

CAUGHT IN THE CROSS FIRE

Jack Dominian

To many people, Soho is synonymous with pornography – the strip clubs, the cinemas showing 'blue' films, the thinly-disguised prostitution, the book shops. But is what Soho provides really any more than harmless entertainment, a safety valve for the frustrated, the unhappy and the bored?

Pornography is a subject of never-ending interest because sexuality involves all of us in one of life's central and most powerful experiences. Sexual activity involves intense satisfaction and is at the root of the formation and maintenance of human relationships and reproduction, so it performs a complex variety of functions which contribute vitally to the maintenance and stability of society.

In addition, and unlike other essential physiological functions (eating, breathing, sleeping, etc.), sex is at the centre of value systems which change and evolve. It is the conflict and tension involved in the evaluation of this evolution – of the meaning, significance and function of sexuality – which forms the background of the present renewed interest in the subject.

Pornography is one of several current features which identifies the 'Permissive Society', along with promiscuity, abortion, pre- and extra-marital sexual relations, the Pill and the impermanence of marriage which some people feel are collectively eroding the moral fabric and the very foundation of society. They are opposed by an equally vociferous and determined group who attack the reticence and hypocrisy of the past, welcome the sexual liberation, extol personal freedom (according to the philosophy of John Stuart Mill) and are determined to defend with word and action the gains of the recent past.

For the sake of simplicity, these factions may be called 'conservative' and 'liberal', although what they call each other privately – and sometimes publicly – is another matter. The pithy language is highly emotive as are the feelings of those caught in the cross-fire.

But what about the rest, the vast majority of people not immediately involved in the debate? Most of them, particularly if they are parents, are conscious of the powerful influence of advertising and of the public media which vividly portray the changing standards of sexuality. They go through the full range of puzzlement, confusion, uncertainty and not a little anxiety over the likely effect on their children and the consequences for society.

Meanwhile the committed protagonists of the extreme positions want action. Those who oppose current trends would like to see tighter censorship and a change of the law to provide greater control, if necessary backed by penal sanctions. Those in favour seek a greater extension of freedom and the abolition of as many restrictions as possible. Assessing the validity of these opposing points of view is difficult, particularly when it comes to considering the contribution of the psychological sciences.

In any scientific approach the first job is to sort out a definition. What constitutes pornography and what, if any, are its dangers? This is the core of the

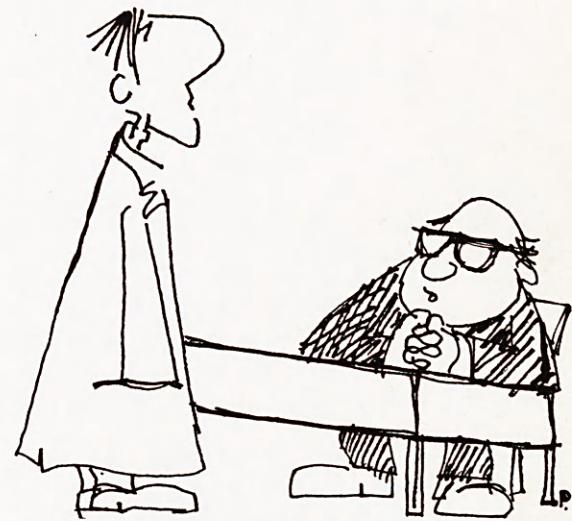
problem because there is no really satisfactory definition of pornography.

As far as the law is concerned it is essentially a matter of the impact of material upon the individual in terms of the extent to which it may corrupt or deprave. Proving a capacity to corrupt or deprave is usually difficult if not impossible simply because both the terms are subjective and lack explicit, objective criteria for assessment.

The starting point is obscenity and this word, which in turn is capable of three broad meanings, is more helpful. First something which is obscene is capable of offending modesty or decency; second it has the capacity to be prurient or to arouse sexual excitement and third, to be disgusting or repulsive. Psychological knowledge and experience can be weighed in a consideration of these three connotations of obscenity.

Obscenity as offensive to modesty or decency

Broadly speaking, society regulates its sexuality by means of language, pictorial representation, fashion and behaviour. It is clear that, in today's world, there are marked differences between the generations as well as between (and within) social classes when it



No Mr Smith, I'm afraid pornography isn't available on the National Health, yet...

comes to a concensus of opinion about these channels through which human sexuality is communicated.

But there are limits which are recognized and set by the law. The exhibitionist, voyeur, obscene telephone caller and people who solicit publicly are all clearly beyond the limit of what is acceptable to society. The psychiatrist quite often sees people who behave in these kinds of ways and they usually show marked psychological features of a failure to develop sexually. While there may be some argument about the wisdom of driving the prostitute off the street, most would agree on the need for protective measures to cope with people who, though psychologically disturbed, can cause distress (and *perhaps* harm) to others.

There will be much less general agreement when it comes to the proliferation of shops selling pornography, strip-tease clubs, cinemas showing 'blue' films, and the appraisal of a spate of plays which feature nudity or include highly controversial behaviour or language. There are those who defend all, pleading the case for the freedom of the individual to choose to participate in whatever he pleases, and those who attack all, either on the commercial grounds of 'exploitation' or because of the fear of corrupting the young. Those who favour unchecked expansion insist that no one is compelled to attend performances which they might find distasteful to which the 'limitations lobby' reply that the very availability of facilities constitutes a danger. No studies are available to assess the professed advantages or dangers of proliferation of 'points of sale' for 'pornographic' material.

Probably the most controversial area in the whole pornography/obscenity debate is broadcasting – particularly television. The listening or viewing audience can be 'exposed' to obscenity without warning and without exercising any choice in the matter – especially so in the case of 'live' programmes. Obviously, what adds up to an 'offence to modesty or decency' will vary depending upon the background of each listener and the viewer. But, over and above social factors like upbringing and religion, there are people for whom sexuality is particularly threatening while other people have reached such personal maturity and social security that no broadcast or programme seems offensive.

The impact on children of exposure to all kinds of radio and TV broadcasting has not been assessed and it would not be any easy thing to do. Age, the sex of the child, its personality and the corrective forces in its environment would all be powerful determinants of the outcome. Until such studies are carried out the subject will remain in the explosive arena of powerful subjective emotional forces.

Obscenity's capacity to arouse sexual excitement

Pornography is intended to be a source of prurience and sexual excitation. But what is the significance of sexual excitation and pleasure in human activity? This is a central and complex issue to which psychological theory has an important contribution to make.

Until this century sexual pleasure and procreation were closely linked despite the age-long attempts at contraception which can be traced back to ancient Egypt. In addition to this link between sex and conception there has also been hostility to sexual 'pleasure' *as such* which is closely connected with Christian doctrine.

The twentieth century has seen the effective separation of the sex act from pregnancy by efficient contraception, the impact of Freudian theory and the reversal – both from within and outside Christianity – of the devaluation of sexual gratification.

So sexual pleasure has emerged as something positive in its own right and there are many people who would not hesitate to advocate unlimited sexual gratification as desirable, natural and healthy for men and women.

If this was the whole answer then clearly anything and everything which stimulated sexual excitement and ultimately produced an orgasm would be desirable in its own right. The most corrupted and ill-understood interpretation of Freud would support this. But Freud wrote not only about libido but also examined the meaning of love and love implies a relationship with another person. The elements of one-to-one relationships have been examined by Freud and those who have followed him in the psychodynamic tradition.

The libido theory of Freud (which suggests a self-enclosed sexual instinctual system characterized by an infantile pattern of oral, anal and phallic phases and adult genital union) has been further elaborated by other research workers who have stressed the need for security, self-esteem and mature dependence as other essential characteristics in the formation and maintenance of one-to-one relationships.

Dr. John Bowlby is the latest theorist to outline an 'instinctual attachment' pattern between child and mother in the first few years of life which acts as a basis of all other intimate one-to-one relationships later in life. In these early years the child learns to feel recognized, wanted, appreciated; in short, acquires the components of affection and love which form the essential ingredients in all significant, subsequent relationships.

So if an adult relationship is to reach maturity it must achieve a balance between the instinctual and affectionate, this is essential if the full potential of the individual and the couple is to be realized. Pornography concentrates on an isolated experience and separates the instinctual from the affectionate and so detracts from the full realization of a relationship. It is probably in this respect that it is most significant in psychological terms.

Psychologically, a case could be made for saying that pornography serves the needs of people who, either temporarily or permanently, find it difficult to form satisfactory sexual relationships. Many who turn regularly to pornography or prostitutes are some of the most impoverished personalities in our society who are incapable of sustaining personal relationships which could give them a much richer experience.



Tony Othen

A lonely potential customer scans the hoardings.

This category of 'regulars' would have to be contrasted with people who have casual and only temporary contact with pornography - like adolescents or men temporarily separated from sexual partners, e.g. soldiers, prisoners, travelling salesmen, etc. Another definable category is that of people who turn to pornography as a source of stimulation to sustain or enrich an existing but impoverished sexual relationship.

In each of these cases pornography may offer crumbs of comfort to people (usually men) who are unable to find within themselves sufficient sexual drive to start or sustain a sexual relationship.

Inevitably mere visual stimulation, leading to solitary sexual activity, is a poor substitute for the wealth of interpersonal exchange involved in a mature relationship although for some people it is considered much safer or is the only thing possible.

Pornography as disgusting or repulsive

Because 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder', one constant problem is to distinguish between the erotic and the pornographic. 'The erotic' tries to capture and portray the beauty and richness of human sexuality in contrast to 'the pornographic' which trivializes, titillates, restricts, distorts, exaggerates and fragments.

Value judgements of this kind are extremely hard to sustain in individual cases but a comparison of different works in literature, painting, sculpture and photography on sexual subjects can leave little doubt that a distinction *does* exist and can be made - if for no other reason than the obvious commercial one. Pornography is a money spinner and its qualities of imagination, artistry and presentation are secondary to its purely commercial goal.

More specifically, a fair amount of pornography is concerned with the portrayal of sexual deviations - sadism, masochism, fetishism, transvestism and homosexuality are all served in and through pornography. This material, together with oral and anal features of infant sexuality, are understandably capable of provoking disgust or proving repulsive. Furthermore, some people fear that deviations, in particular sado-masochism, can be spread by pornography. The evidence for this is non-existent despite the storm which raged over the Moors murder trial.

All we know about sexual deviants suggests that their 'incubation period' spans the whole of childhood and that numerous factors are responsible. Nevertheless, anxiety is widespread. But the abolition of pornography, even if this were possible, would not eliminate the richest reservoir of all - the human psyche whose world of fantasy extends beyond anything that pornography can offer.

Society is in the process of experiencing a major sexual revolution the reasons for which are complex and partially obscure. Pornography, whilst not a new phenomenon, has recently attracted undue attention. The job of the behavioural sciences is to continually evaluate the available evidence and to help society to discriminate between genuine dangers and the over-anxiety prompted by too much imagination and fantasy.