

**Power and Control: A Feminist View of Pornography** By Myrna Kostash 1978 This article was published in [THIS magazine](#), July/August 1978 issue

When Larry Flynt, publisher of *Hustler* magazine, was convicted of obscenity charges in the United States, several luminaries of the arts world, including Gore Vidal and Woody Allen, came to his defense. They called him an “American dissident” and compared him to the Soviet dissidents Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Presumably they meant to draw parallels between Flynt’s victimization at the hands of repressive sexual puritanism and the Russians’ at the hands of the authoritarian Soviet state. It shall be left to the reader to judge the appropriateness of the comparison, but this much can be said: the pornographer as victim is an equation made from the mentality of the mid-Sixties before the advent of the women’s movement. For, thanks to that movement, we are now in a position to understand that obscenity and pornography, far from being an alternative to sexual repression, do in fact trade in the same coin: contempt for women and traffic in our sexuality. Flynt is no dissident; he is a pimp.

The arguments of liberals against suppressing pornography, however, are very often seductive and in some cases even thoughtful. We are familiar now with the attempts of some — as at the Edmonton Public Library and its show of paintings of female nudes — to equate the depiction of the nude body per se with grossness and vulgarity. In this equation no distinction is made between eroticism and pornography, between celebration and degradation, between naturalism and the grotesque. Indeed the assumption is made — and this is as old as the Judaeo-Christian culture — that the nude female body is the same thing as prurience and corruption. Obviously this equation must be protested.

This too should be considered: that the stripping away of sexual taboos is a moment in the liberation from the sexual, emotional, and social control of the male-centred family, the male-controlled marketplace and the male-dominated state. In the taboos around female virginity and chastity, in the double standard of monogamy for women and promiscuity for men, in the systematic devaluation of women’s work based on fallacious arguments about our ‘biology,’ and in the publicization of female masochism in commercial imagery, lies the patriarchal prohibition against women determining the nature and practice of their own sexuality.

Finally, one must be very cautious about asking the state to move against the production and distribution of pornographic and violent materials. Do we really trust the authorities in our society to confine themselves to censorship of pornography, to not expand that mandate to include censorship of anti-establishment points of view? If we ask for the suppression of *Hustler*, do we find ourselves deprived again of D.H. Lawrence, of Germaine Greer, Angela Davis and Lina Wertmuller?

But other arguments raised by civil libertarians and free-thinkers are more problematic. The claim, for instance, that repressive morality is 'responsible for' child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual hang-ups is too simplistic by half. It says nothing about the relationship between repressive morality and the constraints of law, custom, practice and habit, nor about repressive social structures (such as marriage and its feudal economic relations which underlie women's dependency) nor about the intertwining of one's class with one's sexuality. By the same token, the claim that "sexual repressiveness has produced a gun culture of the most alarming proportions in all human history" (this was written in 1971, in the United States) is a rather glib assertion of causality; besides, seven years later, we now have a gun culture and pornography.

The hope that pornography, as 'harmless fantasy,' is a way for the sexually-aroused and frustrated to blow off steam, as it were, the hope that it might embody the individual's right to explore fully his/her sexuality, and the principle that impediments to self-expression must be rejected are only superficially libertarian. They are meant to be meaningful to us all but are mostly meaningful to men. What is 'harmless fantasy' to men is very often a humiliation to women as we see over and over again images that mock and injure our femaleness. The male in process of embodying his sexuality, in the full flight of self-expression (or so he thinks), is very often a rapist, a sadist, a person violent in language and arrogant in imagination. At what point, one might ask, do his rights become in fact women's diminution?

A European film-maker says, "We should be able to open up and show all kinds of things because it means you can trust in people to react soundly." That would be very nice. But people do not react irrespective of their cultural baggage. While watching a pornographic film, say, they have with them the consciousness shaped by their sexual socialization, by their values and of feelings about family life and work life and by the lessons imbibed at school, in church, in the media. As long as that cultural baggage is characterized by the myths of male superiority, as long as the social situation of a film is the generalized coercion of women in our society, then pornography can only be a sexist event.

The same thing can be said of many works of art, too. Traditionally, it has been argued that art is exempt from all considerations of 'permissiveness and 'censorship' because we all believe that 'good' art — the kind that galleries and wealthy people collect — cannot possibly be bad for anyone. After all, aesthetic values are universally beneficent, are they not? Do they not refer only to art itself — no messing about, here, in social and political values? Do we not assume that works of art are or should be part of everyone's cultural experience because they make up a common heritage for us all, irrespective of our maleness or femaleness, our economic privileges or lack of them, our residency in the metropolis or in the hinterlands? In other words, it is usually considered bad form to enquire of an art object just what value system it buttresses, what set of power relations lies behind its execution and presentation, or what particular group finds its interest reflected in its images.

I am looking at a book, *The Nude in Canadian Painting*. The text at one point reads: “the figure in Dennis Burton’s arresting Niagara Honeymoon #1 The Bedroom is a packaged nude, and a reminder that Pop Art was very much involved with containers.... James Spencer’s Margaret, although superficially similar to the Burton, is in fact quite different.... Spencer uses ready-made subject-matter to raise questions about the relationship between the fundamental nature of the subject...and the object. The ambiguity is deepened by the over-life-size scale” etc..... I look at the pictures. I do not so much see playful commentaries on “packages” and “containers” and thought-provoking “ambiguities” as this: women in panties (black lace!) and garters, naked breasts and flesh, thick, heavy and pendulous with their uselessness, scrunched-up faces as though hurting, the whole arrangement pivoted towards the viewer, presumably male, as though it were an offering, long since deprived of any animation. This is art. It’s supposed to be good for me.

I do not mean to sound like a Luddite, calling on feminists to trash cinemas and art galleries. I mean to enlarge the discussion around pornography beyond the usual categories of ‘civil rights’ and ‘aesthetics’. I mean to argue that these categories are not the universal perspectives we have accepted them as but are particular. Particular in the sense they reflect the way a certain group of people (usually men and formerly aristocratic but now middle-class and of liberal proclivities) see culture and social relations, and not the way others might. Their perspectives are in fact a justification for their privileges as men — for ‘pornography is a legitimate human expression’ read ‘pornography legitimizes my dominance’ — and so they are unable to discern in pornography the ideology of male supremacy. It is people outside this dominant group, notably feminists, who discern that.

When, to our Judaeo-Christian inheritance that woman is venal and the gate of perdition, you add the medieval romance that sexuality is separate from spiritual love and the Victorian notion that ‘good’ women experience sex as a violation, then you arrive at the conclusion that women who assert their sexual needs for their own sake are perverse and deserving of discipline. Their victimization is justified. (And that of unassertive women too. If women are ‘naturally submissive and masochistic, then ‘naturally’ they will enjoy being brutalized. A justification for every occasion).

I don’t think it any coincidence that the explosion in imagery of violence against women accompanies the contemporary struggle for women’s liberation. It is a means of dealing with ‘uppity’ women: bind and flog us on record album covers as we march through the streets demanding wages for housework Paint us vapid and defenceless as we organize our collective strength in unions, cooperatives and committees. Snuff us out in films as we get the measure of our female pride and beauty and rage.

Look around. As women press our demands for a fair share of wealth and power, even as we imagine a tough, sweet new order of ‘bread and roses,’ the defence of male authority becomes ever more bizarre and desperate, as it depicts women in increasingly grotesque ways, usually sexual, as though to reduce

us to our despised sexual function again is to blow us away in the wind.

Or, as one man put it, “men need pornography because they are incapable of relating to liberated women.” And women need it like we need a hole in the head.

It teaches us in its pervasiveness, even as we turn away from it, to see ourselves through the dominant male ‘I’ of our culture. “Men act, women appear,” writes the English art critic John Berger. “Women watch themselves being looked at. Thus the woman turns herself into an object” when she views herself in pornographic imagery. Our nudity, our flesh, our posture, are not there as an expression of our own feelings about ourselves but are rather a sign that we have submitted to the wishes of the painter, the photographer, the collector, the audience as to how we shall be displayed. The ways in which we are posed and the expressions given our face are signals not of our own appetites but are rather the means by which is fed the appetite of another. So when we celebrate the humanist vision and the lively individualism of the artist, we should remember that these evolve in contradiction to the sexist reification of the woman-object. And when we celebrate the sexual revolution and its proliferation of sexual images, we should remember: ‘The sexual revolution was so much late Sixties bullshit. It was about male liberation, women being shared property instead of private property. and we know which kind of property gets better treatment.’

There is an education of men as well through pornography. It teaches them that their honest, humane wish to have their sexuality legitimized, to have it shorn of its ashamed and guilt-ridden associations, will be met by images of themselves as fuck artists ‘liberated’ from their feelings and their responsibility to another person. In pornography, a person is no more complex than his or her orgasm, and sexual behaviour no more engaging of the person than a job at an assembly-line. Pornography takes the need-to-be-with-another and distorts it into sexual self-service. “It destroys our connectedness,” says an American feminist film-maker, “and educates us to be alone.”

I am at a photography show in Toronto. There are three walls of nudes, women in various postures in a room — the central prop is a dishevelled bed — and all of them are headless. The connecting image from one photograph to another is a ray of light, now thin and bright, now diffuse and shadowy, playing across the women’s limbs, their breasts, at their feet, across their buttocks. I come to the last picture. It is of the photographer himself, shot upwards from the level of his feet so that his thighs and chest rear up like the Colossus of Rhodes. He is nude. Except that where his genitals should be is a great glowing ball of light.

Women in rooms, lying on beds or strung languorously across chairs. No purposeful activity here, no action outside, there, in the world of relationships and projects, just this enclosed intimacy between

subject-camera and object-woman. Whatever her reason for being here, it is not her own. Perhaps she doesn't have her own, for women are not in the world, they are in their bodies, in the inaction of the flesh. Male nudes are rarely depicted, says Jerrold Morris, a Canadian art critic, because "the sexual attributes of the male nude add little to its heroic, formal characteristics." Men, unlike women, are understood to have other things to do than project their sexuality. Men transcend their corporeality; women are their bodies. Women are shown headless, so irrelevant to their being are their consciousness and intelligence. With every succeeding image of their nudity, we come to know the minutiae of their bodies, the pores and hairs and clefts, just so, and privacy and autonomy are banished. Women are not allowed to withhold themselves. Neither may they generate their own activity. There is, remember, that ray of light, the cord that leads back from the female body to the phallus, that instrument of energy, so mysterious and charged with meaning it does not even materialize but radiates in an aura of blinding light, *homo triumphans*.

The content of eroticism is the power men have over women. The power to enfeeble, enslave, terrorize and, ultimately, to kill: women under pursuit and attack, women in chains and ropes, women abducted and betrayed. Once we have been defined as unconscious and indolent, anything is possible: Hustler magazine makes jokes about Betty Ford's mastectomy; a record album, showing the bikinied crotch of a woman, is called 'Jump on It'; and in Denmark a study of the effects of freely-available pornography shows that all sex crimes (exhibitionism, voyeurism, indecency) have decreased in frequency, except rape.

Sexual violence against women is not about sex, it is about power and control. Our culture's equation of sexuality with dominance-submission obscures this. Obscures the political content of male hostility towards women. Says Susan Brownmiller, feminist author of a book about rape, "if illustrations show the lynching of blacks or the gassing of Jews, then people would understand it as a political issue, but tie a woman up and that's sexy."

In images of erotic arousal, men and women learn well who is allowed to do what to whom. But the location of that lesson in the irreducibles of 'biology' rather than in the mutations of politics, demobilizes us, even as our rage rises like blood in our throats.

What is to be done?

In the short term, feminists and their supporters should demand that materials depicting the bondage, mutilation or murder of women for no other purpose than sexual arousal be banned, whether the image is in a porno film or on a billboard.

We should be organized to put forth our political point of view, to offer a counter-education to the existing ideology that will teach the public to discern in pornography its violently anti-woman content and reject it, the same way the public rejects gratuitous images of the torture of animals, the brutalization of children, and the humiliation of minority groups.

We should offer a definition of pornography that releases the discussion from the liberal trap of 'different strokes for different folks,' that clearly makes the distinction between the erotic connection of equally willing, self-determining partners and the obscene connection of the sexual fascist and his victim.

We need to be clear that the resistance to pornography is not the same as the desire to legislate sexuality but is the need to delegitimize images of male supremacy over women. "What we need now," says the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, "is a new sexual morality freeing sex from the old anxieties, the old inhibitions, and from the social and sexual superiority of the male." That is, the "anxieties" and "inhibitions" associated with the sexual experience are the inevitable concomitants of the intimidation of women and the split in men of their tender feelings from their desire.

We must begin to situate sexuality in our social relations to see that our sexual unhappiness is related not just to the anxieties of the sex act but also to the deadening relations of the family place the workplace and the marketplace. The content of pornography confirms, not contradicts, those deadening effects for it 'celebrates' the atomization and irresponsibility of the person in the pretense that what one does as a sexual being has nothing to do with anything else, neither with the sexual partner nor with the society at large. Eroticism, on the other hand, that gentle, laughing, administering embrace of sensual camaraderie is the exact opposite of, is the alternative to, the social tyrannies of passivity and mechanization. Such sexuality has everything to do with the way we see ourselves politically, in the polis, as co-citizens of the aggrieved against those forces that would circumscribe and attenuate our compassion and vigor.

In the future, the couple will be "multifariously depicted," says Vilgot Sjöman, Swedish director of *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, "socially rooted, psychologically distinct, politically distinct. Prurient interest thereupon slinks around the corner — it cannot manage to embrace the total human being." Will be so? Perhaps. Could be so? Definitely. Men and women as equable collaborators in sex as in work and creative effort. But only if we start from where we are, at the pornographic image, say, at the woman black and blue and roped, the man her disciplinarian, this our, men's and women's only marriage, the only coition permitted us, and say we would have it otherwise.

<https://rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/pornography-a-feminist-view>