

Studies on Sex and Violence

*Why Pornography?
Models of Functions and Effects*

by Neil M. Malamuth and Victoria Billings

Pornography according to Marxist, feminist, and other viewpoints, illustrated by analyses of the Story of O.

In this article we will discuss several ways in which the role of pornography in the lives of individuals as well as within society has been formulated in recent research and writing. As will be seen from the discussion, the issue of pornography casts into strong relief questions of the moral values, the rights and privacy of the individual, and the place of sex in the maintenance and stability of society and the status quo. Because the issue cuts to the heart of human relations as well as social relations, the models of pornography often derive from more encompassing theories of society and behavior. To anchor these more abstract formulations of the role of pornography to the material under discussion, we have chosen to follow the explication of each with an illustration of how this explanation would be applied to a famous and controversial pornographic novel—the *Story of O* (23). In each case we use what might be called a “pure” explication of events in the story according to a particular viewpoint. In actuality, of course, few would accept a single explication, but it is hoped that the examples will illustrate more vividly the strongest voices for each view.

Before proceeding to describe the various viewpoints on pornography, it is necessary to more specifically indicate what we mean by this term. Numerous attempts have been made to define pornography and to distinguish it from what some consider its more acceptable form—

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"erotica." Etymologically, the word pornography comes from the Greek "writings of prostitutes" (*porne* = prostitute and *graphein* = to write). In recent definitions, material has been classified as pornography when the producer's intent is to elicit erotic responses from the consumer (e.g., 13), when it sexually arouses the consumer (e.g., 6, p. 4), or when women characters are degraded or demeaned (16). Pornography has been distinguished from erotica depending upon whether the material portrays unequal or equal power in sexual relations (28).

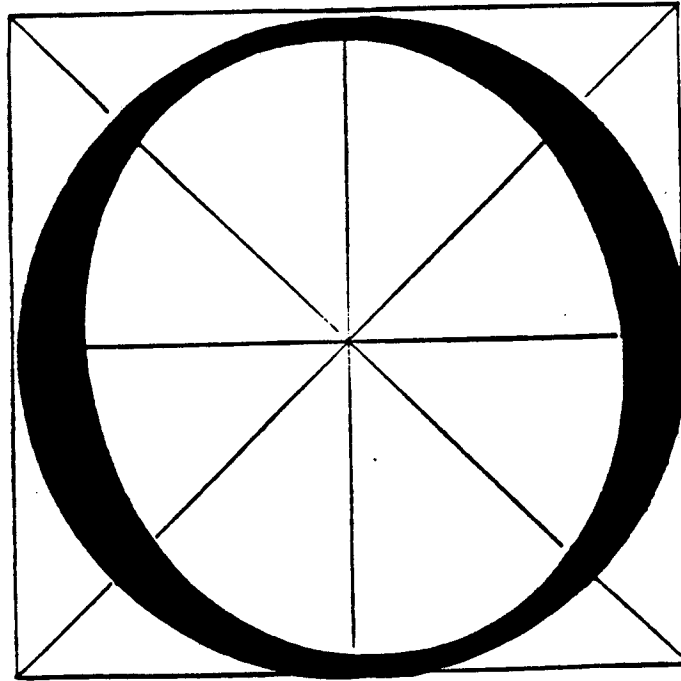
As various writers have noted (e.g., 11), however, definitions and distinctions based on intents or projected effects make it difficult to construct scientific operational definitions. At the same time, we do recognize the potential for developing meaningful conceptual distinctions between pornography and erotica (28). Here we will adopt Smith's (25) suggestion to use the term pornography without any pejorative meaning to refer to material that is sexually explicit in referring to or visually depicting male and female anatomy.

The lack of a precise definition has not impeded empirical work on the functions and effects of pornography, especially since the 1970 Presidential Commission on Pornography and Obscenity and, more vigorously, in the early 1980s. Much of the empirical work to date has been "problem" oriented, and much of the more popular writing more polemical, with impassioned defenses and condemnations of what have been projected as the functions and effects of pornography. These varied explanations for the role of pornography testify to the complexity of the phenomenon.

Pornography has been seen as having beneficial effects on the individual in the realm of fantasy, sex education, and artistic expression.

According to numerous writers (see, e.g., 8, 12), pornography is essentially communication relating to sexuality. As such, it is considered to be a natural result of the fact that humans are sexual beings and to have no discernible negative effects. Pornography using current media, such as magazines and movies, is seen as a modern version of sexual expressions manifested throughout history in paintings, sculpture, drawings, and graphics of various types. Thus, historical, and by extension current, attempts to curtail the content and/or distribution of pornography are perceived as reflecting an antisexual attitude on the part of a society that fears that greater availability of sexual communications would lessen restrictions on the free expression of sexuality.

Some of those who see pornography as sexual communication interpret its function in light of consumers' needs. Accordingly, pornography affects only the realm of fantasy (e.g., 8) or provides desirable information often lacking in many people's sex education (e.g., 31). For example,



in emphasizing the view that pornography is limited to the fantasy world, Gagnon (8, p. 357) writes:

Pornography is fantasy sex, consumed by people who know it is fantasy. Few adults go to pornographic movies or read pornographic books because they want sex instruction; they go or read because they want to participate in a fantasy experience. In the fantasy world of the book or theater they are released from responsibility from the realness of life. Unlike real life they do not have to perform or succeed, they are having a momentary and pleasant escape from daily constraints, from sexual victory or defeat.

Wilson (31) contends that pornography not only has no negative effects, but that it may have important positive instructional functions. (It may be of interest to note that Wilson was the director of research for the 1980 Presidential Commission on Pornography and Obscenity.) He points out that survey and clinical data show that close to half of North American married couples have significant sexual problems, with about 20 percent of survey respondents rating their present sex lives as unsatisfactory. Moreover, the principal sources of such dissatisfaction as well as clinical sexual problems appear to stem from lack of sex information, general anxiety about sex, and inability to communicate freely with one's partner about sex. Wilson indicates that surveys (e.g., 1) show that some men and women report that exposure to pornography provided them with sex information, reduced their sexual inhibitions,

increased their willingness to discuss sex with others, caused them to try "new things," and generally improved their sexual relationship. Therefore, concludes Wilson, pornography "not only can but does help to prevent sex problems" (p. 176). Pornography's usefulness in the treatment of existing sexual problems has been suggested by others (e.g., 10, 32).

A sexual communication interpretation of O. From the first scene of the novel, when O undresses in the car at the instruction of a stranger, the basic purpose of the novel is clear—to sexually arouse the reader and to satisfy curiosity about sexual practices that are often labeled as abnormal. Some of the sex acts may be animalistic and violent, but they can be understood as exaggerations of sexual tendencies that exist in nature. The story is just that—a fiction—that merely triggers sexual thoughts that are not normally acted out. The *Story of O* may even be sexually liberating because O chooses her own pleasure over what other persons think she "should" consider pleasurable. What persons do with their sex lives should not be confused with politics.

Some individuals who see beneficial individual effects of pornography emphasize its aesthetic and artistic functions and aspects. Pornography, in this view, is a harmless or even a socially beneficial form of artistic self-expression that creates a fantasy world built about sexual interest (3, 20). For example, Michelson (20, p. 5) states that

in whatever art form, pornography documents man's archetypal concern with sexuality. . . pornography is the private confrontation of individual psyche with its sexual needs. The larger cultural engagement with pornography is the public confrontation with archetypal—and usually subliminal—sexual impulses. Pornography then, for better or for worse, is the imaginative record of man's sexual will.

Some proponents of the artistic function of pornography have drawn sharp distinctions between what they consider artistic erotica or erotically realistic art as opposed to pornography. For example, Kronhausen and Kronhausen (15) describe pornography as primarily intended to arouse the viewer or reader by depicting sexual relations in a context where conventional standards are violated and the only feelings are those of lust and the release of sexual tensions. They see artistic erotica, in contrast, as depicting a fuller spectrum of human emotions related to sexuality.

An artistic interpretation of O. The *Story of O* transcends the banality of the vast majority of pornography as well as the simplicity

of propaganda. Socially or morally offensive aspects are part of its creator's artistic license to shock the reader and to develop literary themes in dramatic fashion. For example, O's struggle, through sex, to keep her identity and yet link herself to a man represents a more universal search for a sexual identity. The author shows originality in going beyond de Sade's equation of a woman's sexual surrender with liberation to connect surrender with happiness (26). By pushing the surrender of self to its furthest extremes, the author symbolically toys with her own destruction through her main character but, as an artist, retains control of her style and form.

A second explanation of the role of pornography for the individual stems from psychoanalytic theory.

For some psychoanalysts (see 29), pornography represents a sexual fantasy surrounding individual (but universal) developmental conflicts left over from childhood. It provides a repertoire of scripts to help the individual relieve and redesign these conflicts, with possible therapeutic effects. Accordingly, debasing and unconventional behavior in pornography is not propagandistic but rather a dramatic device testing social taboos, like incest or aggression against women, that invite, even require, challenge. Humiliation or pain experienced by the main character is not necessarily harmful but rather is a form of risk through which the character can emerge victorious.

Stoller, an exponent of this view, suggests that other techniques for gathering information about sex, such as societal, cultural, subcultural, familial, and biological data, do not address the subjective state in an individual's mind that produces sexual excitement (29). Erotic fantasy provides this framework but is difficult to study because fantasies are "protected by secrecy, disgust and repression, being powered more by secrecy, shame or hatred than by simple joyous lust" (p. 901). Pornography provides a means by which to look at individual excitement because through it persons "derive sexual stimulation by representations of sexual objects and erotic situations rather than the objects and situations themselves" (p. 901). This leads to fetishization, in which other characters are objectified in the script. Rather than objecting to this, Stoller maintains that "dehumanization" is a key therapeutic feature of the sexual fantasy script. By calling all women "bitches" or saying "all men are pigs," both men and women can ease their anxieties about each other.

Objectification is not a stage through which persons pass, however; sexual excitement is linked to this process for most persons, in part because of the hostility generated by sex roles. Stoller contends that

men's desire to possess women by force is a reaction to women's contradictory roles as withholders and providers of sex. By possessing, say, a photo of a nude woman, the man breaks a taboo about what is denied him, experiencing sexual excitement in the process. But, while pornography may arouse sexual excitement, it may also become too dangerous or, alternatively, too safe, for the individual who then falls from the tightrope of tension characterizing sexual excitement and psychological therapy.

A psychoanalytic interpretation of O. O's ordeal of sexual initiation at the chateau and later with Sir Stephen is a fantasy that reflects basic sexual psychodynamics. O's conflict is that, while she wants to give herself to sex and submit to lovers, she is unable to without the forceful intervention of men. But the men's control over her is prescribed by clear rules about why and when beatings take place and the pain is symbolic of her survival of a trauma that leads to happiness—a clear sign that psychological resolution has occurred. The story also encapsulates basic psychosexual dilemmas, such as the association of sex, punishment, and shame, and may, through O's public confession of her sexual submission, provide a scenario that allows readers to identify their own psychosexual secrets and to rework their life scripts.

*Pornography has been viewed by Marxist theorists
as manifesting the unequal power relations
between the dominant and subordinate classes.*

According to Marxist theorists, pornography functions as an ideological tool of the ruling class to keep the subordinate class in its place, a process having the effect of depreciating the life experience of the subordinate class as well as exploiting it economically. In his Marxist analysis, McNall (17) argues that men in most societies organize social relations to give themselves control not only of women's labor and hence of what they produce as workers but also of their reproduction and thus of their bodies and children. Pornography serves to "mystify" and therefore perpetuate this process by treating it as "natural" and part of the cosmic order, much as liberal capitalist ideology treats the market system, commoditization, and exchange as "natural" and "liberating" when in fact they are really a historically specific form of social domination.

McNall argues that both soft- and hard-core pornography present women as animalistic and in need of control. Women also are portrayed as easily accessible objects intended for possession. This allows men to

commoditize women and appropriate what women produce, undercompensating them or not compensating them at all. McNall explains:

Pornography "says" that sex is under male control. It is men who will decide when sex will take place and with whom. When in hard-core pornography. . . women engage in sex with a number of men, the text accompanying such photographs indicates it is the men who have arranged this. The insensible woman, no longer in control of her own reproductive system, emotions or by implication her work or her money, is standard fare in hard and soft core pornography. Child pornography, in fact, is precisely about the totally naive subject who is simply to be used. [Through pornography] sex becomes commodified not merely in the sense that it can be purchased, but also in the sense that one is dealing with a totally alienated being—one separated from, out of control of her body. Commodified sex can then be appropriated by men. Pornography is purchased sex and the implication for men is that all women can be bought (pp. 21–22).

McNall contends that treating sex as a commodity eliminates the customer's responsibility for the act by pretending that sex is freely put on the market and exchanged. The act of "looking" is a violation in which the woman is held responsible for posing and the viewer is absolved of responsibility for looking. Also, the false market analogy about sex equates pornography with egalitarian eroticism when in fact pornography depicts a relationship of domination. McNall subscribes to the ideological interpretation of pornography advanced by feminists (see below) but sees its function and effects in different terms. Pornography exploits women as a class, not a gender, and its most important effects are in the legitimation it provides for the whole system rather than any individual acts it provokes against women.

A Marxist interpretation of O. Ostensibly, the story is about O's achievement of happiness by submitting herself to sexual initiation, domination, and constant sexual activity. In fact, the plot is merely a device by which the male readers "explain" their control over those aspects of women that threaten their grip on production and reproduction. All sex is arranged by men or at the request of men. Corporal punishment and arbitrary beatings of O and other women are a constant ritual. Women are alienated from their own bodies, which are claimed by men. None of the men in the setting, including the valets, do any productive work other than to exploit the women. The description of the opening scene of the story, when O is asked to surrender her purse as she takes off her clothes, skillfully blends

exploitation with sex by making a coercive arrangement appear to be free choice. The author tells us, "nothing was keeping [O] enslaved save her self enslavement" (p. 112). What this "says" to the male readers is that women need and want to be exploited sexually and economically and men deserve to feed off them. Through such plots, pornography as an ideology of domination supports the economic exploitation of women.

Feminist theorists view the functions and effects of pornography within the larger context of male-female relations.

Feminist theorists (e.g., 2, 7, 21, 24, 28) view pornography as an important reflector and creator of male subjugation of women. While they do not object to the depiction of sexual content per se, feminists voice strong objections to what they perceive as the expression of antifemale ideology in pornography that portrays women in roles contrary to the goals of women's liberation. Instead, women are typically depicted as objects to be used to serve the pleasure of men; they are degraded, dehumanized, and frequently shown as both willing and unwilling victims of abusive and violent acts. In Brownmiller's words (2, p. 443):

Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access, not to free sensuality from moralistic or parental inhibition. The staple of porn will always be the naked female body, breasts and genitals exposed, because as man devised it, her naked body is the female's "shame," her private parts the private property of man, while his are the ancient, holy, universal, patriarchal instrument of his power, his rule by force over her. Pornography is the undiluted essence of antifemale propaganda.

The ideology of male domination and abuse of women is particularly expressed in the context of sexual themes because, according to feminists, in patriarchal societies, where men held the reins of power, the woman's worth was strongly linked to sexuality. Feminists contend that such "antifemale propaganda" within pornography has effects beyond the "fantasy realm" and that it supports similar attitudes and behavior toward women in reality, consequently contributing to a cultural climate in which acts of discrimination and violence against women are more likely to occur and to be accepted.

A feminist interpretation of O. O represents the symbolic annihilation of every woman, her very name reducing her to a reciprocal and a

cipher (5, p. 57). Her "initiation" into the chateau is a ritual by which men strip her of her identity and beat and rape her as if the acts have no moral and political significance. All women in the book appear as domestic and sexual slaves; even the lowest-ranking men—the valets—have the right to beat them because these men are servants, not slaves. The *Story of O* is not about sexual fulfillment, for O is denied the right to touch her own body or to freely choose her sexual partners. Instead, she is expected to be sexually ready at all times to spare men any inconvenience associated with trying to arouse her. In its essentials, the *Story of O* is no different from thousands of pornographic newspapers, magazines, and films that encourage men to treat women as sexual slaves, for their own happiness and the happiness of the women. The controversy over the possible female "authorship" of the novel (see 14) speaks perhaps more to defenders' need to feel that women do wish such enslavement than to the authorship per se.

The role of pornography within society has been formulated not only as representing intergroup conflicts but also as confronting basic social tenets of morality and behavior.

Various religious groups have objected to pornography because it depicts sexual activity that violates religious principles and rules. While this opposition has been based in some instances on very restrictive sexual views among certain religious groups, the position cannot be generally characterized as simply an "antisex-antipornography" stand, as various religious teachings do encourage sexuality and sexual expression. For example, the "Psalm of Psalms" in the Old Testament is considered to be erotic poetry; theologians have written frequently about sex, not merely to condemn, but sometimes to recommend certain relations and sexual positions (30); and so on. A major part of the religious objections to pornography, therefore, concerns moral issues related to sexuality and the fact that pornography generally depicts sex outside of approved realms (as when it portrays adultery and bestiality). Moreover, the explicit public depiction of sexual relations in pornography, even if it were portrayed within an "approved" context such as marriage, would be objectionable to most organized religions due to the belief that sexual matters need to be confined to private expressions within clearly defined boundaries. In addition, pornography is viewed as overemphasizing the importance of sex and sexual gratification, encouraging illicit fantasies and acts and thereby debasing sex and marriage (9). For example, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, before he became Pope John Paul II, wrote (33, p. 192):

Pornography has a marked tendency to accentuate the sexual element when reproducing the human body or human love in a work of art, with the object of inducing the reader or viewer to believe that sexual values are the only real values of the person, and that love is nothing more than the experience, individual or shared, of those values alone. This tendency is harmful, for it destroys the integral image of that important fragment of human reality which is love between man and woman.

In general, then, pornography is seen as contributing to immoral sexual behavior and to a change in the general moral climate that would decrease the authority and influence of moral institutions (22). This position also assumes that sexual relations have a profound effect on other important aspects of people's lives due to the relationship between sexuality and such areas as family structure and spiritual involvement. Pornography is therefore viewed as a potentially serious underminer of social connections and moral judgment.

A religious interpretation of O. Like all pornography, this novel removes sex from the bonds of human caring and morality and robs its characters of their dignity and humanity in the false name of sexual liberation. That O is stripped of all caring relationships and yet is portrayed as becoming ever happier is a contradiction inherent in pornography that explains why it fails not only morally, but aesthetically. From the comparison of O's original state to a nun's to the portrayal of her public exhibition in chains as transcendent, the plot resonates with religious connotations turned upside down in a debasement of humanity. Through such portrayals, the story works—like all pornography—to desensitize the reader, turn sex into a weapon, isolate humans from each other, and make a mockery of humanitarian and religious values.

*Many sociologists have tried to analyze
the function of pornography
as an agent of social change.*

Although sociologists do not refer to the absolute moral and behavioral standards invoked by religious views, they often make evaluative statements about its effects. Not surprisingly, the views have changed over time, reflecting the cultural milieu of the times in which they were first expressed.

For example, in a 1956 study, Sorokin (27) saw pornography as contributing to a revolution in sexual behavior (which he viewed in unfavorable terms) and saw the inclusion of more explicit and deviant

sex in pornography, as well as its proliferation in general, as undermining conventional institutions and social relations such as marriage and child rearing. Sorokin contends that pornography has negative effects because it disrupts the balance of emphasis between sex and other activities. His argument is based on a historical analysis of the relationship between the frequency of sexual themes in Western art and literature and a corresponding decrease in moral and spiritual themes during the past several hundred years. He suggests that the proliferation of pornography in the twentieth century will have disastrous long-term implications for society—a slight variation on the religious concern with moral breakdown.

Between 1960 and the mid-1970s, sociological writings on pornography retreated from the earlier position that pornography produced disruptive social changes. Nevertheless, social change and pornography were linked through the idea that pornography represents a cutting edge in the introduction of new ideas within a culture. For example, Zurcher and Kirkpatrick's (34) studies of antipornography crusades argued that opposition to pornography represented a resistance to a more tolerant, cosmopolitan, and urban society by small-town activists. The antipornography crusader's arguments about the dangers of sexually explicit movies were not taken at face value but were interpreted as a defense of a threat to the activists' status by the outside culture represented by the pornographic movies. Opposition to pornography hence was an attempt to stop social change, which was facilitated by pornography.

A sociological interpretation of O. Pornography, such as this novel, flouts conventional notions of social order to break through the psychological and social barriers that prevent social change, sex being one of the strongest preservers of the status quo. The novel can be read as a Gnostic attempt to strip away the inessential outer self, layer by layer, in order to lay bare the essential inner self. One by one, the heroine relinquishes the objects and activities in which her false earthly self is embodied—her clothes (she is stripped), her freedom of movement (she is bound), her vision (she is blindfolded), her power of speech (she is gagged), etc. Through the depredation of her "false" earthly self by sexual humiliations and even physical torture, she experiences the exaltation of her true spiritual self. *The Story of O* is a type of literature that is directed at believers but seeks to play a role in transforming the world.

The overwhelming impression left by this review of some of the positions taken on pornography is that there are highly diverse and complex functions and effects postulated by writers on this subject. To date, researchers have dealt with only a small portion of these possibili-

ties. Frequently the focus in research has been on rather limited questions, such as whether exposure to pornography affects sexual desires. The complexity of the pornography issue in social and political terms may have been brought into somewhat better focus by recent empirical studies that link exposure to pornographic material among men to an increase in the acceptance of violence against women (4, 18, 19). However, a great deal of additional research remains to be undertaken to address the complex issues raised by the models we have described.

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