Confusion reigns

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There is no general agreement about what is and is not ‘pornographic’. Attitudes change and what was thought daring on the film screen ten years ago would not raise an eyebrow now. The argument about pornography must be set against this background of constantly shifting standards.

I have no qualifications or experience in psychology, and certainly not in psychiatry or psycho-analysis. I am writing as a layman who, until recently, has had the responsibility of deciding, with the help of others, whether a film is, or is not, suitable for exhibition at public cinemas. In doing this job I was inevitably compelled to see some films which many people would describe as obscene or pornographic, and this is the (only) justification that I have for contributing to the argument on this subject.

At the present time obscenity and pornography are subjects for public debate, and I get the impression from what I read and hear that the discussion is often emotional rather than objective, and that difficulties are caused by the lack of specific definition of these words, not only in legal but also in general terms.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines obscenity as something that is ‘repulsive, filthy, loathsome, indecent, lewd’ and pornography as ‘description of manners etc. of harlots, treatment of obscene subjects in literature’, a definition which I think would now generally be thought to be inadequate!

Do these words mean the same or different things? Can either or both words be applied to something other than sex—in particular to violence?

My own inclination is to apply the word ‘pornography’ to written or visual material concerned solely with sex, and the word ‘obscenity’ as a more general term covering pornography and also other things especially violence. This view was held by D. H. Lawrence who suggested that obscenity was a matter of personal opinion, whereas pornography was something specific; he defined it as making sex dirty for money, and added, ‘Even I would censor pornography most rigidly’, probably because he regarded sex as a radiant and heart-warming part of human life—which it certainly can be and should be.

I suppose that most people would use the word ‘pornography’ to describe the books, magazines and films that describe or display sexual relations of one kind or another between human beings of either sex, or between human beings and animals, the descriptions or displays being both explicit in detail or crude. Although such material is not new—
there was much of it around in the Victorian Age* – it has increased in quantity and availability in recent years, to the point where it has caused public protest and demands for legal control.

There are, of course, different interpretations of these words in different parts of the world. The Swedes, for example, do not regard their sex films or sex education films as pornographic, since sex in Sweden is accepted as a normal part of human life and not a taboo subject, whereas many people in this country and some others would have no hesitation in describing them as pornographic.

Extremes of sex and violence in films are apparently acceptable to audiences in Japan, but would not be acceptable in many parts of the world. In India even the mildest representations of sex have not been allowed, although there are indications that this attitude is changing, so presumably what would be

*See "The Worm in the Bud" by Ronald Pearsall, published by Penguin Books.

acceptable in Britain would be regarded there as pornography. There are obviously no absolutes in this any more than there are absolutes in moralities.

There appears to be no evidence that pornography has a harmful influence on people who read such books or see such films. This does not mean, of course, that anyone can claim with certainty that it does not have a harmful influence; only that there is no proof one way or the other.

Such evidence as has been produced – notably in Denmark and the United States – suggests that it is not harmful and, as a result, the Danish Parliament in 1968 repealed all legislation relating to obscenity and pornography, and similar action was recommended by the 'Johnson' Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in the United States, and by a Working Party set up at about the same time by the Arts Council of Great Britain. However, in neither country has this recommendation yet been adopted.

The lack of evidence only encourages the emotional approach on both sides. After the 'Moors' murder case Pamela Hansford Johnson published a book, 'On Iniquity' in which she implied that it was books which caused Ian Brady to become the kind of person that he was, but it could equally be claimed that he bought the books because he was the kind of person to whom they were specially attractive. The recent 'Oz' trial produced some emotional and non-objective arguments on the other side.

'The Little Red School Book' was described in
Court as obscene, yet it fits none of the definitions that I have given, or, as it seems to me, the present legal definition, taken from a legal judgement of 1868, as 'something which, if taken as a whole, would tend to deprave or corrupt . . .'

A further complication arises from the anomalies and inconsistencies of present legislation. The Obscene Publications Act of 1959, for example, specifically excludes films that are exhibited in public cinemas or even in club cinemas, but does not exclude films shown in private dwelling-houses to which the public are not admitted; so if any one of us shows a pornographic film privately in our own home the police have a legal right to take punitive action! So far, attempts to propose amendments to existing legislation have all failed, and there is something in favour of the argument that it is both illogical and unjust to have a law that prohibits an activity that the law cannot define.

One thing can be established. The recent publicity given to this question by Lord Longford and others has increased the attraction of pornography and consequently its sales. This has been confirmed to me by people who distribute and sell this kind of material. Repression by law or censorship tends to have this effect too, and the law, however well devised, cannot impose standards of personal morality.

Quite recently I saw a motto carved on a building in 1894 which read 'Times change and we change with them'. I think perhaps I would modify this to '... and some of us change with them'.

At the same time the basic premise is true, and the censorship of films in Britain has reflected this. In 1958 the film Room at the Top was regarded as sensational and daring; now it would not raise an eyebrow. Nudity of both sexes, which was unacceptable ten years ago, is now commonplace on stage and screen. Homosexuality of both sexes and explicit sex education appear in films and books. Four-letter words are to be found in many modern novels, and in plays and films - the pity is that another four-letter word 'love' seems to have less prominence than it used to have, being largely replaced by the three-letter word 'sex'.

Occasionally there is criticism of something that is considered to go too far - for example, there has been this kind of comment about the film The Devils, based on the Aldous Huxley book, but such criticism, if given wide publicity, simply guarantees increased box-office returns.

To be subjective, I much dislike pornography. I find it distasteful and degrading but, in the absence of any clear indication (let alone proof) that it does individual harm, I find it difficult to say that it should be repressed by law or censorship so that adults who want it should be prevented from getting it legally. They will get it anyway 'under the counter', and at inflated prices, so it seems to me that probably the most sensible solution would be to let them buy it legally at shops which specialise in this kind of merchandise and to make it illegal to sell such material to minors or to have displays in public streets which could reasonably offend people who pass by. This would reduce its attraction and substantially reduce the profits of those who sell it.

What seems tragic to me is that there can be little attraction to people who have happy sex lives, and the interest in pornography emphasises what we already know - that many people are sexually unfulfilled. Since this is a vitally important factor in human life, I think we should have sympathy and compassion for people who need the compensation of pornography. So many people are afraid of sex, and afraid that they may be sexually inadequate.

The clinch on a rain-swept beach from Room at the Top which shook cinema audiences rigid in 1958.
Surely if there is any way in which they can be helped we should not condemn it, especially if we have been lucky enough to experience sexual fulfilment ourselves.

One thing is encouraging. The young do not seem to want or need pornography. In the so-called ‘permissive’ age, they are less inhibited sexually than earlier generations were at their age, and they seem to be better informed and more honest about sex. This honesty is certainly to their credit. The question which we cannot answer is what the young people of 20 today will be like when they are 40. Will they be like their parents whose generation buy pornography, or will they retain a more healthy and natural attitude to sex? Will the sexual frustrations come at a later age?

Another encouragement is the philosophy of the young which does not accept violence; ‘Make love not war’ has much to commend it. We may well see this as a hopeful sign in that violence is often a compensation for sexual inadequacy; indeed, many sex-crimes suggest this. I believe that a philosophy of peace, which does not always appeal to older people, especially those who have not experienced love and who have enjoyed war, should be regarded as a sign of hope and not of despair.

To me violence is the worst obscenity. This extends both to fantasy violence—the use of violence for entertainment—and also to violence in reality. If one has respect for human beings it is surely impossible to regard violence as acceptable even if the cause is just. To use it in entertainment, except for the legitimate purpose of condemning it, seems to me wrong.

As with pornography, there is no evidence that exposure to violence is harmful but, even if it is not, surely it can contribute to a blind acceptance of violence as normal in human relations, both on a personal level and an international level. After the assassination of Robert Kennedy an American journalist said to me, ‘If you live in a violent society you come to expect this kind of thing’. It is this acceptance that I find intolerable.

We cannot eradicate violence, however much we may want to, but at least we can recognise it for the evil and obscenity that it is. We cannot get rid of pornography, but we can look at the problems that it produces with common-sense, and recognise that however much we may personally find it distasteful and degrading it cannot do as much harm to mankind as violence. I believe that society has more serious problems to solve.