

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Nobody -- with the possible exception of the pornographer who stands to make a financial killing peddling the stuff to people whose appetites are jaded to the point of satiety, and to stuff children, emotionally under-developed adults, -- is pro-pornography.

The mature, the intelligent, the decent -- and that's the majority of us -- believe it's unnecessary at best. At worst, it's degrading, immoral, and the world would be a better place without it.

Pornography is defined as licentious art or literature pandering to base appetite or desire, descriptive or suggestive of lewdness, that portrays erotic behavior designed to cause sexual excitement.

The United States Supreme Court laid down basic guidelines for determining what is and what is not obscenity. According to those guidelines, obscenity is to be judged by whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find the work, taken as a whole, appealing to the prurient interest; whether the work depicts or describes in a patently offensive way sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

At least we're in possession of a definition. How we determine the average person, decide which community standards are contemporary, and who is to decide if prurient interests are appealed to, is still a matter for the courts to decide.

That it is necessary to consider questionable literature "as a whole" rather than by its separate parts gives a wider margin to the purveyor of porn than might seem reasonable and consistent when compared to other government-set standards.

In the instance of automobile manufacturers, pollution control devices on cars must meet certain criteria. It's not sufficient that everything else on the car works perfectly; if the pollution control device isn't up to snuff, the manufacturer is obliged to recall the car and install a device that meets standards determined by the government.

The government protects citizens in other ways: by removing from the market red dye No. 2, previously used in lipstick, maraschino cherries, and other red-colored edibles; by banning cyclamates and saccharin; by phasing out fluorocarbon gas in aerosol sprays.

These things are a threat to our physical health, we're told. Who or what, pray tell, is doing anything to prevent our being bombarded from the cradle to the grave with ideas, pictures, movies, and literature that are a threat to our mental health?

Proponents of free speech, and I'm one of them (but not in this instance), maintain the only real and lasting damage one person can do to another is direct, immediate, and physical harm.

If no book, magazine, picture, sculpture, or play ever improved anyone, it might be argued that none ever corrupted anyone. Whatever is read, viewed, or experienced is part of the educational process. Whether we study the Bible, read Shakespeare, or watch an obscene movie, we learn.

Pornography harms us all for it promotes savagery, defiles sexuality, and carries the clear message that individuals are worthless. It reduces man to the level of an animal bent only upon satisfying his immediate carnal desires. It reduces women to a chattel, a toy to be played with and discarded upon the nearest trash heap.

Those who insist there is no difference between art and filth show disdain for the public's common sense and gross unfamiliarity with the world's works of art. They display gross ignorance of any personal nobility derived from sexual experience. Their argument that they "tell the truth about sex" robs the rest of us of natural sexual fulfillment without which sex can become degrading and mankind, no more than animals.

While man shares with animals the instinct and drive to procreate, man possesses the additional capacity to find a deeper meaning than physical gratification in sexual encounter. Just as no animal feels ashamed of its sexuality, none experiences exaltation -- except man. And man may experience either, or both, at different times. Much depends upon his viewpoint.

At the same time we examine the asserted rights of the pornographer to produce offensive material, we're entitled to examine the public's right to freedom from exposure to it.

It's argued, "No one is forced to read or look at obscenities." Freedom from trash, when it blares forth from every TV screen along with all other forms of violence, when its lurid headlines blaze on magazine and book covers, when even schoolbooks illustrate perversions, isn't freedom.

When children, adolescents, and adults learn the shocking ways resorted to by the uncivilized to exploit others for entertainment, people of all ages become inured to violence and exploitation. If obscene material is accepted as fit to be taught -- and if we don't reject it, we do accept it -- we reduce our aims to the lowest levels rather than raising them to the heights.

It's absurd to declare no line can be drawn between art and obscenity. The former makes us feel good about ourselves; the latter produces shame and robs us of our self-esteem.

Those who believe Justice should be so blind as to ignore what is offensive to the majority overlook the existence in law of standards of morality. Besides physical crimes like murder and theft, the law proscribes sharp business practices, unfair political campaigning, racial discrimination, and even misleading advertising.

The position that "some people will seek pornography whether or not it's legal" is comparable to the argument that "since some will murder, some will steal, some will shoplift and some will rape, we might as well legalize these activities."

The law should be a servant of the people and in that capacity cannot force virtue upon them; nevertheless, it can and should be strong enough to make it easier to be virtuous and therefore harder to be utterly vicious.

Without exerting controls upon materials our youth is purposely exposed to, we permit our children to be taught their elders don't know right from wrong.

In years past, when censorship restraints were imposed on sexual exploitation and exposure, this country did not carry the restraints beyond the point of common sense.

No Bibles were burned; no news was banned; no works of art were destroyed because they depicted nudity. On the contrary, it was possible to appreciate art for its intrinsic beauty and to differentiate clearly between beauty and bestiality.

Must we tolerate everything, no matter how depraved?

We have a right to rear decent children in a decent society. As decent adults we have an obligation to ensure a decent society. That's not an abrogation of freedom of the press; that's an assertion of our rights of freedom from wallowing in the filth produced and disseminated by the lowest common denominator which now threatens to drag us all down to that level.