



Jaime Nubiola | Friday, 26 November 2004

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## The black tide of pornography

The only pornography that everyone frowns on is "child pornography". But "deluxe pornography", masquerading as eroticism, is making great strides in the media, advertising and fashion. Philosopher **Jaime Nubiola** sets out to define the difference.

Contemporary society is notoriously contradictory on the topic of pornography. While "porn" is relegated to X-rooms, special areas of video clubs or faceless sex shops, "eroticism", as we see constantly in the media, advertising and fashion, is considered quite respectable. See-through clothing paraded by high fashion models is a clear indicator of this eroticised atmosphere peddled by the media. Perhaps that is why many people are ready to grant that eroticism may have a cultural value and can become refined art, while at the same time looking down on pornography as eroticism gone bad, degraded for the consumption of the rabble, the poor, the depraved.

Pornography, we are told, is difficult to define, but easy to recognise. American novelist Walker Percy, referring especially to books, once wrote:

"Pornography differs from other literature in that it does something which other books don't. You get novels that aim to entertain, to say how things are, to create characters and adventures with which the reader can identify. Pornography does something different: it deliberately seeks to arouse the reader sexually. This is something on which all of us, Christians and non-Christians, linguistic scholars and teachers alike, can agree, for there isn't much mystery about it. Pornography, which is a transaction with signs, is really no different from Pavlov's dogs salivating at the sound of a bell which they've learnt 'means' food is ready."

"So then, what is permissible? I mean, what is permissible for a serious writer and a serious reader. The only rule I follow is to permit everything which furthers the artistic aim of the novel. If I've thought of a specific truth or artistic form for a novel, and then I write a scene which is so explicitly sexual or violent that the reader gets distracted, either by stimulation, that is by sexual arousal, or by disgust, then I have lost my reader and failed as a novelist." (1)

This description gives us a practical way of deciding what is "pornography". Works are pornographic if they are made, sold or consumed for sexual excitement. (2) It does not depend on what is revealed, or how far it goes, but on what its authors intend. Products are pornographic when they are designed to produce or foster sexual arousal in their audience, acting out their sexual fantasies. (3)

Nevertheless, the demarcation lines between pornography and eroticism -so-called "deluxe pornography" - are very blurred. No honest person would question the pornographic dimension of films like *Emmanuelle*, *Last Tango in Paris* or *Basic Instinct*. They have had a lot of money put into them, and aim to maximise commercial success by offering a certain technical quality (scenes of high lyrical value and plots of considerable expressive force) alongside a sex content ever seeking to open new frontiers for the viewer.

### Nudity and art

Catholic tradition has not been afraid of portraying nudity, though fig leaves have been removed or replaced depending on the comings and goings of cultural sensitivity. The Sistine Chapel is a good example. The Catholic Church's teaching in this field "is not that

of a Puritan mentality nor of a narrow moralism, neither is it the product of thinking based on Manicheism." (4) The Church is not against the nude in art. But it is resolutely opposed to those who debase sex by commercialising it or deliberately exposing it to third parties, because such behaviour degrades the dignity of sexual communication and depraves the people involved.

It is worth recalling what Pope John Paul II taught back in 1981: "In the course of the different epochs, from ancient times - and above all, in the great age of Greek classical art - there are works of art whose theme is the human body in its nakedness. Contemplating the body allows us to concentrate, in some way, on the total truth about man, on the dignity and beauty - including that which is 'supra-sensual' - of masculinity and femininity. These works have in themselves, as something hidden, an element of sublimation, which introduces the spectator, through the body, into the entire mystery of man as a person. In contact with these works - which by their content do not induce that 'looking so as to desire' we are told about in the Sermon on the Mount - we grasp in some way the spousal significance of the body, which responds to and is the measure of 'purity of heart'."

### **Reduced to being an object**

The nude therefore can be - is, when it is artistic - beautiful, very beautiful. It can "uplift" us to the sublime. I like to recall a comment which John Paul II makes in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* with regard to the Biblical account of the creation of Eve. God has put Adam into a deep sleep and forms Eve from one of Adam's ribs. When Adam awakes and sees Eve naked before him he exclaims: "You are flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bones!" And the Pope adds: "The exclamation of the first man in seeing woman is one of admiration and enchantment: it embraces the entire history of human beings on earth." (5)

Nevertheless, John Paul II continues, "There are also artistic productions - and perhaps more often reproductions [photographs] - which go against man's personal sensibility, not because of their object - for the human body in itself always retains its inalienable dignity - but because of the quality or way in which it is reproduced artistically, is shaped, or represented. (...) It is well known that through these elements, the real fundamental intentionality of the work of art or audio-visual product, in some way, is made accessible to the spectator, listener or reader. If our own sensibility reacts with repugnance and disapproval, it is because we find ourselves in front of a work or reproduction which, together with the objectivization of man and his body, has a fundamental intentionality of reducing the body to the level of an object, an object of 'pleasure', destined to the satisfying of concupiscence itself. This goes against the dignity of man, even in the intentional order of art and reproduction." (6)

When this is taken into account, it can easily be seen that the so-called distinction between "pornography" and "eroticism" has no meaning. Let me emphasise again that when I speak about "eroticism" I am not referring to tenderness, suggestions, caresses, or sexual intimacy, but rather to erotic art, to the objectivization of the sexual stimulus.

### **Pornography and sexual exploitation**

There is nothing new about pornography. It goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks. Anyone in our 21st Century reading Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* will still find himself blushing at its lewdness. Works of this kind, even though they parade at times as literature or art, are nothing but pornography. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado calls them "low level literature which appeals only to the inferior part of the human centaur". (7) And the Italian critic Claudio Magris, using an expression of Céline, calls it the "lyrical toilet". (8) As George Steiner accurately pointed out, despite frequent expressions of praise for the creative potentiality of sex, the crude reality of pornography is always monotonously the same and does not have any great literary importance. (9)

On the other hand, what has certainly taken on a growing importance throughout the 20th Century is audio-visual pornography thanks both to the extraordinary growth of audio-visual communications - more recently, the Internet - and to the so-called "sexual revolution" of the 60s, which has banalized both the unveiling of conjugal intimacy and all manner of perversions. Frankly, in our Western society, the only truly unacceptable pornography is "child pornography", the sexual abuse of children. Other sexual mores are presented simply as the "sexual options" of adults.

### **Anti-woman**

Pornography is consumed principally by males, (10) and pornographic films for men include subject matter that is systematically offensive and degrading for women, who tend

to be presented either explicitly or implicitly as sexual slaves. (11) This fact help us understand the nature of pornography and confirms what the etymology of the term "pornography" tells us. It is writing (graphy) related to prostitution (porneia). For the clients, pornographic images are an audio-visual substitute for prostitution, more hygienic, cheaper and even, perhaps, more practical.

In the last ten years we have seen a strong movement in Canada and the United States to eliminate pornography not so much for religious reasons, but based on the practical realisation that pornographic films damage women, not only those who take part in the filming, but also those who are abused or even raped by males aroused by the films or who have learnt new "techniques" from them. (12)

### **A wounded sensibility**

How does pornography influence the lives of its consumers? Scientific studies do not seem to have reached total consensus, (13) but I think one can definitely agree with the expression that these films can wound the sensibility of the spectator. Pornographic images inflict wounds on the sensibility of the spectator to such an extent that they are indelibly engraved in their memory. I am not referring only to spectators who may have a sickly, obsessive or degraded sensibility, but to your normal healthy spectator, and for this I appeal to the personal experience of each one of us and the store of repugnant images that each one's memory retains, even against our will.

The pornography trade is a brutal exploitation of the sexual drive of males, but it also lives off, perhaps to an almost equal extent, natural curiosity. The extraordinary attracts our attention. It's like a bad traffic accident. No one wants to get involved, but we all slow down to have a look. (14) This attraction to novelty explains why our attention is drawn to what is extraordinary, abnormal or deviant. It also helps us to understand the phenomenon of films providing what we have called "deluxe" pornography", in which sexual arousal is offered in "prudent" doses wrapped together with sentiment, adventure, and even lyrical beauty.

### **Just say No**

What can be done to counter the "black tide" of pornography?

*One:* We need to reject pornography systematically in all its forms and denounce its degrading effects both on the women it abuses and its consumers. Pornography not only reveals genitalia; it also establishes chains of arousal and consumption - a real exploitation - between its creators or producers and the receivers. In this sense, pornography should be seen as an addiction comparable to drug addiction, because of the volume of money it moves, the blurred distinction between "hard" and "soft" porn, and indeed the naïve self-satisfied tolerance towards it in many democratic countries in the name of freedom of expression.

*Two:* We should seek to eradicate sexual arousal in the media. The most generalised and negative influence of pornography or eroticism is that it impoverishes the imagination of men and women up to the point of reshaping, that is, degrading, the relations between them. Since interpersonal relations pass through the imagination, the systematic reduction of relations between women and men to a matter of mutual sexual arousal is a violation of our human condition.

*Three:* We should demand that pornographic products be clearly identified as dangerous and polluting our moral atmosphere, so as to keep them as far away as possible, if they can't be eliminated. As C.S. Lewis once wrote: "When poisons become fashionable they do not cease to kill." (15)

More and more people are calling for a "right to non-information", the right not to be bombarded by the sexual intimacy of others, or the perversions or barbaric behaviour of our contemporaries, as presented to us by television (and newspapers) competing to provide more degrading material, as a way of increasing their ratings (and circulation).

*Four:* We must strive to educate our imagination and that of others. We need to embark on a purification of the social climate. This will involve not only eliminating or limiting contaminating products, but also and above all spreading creative and helpful life styles, which can make human beings happier.

A world without pornography would be a much better world. If pornography exists (while not forgetting it is one of the consequences of original sin) it is because daily life does not satisfy people's imagination. Simone Weil expresses this paradox as follows: "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is sad, monotonous, barren, tedious. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvellous, intoxicating." (16) That is the way with

human imagination and that is why we have to educate our own imagination, purifying it and developing it creatively.

In this sense, literature and films have a decisive role in cultivating our imagination. They are not there simply to entertain, but to educate the deeper side of human beings, to educate the heart. They are a wonderful means to expand our human experience, to cultivate our heart, to educate our imagination. There are films and novels which illumine our personal experience, often in ways we cannot explain, and become part of the treasure of universal human experience. (17) In particular, I am convinced that films and literature can be a most effective means for men to learn from the experience of women, and vice versa, teaching both men and women to treat each other as real people.

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## Notes

(1) Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York 1991, 362-63.

(2) A similar definition is found in D. Jones (ed.), *Censorship. A World Encyclopedia*, Fitzroy Dearborn, London 2001, vol 3, 1907: "Pornography is the description of sexual behaviour in the arts and media that is intended to cause or does cause sexual arousal".

(3) D.L. Mosher, "Pornography defined: Involvement Theory, Narrative Context, and Goodness of It", *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, 1 (1988), 67-85.

(4) John Paul II, *General Audience*, 29 April 19814.

(5) John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* (1988), 10.

(6) John Paul II, *General Audience*, 6 May 1981.

(7) Antonio Machado, *Los complementarios*.

(8) Claudio Magris, *The Danube*.

(9) Geroge Steiner, "Night Words", *Language and Silence. Essays 1958-1966*, Faber & Faber, London 1985, 91.

(10) A study by Carnegie Mellon on pornography on the Internet reported that "98.9% of on-line consumers of pornography are males. And there is some indication that of the remaining 1.1%, many are women paid to take part in chat rooms and in bulletins so that the clients may feel more at ease". P. Elmer-Dewitt, "On a Screen Near You: Cyberporn", *Time*, 3 July 1995, 38.

(11) Cf G. Cowan & K.F. Dunn, "What Themes in Pornography Lead to Perceptions of the Degradation of Women?", *Journal of Sex Research*, 31 (1994), 11-21; D. Linz & N. Malamuth, *Pornography*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA 1993, 4.

(12) M. Serrill, "Smut that Harms Women", *Time*, 9 March 1992, 48; C. MacKinnon, *Only Words*, Harvard University Press, 1994.

(13) D. Zillmann, "Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography", in D. Zillmann & J. Bryant (ed.s), *Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ 1989, 127-57; D. Zillmann, "Influence of Unrestrained Access to Erotica on Adolescents' and Young Adults' Dispositions toward Sexuality", *Journal of Adolescent Health* 27 Sup. (2000) 41-44; see also D. Linz & N. Malamuth, *Pornography*, 16-28, and C. Rogala and T. Tydén, "Does Pornography Influence Young Women's Sexual Behavior?", *Women's Health Issues* 13 (2003), 39-43, which includes relevant bibliography.

(14) E. Laumann, *Sex in America*, 1994; P. Elmer-Dewitt, "On a Screen Near You: Cyberporn", 40.

(15) C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, ch 4.

(16) Simone. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*.

(17) Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 359.