

PORNOGRAPHY AS GYNOCIDAL PROPAGANDA

LEAH FRITZ

To many people pornography is a trivial matter. It was to me until a few years ago. Some even see its permissibility and pervasiveness in our society as a breakthrough in freedom. They are alarmed at the idea of any measures to suppress it as somehow a step toward fascism. I shared that feeling, at least on an intellectual level, until about three years ago when a film called "Snuff" appeared in Times Square with advertising implying it was the photographic record of the real torture and murder of a woman, done for profit. Many of you may remember the slogan on the marquee of the National Theater: "The film that could only be made in South America . . . where life is *CHEAP!*"

Long before that film I had become aware that I could no longer be cheerful about pornography, but I had put it in the same category as demeaning advertising: you know, the women who squeeze the toilet paper or, recently, the woman who finds liberation in an expensive perfume. Stupid and slanderous, and part and parcel of the whole misogynistic trip—but there were more pressing and more positive matters for women to put their energy into, like getting job opportunities, maintaining their right to abortions, setting up alternatives for battered wives, preventing rape—the lot. And each of those things had once-upon-a-time seemed trivial, although it's hard now to remember how they could have seemed so, they were all so obviously matters of life and death.

Well, more and more we learn that all evils are connected, but unfortunately their nature is not to form a fabric where one strand is pulled and the whole thing falls apart. Their nature is more like that of the octopus who squirts ink in your eyes so that you cannot find his vulnerable center, and you cut off the enveloping tentacles in vain.

I will let that murky metaphor go and tell you something of my own too-intimate past connection with pornography. In 1968, I was up to my ears in what we called the "movement," or the "new left." At that time I was writing for a number of underground publications, several of which are long dead. One of them was the New York *Free Press*, in which I wrote about the school struggles in Harlem, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, etc. The managing editor of the *Free Press*, Jim Buckley, dropped around one day to pick up a manuscript. He told me that he and Al Goldstein were about to embark on a new venture, a no-holds-barred publication about sex, an organ of the sexual revolution.

I was all for it! It seemed at last we'd got the head of the octopus, sexual repression. (Ah Freud, ah mores!) The name of the publication was *Screw*, and I volunteered to write the "women's page." I wrote for *Screw* for almost a year, thinking it was all for the movement, for free speech, for a cleaner appreciation of our homely bodies and their uses. I guess I was so naive because I was paid so little: ten dollars for the first article; fifty dollars for the last. Those were hardly the wages of sin!

The pictorial and verbal insults directed at women in *Screw's* pages made me uncomfortable, but after all, the purpose of the newspaper was to make *everyone* uncomfortable. This was the age of Lenny Bruce. And I could, and did, give some verbal abuse in return—all in the name of humor. Oh, yes—I was in there proving women have a sense of humor *too*. I used my wit to attack political and religious institutions as well as sexual hypocrisy—but I didn't yet know how to attack the patriarchy, the big daddy of them all. I didn't know that I was still using its language and doing its business to bring in a profit. (A large profit, as it was to turn out, in spite of the fact that I was paid on the movement scale.) I didn't fully realize either, because I received a fair amount of mail (and not all of it the please-shit-in-my-face variety characteristic of masculine masochism), that my precious Swiftian observations just served, the editors hoped, to give the publication some socially redeeming value and were totally ignored by the mass of so-called readers who bought it for the pictures. (Goldstein used the banner of political protest to hide his simple profiteering. *What* protest? He called *Screw* an empire and meant it to be. He apparently wanted to become another William Randolph Hearst.) Ironically, the first issue of *Screw* to be busted *did* contain political satire—mine!

By and by I stopped writing for the paper, when Goldstein offered me a publication of my own—a feminist newspaper with no strings attached, he said, except that the *Screw* empire would control the money and the—ahem—art work, and Goldstein would get to write a column now and then. I was told I would soon be wearing diamonds and furs.

But by then I understood that feminism would require another sort of language than the words Goldstein would sponsor, another sort of picture than those his "artists" were capable of rendering. I turned down his offer. Goldstein called me a loser.

I called him Adolf Hitler, in a letter to *Screw* which he published. Neither of us believed I meant it literally, and I didn't. But it was interesting that I chose Hitler for my parting epithet, because I was soon to realize that pornography is nothing less than genocidal propaganda. And Hitler was, if not the inventor of such propaganda, certainly its most intentional and effective perpetrator—to date.

What does the genocidal propagandist do? I remember well some of the propaganda issued by our government when I was a child during the second world war. Particularly we were taught, in film after film, to look upon the Japanese as humorously subhuman, as well as evil. They were small, we were told. They had buck teeth—*all of them!* The Germans, on the other hand, with the exception of Hitler, were portrayed as handsome, if sadistic. While the war in Asia was clearly a war against the Japanese people, the war in Europe was just as clearly not against the German people but against one funny-looking little man whose death alone was its desired end. It's true that German cities were bombed heavily—too heavily—but our greatest atrocity was against the Japanese. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could not have been acceptable to the American people except for a relentless propaganda which portrayed the Japanese as laughable, and therefore expendable. The same racist propaganda was used against the Koreans and then against the Vietnamese.

Little people. "Gooks," in the vernacular. Ineffectual, disreputable. Therefore, worthy of genocide.

Of course, this is the way *women* have always been depicted. Small people, physically ineffectual, mentally defective—not worthy to be considered human. Playthings. Victims. A prop for the battle between the villain and the hero—sometimes not even that. The villain and hero can shake hands over the corpse of a "bad" woman, even as the male left and the male right shake hands over *Hustler*.

But hard-core pornography goes beyond war propaganda. It shows women's bodies in parts and emphasizes those parts. This creature is surely less than human, born solely for the pleasure of men. For consumption. The model's face is made up like a mask, devoid of personality. Her breasts are distended with silicones. The pornographers don't care how dangerous silicones may be to the life of the woman, how painful, how destructive to the possibility of nursing children. The model might be a flower a child carelessly plucks and destroys. She is, as Marilyn Monroe put it, a *thing*.

The murder of Sharon Tate brings into bitter focus a bizarre connection between pornography and violence. Her murderer became a folk-hero, and it is rumored that a film of the event was made to become a prized item on the underground porn circuit—perhaps the first real snuff film. Interestingly, her widower, Roman Polanski, was a director of movies portraying violence against women. Was there no connection between Polanski's movies and his wife's assassination? Not the connection Charles Manson made—that she was guilty of Polanski's money. Otherwise, why wouldn't Manson kill Polanski? It certainly isn't too far-fetched to guess that Sharon Tate died—many women die—because of the gynocidal propaganda in films by men like Polanski. It is hardly surprising that Polanski continued to make money in this genre and that he was later picked up as a child-molester.

More and more the media, in both so-called art films and cheapies—becomes openly sadistic toward women. And this is said by civil libertarians and male psychologists to be cathartic—while rape and murder statistics steadily rise, while women's civil rights increasingly are violated. Cathartic for what?

Manifestly, the market for violent pornography is *created*, the appetite for it is *cultivated*. The un-thought-out sexual revolution sired by the new left was co-opted and extended by the profiteers, and for once the left didn't oppose the capitalists. It bought the misogyny of Andy Warhol. It bought the misogyny of Charles Manson and the SLA and Eldridge Cleaver. It bought the misogyny of its very own entrepreneur, Paul Krassner. To perpetuate violent pornography against women is a goal which unites men of all political persuasions.

But suppose sadism *is* being purveyed as a cathartic. What is it intended to relieve men of? I can think of a number of reasons why it is being pushed at this time. One is that America recently lost a war. Men can't stand to lose, particularly Americans to "little men." They are being offered a cathartic, all right. Women are the cathartic. The blood of women will run to pay for the insult inflicted by "little men." After all, are not women little men?

Another reason is the consciousness of impending nuclear annihilation.

The present society faces a greater threat than confronted the Roman Empire or Imperial Russia or the Third Reich in their last days. There is no liberating force capable of bringing new hope after a nuclear disaster. The end of this society will very likely mean the end of complex life on this planet. And so the circuses have begun—to keep men from exploring this reality, to keep them from taking measures which might stop the enforced suicide in which we are all involved. The primeval envy of women, the evil men associate with their own sexual equipment and desires, is invoked and aggravated by the media to turn them violently against women—the nurturers of the planet—rather than against those who short-sightedly hope to profit from unlimited nuclear proliferation and the wanton assault on all elements supporting life.

The rise of feminism as a possible antidote to these evils is co-opted, corrupted, trivialized in the media in every possible way. At all costs, men are being turned away from looking toward their mothers and sisters for salvation, from asking the questions which might beget the answers to save their lives. At all costs, even their own deprivation of literacy, men are turned from looking inside themselves and finding there the deceptions which doom them. To hate women and to express that hatred through their sexuality is the only way men can be prevented from loving themselves enough to call a halt to their own annihilation. At end of the world, women are not only objects of submission, but totally expendable.

Against all the evidence of the effects of advertising and propaganda, however, it is still claimed by some that no one can say with conviction that pornography leads to abuses of women. Even if there were something to be said for this uncertainty as to cause and effect, even if all the films of women being raped, tortured, and murdered led to nothing but male masturbation as some advocates blithely claim (without regurgitating at the phantasmagoria male sexuality presumably requires to function), should women endure the indignity of pornography? What minority group would stand for such demeaning portrayals of its sacred humanity? After collaborating in our own betrayal by a male-directed “sexual revolution,” women are coming to understand that pornography is no more sexual than rape; that men in our society are not erotic: they get off on power. The only kind of relationships men can understand (and I say this knowing of exceptions) are those involving masters and slaves. Equality is, quite literally, bullshit as men define it. It always implies the slavery of women.

Far from destroying the first amendment, conscious women will describe its limits—and thus make it a less hypocritical gesture. At the moment it can easily be destroyed because it is an absolute abstraction, and all absolutes lead to absurdity. A silly question is often raised in political philosophy: whether we are to be ruled by laws or by men. Women can tell you that we have always been ruled by men’s laws, interpreted by men, and the failure of the Bill of Rights to come to terms with abuses against the bodies and souls of women is the logical outcome.

Eventually, perhaps, we will acknowledge that we must be ruled by women and men, by ourselves, by our reason and by our sensibility. Eventu-

ally, perhaps, we will care for each other and won't be hell-bent on getting one-up. And then there will no longer be a pseudo-need for pornography, for prostitution, for rape, for murder—for any of the large and small crimes against women men consider natural now.

This, of course, is never likely to happen, but whether it does or not, women will stop the degradation of pornography. I wish it were trivial. It isn't.

