeoisie*. To some extent that struggle still goes on within academia, where the legitimacy of courses on popular culture is being determined in much the same way as, earlier, courses on Henry Miller and James Joyce were fought for by the *avant-garde*.

I have singled out these four principles—the distinction between thought and action; the focus on motivation, particularly that of the censor; an emphasis in child development on building emotional maturity; and the emergence of the values of the new elites—because they have been strained by changes in our social structure, frustrations with our ability to bring about social change, and unanticipated consequences of some of our liberal social policies. Nevertheless, the four ideas remain as pillars of modern liberal thought, and they are currently contested by both the left and the right.

It has already been noted here that our traditional civil libertarianism, particularly the First Amendment, has dealt inadequately with phenomena like "hate" literature and pornography. (In Canada, which has legislated against "hate" literature, the record is far from encouraging: cases get front-page publicity that often offsets any good that might be accomplished.) Contemporary political theory that distinguishes between freedom and tolerance has not been integrated into our statutory experience.

Within academic psychology there has been a shift from theories of motivation to theories of either cognitive development on the one hand or behaviorism on the other. It



is noteworthy that the studies cited by the Meese Commission and those which have figured prominently in the pro-censorship movement have been studies based on a behaviorist model of human nature.

There has been a backlash against progressive education and a return to a more controlled and discipline-centered notion of child development. This may be partly a reaction to the sixties and a generation that was perceived as more interested in love-ins than the work ethic, that seemed to lack any sense of traditional patriotism, and that sought instant rather than deferred gratification. Parents, teachers, the military, law-enforcement agencies, and others in authority felt that the rebellion and the counterculture had gone too far and that the fabric of our civilization was disintegrating before our eyes.

Finally, a new generation of intellectuals was challenging elitism itself. Conservative thinkers never accepted the primacy of knowledge or art over morality, while the New Left with its "pornopolitics" exposed the hypocrisy of the distinction between erotic art and pornography. At the same time, the feminist movement insisted that behind these so-called "objective" standards of literary value lay sexist values and androcentric thinking.

The history of the pornography debate, then, parallels the history of the breakdown in the liberal philosophy. The difference between the reports of the Special Commission of 1970 and the Meese Commission of 1986 stems not from changes in pornography itself, but from changes in the public's perception of pornography. The allegedly "new pornography" does not exist. True, there is a new technology and distribution system, but the important difference lies in our conceptual understanding of pornography. That change, as has been suggested, did not start with the Reagan administration, but in an earlier time, and has been taking place over many years.

#### THE ROLE OF PORNOGRAPHY

The scientific literature on pornography has led to an impasse. We have two very powerful models, both supported weakly by empirical evidence and strongly by common sense. Is pornography a wish-fulfillment fantasy, a safety valve that helps us deal with our sexual repression? Does it help us to keep our psychosexual states in equilibrium? Is it a harmless form of escapism like detective stories and science fiction? Or does it encourage people to copy and carry out the scenes and scenarios that are so vividly and realistically portrayed in "adult" magazines and in X-rated movies and videos? In particular, can we be sure that popular media in which there are many and repeated scenes of violence serve to help us lower our own levels of aggression through vicarious experience, or is there reason to believe that these media can overpower our normal inhibitions and create the effects they are otherwise held to subvert?

In the first paradigm a significant part is played by fantasy, imaginative experience, and vicarious enjoyment. Without these capacities, we would have no art; because of them, we are all potential artists, able to comprehend the vision of the artist. But the imaginative life is also a form of emotional growth. As Bettelheim (1976) indicated in his study of children's literature, a drama is taking place within the child that is essential for maturity. If we take the grotesque and violent stories literally, if we rewrite them to conform to our own hygienic and class standards, or if we withhold them entirely, we are depriving children of an essential part of their emotional development. If, on the other hand, we regard the stories as symbolic and let children themselves construct meaning for them, we are preparing children for a healthy adult life. Finally, we are expected to be accountable for our moral behavior. The conscience, our internalization of values, our bonds to others all, in one way or another, restrain



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what we might otherwise be inclined to do to people who anger us. The social problem has been social and sexual taboos that become so inflexible as to cripple emotionally those who obeyed them. We have a considerable literature suggesting that certain kinds of violent aggression are the result of too much inhibition, too much Bible-reading. Our models of good behavior have been known to break down. All too often the quiet man down the street, the good neighbor, the part-time Sunday School teacher suddenly and without warning murders his family.

The second paradigm regards human beings as organisms responding to external stimuli rather than selecting experiences based on an inner logic. The self is not the outcome of an Oedipal struggle or conflict, but of the cumulative influence of others. These include media influences which are understood literally. Thus, the pleasure small children find in Saturday morning television animations, which are among the most violent portrayals in the media, should be discouraged and the industry required to transmit prosocial messages. Programming cannot be left to chance, for if young, impressionable people are regularly exposed to crime comics, the occasional pastoral idyll will have little impact. And since children do not distinguish between reality and fantasy, they believe fantasy to be true. Thus all behavior is a "natural" or biological response to frustration or gratification, or it is learned through the role models provided by others. Inhibitions may prevent us from realizing our goals, but to the degree that they are learned responses they can be unlearned. In this model, values have the same status as phobic responses which may interfere with desired goals; like phobic responses they can be changed through a conditioning therapy. From this theoretical perspective, the psychological profile of a person who is likely to commit such anti-social acts as murder and rape is someone with too little conscience; someone who has

learned that these are appropriate responses. It is as if Victorian society had been turned inside out.

#### *Research on Aggression*

These two models were juxtaposed as alternative explanations in the pioneering work of Berkowitz (1962, 1964, 1965, 1969) on aggression. In a series of experiments, he and his collaborators (Berkowitz, Corwin, & Heironimus, 1963; Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963; Berkowitz & Geen, 1966, 1967) challenged the notion that exposure to violence leads to a reduction in tension. The examples he used in his experiments were of male-on-male aggression where he found that, contrary to the catharsis theory, his subjects were more prone to acts of pushing, hitting, and inflicting harm on others. Like most laboratory experiments, these were highly artificial, but the stimuli he used most often were scenes from a popular Hollywood film, *Champion*, about a boxer. Compared to the violence of more recent boxing films (*Rocky I, II, and III* or *Raging Bull*), *Champion* was sweetness and light. But the use of a real film gave Berkowitz's work a degree of credibility that the more contrived experiments lacked. However, it was not his intention to study a particular genre of Hollywood films, nor has he been tempted to discuss prize fights in the way some of his followers have discussed pornography. It was the violence of the ring scenes in this film that was relevant for his purposes, and these scenes were taken out of context and shown to subjects as stimuli.

It was Berkowitz's work more than anyone else's that challenged the catharsis model based on Freudian theory and used by Feshbach (1955, 1961, 1969). Berkowitz never claimed to be an expert on films, but his experiments were increasingly cited in discussions of the impact of violent films on children. Implicit in this research was a concept of human nature as aggressive. Men were regarded as either having more aggressive drives than women or being less



able to control them. In short, Berkowitz accepted a certain aspect of the Freudian model, the notion of innate aggressive drives, but not the catharsis concept (*Morris Eagle, personal communication, April 1987*).

Some psychologists who agreed with Berkowitz about the catharsis model did not share his notion of innate male aggression. Bandura (1969, 1973), for example, focused instead on modeling and social learning. But here, too, the concept of violence as escapist fantasy that might help us get through life was rejected. Children learned from the violent cartoons on Saturday mornings and carried this programming with them throughout their lives. Whereas Bettelheim saw young children developing ego strength through the violence of classical children's literature, the new behaviorists saw these stories as legitimating aggression.

The criticism of these aggression studies came from outside the profession of psychology; they came from sociologists, from people conducting communications research, or from people in the humanities. Sociologists were skeptical about the degree to which media could override the influence of peer groups and socialization. Communication theorists emphasized the selectivity of perception. Scholars in the humanities emphasized the multiple meanings in even the simplest of texts.

Among psychologists, not everyone rejected the catharsis hypothesis. Feshbach (1955, 1961, 1969) claimed evidence in its support. But it was in the psychologies of esthetics and humor that the catharsis hypothesis received greater support (*McCormack, 1978; Scheff & Scheele, 1980*). It seemed, then, that both could be true: under some circumstances the exposure to symbolic violence could increase our aggression; under other circumstances a good violent movie could soothe us. The two concepts never became integrated and, instead, each was used to undercut the authority of the other.

Research on pornography picked up the same two hypotheses, catharsis or social learning, and the experiments conducted by Donnerstein and by Malamuth followed closely in the Berkowitz tradition of experimental methods. Their work, too, found against the catharsis hypothesis (*Donnerstein & Linz, 1986; Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod 1987; Feshbach & Malamuth, 1978; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1984; Malamuth, Heim, & Feshbach, 1980*).

However, it is one thing to reject the catharsis model, another to demonstrate the antisocial effects of media violence or pornography. Here the evidence is much less clear. The current state of their research can be summarized as follows: men *a*) with traditional concepts of sex-roles and *b*) with a predisposition for aggression will, *c*) under experimental conditions *d*) when they have been previously angered by a female confederate and *e*) exposed to violent pornography, display a tendency to show aggression against a female target or an unwillingness to show aggression against a male target *f*) in the absence of any other (impersonal or abstract) opportunity to express aggression.

What these studies tell us about is male anger and the ease with which men's normal inhibitions are (at least, under experimental conditions) dissolved (*Gray, 1982*). In all the experiments, the subjects were angered by someone before the exposure occurred; following the exposure they had the opportunity to "pay back" the person, male or female, who initially provoked them. Their reluctance to show aggression toward other males suggests a male solidarity. It is, then, probably more accurate to view these studies as an extension of the Berkowitz-Bandura work on aggression rather than research on pornography per se.

The studies have received extensive criticism: the way the research was done, the interpretation of findings, the extent to which the findings can be generalized, even the ethics have been questioned (*Sherif,*



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1980). Donnerstein himself has, in various press interviews, cautioned against using the findings indiscriminately to support censorship or other kinds of social policies. Some of the objections are to flaws inherent in the experimental method itself; some reflect the limitations of the present state of causal analysis. For example, recent studies have shifted from attempting to show a direct effect of pornography on behavior, seeking instead to demonstrate a long-term effect on attitudes; specifically, increasing desensitization. Plausible as this hypothesis is, there is no way of proving or disproving it because we do not at present have the statistical models to do so. There are also semantic difficulties with the term *desensitization*. In one study, for example, the operational measure of desensitization was the willingness or unwillingness to inflict punishment (jail terms) on persons alleged to have committed acts of sexual aggression (Zillmann & Jennings, 1982). This is like saying that those of us who are addicted to murder mysteries and are also opposed to capital punishment have become callous about homicide.

Without wishing to belabor the point, it must be emphasized that all research has limitations. Indeed, many of the more recent studies in this field have begun to take cognizance of the objections. What has been largely overlooked in the various methodological critiques is the theory. If the studies have failed to establish a connection between exposure to pornography and rape it is partly because they show no clear understanding of rape (Groth, 1979). There are many theories about rape and many forms of rape, but whether rape is seen as a political act, a cultural pattern, or a sexually motivated act, studies of rape have failed to turn up evidence of pornography as instrumental to rape or to other acts of sexual assault. (This does not mean that pornographic images are not viewed by rapists, but it is analogous to alcoholism and wife abuse; that is, an excuse, not a cause.) Re-

search into rape calls for different models of study and the skills of criminologists in the interpretation of rape statistics. The criminologists who have looked at the data have found nothing to indicate a relationship between pornography and rape (Kutchinsky, 1985). Claims that free access to pornography can reduce the incidence of rape must be taken with the same grain of salt.

The second difficulty, and from my point of view the more critical one, is the failure to understand how people interpret content. In their many studies, Donnerstein and Malamuth claimed that they were interested in the "message" of pornography and how variations in the message lead to different outcomes. But, in fact, they only assumed that they understood the message. The whips and leather boots of sadomasochistic pornography can be read in different ways, and to presume that they advocate a rape ideology is to assume what needs to be demonstrated (Slade, 1984). To take a different example, in a study of boxing films inspired by Berkowitz's experiments using *Champion*, McCormack (1984) used the full-length films, not selected scenes. Results showed that the messages received were different: the heroes were now "jocks," not killers, and the violence in the ring between trained fighters was now seen as far less dangerous than violence in the streets. Regular fans of these films, in fact, regard them as films about sports, in contrast to romance, and they have a pretty good idea of what to expect. They enjoy them in the way that chess players enjoy watching a masters' tournament or soap-opera fans enjoy predicting the outcome of the latest crisis, or the way regular fans of Agatha Christie know her style and her rules but are never sure of "who done it." Pornography fans may use the X-rated video as entertainment or to create an erotic mood. If no room is given in the analysis for the construction of meaning, there is no way to understand the impact of the content on the reader, viewer, or listener. Meaning is de-



pendent on the larger whole, on a context that, whatever its limitations, is a narrative with conflict and choices. Even the range of meanings can change over time. When *Champion* was first written as a short story by Ring Lardner, Jr., it was a story of an American "hood," a bully who bore a strong resemblance to the new Hitler storm trooper. Both the short story and the movie based on it had, against the background of history at the time, a political message. Even the fighter's rape of his ex-wife is a part of the politics. The same film shown to a university audience in the 1960s or the 1980s might carry a different message.

Meaning also depends on cultural levels. We do not know what influence a sexually oriented movie has on young people without some knowledge of the levels of sex education in the society, accessibility of other forms of culture, and leisure lifestyles.

#### *Limitations of the Research*

Given the limitations, then, of the new research and the failure of the findings to answer any of the crucial questions, one must wonder why the research has assumed its present importance and why the catharsis hypothesis is now seldom taken seriously except by the producers of culture, who cannot provide us with enough escapist entertainment.

One explanation for the weak, almost nonexistent defense of the catharsis hypothesis is the notion that catharsis is depoliticizing, that it deflects people's aggression from its proper target, their oppressors. This would explain why the poor and underprivileged, for example, languish in political apathy: rather than being assertive and claiming their rights, they retreat into wish-fulfilling fantasies; a John Wayne movie that has drained off anger is not the best preparation for a picket-line. Implicit in this critique of catharsis is a broader one, that maintenance of societal equilibrium or the status quo was a concept implicit in Freud-

ian psychoanalytic theory and was carried over into therapy. This political evaluation made the theory suspect and is still a matter of concern in terms of the sociology of knowledge and radical politics.

The alternative explanation is that of the behaviorist which falls within the politics of law-and-order. It assumes a person with no social relationships, an atomistic organism open to any stimulus, with no inner controls and no selectivity, a person who cannot anticipate or learn through introspection but who is capable of unlearning any social norm. Given this profile, an obvious case can be made for external controls. When no categorical imperatives restrain us, and no values guide us, even Mother Teresa is not beyond disinhibiting influences. If he sees enough video tapes on incest, the most loving father will find it acceptable to force himself on a young daughter or excuse his neighbor for doing so.

Ironically, the same assumptions about human nature are made in pornographic texts. There, too, we see people who respond indiscriminately to any and all sexual stimuli, e.g., a man returns home unexpectedly and finds there a fourteen-year-old babysitter, and within minutes is copulating with her in the marital bed. In pornography, we see mindless people who are not constrained by bonds of sentiment; everyone is a stranger to everyone else so that there are no restraints to whatever transgression is on the menu. These one-dimensional figures are the very model of disinhibition.

To many social critics these assumptions are unacceptable whether in formal theory or popular culture. But at present we lack a third alternative. That alternative would, I believe, arise from the following: 1) a more complex set of assumptions about human nature that recognizes the existence of values and of our capacity to control our own behavior; 2) a recognition of the type of socialization and education conducive to the



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development of a self-directed person; 3) a more dynamic notion of society than the equilibrium model assumed by the catharsis hypothesis; that is, a concept of society that is sensitive to the social instability and potential violence of various forms of inequality (class, race, gender); and 4) the examination of pornographic scripts as texts that can either be understood historically or deconstructed. The more fruitful approach lies in constructing a different matrix from psychology, sociology, and literary analysis: a model which draws on insights about sexuality, our knowledge of gender inequality and institutional oppression, and the meanings of texts. All these perspectives are necessary if we are to understand pornography as a cultural and behavioral phenomenon.

#### CONCLUSIONS

From a purely practical standpoint, we may never attain the minimal conditions for studying pornography. The various legal measures—federal, state, and municipal—to control it create a special environment in which pornography is stigmatized. Consequently, what is being studied is how people react to an illegal phenomenon.

But the "chilling effect" of censorship on scholars must be weighed against the anxieties of women about violence, and the concerns of feminists. The latter have increasingly recognized that their case for censorship cannot be made on the basis of scientific data. Their strength lies in the obvious: pornography may not be harmful, but it is no help. It is a factor that makes the achievement of such feminist goals as pay equity, day care, and reproductive choice more difficult. As a hypothesis, one can suggest that the long-term effect of cultural misogyny—whether it is *Deep Throat* or the Harlequin romance, *Penthouse* or the Bible, *Snuff* or sociobiology—is to depoliticize women. In the last analysis, even if it were possible to eliminate all hard-core pornography, we would still be left with a

male-dominated culture in which women are either invisible or depicted as naturally dependent on men. The introduction of censorship would itself set back the liberation of women. Thus, to censor pornography is to displace a problem and create an illusion of achievement. To censor it in the name of protecting children from adverse influences is to conceal from one's self the forbidden pleasures of an underground culture. To censor it in the name of advancing the equality of women is to sacrifice liberation for a mechanical concept of equality.

The pornography scare has replaced the Red scare in American political discourse, and there are similarities between them. The more we censor pornography or Communism, the larger they loom in our imaginations and the more they contribute to the simplification of complex problems. The policies based on these naive ideas inevitably fail but are comforting to the powerless and, in addition, advance the politics of the Right. The Meese Commission fostered this kind of thinking and the Attorney General himself has led the way by creating within the Justice Department the National Obscenity Enforcement Unit (*Bishop, 1987*). One of the casualties of this style of action may be research itself.

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