



Pornography:

Beyond the
Sizzle

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Pornography: Beyond the Sizzle

M. L. Tan

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Late in 1999 we witnessed the heated debates over local "bold" films and the attacks on the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) for allowing these films. One group even went to the extent of suing the MTRCB for "obliterating the moral fibers (sic) and values". All kinds of claims have been made about pornography's effects, including adultery, rape and incest. There have also been calls for a return to censorship, which would cut out "obscene" portions of a film. (Under the present system, the MTRCB only classifies films, suggesting which ones should be restricted to adults only, or to younger people with parental guidance, or for general patronage.)

The debates often shed more heat than light. Few people are asking what exactly is pornography and even fewer people seem to be interested in looking at the voluminous research that has been conducted on pornography's effects.

In this issue of Health Alert, we summarize the most important findings about pornography in order to encourage a more balanced view of the issue. Many Filipinos don't really care too much about the debates because, rightly so, they see it as another political game. But pornography is an important issue because it is connected as well with issues about gender and sexuality.

What is pornography?

First we need to define pornography. This is not easy. Definitions of pornography are often tied to vague definitions of pornography and immorality. Article 201 of the Philippines' Revised Penal Code has a long but vague list of "offenses against decency and good customs". Literature, plays, live shows and films are considered to be offensive to "decency and good customs" if they:

- (a) glorify criminals or condone crimes;
- (b) serve no other purpose but to satisfy the market for violence, lust or pornography;
- (c) offend any race or religion;
- (d) tend to abet traffic in and use of prohibited drugs; and
- (e) are contrary to law, public order, morals, good customs, established policies, lawful orders, decrees and edicts.

We see that the definitions of what is "indecent" can be quite broad, open to many interpretations. Even the President falls into this trap of vague definitions when he issued an order to the national police to to seize "all materials that gratuitously display frontal nudity or even outright sexual acts. . ."

The definitions of what is "decent" or not change over time. Kissing scenes used to be considered scandalous but are now considered ordinary. Until last year, films could show one female breast but not two. The censors were also bent on banning "pumping scenes".

Most dictionaries will define pornography as material that is sexually arousing. But that, too, can be problematic because different people have, to use a term from psychologists' research, different "excitatory potential". Younger

people are generally more easily aroused than older ones, while men, as many studies have shown, are more easily stimulated by visual materials than women. The studies also show that less sexually explicit materials may sometimes be more arousing than those that are blatantly so.

The debate over what is obscene or not can just go on and on. For purposes of our discussion here, we can tentatively define pornography as materials — verbal or visual, appearing in print, on radio or television — that have the potential for sexual arousal. If sexual arousal in itself is considered bad, then there is no more room for discussion.

We need to ask if pornographic materials cause harm to individuals and communities, particularly by causing rape and sexual crime. This point is important because the Supreme Court decided a few years ago that prior censorship is not warranted when there is no "clear and present" danger posed to the community.

Does pornography cause rape and sexual crime?

Let's tackle the claim that pornography causes rape and sexual crime. Sometime during the debates on pornography, a politician appeared on television claiming, as "proof" that pornography causes rape, that "most" Filipino sexual offenders in prison "like" pornography. It is not clear what he meant by "most" and "like" and what the pornographic materials were. Similarly, one American anti-porn website posts a personal testimony, allegedly from a convicted rapist who claims he went out and raped a woman after watching pornographic film in a shop.

All those anecdotes do not prove anything. To prove that pornography leads to sex crimes, you have to explain why there are hundreds of thousands of other people who read pornographic magazines or watch X-rated films but do not become sex criminals.

In the 1970s, the US Commission on Obscenity and Pornography published nine volumes of technical reports on the topic. The overall conclusion was that it was difficult to demonstrate that pornography had any substantial effect on the occurrence of sexual crimes. In 1979 the British Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship did another study and came up with conclusions similar to those of the Americans.

Human behavior is too complex to be explained through monocausal theories. The incidence of rape dropped in Denmark after they legalized pornography, but that fact isn't being used either to claim that pornography reduces rape. Our behavior is shaped by attitudes and values acquired at home and with peer groups. These attitudes do not change by viewing one pornographic film, or even a succession of X-rated material. If indeed pornography mechanically incites people to sexual crime then the censors themselves would be in dire danger.

What causes rape?

This is not the place to go into a long discussion of rape and its causes. But it is important to bring out a few of the basic facts about rape. The studies over the last 50 years show that sex crimes are committed by people who have suffered

violence and sexual abuse in their childhood, usually inflicted by family members. Moreover, and this is important, the studies show a correlation between sexual crime and sexual repression in childhood and adolescence.

Men who rape have a low regard for women, and that low regard often comes from repression, including moralistic attitudes. If a boy is raised into believing women are dangerous seductresses, these ideas can become transformed into misogyny or a hatred of women. These distorted religious values may even create the justification for rape: a woman in a short skirt, out at night, is seen as "immoral" and therefore "deserve" to be raped.

Rape is also more likely to occur in societies where women are considered as male property. This includes countries like the Philippines, where macho values are stretched to include notions that a man has sexual rights over all females, sometimes including his own daughters. The reasons for rape are often based on social values, including those that we uphold as "sacred". A person raised with distorted values about gender relations will rape, with or without exposure to pornography.

Centerfold Syndrome

Some people fear pornography claiming that the frequent explicit portrayal of sex trivializes it, meaning people then take sex for granted. Actually, research on pornography shows a different kind of desensitization. Repeated exposure to pornography actually leads, for most people, to a decrease in interest. Most people can take only so much of pornography, especially the type you get in those mindless, plot-less X-rated videos.

Addiction to pornography does exist, and can be a problem, but the addiction is to pornography itself and the danger lies more in the creation of unrealistic fantasy worlds rather than in men incited to go out and rape. The problem is what American psychologist Gary Brooks calls the "centerfold syndrome", which he described in a book of the same title with five principal "symptoms" that affect even consumers of "soft-core" pornography (e.g., Playboy or Penthouse magazines and videos):

- ❧ Voyeurism: a kind of peeping Tom complex (*mamboboso*), an obsession with visual stimulation.
- ❧ Objectification: an attitude where women are objects rated by size, shape and harmony of body parts. Centerfold models are held up as the desirable standard for sizes and shapes (e.g., a "coca-cola" figure). Desire is centered on body parts, such as women's breasts, rather than the person.
- ❧ Validation: the need to validate masculinity through beautiful and physically "perfect" women. Men unable to attain the "perfect" dream woman then feel cheated or unmanly.
- ❧ Trophyism: the idea that women are collectibles to show off to the world. Like trophies, women become property of the winner, a symbol of accomplishment and self-worth.
- ❧ Fear of true intimacy: This is actually the result of voyeurism, objectification, validation and trophyism. An obsession with pornography and satisfying sexual

needs means the men do not give time for developing relationships in the "real world", where sensuality and intimacy are as important as sexual gratification.

Brooks was writing mainly about heterosexual situations, i.e., men consuming pornography with women's images, but some of Brooks' observations can apply as well to gay pornography. The dangers of pornography would lie mainly in objectification and the inability to develop intimacy. Centerfolds and pornography do not in themselves create objectification, or a flight from sexual responsibility; rather, they reinforce existing social norms of male conquest and gratification. As the expression goes, "centerfolds don't talk back." Men will fantasize not just over "perfect" physical attributes but also over the docility and submission that centerfold models project.

Some feminists have expanded on this concept of the centerfold syndrome to say that pornography is a form of sexual violence because it debases women. They also say some of the pornographic films show rape scenes with hints that women actually want to be raped.

In reality, many of the X-rated films do not have such themes of female submission — they simply depict scene after scene with sexual intercourse. (In fact, in many western pornographic films, a popular fantasy genre is having a "dominatrix", a woman who is sexually dominating.) The controversial themes of rape appear more often in mainstream films, meaning those that are not X-rated. In fact, there is a strong tendency with local television to depict rape in a comic fashion, or in ways suggesting that women want to be raped. Local television also tends to

show more scenes where women are physically abused. If we are truly concerned about violence against women, then we should be campaigning to have local television come up with more responsible programming.

Returning to the point about the centerfold syndrome, feminists do have reason to be upset about the way women are depicted in bold films and magazines. Most local tabloids are sold using "crime and cleavage": news about violent crimes, including rape, interspersed with pictures of nude or semi-nude women. Pornography turns women into sexual objects for men, their very existence defined in terms of male desire.

Yet, it can be argued that it is not just pornography that objectifies women. Many "wholesome" magazines and newspapers feature photographs, advertisements, and articles that objectify or debase women. For more than a year, one drug company promoted its vitamin product Pharmaton by showing a man complaining that he has bought his wife all kinds of gifts and taken her on trips abroad but that she still doesn't appreciate him. He asks his friend what he does to satisfy his wife and the man, smiling, pulls out his Pharmaton and says it costs only P20 a day.

Women are turned into passive objects, such as in advertisements for shampoos that tell women they have to have long hair (brushed 100 times) for their men, or portrayed as demanding persons with only physical needs as in the Pharmaton ad. A British group, Feminists Against Censorship, argue that instead of concentrating on pornography, "we should criticise images of women in soap operas, women's magazines and fashion photographs, because more people see them and because they are thought of as part of 'real life' whilst everyone knows that pornography is a fantasy world."

We see then that the outcry against pornography can distort our priorities, obscuring other pressing social issues. Anti-pornography crusades ride on an unwarranted fear of so-called harmful effects of pornography. Pornography is a dead issue in the west, not because westerners are less moral than we are but because, quite simply, they've realized that the fears we have of pornography are often unwarranted.

What's bad about bold?

If pornography isn't that harmful, then why is there such an outcry against local bold films? One reason is that many people protest so-called bold films without actually having seen them. It's presumed the films feature non-stop sexual intercourse and frontal nudity. In reality, the films are actually mild, compared to some of the "soft-porn" Playboy films you can buy even in department stores. The colonial mentality is all too evident here — foreign films can be sexually explicit but not local ones.

Our bold films imitate life, rather than the other way around. For the longest time, we tolerated Dolphy films like *Facifica Falayfay* that parodied the *bakla*, presenting him as entertaining and fun, but as soon as more serious gay films emerged, daring to give a sexual persona to the homosexual, people protested. In the same way, bold films disturb more conservative people because the women in the film often go through a transformation, from a passive martyr to a fighter, one in control of her sexuality, and of men. *Ligaya ang Itawag mo sa Akin* is an example of such a film, which was first banned by the censors.

The "bold" films of directors like Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal and Carlos Seguion-Reyna have created space so

Filipinos could discuss the realities of Filipino sexuality, including previously taboo issues such as prostitution and, yes, rape itself. The films showed the rich and sensual variety — yes, to use the cliché, of the good and the bad and the ugly in Filipino sexualities.

If the films cause uneasiness, it is because some of them probe into the personal, into themes such as sexual obsession which, like it or not, is part of our psyche. Not only that, these so-called erotic films were also important in tweaking society's hypocrisy and prejudice. To cite just one example, *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* exposed the small town hypocrisies — including religious prejudice — surrounding adultery, abortion, all that framing a young boy's coming of age.

No to censorship

This is not to say all "bold" films promote "social consciousness". A lot of them rightly deserve the trash can but censoring such films is not the solution. Censorship presumes Filipinos are not mature enough to decide for themselves when in fact censorship itself contributes to this immaturity. People learn to be responsible by being given responsibilities, not by having other people decide for them.

Anti-obscenity campaigns and calls for censorship often have more to do with politics than morality. In the past, anti-obscenity laws were used to ban the works of such literary giants as Honore Balzac, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, as well as the father of modern psychiatry, Sigmund Freud. Here at home, Marcos tolerated bomba films because they kept Filipinos' minds off revolution but his censors cracked down when they realized the films were also depicting a seamy side of Marcos' New Society.

If people find the MTRCB too lax, then they have every right to protest, but it is dishonest and unfair to blame the MTRCB, bold films or even pornography for our social problems. Films do not promote promiscuity and adultery; role models do. Films do not promote rape; sexual repression does.

If we want to prevent rape and incest, we should start questioning our so-called traditional values, including this irrational fear of pornography. Certainly, we have to fight the objectification of women (and men) in pornography, but censorship is not the solution. Educating our young to be sexually aware and responsible is the best safeguard against sexual crime.

Eventually, we have to accept, too, that erotic films can be good and healthy, that quite often they are viewed as comedy and satire rather than lewdness and lasciviousness that dirty minds interpret them to be. Other films force us to confront the problems of social hypocrisy and prejudice when it comes to matters of sexuality.

The anti-pornography crusades often degenerate into mindless political gimmickry. During one anti-pornography rally, former censors head Manuel Morato suggested that members of the MTRCB should be raped. The rallyists applauded wildly. This says a lot about the minds of the anti-pornography crusaders. Like some of the trashy bomba films, the cast of characters and what resembles a story line all become too predictable. There lies obscenity — arousal without passion or conviction, a wagging of tongues dismembered from the the brain, as mechanical as the bored pumping in X-rated videos.

Discussion Guide

1. What is "obscene"? (Use local terms like *bastos*, *malaswa*.) Is nudity alone, or scenes showing sexual intercourse, enough to make a scene "bastos"?
2. Is Filipino culture truly "conservative", i.e., do people fear nudity? Make a survey of homes and sari-sari stores and look at the calendars people put up. If the calendars show nude or semi-nude celebrities, does it mean the owner of the home or the sari-sari store is immoral?
3. Arrange for a session to screen some of the "bold" films. (Even the senators have been doing this so we should follow their footsteps.) Are the "bold" films as "bold" as you expected them to be?
4. After watching some of these bold films, ask viewers, especially the men, about the effects the films had on them. Were they aroused? shocked? angered? bored? What scenes were particularly striking and why were they striking?
5. Get some "bold" magazines and tabloids and use these for discussing the Centerfold Syndrome. What do we mean by objectification here? Can males also be objectified? Why or why not? How do the models pose? What are the messages in the posing? Compare the models' posing with those who appear in advertisements in "non-bold" magazines.

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We are resuming Health Alert, which we published from 1985 to 1996, on a limited basis, as an occasional publication focusing on current burning issues. Each issue presents important facts and figures from scientific research and then presents references and a discussion guide for organizations that want to probe more deeply into the issues. These publications are intended to stimulate a more critical analysis of our health issues.

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9 Cabanatuan Rd. Philam Homes,
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