

Porn doesn't contribute to crime, sexual deviation or antisocial acts. It does, however, give people the wrong idea of what goes on in the bedroom.

By John Townley

Pornography—it seems like it's everywhere. In cities like New York or San Francisco, you can't escape it. Huge signs shrieking "Sextacular Acts!", "Live Sex on Stage!", "Bizarre Perversions!" proclaim the fact.

Even in the most conservative rural town, where *Playboy* magazine is kept off the stands, porno is lurking within easy reach. There's always a store with a back room where dirty pictures can be bought, and the local men's club is never without its stag movies.

It may seem like the recent flood of porn since the swinging sixties is something new and shocking, but it's not. Pornography has been with us for thousands of years. Graphic sex pictures and sculptures adorn the ancient temples of India and are rampant in the Roman ruins of Pompeii. Explicit sex is a major theme of early Celtic and medieval Japanese art. Neither the flaming fires of the Inquisition nor the witch burnings of the Puritans have been able to eradicate what seems to be common to all cultures: an inborn fascination for pictorial sex.

In the West, there has been a general belief that pornography is at the very least immoral and more than likely dangerous, harmful and corrupting. Anthony Comstock, the nineteenth-century crusader responsible for most of the U.S. anti-porno laws, probably put it best:

"It's a deadly poison, cast into the fountain of moral purity. It breeds lust. Lust defiles the body, debauches the imagination, corrupts the mind, deadens the will, destroys the memory, sears the conscience, hardens the heart and damns the soul. It unnerves the arm and

steals away the elastic step. It robs the soul of manly virtues and imprints upon the mind of the youth visions that throughout life curse the man or woman. Like a panorama, the imagination seems to keep this hated thing before the mind, until it wears its way deeper and deeper, plunging the victim into practices that he loathes.

"This traffic has made rakes and libertines in society—skeletons in many a household. The family is polluted, home desecrated, and each generation born into the world is more and more cursed by the inherited weakness, the harvest of this seed-sowing of the Evil one."

Strong words! Perhaps too strong—but nevertheless, they voice the fears that have caused porno and pornographers to be reviled, pursued and repressed for so many years.

But are any of these fears founded? Does porno turn people into sex maniacs? Does it encourage sex crime? Does it breed perversion or unnatural desires in those who would otherwise not have them? Is there a scrap of scientific evidence for any of the allegations that have been used to suppress erotic pictures and films?

In a word: *no*.

And it's not as if the subject hasn't been well looked at by scientists who know what they're talking about. In the early seventies a large chunk of taxpayer's money was spent on an extensive investigation of the effects of pornography by a panel of the best doctors, psychologists and sexologists money could buy. The results, entitled "The Report of the National Commission on Obscenity and Pornography," concluded



Illustration by Fred Appell/Alex Savjuk

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that pornography in no way encouraged sex crime or abnormal sexual behavior. The results were not surprising, as they confirmed other studies that had been done in places like Sweden and Amsterdam where pornography had been legalized.

Yet the U.S. Senate rejected the Commission's report by a vote of 60 to 5, *without even having read it*, simply because of a forewarning that it did not condemn pornography! And that vote probably reflected the feelings of a sizable portion of the nation, for there was hardly a whimper of objection to it.

So are the people of the United States and their elected representatives so stupid that they can't accept the truth about the matter even when it's laid in front of them as clear as day by the best scientists in the country?

Some might say just that, but the chances are there's a good reason for such widespread negative feelings about porno, even though the reasons given for condemning it are clearly wrong. Effects don't happen without a cause.

Then just why is it that so many people—both conservative and liberal, feminists and anti-ERAs—take such a bad view of porno? And are there any harmful effects of pornography that the official researchers might have missed? If porno doesn't cause all the crime and depravity its critics claim it does, just what effect *does* it have on society?

Winston Churchill said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," and oddly enough that is just what is at the heart of the porno problem—fear. While pornography itself has a clean bill of health from

the medical profession, the fear, shame, guilt and ignorance that are associated with it are by no means harmless. Nor is the dubious legal status of pornography, which keeps its quality low and its control in the hands of the mob.

The harmfulness of fear, guilt and shame concerning any aspect of sexuality is obvious; these psychological monsters have ruined many a sex life and won't be conquered until our culture raises a generation that believes deep inside that sex is really OK. And that may be a while in coming, since according to a recent survey by the American Family Medical Association, 37 percent of farm people in the United States believe *any* kind of sex is immoral! Negative feelings are evoked by pornography, for a very good reason. The current average brand depicts sex as dirty, seedy and degrading.

But even more alarming is the sexual ignorance encouraged by most of the pornography available today. It perpetuates many sexual myths that are not only incorrect but are often potentially harmful, both psychologically and physically.

Pornography, for instance, is obsessed with oral sex, and most X-rated movies have more sequences in which men have oral sex performed upon them than any other kind of sexual activity. Women are consistently depicted as oral nymphomaniacs who would rather service a man with their mouths than win the state lottery. In real life, this is just not the case, as study after study has shown. The majority of women can take or leave oral sex, if in fact they don't find it positively

"In real life, the majority of women can take or leave oral sex, if in fact they don't find it positively distasteful."

distasteful.

Unfortunately, pornography, which provides the main sexual-behavior role models for most men, would have it otherwise, and therefore develops expectations that can seldom be properly fulfilled and behavior patterns that lead to conflict and frustration in future relationships.

More actively perilous, however, is the presentation of anal sex in pornography. It is usually depicted as quite easily performed and enjoyable for all parties concerned. In actual fact, without a lot of careful practice, anal sex is considerably painful for most people, and for those with hemorrhoids it can be quite dangerous, involving the risk of great pain and serious bleeding. But what is a wife to say when her husband tells her, "I saw Georgina Spelvin do it in *The Devil and Miss Jones*, and it was easy"?

Other sexual bugaboos, such as the lore relating to penis size, are stimulated by current porno. Women are shown falling all over Johnny Wadd and Marc Stevens, because their erection lengths are fourteen and ten-and-a-half inches respectively. If that's what it takes, then most men might just as well give up before they start!

And then there's that silver screen favorite: rape. It's often enough depicted in ordinary Hollywood films, but porno gives it a special and harmful twist. When a woman is shown being raped in a porno flick, she always winds up enjoying it in the end—and, in real life, nothing could be further from the truth. This doesn't mean that porno causes rapes, but it does encourage the myth that deep

in their hearts (or groins), women desire, or perhaps deserve, to be raped.

Other, more kinky practices such as bondage and S/M, are also depicted as being neither difficult nor harmful, when in fact there may be considerable risk involved for someone who doesn't know the ins and outs of the variation. It's a weak defense, after you've accidentally maimed your partner, to say you saw it done in the movies.

But is pornography in itself to be blamed for our own inability to use it properly? Hardly. Many a young man and woman has met psychological frustration and defeat trying to live up to the bigger-than-life film images of John Wayne or Maureen O'Hara, but few people would suggest banning Hollywood movies because of their effect on those who watch them.

On the other hand, if pornography were openly available and high-quality producers were motivated to enter the business, its function both as fantasy and sexual-role model would be enhanced and improved. Pornography's greatest sin at the moment is simply its poor quality—which is to be expected of anything that is at best only semilegal. Liquor, for instance, shared the same fate during prohibition, when the drinks served in speak-easies were barely palatable and bathtub gin and wood alcohol took hundreds of lives. Once the ban was lifted, cheap and dangerous hooch was immediately supplanted by safe, quality controlled products.

Another, probably well-deserved, criticism of today's pornography is that it is totally male-oriented and is demeaning

to women in an age of would-be sexual equality. Indeed, most porn degrades not only women, but sex itself and all those involved in it.

Were pornography a legal and respectable enterprise, however, this trend would very likely reverse itself, as it has in European countries. In fact, according to research by the Reverend Ted McIlvenna, the head of the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, and Dr. John Money of John Hopkins University, women can and do respond actively and enjoyably to the right kind of pornography. The "right kind of pornography"—characterized by quality and honesty instead of sleaziness—would probably emerge if porn were directly controlled by and answerable to the general public.

Pornography can actually be helpful. Sex therapists around the country, such as New York's Martha Stein or Pauline Abrams, are using some of the higher-quality pornography now available under some states' more liberal laws for sex education and as an aid in clearing up patients' sex hang-ups and sexual misconceptions. From a therapist's point of view, sensitive, high-quality pornography is a potent tool in the war against the ignorance, guilt and shame that have clouded healthy sexuality for such a long time.

So, in the end it looks like both the scientists who say there is nothing wrong with pornography and the majority of the population who think it stinks are each right in their own ways, though not necessarily for the reasons they give. And there probably won't be much change in the situation until people become more aware of the right answers to the right questions about porno:

Is porno bad? Yes, it's dreadful, and it's not likely to get much better unless some laws are changed.

Is porno harmful? Probably, but not in the ways most people think. It doesn't contribute to crime, sexual deviation, or antisocial, harmful acts. That's a fact. But it does confuse its audience about

sex, it is degrading to women, and it perpetuates the myth that sex is something sleazy and dirty that "good" people shouldn't do.

Should porno be stamped out? No, because it is just the very attempt to do so that has been the key to all the real ills that pornography is causing. The fault lies not in pornography itself, but in the way in which society has chosen to handle it.

Then what can be done about it? It needs to be fully legalized and made subject to the same trade regulations as any other industry. Free competition in an



open market will serve to improve vastly its quality and to drive the mob producers of the current dirty movies out of business. In the hands of creative, law-abiding businessmen, filmmakers and sexologists, pornography will finally have the opportunity to get out of the rotting, underground smut in which it has been festering and evolve into a truly erotic art that can serve and advance the needs of humanity. Take this sullied image of natural sexuality out of the closet and set it out in the sunshine to heal.

You'd be surprised what a little fresh air can do. □

John Townley has been writing on sexual issues for the past ten years. He has a particular interest in the subject of pornography.

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