

Porn again

Meese's pornography commission, unable to define pornography, says homosexuality is degrading, inimical to the public good. A paean to rhetoric over reason, the report is a fundamentalist wish-book.

BY NANCY R. WALSETH

Last year United States Attorney General Edwin Meese, on orders from Ronald Reagan, created an eleven-member panel of mostly far-right individuals to study the effects of pornography on American society and to suggest ways to control its spread.

After a year of hearings the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography produced a two thousand page report which concluded that depictions of explicit sex were generally harmful to the public and recommended various actions to combat the menace. The written word and Cable TV were exempted from the Commission's recommendations, reportedly due to lobbying by large book publishers and cable television executives.

While the Commission was unable to arrive at a definition of pornography, it categorized several types of sexually explicit depictions which the majority of its members believed were harmful to the public. One group, "not violent but degrading," includes not only *homosexuality* generally, but even *auto-eroticism on the part of a female* ("a degradation to femininity").

This is bad news, but comfort can be taken from the methods employed by the Commission: Its conclusions were not based upon any new empirical studies or research; in fact, the one sociologist who was hired by the Commission to review some recent studies of sex in the media was placed under a gag order and her report classified when it was discovered to be inconsistent with the conclusions desired by the Commission's majority. The massive Final Report itself contains a rather defensive admission regarding its findings of harm, obviously the result of some infighting:

"[W]e have felt free to rely on less proof merely to make assertions about harm than we have required to recommend legal restrictions . . ."

This little gem, on page 307, is the hole in the dike. While the Commission intimates it used a more reliable standard than individual taste in recommending legal restrictions, all the recommended restrictions are vulnerable to attack, in the absence of a credible finding that the activity sought to be restricted is harmful. So, the whole report is soft as butter on a summer's day. That is the good news; now for the fun.

At about the same time the Commission's report was released, the stories of two particularly good writers who dogged it from beginning to end appeared in the national mainstream press: Carole S. Vance's "The Meese Commission on the Road" in the August 2/9, 1986 issue of *The Nation*, and Robert Scheer's "Inside the Meese Commission" in the August issue of *Playboy*. The Meese Commission undoubtedly has inspired scores of writers; this article, however, is based upon Vance's and Scheer's eyewitness accounts and on a perusal of the Commission's Final Report.

First of all, the Meese Commission's total budget was \$500,000, referred to by Scheer as Washington "lunch money" in comparison with the \$2 million budget of the 1970 President's Commission convened seventeen years earlier, which in 1968 dollars had sixteen times the Meese Commission's buying power. The 1970 commission used its ample budget to obtain more than fifty independent studies, and held only two public hearings, apparently valuing sound research methods over anecdotal testimony. The 1970 report found no evidence that sexually explicit material caused antisocial behavior.

The eleven members of the Meese Commission were categorized by both Scheer and Vance as consisting of seven hardliners, some of whom fought pornography for a living, and four moderates (three of whom, notably, were women). The hardliners included a priest, a prosecuting attorney, a fundamentalist radio counselor, a former Nixon speechwriter and contributor to the *National Review*, a psychiatrist/criminologist, an Arizona municipal official, and a Reagan-appointed federal judge. The moderates included an editor of *Women's Day*, a law professor, a psychologist, and the head of California's Consortium of Child Abuse Councils.

Testimony was taken at various locations around the country, and witnesses included born-again former sex offenders, born-again former porn stars, ministers, and even a vice officer who had miraculously survived having his bottom fondled in an adult bookstore. Many of these witnesses were reportedly flown to the hearings expense-free and treated like honored guests, whereas those witnesses who were less supportive of the conclusions the majority of the Commission wished to reach were cross-examined meanly and treated like unwelcome troublemakers.

An aspect of the hearings which is difficult to describe even third-hand with a straight face is the participants' tireless and unflagging interest in personally viewing the examples of sexually explicit materials which were brought before the Commission by a stream of anti-pornography witnesses. (One witness, a sheriff, was unable to present all of his evidence, but he reported having 27,000 dildos in the property room back home.)

Both Vance and Scheer noted that there was not much review or discussion of the kind of thing one might expect to see in a typical adult bookstore, but there was vital interest in the rare stuff, pictures of people doing things together that nobody had ever heard of. In fact, Scheer commented that "the Commission exhibited an uncommon fascination with the scatological fringe of the porn world," which, in case this terminology is new to you too, apparently refers to sexual interest in excrement.

Vance elucidated: "The atmosphere throughout the hearings was one of excited repression . . . The material shown was hardly mainstream fare; . . . At every 'lights out,' spectators would rush to one side of the room to see the screen, which

was angled toward the commissioners. Were the hearing room a ship, we would have capsized many times."

At their year's end, the commissioners approved a 1960-page report, concluding, in part, that "degrading" sexually explicit depictions are harmful to the public, and making close to a hundred specific recommendations, including stiffer federal pornography laws, stepped-up state and local prosecutions and grassroots community activities.

Most of the Final Report concerns itself with the real thing, the stuff hardly anyone cares about enough to want to protect. But apathy is not warranted; sexual liberalization, as Vance reminds in her concluding paragraph, is fragile. While it appears the Commission avoided specific reference to "homosexuality" in its report (the word "lesbian" appears on an included list of thousands of porn video titles), it does contain oblique references to practices "although undoubtedly consensual and equal, . . . frequently condemned in this and other societies," and though clearly not linked with sexual violence, such practices "might simply for some other reason constitute a harm in themselves." (Final Report, p. 338.)

A report is simply a report, and is not binding on any legislative or judicial body. However, this attractive, two-volume book displaying the gold seal of the United States Department of Justice, undoubtedly well-intentioned and containing helpful information about the child pornography industry and similar activities, undisciplined in its own way, did not impose rational limits on its commentary, and this could insidiously affect present legislative efforts, such as those for sexual preference employment protections. In its elevation of rhetoric over reason, the report supports the religious right-wing culture guards, who seek to reclaim something they feel they have lost, but which in fact has never existed — an environment devoid of confusion and temptation, bathed in heavenly light, an easier road to sainthood than the one they're on, a very American dream indeed.

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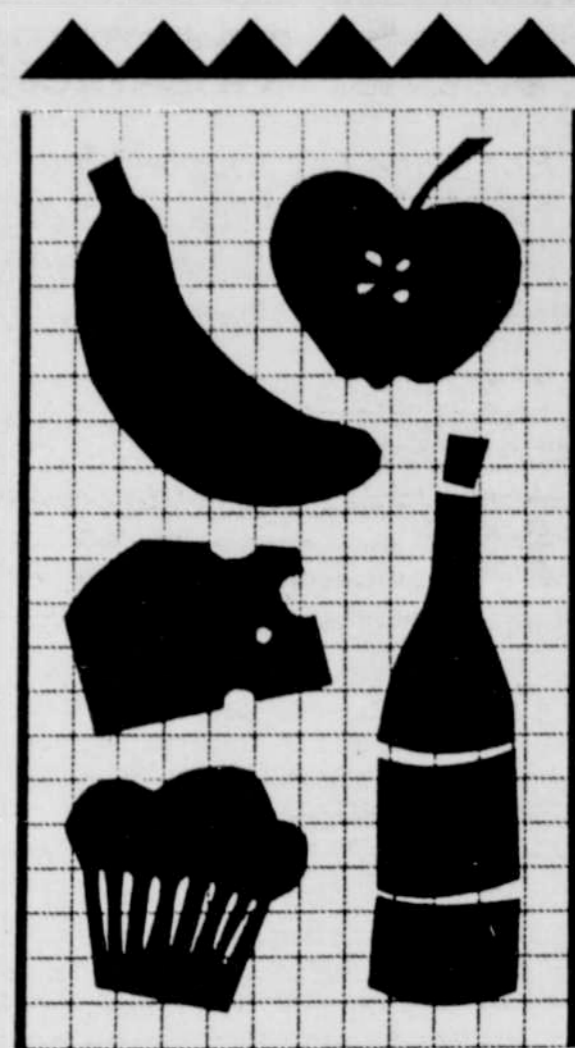
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