

Fascism & Pornography: A Response

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1978

I

When I first saw the headline of the article on pornography in the last issue of the Fifth Estate ("Fashionable Fascism—The Slick Misogyny of Porn," #289, January 24, 1978) I was pleased that the question was finally being taken up. It is a complex issue, and its treatment would certainly contribute to the ongoing discussion in these pages of human sexuality and its distortion within modern society.

Unfortunately, despite a few somewhat obvious insights, the article was extremely dissatisfying. The arrows of its rather obtuse criticism fell far short of their mark; the issue was not clarified in the least.

First of all, its sloppy premises are based on a thoughtless equation of fascism and sexism, pornography and nazi hate literature. Immediately, two crucial issues are blurred. Pornography's objectification of women and its promotion of male philistinism does not make it fascist. Terminology is important. If we are going to label all forms of domination and exploitation fascist, then we will get nowhere.

The author, Michael Betzold, speaks legitimately of "the mystification about the pseudo-liberation pictured in pornography," but fails to discuss the historical development of this phenomenon. The fact is that during the 1960s the liberal "*Playboy* Philosophy," the "counterculture," "self-awareness," the spread of sexual permissiveness and feminism all played roles in a generalized "sexual revolution" of sorts. Any comparison of the stultified, paranoid '50s and the narcissistic, libertine '60s and '70s would be adequate in demonstrating this shift in values and attitudes. *Playboy*, Ralph Ginzberg, Lenny Bruce, marijuana, and a lot of other elements shared in a general expansion of honesty about sex. Homosexuality came to be looked upon as an acceptable alternative by a significant section of the population. Women became more assertive, more open about their own needs. To deny that the "pornographers" of *Playboy* as well as the *Evergreen Review* had anything to do with this is to deny the facts of the experiences that many of us shared during that time.

Of course, this development took place within the framework and definitions of capitalist relations. It was the result of the permissiveness allowed in an expanding, affluent society geared towards more and more consumption. "Openness" towards sexuality became simply another fad, another product, just as "self-awareness" became the password for pseudo-individualistic therapy cults and as "natural" nutrition collapsed into a fad health food industry.

It is important however to grant the positive effects of this "pornographic literature" no matter where it led. But Betzold, for reasons which I will discuss below, omitted this question altogether.

Another flabby use of words: the article equates voyeurism, which is the subject of the pornographic object, with misogyny. It attacks the crudeness of the photos, implying that a better (photographic) technique would be preferable, perhaps genuinely erotic. I don't wish to discuss Betzold's personal standards of what is prurient, nor do I wish to discuss photography and the evaluation of its eroto-aesthetic quality. If he claims that erotica is under some conditions valid, then he must be extremely careful in judging taste, quality, etc. After all, different strokes for different folks, Mike.

Most people are to some degree voyeuristic, but, like preferred positions, they find various fantasies more or less satisfying to them as individuals. What should concern us, perhaps, is not whether we are “turned on,” whether the photos are “realistic” to us, but the fact of the proliferation of a commodity such as pornography which tends to rigidify the barriers of isolation.

The author is quite right when he criticizes pornography for dealing with body parts, with empty images bereft of any genuine human aura. It is clear that lonely people masturbating while viewing anonymous photos instead of making love with loved ones, is a reflection of the total atomization of human beings, the antithesis of human sexuality which must be a communion between human beings. It is another factor in the eclipse of human emotion, of love, of touching. It is the human being smashed into a pathetic monad, creaming over disembodied images as the religious fanatic scrapes before icons. It is the addiction to the negative image: the spectacularization of the deepest human emotions into distorted, never-to-be-fulfilled human desire. Hence it is also the signal of impotence and rage.

It is anonymous because within capital we are all anonymous. It is “unrealistic” because we live in a world peopled by phantoms; we are all phantoms, nothing is real, it is only merchandise. We are like the hashishin described by Baudelaire in his Poem of Hashish, “a madman who would replace solid furniture and real gardens by scenery painted on canvas and mounted on a frame.” Pornography is the sigh of the repressed, the sex of a sexless world. It is the glaring proof of our thingness, as objects and consumers within capital.

Pornography, as Betzold so aptly says, turns sex into “a marketable jerkoff.” We are all too busy gazing at photos and icons to ever demand the real thing. We’re satisfied with Coca Cola, and we remain submissive. The Fetish not only speaks, it spreads its legs and we are hypnotized. This seems to be the problem of pornography. Because it is the product of a society which dominates and brutalizes women it will tend by definition to promote violence against women. Pornography has existed since the birth of civilization, however, so this insight is not particularly profound. Most every aspect of our culture incites violence against women and against everyone else.

But there are trends in pornography. Even a casual perusal of skin magazines over the last few years will reveal that there are darker, more ominous signs—the racist jokes in *Hustler*, the increasing popularity of nazi regalia, bondage and discipline, overt violence, abuse of children, the soulless mechanization of sex, and all done with the characteristic ho-hum approach of the magazines. It is all reminiscent of the pre-nazi Berlin cabaret scene, and says something about the motion of society, but this is not even considered in the previous article.

II

From his porn = misogyny (a false equation of two overlapping sets, let us say), Betzold moves to his major, and weakest claim of pornography’s relation to rape. The article is full of grandiose but undemonstrated contentions such as the following: “The truth is that pornography does not diffuse potential male sexual violence, but encourages it; does not diffuse fantasies harmlessly, but actually creates destructive ones does not deter rape, but promotes it.”

Pornography incites violence rather than diffusing it His evidence, his argument? Nothing. Pornography-creates destructive fantasies that men could muster on their own, according to the argument, as if it were not the result of the work of men who did dream up the stuff! (In any case, he may as well rail against literature, since watching Richard III’s violence will certainly encourage us to become homicidal schemers!) Pornography “does not deter rape,” he says, “but promotes it.” Proof! Show us that pornography, any more than *Kojak*, or the vixen selling me a power saw by shakin’ it on television, or Bruce Lee, or football, promote rape! Modern “popular” culture, because it is fundamentally and mortally sexist, promotes rape. So what is the article’s strident feminism saying? Nothing much about pornography that we didn’t already know, and a lot of horseshit that won’t withstand even the merest objection. What it implies is that pornography causes rape, which is completely fallacious. “How have rapists learned,” it asks, “that women are beautiful as victims? In hundreds of ways—pornography one of them.”

The fact is that rapists, as evidenced by the frequent assaults against children and elderly women, have not resorted to the desperate act of rape from learning in skin magazines that women are beautiful victims. The author,

despite what he says, sounds disturbingly like a born-again Baptist. Pornography causes rape. So what to do? The solutions are clear, and they are already to be found in Susan Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will* (the one source he uses): a (female?) cop on every corner, a cop in every bedroom. More authority, more control. Though he explicitly denies this, the implicit logic of his argument makes this conclusion unavoidable.

The causes of rape are not to be derived from pornography any more than from any other superficial super-structural phenomena in society. These products reflect the underlying hatred towards women and the mutual estrangement of men and women, which define social relations within class society. Nevertheless, the causes of rape are much deeper, to be found in the complex web of relations within the nuclear family. Porn and advertising, movies, TV, as well as most popular literature (Harold Robbins et al)-contribute to a generalized philistinism and mistreatment of women, but as factors in the creation of a rapist are negligible.

Certainly, class society promotes rape. But to single out pornographic or erotic (Betzold can decide which is "genuine") literature and cinema is moralistic, simplistic, and presumptuous. And the type of argument which centers on pornography at this time must be basically authoritarian and traditionalist in its conclusions. This is why the article's conclusions are so weak. It balks at calling for authoritarian measures, but considers picketing "adult" bookstores as a possibility. It is easy to imagine the nature of such demonstrations if they were to be organized. They would be identical to the struggles by fundamentalists and bigots which have already been organized in the past.

III

The article is filled with an abundance of windy declarations void of content, such as, "The one central fact about sex is that it is a profoundly human activity..." Bugs and Mrs. Bunny would probably disagree, but I don't want to quibble. What the statement attempts to do is to compare a sexuality which is "playful, cooperative, energetic, passionate, and powerful" with the "inhuman violence, helplessness, objectification and distress" on the newstands. Actually, one need not point to the newstands—distress is the name of the game today, pornography being just another gaudy example of it.

It can be found elsewhere on the newstands to be sure, in *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, and the *Ladies Home Journal*, which in their own way are as reactionary and stupefying as pornography. It can be found in pulp novels, in comic books, on television, in the cinema, in churches, on the street, in the schools, in the homes and the bedrooms and in the hearts of every victim of capital. It is splattered across the newstandlike blood. Why talk exclusively of heterosexual pornography, and not *Cosmopolitan*? Because the author is fixated on male sexism, refusing to see the consumers of pornography as victims, as lonely, isolated, voyeuristic fantasy-addicts beating off for momentary escape from the emptiness and powerlessness of their daily lives.

Pornography is revolting not simply because it is by its nature anti-woman, but because it is emblematic of the dehumanization which has already taken place wherever commodity relations prevail, a violence against man and woman since it banalizes not only love but lust. That is why homosexual pornography is just as much a violence. All pornography is a method of repression which prevents any of us from living our desires. It is disgusting not because it exhibits pictures of naked people in weird positions, but because it's so stupid, so shallow, so vapid. It will never go far enough since it goes nowhere; it is ultimately the negation of desire.

The attack is a flat, uncritical exercise in rabid feminism. This is why I felt the necessity to respond, since such a view is not the perspective of the *Fifth Estate*, at least as I understand it. Feminism is a parochial and two-dimensional ideology which mutilates the fabric of the social whole, and thus proves incapable of providing a revolutionary critique. A revolutionary critique embraces the struggle for the liberation of women, but refuses to be reduced to a narrow feminist outlook which poses the false theory of male oppressor versus female victim rather than the necessary point of departure, which is humanity's struggle against domestication.

IV

Despite Betzold's affectations of radicalism, he is actually a liberal. His simplification of critique and his reductionism of culture are paralleled by his lack of understanding in analyzing fascism.

"The uproar over the nazi bookstore is ridiculously disproportionate to its threat," he writes, because he defines nazism as simply the extermination of Jews. "No Jews are being exterminated in this city," he taunts, proof that the fascists are harmless.

First of all, no Jews (or blacks, etc.) are being exterminated because the nazis are not in power. No Jews were being exterminated in the Berlin of 1930 either, but the Nazis turned out, nevertheless, to be a greater threat than anyone had ever imagined.

Secondly, fascism is a more complex phenomenon than Betzold credits it to be. The fascists are an action group, aggressive, military, determined to effect a program of capitalist austerity, the utter intervention of police control into personal life, the extermination and deportation of racial minorities, imperialist war, the degeneration of culture, and traditionalist authoritarianism, which certainly would represent the further enslavement of women and the reversal of what few gains they have made under bourgeois democracy. They have already embarked upon this program by attempting to foment race riots against black people, particularly at Western High School (50% black) near which the nazi bookstore is located.

Porno bookstores, on the other hand, are just an aspect of the banalization and degradation of our lives, which is perhaps equally represented by the proliferation of fast food chains, and magazines like Cosmo.

Betzold has failed to demonstrate a relationship between rape and pornography. Instead of picketing porno bookstores in particular, he may as well picket all of society, picket sexism in general. The relationship between fascist hate groups such as the nazis and the Klan, and violence against black and working people, however, can be easily enough traced, as shown by events throughout the country, in Detroit, Pontiac, Boston, Selma, Chicago and elsewhere.

The article clearly lacks any sense of proportion. Regardless of the possibility (less than slim) of the fascists' coming to power, the role that the fascists play in their defense of capitalism and their mobilization for reaction against human rights is infinitely more dangerous to the freedom and dignity of women than pornography. Comparison of armed fascist combat organizations bent on genocide and counterrevolution, and the pathetic, vacuous stupidity of pornography, is blind and absurd.

V

I have not so far developed any rounded analysis of eroticism and pornography, but only clarified what I think were some of the issues raised by the previous article. My response, I think, has been to discuss the question of pornography, but with the emphasis on criticism. Bad criticism is harmful to a project such as ours. It leads our explorations into familiar, barren territory, and recuperates our revolt. We've been guilty of it before, of course; we are bound to make mistakes. Nevertheless, we must remain within the perspectives of revolt with which we began, and not be misled by the distortions generated by moribund ideologies which tend to creep into an anticapitalist outlook, namely feminism, Marxism, anarchism, and moralism-messianism.

Hence, an article on the pervasive misogyny of class society would include most pornography as one of the more putrid examples, where the female sex ceases to be a tool in the sale of commodities and is transformed into a commodity itself. But an article on pornography can in no way stop there or it becomes reformist feminist rhetoric and little else.—A genuine discussion of the subject would first speak of it historically, then detail its components and variations. The Betzold article did none of this—it was a diatribe based on one individual's response to pornography.

The subjective response is a legitimate one as long as it does not pretend to be analysis. When it passes itself off as criticism it falls flat on its face. The writer apparently never bothered to study the subject since he lumped it all into a single, homogeneous totality, which cannot be done. He never spoke of it as photographic, cinematic and

literary material. He saw no difference between the slick liberalism of Playboy and the subliminal fascoid violence of Hustler.

He made no mention of modern literary eroticism, nor of the eroticism in “straight” films. Sexual humor and the fascination with sexual taboos which have been with us since the Paleolithic, were nowhere mentioned. This is what we should demand of criticism, of ourselves, or quit talking and chew gum. Silence is preferable to bad criticism.

The problem of genuine eroticism and pornography is underlined by the author’s failure to treat it seriously. He mentions “genuine eroticism” as if it were automatically agreed that his (vague) standards were: acceptable to everyone. His criteria are that “both men and women would be portrayed, and as real people.”

Obviously, he has viewed little or no pornography—most films show both men and women. But I, for one, have the suspicion that this first criterion has nothing to do with whether or not material is erotic, since it is easy to imagine an erotic film or photo essay or short story that centers on a single person.

The second criterion, that the people involved be portrayed as “real,” is a meaningless statement. At best, it sounds like a “proletcult” argument for social realism: “No one will [make an erotic film] until the commodity relations that are the basis of pornography are destroyed.” This is equivalent to saying that no great novels, or great films can be created until capitalism is overthrown.

The dividing line between genuine and “false” eroticism is not distinct. A good description appeared in a recent review of a book by Georges Bataille, written by Peter Brooks in the *New York Times Book Review* (2/12/78):

“Where pornography records sexual enactments, eroticism reflects on the extreme and excessive limitations of human experience and imagination. In a world that has lost its myths of transcendence...it is in the erotic experience that man rediscovers the Sacred: discovers it as interdiction, taboo, accessible only through violence and transgression. Erotic is a subject for philosophy because it pushes thought to its utmost perimeter, to the encounter with death and evil, to the realization of man’s most liberating and frightening capacities. Only at the confluence of sexuality, evil and death, on the brink of the unthinkable, can there be a practice of “joyous wisdom,” which restores a sense of the rapture and terror of existence.”

Here we see an entirely different aspect to the question of eroticism. Least of all is it concerned with the question of realism as opposed to other genres. Rather than a simplistic “turn on,” eroticism contains elements of rebellion against the sterile modern world. Like all rebellion, it is two-sided: the smashing of taboos is both liberating and terrifying, both revolutionary and reactionary, depending on circumstances and the consciousness of the protagonists. We can through it regain our humanity or sink to a depravity similar to Sade’s descriptions in *120 Days of Sodom*.

But it is for literature, and eroticism, to follow every road, even the most terrible. In any case, what is important, as Breton maintained in his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, is that “Everything remains to be done, every means must be worth trying, in order to lay waste to the ideas of family, country, religion” (first italicized section mine).

And eroticism, as Brooks notes, can be a weapon. All of the murky, hidden horrors and delights of the psyche should be the subject of eroticism. We can go in fantasy and in art where we can never go in our lives. This is our animal right, to fantasize, no matter what. It is a necessity of life. Hence even violence is acceptable within the realm of genuine eroticism, and not a proper standard for its proscription.

Therefore, the problem of pornography is that it is a trivialization of this psychic research. Commercial pornography today is a theft of our dreams and our desires, it is the counterfeit by which capital maintains its repressive external and internal apparatus, That is why the religious conversion of Larry Flynt is not a contradiction, but the completion of a circle: pornography is the vile twin of bourgeois moralism.

VI

I want to end on a “hopelessly utopian” note: the call for revolution is our only alternative to this existence which has robbed us of everything which once defined us as human beings. We must struggle to become more

human. What this means is hardly clear, but maybe such discussions as these are a small beginning. Perhaps we must simply learn to live our lives and be just as willing to throw them away for love and solidarity.

“Passion wells up like a tornado of spiraling blood so that the tongue barely can move its thickness into the mouth of another”

—Frank O'Hara

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Fifth Estate #290, March 2, 1978

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