

Anti-porn view not censorship

By Annette Bridges

The recent letters concerning free speech and pornography, particularly in relation to magazine sales at the EMU, are symptomatic of the simplistic dichotomy by which we generally frame the debate. Akin to the simplification of the reproductive rights issue, which labels people as "pro-abortion" or "pro-life" and ignores the centrality of individual choices, the pornography debate is thought of as a battle between advocates of free speech and censorship. We gain a deeper understanding of the subject if we re-examine our definition of censorship.

Commentary

Feminists who seek to limit the distribution of violent and exploitative porn (or art, or literature) are accused of wishing to "censor." This word conjures up images of a dictatorial suppression of artistic freedom; it also implies presentation of a distorted view of the truth. In fact, women have never had this supposedly sacred freedom of expression. Whether we speak of the media, of "erotic art" (which claims aesthetic worth) or of "pornography" (which seeks only to create

"pleasure" for the viewer), we find that they contain exploitative images of women and are generally produced by those (males) with economic and societal power, thus denying women self-expression and presenting a skewed image of the world. Our art and media are in fact filled with censorship - all the more insidious as it is covert, unspoken, and denies the existence of the female creative subject to begin with.

The pornography issue, then, is not an issue of censorship of male pleasure, but rather one of the civil rights of women (and increasingly of women of color - witness the issue of Penthouse featuring bound Japanese women). Women experience violence daily in our society and porn strengthens the link between this violence and male pleasure. A law banning violent pornography would be based on the fact that its consumption occurs at the cost of women, and not on the same high moral ground.

Tim Webber's rhetorical question "And what about all of the nude women in classic art?" has an important corollary: Why is "classic art" full of nude women, of images of rape and kidnapping of women - all painted by men? Certainly this art has been exploitative. Not, as some would have

us believe, because of its nudity, but rather because of a complex reciprocity between the aesthetics and the ethics of a society. The analysis of this reciprocity bears no resemblance to the moralistic and self-righteous posturing of a Jesse Helms.

Explicitly violent porn is obviously not the only vehicle for damaging images of women. There are few people who would wish to outlaw Playboy, but this does not imply that we must bestow our approval.

The EMU Board's decision represents one small (but very laudable) act of intervention. The fear, the rage, the shame, and the lack of self-esteem in women to which violence and pornography contribute need to be abolished before we can begin to speak of freedom of expression or of speech. As Jenny Kane suggested (*ODE*, May 25), women do work hard to command respect - and part of that work is the elimination of violent pornography. Her suggestion that those women who pose for Penthouse are to blame, however, is ludicrous in light of male censorship of women's attempts to speak, write, publish, or sell (anything other than their own bodies).

Annette Bridges is a Eugene resident and a University student in comparative literature.

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