

TEMPEST IN A TEACUP: OR FIGHTING PORN IN THE GARDEN CITY

Pam Blackstone



Victoria, une ville de la Colombie Britannique où règne le calme et la réserve, a été secouée par le problème de la pornographie. L'ouverture d'un magasin de Red Hot Video a déclenché la riposte d'un groupe féministe local, Women against pornography (WAP). Au début, WAP demanda une réglementation municipale qui banirait la pornographie. Cette réglementation ayant été déclarée inconstitutionnelle, le groupe se tourna vers l'éducation comme moyen d'arrêter le pornographie. Finalement, quand des films "Snuff" furent découverts dans le magasin, les femmes détruisirent les bandes pendant une présentation à laquelle assistaient des représentants officiels et la presse. Le public, dans l'ensemble, leur apporta son appui. La question de la censure faite par la province et les actions féministes contre la pornographie sont aussi discutées: il faut considérer qui a le pouvoir de censurer, qui serait censuré, et pour l'intérêt de qui. L'auteure voit trois moyens de contrôler la pornographie: réforme légale, éducation, et action directe, qui sont complémentaires puisqu'elles visent toutes le même but.

Victoria: "City of Gardens." The home of the Empress Hotel, scenic marine drives and performing sea mammals, hanging flower baskets and magnificent stately gardens.

Apparent bastion of gentility and refinement.

Behind this façade of charm and culture exists the same poverty, violence, and human suffering found in any Canadian urban centre. Violence against women is very much a reality here. Other blatant scars on Victoria's ostensibly flawless complexion are a growing prostitution problem, high unemployment, a disproportionately high crime rate — and pornography.

The sudden advent of Red Hot Video one year ago visibly cracked Victoria's carefully cultivated façade. Its local outlet chose, foolishly, to locate prominently on Victoria's main drag. This was akin to the serpent's invading the Garden of Eden, and indignant civic officials moved quickly to enact a prohibitive by-law.

It is ironic that Victoria, which has a relatively minor porn problem, finds itself — with Vancouver — at the forefront of the porn-resistance movement. It is for this reason that I was asked to write about how local events of the past year have influenced Women Against Pornography's (WAP) anti-porn strategies.

During the events of the past year three major developments profoundly changed our strategies for fighting porn. By far the most



These three strategies vary in effectiveness; they carry varying degrees of personal risk for women undertaking them. We see them as basically complementary rather than mutually exclusive. It is a tribute to the rich diversity of the antiporn movement that parallel yet vastly different strategies can exist in harmony. Activists have long felt that their actions bring *greater* rather than less credibility to the work of those who pursue change through "legitimate" avenues.

The Thorny Issue of Censorship

I should add one qualifier to the preceding statement: the issue of *state* censorship poses the one serious threat to the unity of the antiporn movement. Any action we take will be construed by some as "censorship." This is essentially a red herring; the vital difference between feminist antiporn actions and state censorship is the matter of power and control. Seeking legal reform is not necessarily a "censorship" position. Attempts, for instance, to utilize legislation such as the Criminal Code, which is designed to weigh the merits of each individual case *after* the fact, are not comparable to *prior* censorship, such as legislation like a by-law, which seeks to define and ban porn. In assessing the merits of state (prior) censorship, we must consider who would have the power to censor, what would be censored, and in whose interests this process would take place.

We have agonized over the issue of state censorship. It has considerable appeal, particularly when we first face the ugliness of porn. We have, however, concluded that the only "pro"-censorship position we can support is that which desires to have porn recognized as anti-woman hate propaganda. By definition, the focus would have to be on violence, coercion, and degradation directed at women, and thus the dangers for women of censorship would be minimal.

So, you may be wondering, how did WAP, which only one year ago supported a city by-law to ban

influential was city council's effort to enact a by-law to ban porn and our frustrating attempt to gain feminist input into this and other legislation. For the first time, we were forced to confront and examine our naïve optimism about the possibility of achieving legislative reform *which would address women's concerns*. We held a series of intensive strategy sessions to examine the censorship issue and began to articulate our reservations about the effectiveness and dangers of this approach. Another alternative seemed preferable. Education became our main focus in the months which ensued. We conducted countless workshops and discussions designed to reveal to women the horrifying images of pornography. In September we discovered several copies of "Snuff" films in Victoria video shops (films in which women are reputedly *really* murdered). Instinctively, we obtained and destroyed the tapes; this strategy was a radical departure from anything we had previously tried. Shortly after this, two Vancouver Red Hot Video locations were fire-bombed by the "Wimmin's Fire Brigade."

Clearly three distinct strategies exist for fighting porn:

a) **Law Reform and Enforcement.** Some women are lobbying for strengthened "obscenity" legislation and for a shift of emphasis

away from sexual explicitness to violence and degradation, and the sexual exploitation of children. Such efforts are aimed at federal, provincial, and municipal jurisdictions, as well as various regulatory bodies. Women are also seeking better enforcement of present and proposed legislation, for without enforcement any legislation is meaningless.

b) **Education.** This strategy is broadly defined as any activity which raises awareness or creates public debate: leading workshops, seminars, and discussions; picketing, leafleting, rallies, boycotting, street theatre, research and writing, letters to the editor, conducting media interviews, debates, and editorials.

c) **Civil Disobedience.** This strategy is more commonly known as "direct action." These are activities which are generally considered property damage or harassment. Use of this strategy is restricted only by the limits of imagination and personal willingness to face the consequences. Spray-painting and fire-bombing are "direct-action" strategies, as are destroying porn materials, gluing locks, barricading store fronts, and any other disruptive or "nuisance" tactics. These have been widely used, all over North America, in the battle against porn. Needless to say, such actions are criminal offenses.

porn, get from there to here? When we first learned of the possibility of a by-law, we were optimistic and naïve about the likelihood of gaining input into it. At that time, we had not explored the ramifications of censorship. Neither were we prepared for the incredible hostility of the (mostly male) council members or their remarkable ability to ignore or trivialize our views. Disillusioned, we chose nonetheless to support the by-law despite our failure to obtain the semantic changes we perceived as necessary. (These would have replaced the "moral-decency" focus with emphasis on degradation and violence.) The by-law, which was promptly challenged in court as unconstitutional, was quashed. We were consistently credited by the media with having initiated the by-law and portrayed as allied with a "moral-decency" council.

What quickly became apparent was the ability of a *feminist* analysis to go unheard in this polarized debate. This experience facilitated our change of focus to education. We began to realize that the only way, ultimately, to eliminate porn is to change the attitudes which create its market — admittedly a long, slow, and unrewarding process.

A few months later, far more cynical, we chose a radically different solution to deal with the "Snuff" films we had discovered. There was no question of waiting for "the system" to deal with this new horror. In choosing to destroy the films ourselves, with the media present, we realized we were risking both civil and criminal charges.

Again, we were not prepared for the outcome. We were shocked (still) by the apathy of the seventy-five public officials we had invited to the screening. The politicians who did attend were outnumbered by reporters. We were, however, amazed by the public reaction: sympathetic editorials; requests for interviews; and a flood of support, encouragement, and cash donations.

Two months later, the now-infamous fire-bombings propelled the issue of porn into media prom-

inence. For the first time, women's concerns about porn began to be taken seriously by those in authority. It was shortly after this — after months of stalling — that the B.C. attorney general's department announced pending Criminal Code charges against Red Hot Video.

The actions by the "Wimmin's Fire Brigade" resurrected the "do-the-means-justify-the-end?" argument and spawned widespread debate on the wisdom of fighting violence with violence. (It should be pointed out here that there is a crucial difference between actions which damage property and those which threaten lives.) Whereas we received support for our "Snuff" action, the W.F.B. received censure from horrified editorialists. The bottom line here appears to have been the potential threat to human lives their action contained. This placed them in the realm of "terrorists," and they are being treated as such by the criminal-justice system.

All of these strategies have different advantages, disadvantages, and personal risks, some obvious, some not. There is room in this battle for all of us, whether our focus is law reform, education, or direct action. Each of these strategies strengthens and enriches the others. Without *all* of them, we will win only partial victory.



Pam Blackstone is one of the organizers of Women Against Pornography (WAP).

PORNOGRAPHY AND CENSORSHIP

Two Simon Fraser University philosophers, David Copp and Susan Wendell, have edited a new book, *Pornography and Censorship*, which they hope will facilitate rational and informed debate on the topic. The approach of the book is interdisciplinary: it collects in one volume related studies from philosophy, the social sciences, and law, and it provides a wide range of points of view on the subject, from defences of extended censorship to arguments for virtually unlimited freedom. Some of the very recent research on the link between pornography and violence is contained in the anthology. *Pornography and Censorship* will be published by Prometheus Books.

WE ARE NOT INDEXED

We are attempting to get *Canadian Woman Studies* listed in the *Canadian Periodical Index*. This listing is not automatic. CPI indexes the magazines most often requested. The next series of inclusions is due this fall. Since women's studies materials do not have the research visibility they deserve, you can assist us in obtaining this essential resource. Please write a brief recommendation and request on behalf of CWS/cf and send your letter to:

The Canadian Library Association,
151 Sparks Street,
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 5E3

canadian woman studies
les cahiers de la femme
CWS/cf