

# Understanding

*Thelma McCormack*

*Alors qu'elle faisait le reportage d'un procès pour meurtre, l'écrivaine Pamela Hansford Johnson s'est rendu compte que la pornographie peut corrompre. Elle en a conclu qu'une société qui place la liberté artistique au-dessus de la morale est une société malade. La pornographie fait partie des tabous sexuels et elle n'est pas séparée de la norme. On la voit comme venant d'une carence affective ou bien comme une aventure sexuelle différente pour les hommes mariés. Les féministes pensent qu'elle est l'extension des fantasmes masculins dans une société patriarcale.*

In 1966 Pamela Hansford Johnson, a distinguished British novelist and journalist, was assigned to cover a murder trial. It was an extraordinarily cruel and gruesome crime. The defendants, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, were accused of kidnapping and torturing two young children, terrorizing them into performing deviant sexual acts (during which time their voices were being recorded on tape), and finally murdering the children in cold blood. During the course of the trial, no one could give any reason why Brady and Hindley would engage in such activities; there was no evidence of insanity. But they were collectors of sado-masochistic pornography, a kind of literature in which characters find

sexual pleasure in giving pain (sadism) or in receiving pain (masochism).

This bizarre fact in combination with the "cool" of the defendants haunted Johnson. Whatever views on pornography and censorship she may have held before (most professional writers regard any interference in their freedom of expression with extreme distaste), this evil case made clear to her that literature can deprave and corrupt us. Going one step further, Pamela Hansford Johnson concluded that a society which puts artistic freedom above morality is a sick society.

Part of the sickness, she argues, is the kind of liberal scientific mentality that typically demands strict evidence of cause and effect and which tends to deal with statistical groups of people rather than individuals. To say, for example, that most people reading pornography would in all probability not behave the way Brady and Hindley did is, in her view, a form of moral callousness that is inexcusable. If only one child dies as a result of pornography, that is sufficient proof of its harmful effects.

Today many feminists take the same point of view as Pamela Hansford Johnson, that pornography is symptomatic of a sick society, that putting freedom of expression as a higher value than morality is the wrong way of or-

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dering our priorities, and, if only one woman is harmed as a result of pornography, that is enough to consider legal restraints on its distribution.

What is pornography? According to the law — in this case the Criminal Code — it is any kind of literature, film, photograph, play, or such that can be described as "undue exploitation of sex" and that goes beyond "community standards." (What may offend people in North Bay may not offend people in Toronto.)

Legal definitions, however, do not help us to understand pornography. For our purposes, pornography has three characteristics. First, it deals with sexual taboos: that is, kinds of sexual activities which we (in our society) regard as morally wrong, socially undesirable, improper, "unnatural." These sexual "no-nos" or taboos differ from one culture to another and from one period in history to another, but in all human societies there are rules about sexual activity, and in all human societies there is a kind of underground obscenity which mocks these rules.

Second, pornography deals with these sexual taboos as if they were common, everyday practice. Pornography does not pass judgment, positive or negative, on the kinds of activity depicted in the story, film, pictures. It is the combination of these two characteristics — the sexual taboo and the attitude toward it — that accounts for our shock.

The third characteristic is that the characters in pornography do not have any real relationship. They neither love nor hate; they do not think, and they have no regrets about what they do. They simply act, and they engage in sexual activities with any partner(s) who comes along. What we see in pornography, then, is the sex act devoid of any social context, stripped of all meaning except sexual gratification. That is why characters in pornography never seem real; they lack any mind or heart; they lack any dimension except a genital one.

Sometimes a distinction is made between "erotic art" and pornography, but there is no consistency in the many ways the distinction has been made. Nevertheless, we seem to want intuitively to make this distinction. Meanwhile, we do recognize that pornography can vary with respect to its artistic qualities. It can be "highbrow," "middlebrow," and "lowbrow." In addition, we distinguish between degrees of pornography: hardcore, mediumcore, and softcore. One of the major trends in our cultural life is the acceptance of softcore pornography in advertising, fashion, theatre, film, and television.

Pornography has been with us for as long as recorded history, yet we still do not understand it very well. Social scientists who have studied it — and who have also studied the people who buy it or enjoy it — have offered three major theories.

The first emphasizes sexual repression or sexual deprivation. People who have a lot of sex hang-ups, who feel guilty about sex fantasies or guilty about engaging in sex, or people who have been cut off from any kind of normal sexual activity for a prolonged period of time are, according to this theory, attracted to pornography. They enjoy it as a substitute for real sexual behaviour.

Another theory links pornography to our institution of marriage, in which we have only one partner. Marriage, according to this theory, is an important institution for the survival of society, but it is restrictive, especially for men. Through pornography men can find an indirect experience of sexual activity without endangering the institution of marriage. Pornography, in this theory, is a substitute for prostitution, which is regarded as a necessary evil.

A third theory holds that sexual activity, like any other social activity, is learned behaviour. (For the uninstructed, pornography may act as a sex manual.) For many people sexual activity is not merely a satisfaction of a sex drive; it is a creative act. Partners enjoy experi-

menting and finding new levels of sexual excitement. Pornography is often an aid to increased sexual enjoyment and, as well, provides partners with fantasies that add further to their mutual pleasure. In this theory pornography is a stimulant as well as a source of information.

All of these theories look upon pornography as harmless and even as having a positive function for the individual as well as for the society.

In contrast, feminists have viewed pornography more critically. They see pornography as an extension of our patriarchal society: that is, a society in which men as a group have positions of privilege, authority, and power. Since most pornography does show women as sex machines who exist only for the pleasure of men, it is easy to accept the view that most pornography does reflect the patriarchal social system.

But pornography is more than an extension of our patriarchal society. It is male fantasy in which men are sexually irresistible, sexually insatiable, and sexually powerful. It is, as we say, "macho" man.

Why do men need these fantasies of masculine power? One reason may be that a great many men in our society lack any real power in the economic and political world, so that they can demonstrate their "manhood" only through their sexuality. Another reason may be that both men and women have a great deal of insecurity about sexual identity.

Assuming that these are the reasons, the long-range solution to the pornography problem then is: 1) full equality for women; 2) reduction of and elimination of class differences; 3) legal and social recognition of homosexuality as a normal condition; and 4) the development of an alternative feminist art.

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