

Reading pornography

Simon Hardy*

University College Worcester, UK

Over the last 30 years academic discussion of pornography has been largely confined to questions about its social and psychological effects. The debate has been cast in black and white terms; partly because the stakes were political, as in the debate over porn amongst feminists, and partly because social scientists have sought to produce a hard, definitive conclusion as to the harmfulness or otherwise of porn. Recently, however, these disputes have died down. This new climate provides the opportunity for a calmer and more considered evaluation of the part that pornography plays in the formation of sexual identities, practices and experiences. We need to view pornography as one more significant factor in the life-long sexual socialization of individuals in modern society. Drawing on previous qualitative research this paper seeks to illustrate ways in which the social and personal impact of reading pornography can be treated in terms of three aspects: how the act of reading fits into personal biography; how the reader or viewer negotiates the meanings about sexuality and gender contained in porn; and the processes of identification and interpretation involved in the use of such material.

Introduction

Pornography is a significant aspect of modern culture. Over the last 30 years it has undoubtedly become more easily available and more explicit. During this time the traditional concern of philosophers and educationalists with its moral impact (Holbrook, 1972) has been generally displaced by research investigating the social and psychological harm it might cause in behavioural terms (Yaffe & Nelson, 1982; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1984; Zillmann & Bryant, 1989; Linz & Malamuth, 1993). In particular, concern has centred on the influence of pornography on men's conduct towards women. Yet a clear-cut scientific quantification of the harmful (or beneficial) effects of pornography has proved elusive. This has been an important factor in permitting the quiet relaxation of state controls on pornography. In Britain, for example, many of the long-standing restrictions on 'hard-core' porn are no longer enforced.

Despite the failure of the behavioural paradigm, the nature and influence of such a radically distinctive aspect of modern mass-culture as pornography should surely remain a topic of priority interest to the social sciences. What is needed is a more open-ended, qualitative approach. Research questions need to be framed in new terms. For example, it is well worth asking what contribution pornography makes, for better or for worse, to the education¹ of young people on matters of sexuality. One will immediately appreciate that this question goes far beyond any assistance

*University College Worcester, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK. Email: s.hardy@worc.ac.uk

provided to young males in fathoming the mysteries of gynaecological anatomy. We need to consider the place of pornography in helping to define the gendered roles and erotic meanings in terms of which sexual conduct is organized. What contribution does porn make to the creation of what the sociologists Gagnon and Simon (1973) called 'sexual scripts'?

In short, the time is right for a fresh approach to this area of research. To this end I offer here a reappraisal, in terms of the above questions, of my own qualitative data from a study that was first published in 1998² but which remains virtually the only one of its kind. This research was originally designed in 1992 to investigate the impact of pornography on the sexuality of young heterosexual men.³ The sample of 24 men in their 20s and 30s was accessed through a wide range of personal contacts at the University of Essex, although none were themselves members of that institution. This method of recruitment achieved a sample with a fairly diverse range of class and educational backgrounds, although all were white and there was a slight over-representation of occupational categories B and C1. Data were gathered by means of in-depth qualitative interviews. These consisted of two parts. The first employed open-ended questions to explore the experiences the subjects had had of pornography through their lives and their feelings about it. The second part involved discussion of selected representative extracts of textual material, drawn from 'top-shelf' magazines of the type universally available at local newsagents. Here the questions were designed to find out what meanings the men saw in the texts by demanding both denotative and connotative interpretations of the sexual interactions represented in them. In essence this involved going through the stories paragraph by paragraph and naively asking for a blow by blow explanation of everything the fictional characters did and said to each other. Interview transcripts were then subject to the standard techniques of discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherall, 1987). Drawing on these data, the following report covers three key aspects of men's use of pornography: the personal and biographical context of use, the content of the subjects' interpretations and the process by which such interpretations are made.

Personal narratives

Men do not normally come into contact with pornography in the sterile environment of a social psychology laboratory. Rather they do so in a specific social and emotional context. Therefore before we ask what happens when men use pornography, we need to consider the personal context in which use occurs. When asked to reflect on their use of pornography men will locate their experiences within a personal narrative. The following section summarizes the common features of these narratives, as provided by the men I interviewed.

These narratives divide into three biographical phases, each involving a particular type of commitment to pornography. These can be termed: *casual* (pre or early adolescent), *conditional* (adolescent), and *reconciled* (adult). Each phase is characterized by a particular way of using the material. In the first phase use occurs in a social or group context and is essentially non-sexual and the type of commitment is only

at a *casual* level. In the second phase the use becomes sexual and private but the commitment is *conditional*. In the mature phase the use remains sexual but the commitment is now unconditional, as the individual has negotiated or *reconciled* himself to his need for pornographic stimulation. Since there is always a watershed in the progression from one phase to another not all the individual narratives went through all these stage. It should be pointed out however that these categories are figurative, in the sense that these types of use first appear in and broadly correspond to particular commonly recognized stages of life. They are not an attempt to define a process of normal personal development.

Casual use

The initial contact with pornography had typically occurred in late childhood or early adolescence. It would seem that pornography is something that boys discover by accident or are introduced to by contact with others in a public place, such as school. The unanticipated and unintended nature of this contact is one of the defining characteristics of the casual use. The public circumstances in which this contact usually occurs obviously mean that the manner of use is confined to social rather than sexual purposes, such as shared curiosity, hilarious banter or the mutual affirmation of exchanging expressions of dismay and incredulity. However, even in cases where first contact occurred at home, when the father or elder brother's 'stash' was discovered, the experience was not sexual in character.

Besides being contingent and public, casual use is then essentially non-sexual. It is important to note that casual use is not confined to the earliest stages of contact with pornography, it is merely the form of use which is the first to be inaugurated in biographical terms. Casual use may be maintained latter in life alongside sexual forms of use or, in some cases, may remain the sole form of use throughout life.

Typically the mature casual user acknowledges the sexual purpose of pornography but claims that he himself does not engage with it in these terms. As one interviewee said:

I think there are people who look at [pornographic magazines] very seriously. But I also believe that myself and the people that I associate with, will light-heartedly pick one up and look at it, but certainly not any more than that. There's no hidden meaning. Certainly in my case, there's no hidden meaning to it. If they're there, I'll pick them up and look at them, and I think that's just basic human male instinct. ['Alan']

In short, the casual user can take it or leave it, his interest is purely natural, straight-forward and unproblematic.

The recurrent feature of the statements of those who put themselves into this category is the disavowal of any sexual motive, which in cases like the following could be emphasized to the point of absurdity:

I think it just cures my curiosity in that I see what the naked woman looks like, you know. Lots of different naked women, and now I know what goes on in these magazines, and I still pick them up now and again and look through. But I don't actually get turned on by ... I don't actually find enjoyment in looking at naked women. [Stephen]

What is important about this is not whether we really believe that the speaker gets no pleasure from looking at naked women but that we note the insistence that his interest is non-sexual, and consider its significance.

There is clearly a sense in which masculine identity is vulnerable where sexual desire is concerned, as we can see in the following example:

You start talking about the sexual side, and then there's me imagining the guy in the raincoat, seeing Madonna, and thinking, 'Oh, lovely ... I'll have to go and get those, and then I'm off to the toilets, and I'll have a good read,' as opposed to say, myself, and other guys who think, 'Oh, that's Madonna. I wonder what she looks like naked? I'll have a quick look,' and there we go, there she is, that's it. No more. [Richard]

So, why look at this type of material at all?

I think if you want to go deeper, it is because of a power complex, to see such a powerful person as a female star in a vulnerable position, appearing naked, exposing herself in a magazine, gives you a certain gratification that you are then obtaining, or you're lowering her level of power, if you want to take it down deeper. I would say that that is the primary motivation ... I mean, if I imagine myself looking at one of these pictures, I feel, consciously feel, in a powerful position, because I'm looking at this woman, a famous star with no clothes on. At the time it feels like curiosity, 'There we go, interesting. Thanks very much.' But going on a deeper level, a psychological level, yes it is, I feel, because they are vulnerable, and one feels a certain power, and, 'Oh yes, I've got the power to go and look at this person with no clothes on.' [Richard]

The exposure of beautiful women in pornography alters the balance of power by making them available to the male gaze.

Yet it is essential to note that the power with which pornography provides men actually represents, from their point of view, the partial restoration of an equilibrium initially upset by the force of their desire for the female object. In defining their interest as non-sexual the mature casual user is attempting to maintain the same qualitative relation to the material that we would expect to characterize their first encounters with it in pre- or early adolescence. This relation is essentially one of sexual naivety, before the individual has learned to see and to use pornography in sexual terms. That this relation of naivety is generally characteristic of young males' initial experiences with pornography is corroborated by Rachel Thomson (1999). These responses of innocent curiosity and laughter are also widely seen as characteristic of conventional female reactions to pornography. The threshold that must be crossed in shifting the individual from a casual to sexual relation to porn depends upon the cultural positioning of men as the sexual subject: the one who looks, desires and defines. While pornography undoubtedly contributes to the enculturation of young men into sexual subjectivity, it also provides relief from the difficulties and frustrations that the lopsidedness of heterosexual desire creates for men.

Before leaving the category of casual use we must dispose of any notion that it is in any sense less 'sexist' than directly sexual or masturbatory uses of pornography. On the contrary, compared to the cool masculine denials of desire we have seen, the sexually motivated resort to porn constitutes a confession of vulnerability, of need, of enthrallment to women. Moreover, some of the men I interviewed attested to the use of pornography in public contexts, such as work places, for what were clearly

socio-political rather than strictly sexual purposes. One, for example, spoke of his experiences on a building site where pornographic magazines were a 'focus' for sexual banter that served to brutalize the younger men into its macho and sexist culture. The abusive commentary maintained about the woman featured in the magazines provided a resource for the verbal harassment of female passers-by. Thus pornography can be used in more than one way to defuse the sexual power of women. In the casual use of pornography in public contexts we often witness the displacement of a jealous desire to sexually possess a woman's body with a misogynistic envy that coldly disparages the unattainable object.

Conditional use

Those who move on from the casual use of pornography to sexual use usually do so during adolescence. From this point on contact with porn is more regular and is actively sought, with men going out to purchase material or taking other purposeful steps to secure it for exclusive consumption. So long as contact with pornography had remained casual and circumstantial its use could be open and public, now the public space of the newsagents or sex-shop, where one's sexual intentions are exposed to the public eye, becomes a hazard to be anxiously negotiated, on the way to the safe haven of private consumption. In biographical terms the sexual use of pornography may itself be thought of as occurring in two distinct phases. Between the onset of adolescence and full adulthood, sexual use has a temporary, expedient or *conditional* character. At the crisis point that marks the end of this phase the use of porn will either be abjured or move on to the ultimate *reconciled* phase.

One interviewee recalled particularly clearly his transition from childhood curiosity to a more focussed sexual interest in his father's collection of pornographic magazines:

I remember when we were very small children, we used to read them without understanding them, and just laugh because there were naked women in them. We wouldn't read the text, just look and laugh at the pictures. But, I would have said I got to, I suppose 12 or 13 and started to read them when my dad was out. I looked more consistently and would actually read them ...

I remember when I used to read the magazines, the ones I used to like best was when it would be over four, five or six pages, and the woman would get gradually undressed. And you wouldn't get the sort of full frontal until you got to the last photos ...

I remember the sense of power too. Yes, I can explain it concisely. It was always the idea that, were I to meet any of the women in these magazines in the street, the last thing they would do, the last thing they would dream of doing, is take off all their clothes for me. And yet, there they were. So it was a sense of being let into a secret that *they* would not like me to see. All right, so they'd been paid to pose in these magazines. But yeah, I remember vividly, there was always the idea that if I walked down the street and met this woman, and said to her, 'Take off all your clothes,' she would probably punch me in the face, or tell me to fuck off, or whatever, but there she was over six pages, revealing all, you know? ... I dunno if there was an element of peeping Tom, there was an element of power there anyway, maybe I was getting one up on her. And probably to an adolescent boy who didn't find it, at this stage, easy to get on with girls,

you know, I never had sexual relations of any kind with a woman until I was seventeen, and I didn't lose my virginity until I was 19, so at that age, 13, 14, 15, that was all there was really. [Chris]

Here Chris articulates with exceptional clarity the key features of the conditional phase of use. The development of desiring subjectivity in adolescent men, a hallmark of men's collective cultural power in western society, is initially experienced by the individual in terms of disempowerment and exclusion. In these circumstances pornography comes to hand as an expedient and short-term solution, a means of restoring the balance of power between male subject and female object.

But pornography does more for the adolescent user than simply provide sexual relief. Many men looking back on their early experiences felt pornography provided an education at a time when interpersonal experience or any other forms of information were lacking. At this stage of life pornography often represents the best available means of exploring the strange new world of sex and especially its darkest continent: female sexuality. The pornographic magazine, with its two components of text and image, appears to offer the ideal vehicle for discovery. The pictorial element enables young men to examine and engage their sexual imaginations with a wide range of variations on the female form. The individual discovers his own sexual and emotional responses to different 'types'. These may be surprising: does one in fact find the fuller figure more stimulating? or the older woman? What re-evaluation of the teenager's world view is necessitated when he finds himself aroused by images of women of other 'races'? Then there is the text. This provides an insight, or at least the semblance of an insight, into the behavioural and subjective aspects of sex, including the ways in which gender roles and identities are conventionally enacted in a sexual context.

The best understanding of the educational function of adolescent use of pornography can be achieved by viewing it within the theoretical framework provided by Gagnon and Simon's (1973) concept of the sexual script. In contrast to the conventional Freudian view of sexuality as a psychological and, by adolescence, fully formed drive, Gagnon and Simon argue that the crucial phase of psychosexual development occurs as a result of social learning during adolescence itself. This learning takes the form of sexual scripts, which contain erotic meaning, practical guidance and conventions about behaviour. For example, scripts prescribe a certain sequence of action within a sexual scenario, typically for young heterosexuals: kissing—digital petting—coitus. But scripts do not limit so much as enable. They are the means by which behaviour, consisting of 'mute, inarticulate' gestures, can be linked to a whole universe of symbolic meanings and thus transformed into sexual conduct.

Gagnon and Simon (1973) regard the years 11–14 as especially important in laying down adult sexual character. In this period males and females are socially separated and their sexual development takes different paths. By the age of 15, according to Kinsey's statistics, over 80% of males and only 20% of females are engaging in masturbation.⁴ Men as a group gain substantial advantages from their greater engagement in masturbation, which builds sexual autonomy and initiative.

In masturbation the individual invests symbols with affect and trains himself to derive gratification from them. By the time young men and women come into sexual contact it is clear that the latter face a considerable deficit in erotic education. While Gagnon and Simon's data are some thirty years old more recent evidence confirms that such a deficit still exists (Holland *et al.*, 1996). One of the key factors in accounting for this difference between the genders in capacity to engage and employ sexual scripts is surely the greater and earlier sexual use of pornographic material by young men.⁵

The relief offered by pornography to those caught in the predicament of male adolescence only makes it indispensable for a time. The key aspect of conditional phase of use is that it is short-term. As one 21-year-old conditional phase user, who had not gone on to the reconciled phase, said of his relationship to porn:

I think I was going through a time where it was an alternative to the real thing, I suppose, I think I would put it down to that. I was going through a personal phase where I couldn't see myself, sort of forming a relationship with anybody and therefore it was an alternative. Whereas in the past I don't really think I had ever really felt like that, not that I've always been in relationships all the time, but there always seemed as if there was something around the corner. [Robert]

The individual does not define himself as a confirmed porn user and does not yet reconcile himself to such an identity. It is notable that a typical feature of conditional use is the constant preoccupation with the danger of discovery, the problem of storage and the safe disposal of pornographic material. By early adulthood doubts about pornography impinge on many men. One interviewee spoke of being caught up in 'paradoxes and contradictions' during his university years, when he was publicly supporting direct action by the women's group against the sale of pornographic magazines on campus whilst secretly purchasing such material elsewhere for his private use. This quality of deferred moral reckoning is a central characteristic of conditional use.

While the unfulfilled desire for women is what initiates the conditional phase of use what brings it to its inevitable crisis in most cases was the arrival of a woman in the individual's life. The individual's future career as a porn user, the curtailment of the temporary conditional phase and the likelihood of progression to the permanent reconciled phase, is largely governed by the way he negotiates his commitment to porn with his commitment to his partner. Some men reluctantly gave in to external pressure from their partners to abjure the use of porn, even though they were quite happy in themselves to continue using porn alongside their relationships, for example:

I would like to think of [using porn] as being another equal, an equal status, if you like, I mean that isn't to say I'd like a magazine here and a woman here ... I enjoy sex ... And it is part of, you know, sexual gratification ... and if I was on my own I would buy the stuff, occasionally ... [But] she now has very strong views about it, and I respect that. So I don't go near it, because I do understand what she's saying. But at the same time it's something which does need to be aired ... Even now, I'm a little bit cross with myself for having rationalized my thinking into not buying it. And I still find,

when I go into our local paper shop to buy *The Guardian* I have to say, my eyes still drift up there. [George]

More commonly however men abandoned the use of porn once they were in a steady relationship of their own volition, because they felt themselves unable to sustain what they saw as conflicting commitments. The light of sexual experience made pornography seem hollow and unrealistic:

I think it was probably the unbelievable aspect of them while I looked at them with my partner, but it often seemed rather far-fetched, and perhaps even made up in cases, whereas I don't recall thinking that before, when I used to use the magazines for masturbation. So, I mean, I assume that's partly through the influence of having my partner there ... [Before this] I hadn't had any sexual activity with another person ... So I suppose the magazines, in that respect, might well have played a big part in what I supposed sex with a partner would be like. And I suppose that the relationship I found myself in, not being like a lot of the stories I'd read made them seem more unbelievable. [Andrew]

Besides the perception that pornography might be degrading to women, men more often sited the idea that their engagement with pornography might adversely effect their sexual relationships and performance as reasons for discontinuing their consumption of porn. Masturbation with pornography was likely to foster selfish sexual habits. The unrealism of its portrayals threatened to gear their sexuality in such a way as to make it inadequate for interpersonal experiences:

the problem with [pornography] is that it encourages the ignorant amongst the male population to imagine a female sexuality which is more active in an appetitive sense than is realistic, and also that female sexuality is far more easily satisfied, and that's deeply ironic I feel, that these sorts of images and the prevalence of pornography ... may well damage one's own sexuality, perhaps at root there is that question of different sexual speed of males and females and that the effect of that sort of narrative is precisely to widen the gap, by encouraging or legitimating male speed, because if my memory serves me right [the woman in the story] has, something like three orgasms altogether, and you know he has come once, now the statistics usually are reversed by N fold, and therefore this is a highly unfortunate effect, particularly for women, and that were more women aware of that effect, that for me would be as legitimate a source of anger and resentment against pornography, the fact that it may have encouraged in men sexual inadequacy with regard to their own sexuality ... [Mark]

The whole gamut of factors which first initiate and later curtail the conditional phase of sexual use are well summed up well in the following quote:

[Porn] was instructive in as much as I was inexperienced in life, inexperienced in relationships, inexperienced in terms of sexual encounters, and I guess I just didn't know how to handle myself very well with women. I suppose I stopped finding [pornography] interesting, apart from casual interest. But I stopped finding them real when I started to understand that you just can't keep it going for six hours a night, seven nights a week. And, that was the ideal image that was portrayed that men were so super-masculine, and women were super-sexually charged and compliant, and always had orgasms. I mean, it just doesn't happen, does it, in real life? So as I say, once I became more experienced in life generally, but in relationships in particular, then [porn] lost [its] appeal in many ways. I was married quite young. I was twenty-one

when I got married, and my wife wouldn't have anything to do with [porn] anyway. She found it quite offensive to herself and to women in general. [Philip]

Reconciled use

In many cases as men entered into relationships for the first time it initially appeared that pornography could be integrated with them. In the context of a relationship pornography could be employed as a sex aid or sex manual, without the inevitable embarrassment of having to have to use something so labelled:

I suppose it's a case of something is described in the story and then you can have a conversation of: would you like that done to you? ... Possibly giving a springboard for ideas ... different positions and role-play an' whatever. [James]

It must, however, be noted that in the sample of men that I interviewed almost all had experienced the shared use of porn with their partners only during a brief honeymoon period at the outset of the relationship. In many cases (such as that described by Andrew above) female partners had subsequently expressed either distaste or indifference for pornography and shared use was discontinued.

The gradual realization by these men that pornography could not be integrated into their sexual relationships meant that they would eventually have either to give up pornography or maintain a commitment to it alongside their sexual commitment to their partners. In the latter case some kind of internal reconciliation of these divided commitments was necessary. Only in those cases where this is accomplished can we speak of the reconciled long-term porn user. The ability to arrive at this form of reconciliation appears to be generally predicated on an acceptance that women and pornography are separate and incompatible domains to which male sexuality may be directed. The perception of the reconciled user is that for reasons of fundamental gender difference men need pornography and women do not:

I should imagine there are very few males in British society who haven't had contact with some form of pictorial sex magazine, and then haven't from that used it as some sort of visual stimulation, within their programme of wanking ... women generally seem a lot less interested in them or appear to be anyway, because they are given to looking upon it as an immature male trait and you tend to think, well there is not much point broaching the subject with them or being particularly open about it, because they obviously have views which tend to down-grade you and it tends to be a male bastion. [Brian]

The men explained their need for pornography in addition to interpersonal sex in terms of a desire for visual access to a wide variety of women. Indeed several reconciled users argued that access to the various and vivid stimulation offered by pornography helped to sustain their marriages. Those who advocate censorship, some of the men argued, failed to see that it plays a useful 'role' by 'releasing pressures' which might otherwise cause harm to women or to society. In such cases the invocation of a public discourse about the benign social effects of pornography and their evident satisfaction with those arguments are the token of the fully reconciled, life-long user of pornography. For others, however, the terms of their reconciliation were less confident. They continued to experience the ambivalence of

divided commitments to pornography and to their partners, but pragmatically accepted the situation as a permanent state of being. Some of those who continued to buy pornography did so ‘furtively’, their solitary masturbation being accompanied by feelings of guilt and ‘shoddiness’.

Porno narratives

Having seen the personal contexts in which men consume pornography, in the last two sections of this paper we can deal with the way it is used. Above all we need to understand how its meanings are interpreted, in terms of both the content and process of interpretation. Selecting a few brief stories from pornographic magazines, which seemed representative of their type, I asked my interviewees for a point-by-point interpretation of several textual scenarios as they unfolded. Unfortunately there is insufficient space here to illustrate at length the responses I received, though a full account can be found elsewhere (Hardy, 1998). Moreover, a summary of my conclusions is adequate for the present purpose of showing how the textual narratives articulate with the lived experience of the reader.

First of all, nearly all my readers interpreted the sexual scenarios described in the texts in terms of a power relation between the characters (to avoid additional complications I had selected stories featuring only two characters, one female and one male, which was in any case the most common configuration). That is to say that specific interactive gestures from which the representational scenarios were built up were interpreted as signs of a power relation, for example:

It’s emphasizing the power of the man, he’s slapping her bottom, he’s causing her pain, and he’s saying he can do whatever he wants, cause her pain, or whatever, and he has, like, total superiority over her. And sort of saying she doesn’t mind getting that, she likes a bit of pain, and he can inflict on her whenever he wants. [Robert]

That is the dominant position of the man over the woman, and its appealing to that dominance, the idea of the woman being taken from behind. It’s just, I suppose, a much more submissive pose for the woman, position for her. She’s open physically open, and she’s submissive, and the man’s absolutely in control, whereas you can think of loads of other sexual positions where the woman could appear to be in control, or alternatively, it could be equal. This is the position that implies the man is in control. [Ian]

I would think, from the dominant point of view, that the woman would find it possibly a turn on that [the man] was coming on all, you know, strong and macho, whatever, asserting his authority on her, over her, she probably thinks, ‘Yes, here is this powerful man that’s ruling the way of the situation.’ ... ‘Come over here and use me’, she probably gets a great buzz out of it. Going back years and years, possibly, to the slave element of things, you know, ‘Come over here and use me’, she’s basically saying, ‘Come over here and abuse me’ really. [David]

At the same time the readers also made sense of the text in terms of narrative sequence, through which the power dynamics altered. In the early stages of the stories they saw the woman as exercising power as an object of the man’s as yet unfulfilled sexual desire. After a critical point in the narrative marked by the sexual

acquiescence of the woman, the power relation was reversed. In this latter part of the narrative, in which the sexual scenario itself takes place, the power of the man over the woman was continuously signified and re-signified by the verbal and physical gestures of the characters, in a manner that was readily interpretable to the readers. Furthermore this power relation was often read as an expression of the natural dominance of men over women, which in our time finds undisguised expression only in the sexual act. One interviewee, for example interpreted the rough treatment of the woman by her lover in the story in the following terms:

The [rough] gesture is to show that he is the stronger partner, he does this because he feels that is what she wants, and he is hoping that is going to turn her on even more, because most women would like that because they like to be the weaker sex, and it is the same with all the animal world, I would say that it is universal, a woman definitely likes to be dominated in sex. [Peter]

We should note that in the earlier narrative situation, in which the woman is a powerful object of desire, the frustrated, desiring, powerless condition of the male character closely reflects the circumstances of the reader of the text. This is true both in terms of the immediate sexual need that leads the individual to procure pornography and, as we have seen, the broader life-stage at which the consumer finds himself. We have therefore grounds to expect the identification of the reader with the male character in the text. Certainly this figure is left largely un-drawn by the text. We are not told of his beauty, wealth, intelligence or sophistication. He is Mr Ordinary in every respect except one: he has a big cock. He is simply a phallic apparatus within which the reader is invited to position himself. Nor, when the sex begins, are we told of his pleasure, for the reader knows all about this. What the text concentrates on is the woman: how she looks, what she wears, how much she wants sex, how much she wants to be dominated, how it feels to be fucked, how many orgasms she has, how much she loves it. Here one interviewee explains why the female characters are better drawn:

for visualization purposes. It's easier if you are actually thinking about some woman having this done to her, this done to her, this done to her, as opposed to actually having to reverse the ideas, the woman actually doing such and such a thing. And also, if you know what's happening to you [chuckles], whereas you can actually imagine what's happening to the woman who the story has been describing in detail ... [James]

The text provides the desirable woman opposite the desiring male, with whom the reader can identify, and then the developing narrative provides what life usually does not: the submission and conquest of the woman.

We see then that the personal narratives, which situate the consumer's resort to pornography in the emotional context of unfulfilled sexual desire, become fused with the pornographic narrative, which provides imaginary sexual resolution, as part of the normal functioning of the genre. Through the reader's intimate identification in the textual scenario there is a certain welding together of the reader's lived *reality* with representational *fantasy* that is inherent in the use of pornography. Surely, no other representational genre requisitions the emotional disposition of its audience in such a direct way.

The process of reception

This final section examines the process of reception that occurs in the consumption of pornography. The key to this process is the mechanism by which the reader or viewer projects himself into the text. The concept of the relation between subject and object is useful here. Put simply, the subject is the one who looks, interprets, defines, desires and the object is the one who is viewed, interpreted, defined, desired. Susanne Kappeler (1986) applies this concept to pornographic representation. She sees it as having a double subject/object structure. There is the subject who views the text and the object who is represented within it. At the same time there is a second relation that is internal to the text, between the subject and object of the action taking place in the text (the sexual scenario). The essence of Kappeler's feminist critique of pornography is that both subjects are male and that the women portrayed are thus doubly objectified by the external male gaze and by the agent of the action. Moreover it is a crucial characteristic of the pornographic structure of representation that there is a slippage between the two male subject positions. Put crudely, while the figurative male of the text acts sexually upon the woman, the external reader subject masturbates and puts himself into the position of the former, matching him thrust for thrust, stroke for stroke. This suggests that the user of pornography, at least while he is using it, must actively take on the role and attitude of the figurative male and his structural relation to the woman.

The process of putting oneself into the representational scenario was well attested, in general terms, by the men I interviewed:

It was just I was able to use the text to picture the scenario that the words were describing, and this was for arousal ... it would, I think, depend on how the text was framed. If it was in a first person and 'I' and 'me' were being used consistently throughout, then I might actually have to put myself into the position of a more pro-active role and be one of the participants. [Chris]

Those men, often the younger ones, who found the written text more useful for fantasy than the pictures, did so because it was able to provide a more elaborate scenario and representation of the female other:

[The writing provided] a means of finding out what it was all about ... the acts of sex. I mean none came through the [images in] top shelf magazines, that had to come through the writing, thinking about it now, I don't think that you'd really gain much idea from the photo sets. [Andrew]

I think that [the text] is more involving, in the sense that I think 'Yeh', you know, 'I'd enjoy that'. I think it would involve me more. I think it's more likely I'd be part of the story, either integrating myself within it, you know, their words coming out of me, and I would sort of be involved in whatever way, it depends on the story. [George]

A story allows you to use your imagination, doesn't it? Whereas a picture is just, like, a picture of a woman, and, well that's it really. You can't really imagine ... I mean, you know she's just to be photographed ... they're not people, are they, they are just sexual objects, they are nothing, there's nothing to them. [Robert]

In essence what is happening is that the reader is seeking to engage in an imagined interaction with a model woman, provided and defined by the pornographic text.

We cannot safely say that people acquire their perceptions of others and conduct towards others from lived interaction, and yet are not seriously influenced by representation, because representation, especially pornographic representation, itself involves the reader or viewer in imagined interactions that are experienced in essentially the same terms. Interactions, real or imaginary, involve two parts: self and other. What the pornographic image or text does is to provide a model of the other person, the other part of the interaction, the element of external input that provides the stimulus for sexual fantasy. Using the classic social-psychology of G. H. Mead (1934), we see that interaction is conducted by means of 'role-taking' and in terms of 'symbolic meaning'. We may add that meaning operates at both a denotative and a connotative level.

Let us consider the example of a soft-core photoset of the type common to the most popular sex magazines. As we have just seen, the possibilities for projection and identification are more limited here, but this has the advantage of simplifying and hence clarifying the essential process. These images differ from the textual example we have had in mind so far (and from hard-core), because there is no male figure for identification. Instead the viewer takes the position of the camera in relation to the woman-object. The viewer interprets the gestures of the woman as they are provided in each frame, while between frames he imagines his responses. In such a way a two-part interaction is imaginatively structured. The photosets are usually arranged to support this. Typically in the early frames the model looks into the camera in invitation, then is gradually divested of her clothing before appearing in a variety of prone positions. For Mead (1934), objects and verbal and physical gestures are invested with commonly understood symbolic meanings, which 'call out' in a more or less involuntary way certain mental responses. One of Mead's examples was a chair, which calls out the conceptual response of sitting. Of course, we exercise volition and do not have to sit down every time we see a chair but the point is that we know what to do with a chair because it is a symbolic object. The same applies to human gestures. If, for instance, the model in a photograph should, in one of the latter frames, be seen from behind bending forward over Mead's chair, we may assume that this calls out in the viewer the concept of a certain response. But the invitation to sexual intercourse is only the literal or denotative meaning of the gesture. It is also possible that such a gesture carries connotations of submission, bestiality and power,⁶ and that they call out in the viewer a correspondingly dominant or aggressive response.

This symbolic exchange also involves what interactionist sociology terms role-taking. The individual must take the role of the person with whom they are interacting in order both to measure their own contributions and to interpret those of the other. But specific gestures only make sense in the context of the overall character of the relative roles being played out. In short, one must have in one's head a working model not only of one's own part but also that of the other. These behavioural models are acquired through experience of interaction in given interpersonal situations, or, presumably, through experience of *representations of interactions*. The latter may not be as good as the real thing, so to speak, but may in some contexts be the only resource available. For many young men there is something of a mystique

surrounding the role of women in sex. We must therefore consider the contribution of pornography to the construction of young men's internalized working model of female sexuality, a model which contains expectations about the character and attitude of the other and informs the attitude of the self to the other in interaction.

Conclusion

After the failure of social science to quantify the hypothesized harmful effects of pornography it has become fashionable to dismiss out of hand the whole notion that representation has any effect at all on behaviour in real life. This view seems complacent and even irresponsible. Obviously representation does have an impact on human social conduct. The difficulty is in finding approaches that enable us to comprehend in qualitative terms the nature of this impact. Only when we have done this will it be possible to arrive at an informed and intellectually mature view of the benign or harmful influence of pornography in society generally or upon the personal development of individuals. But from the outset we must recognize that by its very nature qualitative data, which depend upon analytic interpretation and deal in the realm of subjective truths, will never produce definitive evidence that pornography causes quantifiably harmful effects.

In what sense then might we see pornography as potentially harmful from an interpretative standpoint? Given the way women are usually represented, or misrepresented, in pornography as acquiescent and submissive we are bound to wonder whether in fact its use establishes in the minds of some men a distorted, or at least unrepresentative, model of female sexuality, as both a mirror and repository of male sexuality. This concern is all the greater given that, as we have seen, porn is often resorted to in the absence of other experiences and opportunities that might otherwise be set against it, especially in the formative years, discussed here in terms of the 'conditional phase', where it is most intensely and universally made use of. The idea that pornography may foster a significant misconstruction of female sexuality and may therefore have a baleful influence on some men's sexual disposition toward women seems to me to have some substance. However, it is clear that two important points will have to be set against this concern by anyone who wishes to evaluate the impact of pornography overall. Firstly, we must not lose sight of the personal and educational benefits that many consumers attest to. As we have seen porn has rescued many young men from the worst frustrations of unreciprocated sexual appetite which circumstances have imposed upon them. At the same time porn also provides a source of erotic meaning and sexual scripts that may only be a starting point for the sexual imaginations of both men and women. That is to say, it establishes a common currency of images and meanings which is necessarily open to diverse elaboration and transformation by the subjective agency of the reader. Secondly, we must never forget that just because a large proportion of men engage pleasurably with the false model of female sexuality provided by pornography this does not mean they necessarily believe it to be truthful. It is possible after all to lose oneself in reading any form of fiction without believing uncritically in the literal truth of the characters and plots that one finds. However limited the experience of some

consumers of pornography, everybody has *some* other sources of information against which to set a given portrayal of women's sexuality. Should any individual opt to take on board from a pornographic text unquestioningly the idea that 'all women are whores' or that they mean 'yes' when they say 'no', we must recognize this as a wilful act of interpretation by the reader for which he alone is ultimately responsible.

Notes

1. The term 'education' carries a connotation of being inherently beneficent, in which readers of this journal will doubtless have a natural investment. However in this paper I would wish to suspend this connotation, in order to say that young people may learn things from pornography, without suggesting that what they learn is necessarily beneficial or truthful.
2. See my *The reader, the author, his woman and her lover: soft-core pornography and heterosexual men* (Cassell, 1998).
3. In this study I have focussed exclusively on what is by far the most common kind of pornography, namely that which primarily features women for the edification of a male audience. I have also concentrated mainly on the most widely and easily available instance of that: soft-core mass market magazines, believing that the most common instance is the one most urgently in need of analytical attention.
4. Unfortunately more up-to-date information on this important and formative sexual practice is difficult to obtain. The very substantial British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Wellings *et al.*, 1994), for example, found that masturbation was too embarrassing a topic for its subjects and, in view of the research priority for information on practices with potential for sexual transmitted disease, reluctantly elected to set it aside.
5. One might say the greater access of young males to pornography. But a distinction needs to be made between exposure and sexual use. A recent French survey suggests that 89.6% of 16- and 17-year-old males had seen at least one porn film, while the figure for females is nearly as high at 81.1%. Whether use is sexual or not, the majority of these teenagers claimed to have watched pornography to find out about sex. Other evidence from France suggests that teenagers' understanding of sexuality is now substantially influenced by the language and behavioural repertoire characteristic of pornography (Henley, 2002).
6. These are the terms in which my interviewees most commonly interpreted such a gesture.

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