

Pornography

What's Out There Now

BY ALISON KERR

After more than a decade of struggle by feminists to expose the products and producers of an industry that relentlessly promotes the use and abuse of females and female bodies, ignorance about what's available for sale, rent or loan on the Canadian porn market still runs high. Most non-users in Canada entertain the antiquated notion that pornography is about nudity and "naughtiness" — nothing to get alarmed about unless you're sexually "unliberated" or "repressed."

The billionaire pornographers are delighted by our collective reluctance to take a closer look at what they're doing; they profit enormously by our silence. Pornography is a mass medium — a multi-billion dollar industry in North America — which grosses more annually than the film and record industries combined. Currently there are more pornography outlets in the U.S. than there are McDonald's.

It's time we took a good, hard look at what the pornographers are doing and how their product is affecting our lives. Because while we haven't been looking, the pornographers have been making a few changes. Nudity and naughtiness are "out"; extreme degradation and the promotion of sexual violence are "in."

Definitions of "pornography" abound. Here's one that captures pornography's essence and distinguishes it from erotica: pornography is material designed to sexually stimulate the consumer by showing or describing a power imbalance among the participants; it stimulates by showing or describing violence against, or the degradation of, a human being.

That's different from "erotica" — a word which is derived from "eros" or passionate love. In erotica, there are neither conquerors or victims; no one is objectified because all the participants are subjects. The power in erotica is shared power. But erotica only flourishes in an atmosphere of equality and perhaps that's why there's not very much of it around.

The word "pornography" comes from two Greek words, "porne" meaning whore and "graphos" meaning writing about or drawing. Pornography literally means writing about or drawing prostitutes. Pornography's essential message is that all females are whores by nature and whores, by definition, exist for sexual use.

Pornography is at least as conservative as the other mass media; it teaches that women's place in the world is on their knees or on their backs. Think about that the next time you hear someone claim that pornography is about sexual freedom. Whose freedom are they talking about? Certainly not women's.

The main consumers of all forms of pornography, including

pornography showing males, are males. Recently, the pornography industry has begun to expand its market to include a small but growing segment of the female population. This gradual shift is taking place because: images of female degradation are becoming ever more common in mainstream media, the population as a whole is growing increasingly desensitized to the real meaning of such images and male consumers are exerting more and more pressure on their female partners to replicate activities they've seen in pornography.

Pornography exists on a continuum with soft-focus material like *Playboy* at one end, followed by more overtly degrading material such as that found in *Hustler* magazine, followed by true bondage and torture material — through mutilation, body piercings and castrations — and at the extreme end of the spectrum is something called a "snuff" film.

This is a genre in which it's claimed that a woman is literally killed on screen for the sexual pleasure of male viewers. Pornography advocates will argue that some of these "snuff" scenes are only simulated, as if this fact automatically rendered harmless the coupling of male sexual pleasure with the image of a woman's death. But the effect on the consumer is the same whether or not a woman is literally murdered on screen.

While pornography denies full humanity to women, it tends to differentially objectify white women and women of colour. For the most part, white women are depicted as human "bodies" if not human beings. But women of colour are often depicted as animals or as monsters — sub-humans.

Pornography is the propaganda of sexual and racial hatreds. It reinforces racist stereotypes. One of the functions of using models of colour in pornography is to discourage the white male consumer from identifying the models with his own wife or daughter, for whom he might be expected to feel some compassion and concern. He can enjoy portrayals of violence against women of colour without any pangs of conscience because he's encouraged by the pornographers to believe that he's just observing the "natural" ways of an "alien" and "less civilized" culture.

Along the continuum from *Playboy* to "snuff" are all sorts of other permutations including "dress-me-down" pornography which displays nearly nude female models who may or may not be 18 years of age wearing pigtails and bobby socks, and clutching teddy bears. This type of pornography is intended to appeal to pedophiles. It flourishes here because it provides a way of getting around the Canadian prohibition against making or

distributing pornography that uses actual children. A "dress-me-down" magazine entitled *Young and Lonely* (No. 23, April 1985, London Enterprises Limited, Van Nuys, California) contained the following "editorial":

Young and Lonely is a curious title and deserves a moment of examination before we bring on the bimbos themselves. What do we mean by that epithet? How do we know?

That the five foxes undraped and examined for your fantasizing pleasure are young is obvious. This is the realm of pert buttocks, prime tits and pristine pussies... not wrinkles, sags and varicose veins! But why should lovely lassies like these ever be lonely? Surely

there are studs aplenty just waiting to fill their holes with hot, hard cocks!

Well, the truth is that beauty and youth are a pretty intimidating combination. Studies have shown how many lovely women are lonely indeed because men naturally assume their own rejection by such specimens of feminine perfection! The fault, dear reader, lies not in our bitches but in ourselves that we are horny!

So go on and approach the cute pieces of crumpet you see in the world. Explore the possibilities for your mutual enjoyment of the good things in life and sex together! Exploring the sexual attitudes of our young and lonely ladies will help you to know where to begin,

but the next move is yours!

Go for it! You deserve a hot young woman to sexually amaze and craze you tonight! And you'll be making a young and lonely lady feel not so lonely after all!

This magazine and others of its ilk are clearly encouraging men to see young girls as appropriate sexual objects and a text like the one above unabashedly projects the reader's desires onto the females in the photographs, absolving the reader of all responsibility for his appetites. The publisher of *Young and Lonely* includes, among publication details, the statement that "[t]his magazine is published in the interest of educating and informing the adult public on the various forms and means of sexual expression." It's obvious that the consumer of such a magazine is being encouraged to act on his impulses with *real* young girls.

Other permutations along the pornographic continuum include material that features women having sex with animals, people eating, drinking or wallowing in their own urine or feces, nude pregnant or lactating women and an incredible range of magazines and videos that focus on fetishized body parts, body types or accessories.

There are a whole series of magazines devoted entirely to the graphic display of black women's breasts or Oriental women's buttocks or Native women's legs (to name only a few) and still others that focus exclusively on, for example, shaved genitals or high heels or rubber clothing.

All of the material described so far is on the *visible* continuum — that is, you can get some of it in almost any variety store in Canada. The rest can be had in porn shops in larger centres or by mail from various distributors in Canada and the United States.

Unfortunately, there is also an invisible pornographic continuum. Child pornography is an underground phenomenon in Canada. It's illegal to produce or distribute pornographic images of real children in this country, but there's no law against possessing such images. Consequently there's a flourishing underground traffic in homemade child pornography.

Real-life children are recruited, bought, coerced, lied to, drugged, beaten and imprisoned in the making of these materi-



Irene Kindness, "She Walks Alone II" (1990). Exhibited in Healing Images, Toronto.

als just as real-live women are routinely used and abused in order to meet the ever-increasing demand for new flesh in adult porn.

Among themselves, pedophiles who are part of pedophile rings "trade" pictures of children being raped and assaulted and because no money changes hands, no charges can be laid. Only if police can prove that a pedophile snapped the shutter or aimed the camera can they lay a charge.

As such, the police in Canada know of some quite outwardly respectable men who are pedophiles, who own sizeable collections of child pornography, who have unimpeded access to children via their professions, who entice or coerce children into prostitution or making pornography and whom no law in Canada can touch unless they can be caught red-handed. Think about that the next time someone blithely remarks that censorship is worse than pornography. Worse for whom?

There's an incredible variety of pornographic material available on both the open and the underground markets in Canada today. But despite the stunning variety of images, there's really only one message and it is that inequality is sexy.

Pornography, like all mass media, is a conservative force, supportive of the status quo. Pornography reinforces the cultural myth that males and females are made of entirely different stuff and that male dominance is natural and inevitable.

Pornography couples male sexuality with aggression. By linking sexual pleasure with images of dominance and the control of "inferior" others, pornography reinforces the aggressive male sexuality that it portrays — with serious consequences for women and children both in the home and outside it.

The coupling of male sexuality can be blatant: women with pierced genitals and nipples, bound, gagged and hanging from meathooks, at the mercy of a male torturer. Or it can be subtle: a small silver handgun on a night-table "accidentally" pointing at a woman's head in an air-brushed bedroom scene from *Playboy*.

It's often rather obviously present in mainstream movies but in ways that don't violate existing laws. *The Canadian Criminal Code* talks about obscenity, not pornography, describing it as the undue exploitation of sex or of sex in combination with one or more of crime, cruelty, horror

or violence. The interminably repeated scenario in many of the popular slasher films (*Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm St.*) goes like this: boy and girl have torrid sex, and then one of them (usually the girl) is immediately hacked to death by the slasher.

Films that show the sex and the murder happening simultaneously would contravene the provisions of the criminal code. So the filmmakers obligingly separate the two events by a few frames. This allows films to reach theatres uncut where their effect on the audience is about the same as it would have been if the sex and the murder had taken place together.

Here's why. A teenage boy watches the rather graphic sex scene and, understandably, he's turned on. The scene reaches a climax but the boy doesn't and while he's still feeling aroused, there's a gruesome murder. Picture for a moment the millions of teenage boys who had erections while Freddy slashed his female victims to bits — who had erections not because they had already learned to be turned on to violence, but because the film had set them up to experience arousal just prior to the violence.

How many times must a "normal" kid have that link made for him before he begins to make it himself and to respond sexually in an automatic way to depictions of violence against women? It's a question we, as a society, have an obligation to ask.

There are many movies, both mainstream and not, that show a woman initially protesting a rape and then turning into a wild slobbering nymphomaniac as she is raped. This type of scenario reinforces the notion that rape is not an offence, that women aren't hurt by rape, even that women *want* to be raped.

An alarming percentage of porn users take pornographic messages about women quite literally. Bill Marshall, a research psychologist at Queen's University, who recently produced "A Summary of the Evidence of the Harmful Effects of Pornography," says studies have shown that somewhere between 25 and 35 per cent of the general male population is negatively affected by viewing pornography.

Marshall includes among the negative consequences of viewing pornography an increased likelihood of trying to copy acts seen in pornography and significant attitudinal and behavioural changes. As a

result of exposure, a significant percentage of males come to believe that women are not and should not be the equals of men in any way, that violence enacted against women is acceptable, that women's behaviour is the primary cause of rape, that women can easily resist rape if they try, that rape doesn't really traumatize women, and that men who rape should not be treated harshly, among other things.

Marshall goes on to say that these are the very same attitudes that rapists hold. Furthermore, he states that the same 25-35 per cent of the male population whose attitudes are likely to be changed through exposure to pornography also reports some proclivity to actually rape a woman.

Marshall has documented that sex offenders generally have much higher rates of exposure to pornography than non-offenders. We know that some rapists and child molesters use pornography to excite themselves immediately prior to their crimes and even *during* the actual assaults. In Toronto, Barbara Schliker's body was found strewn with the pornography her murderer had used prior to assaulting and killing her.

Offenders, particularly child rapists and molesters, frequently make remarks to their victims citing pornography as a justification for their crimes.

In a study of 105 women staying in battered women's shelters in Ontario, 25 per cent of the women reported being forced to perform acts their partners had seen in pornography. All of these women described these experiences as dehumanizing.

Pornography is the ideology of a culture that allows rape, wife-battering, incest, sexual harassment and women's economic inequality to flourish. It is the most graphic representation of the attitude that makes all of these abuses, and more, possible.

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In the next issue of CWS/cf, Kerr will focus on what can be done, through policy, legislation and activism, to get rid of violent and degrading pornography.