

Governing Pleasures. Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914

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Pornography used to be regarded as ephemeral, trivial and unimportant. Insofar as it had a history, it was as one aspect of the long battle for, and ultimate triumph of, free speech. Histories of literary censorship and legal obscenity by writers like H. Montgomery Hyde which celebrated the gradual destruction of 'Victorian' controls on expression and the corresponding liberation of D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and their fellow modernists, had little to say about sexually explicit, mass market pornography. Even for these writers, pornography remained relatively insignificant. The modernist project of distinguishing 'healthy' discussion and depiction of sex from low representations of the sexual act remained part of this historiography. For Lawrence, as for Hyde and even for later writers like Susan Sontag, most mass market pornography was a sign of sexual degeneracy and psychological disturbance in both consumers and producers. This market would become attenuated and might even disappear when the barriers to sexual knowledge placed by moralisers and prudes could be removed. The feminism of the 1970s and 80s, which attacked pornography as one more aspect of patriarchal domination and oppression, marginalised it still further.

More recently, however, pornography has been reclaimed as one of the characteristic creations of modernity. The word pornography, used to define forms of purely sexual representation, was coined in the 1860s, and represented a significant shift in the nature of sexual imagery and in the place of sexuality within modern culture. Lynn Hunt has argued that until the late eighteenth century, sexual imagery was rarely isolated from other forms of address, which might include satire, philosophy or wider instruction on modes of life and matters of taste. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, a new category of representation emerged which dispensed with the satirical and focused on the sexual content with the single, narrow intent

of arousal. Sex, in this form, increasingly promised to be about itself, rather than anything else. Hunt, Walter Kendrick, and Lynda Nead all suggest that the rise of mass print culture and the possibility of reproducing images on a large scale caused new anxiety about the access to obscene material that this culture provided. Therefore, the obscene was invented as the category that contained such restricted forms. Pornography was made up of imagery that had to be kept away from the masses and restricted to those of high enough social status and education to be able to master the inconvenient or deviant passions it aroused. Obscenity and pornography, then, have come to be seen not as ephemeral, but vital to the formation of liberalism, freedom of speech, mass culture and modernity in general.

Lisa Sigel's interesting book continues the trend of placing pornography at the centre of western history, and does so not through an examination of obscenity as a legal or social category, but more originally, through a close reading of particular forms of pornographic representation. Such imagery is important, Sigel says, because it provides a glimpse of the social imaginary. It does not describe what people did or do, but what they can imagine as possible. The stated aim of the book is to link stories of social change with changes in the nature and market for pornography. Also, Sigel sets out to explore patterns of change, to show how British society 'used pornography as a way to communicate' and to explain 'how this communication responded to changing cultural and social relationships' (p. 3). Sigel recognises that pornography is protean, and defines it using what she says are nineteenth-century definitions. In practice this includes a very broad category of literature, drawings and photographs which are united by a 'focus on sexuality' (p. 4), as well as a narrow and more problematic - not to say circular - definition of works 'that people wrote, published, printed, legislated, and collected as pornography'.(p. 4)

The first chapter deals with the radical printers and pressmen first examined in Iain McCalman's *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1988), and describes some of their output in detail. Whereas McCalman presents the career development of these printers - from radical politics to pornography - as a symptom of radicalism's demise, Sigel suggests that erotica was in fact a method of prolonging the life of radicalism by other means. Although these men produced prints and books for a restricted upper class market, they continued to pursue the politics of libertinism in this way. Libertinism, in Sigel's reading, represents a radical desire to remove the worldly hypocrisies of manners and morals, and return to a more natural and vital form of (male) passion. The use of the carnivalesque, and of a female voice in works like Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, tended towards the inversion of hierarchy, and also placed women at the centre of these erotic narratives. While women were clearly subordinate to men in libertine erotica, and their desires were obviously secondary to the revolutionary urges of the natural man, they were nevertheless the subjects, rather than the objects of these stories. Sigel suggests that women were therefore seen in these stories as participating fully in the politics of libertinism, if only from a secondary position. However, when this expensive libertine pornography was summarised and translated for a larger market in magazines like the *Exquisite* (1842-44) its complex libertine politics was diluted and lost. Mass markets effectively removed the politics from this kind of literary erotica, leaving a decayed libertinism in which sexual conquest, rather than liberation was the object of the narrative. Women and racial others, such as the many lustful Turks who inhabit these stories, were reduced to mere objects of conquest rather than possible or actual protagonists.

Sigel interprets the mid-Victorian Cannibal Club, members of which included many eminent anthropologists, lawyers and writers like Richard Burton, A. C. Swinburne, and Richard Monckton Milnes, as representative of the turn away from the politics of libertinism. Although the Cannibals consumed pornography and erotica with a passion, they did not present this as a project of liberation, but as personal and private, a function of social and educational superiority. By the mid-Victorian period, therefore, libertine sexual freedoms had ossified into one aspect of social and imperial privilege, and this was reflected in the pornographic tastes of the Cannibals. Their interests lay mainly in eroticised forms of domination and submission, from flagellation to erotic anthropology. Sigel argues that the study of priapic cults and of racial/sexual difference created a new form of 'empirical' erotic representation that sought the authority of science. Taking the Cannibals as representative of the British ruling class as a whole, Sigel suggests that their erotic preferences show how anthropology, science, empire and pornography developed together and

how each was implicated in the other.

In the final two chapters, Sigel turns to the way in which the form of pornography was affected by changes in its market. Here, she provides a wealth of information about networks of publishing and distribution, prices and producers. Articles such as books, prints and photographs were, Sigel argues, still well beyond the reach of the mass market even in the 1870s, and remained primarily a form of elite consumption. This fact was reflected in the form taken by erotic photography, which concentrated, just as the Cannibal Club had, on lower races and classes. The objects of pornography - women, children, other races - were however, excluded from its consumption by its high price. These erotic objects therefore became, in these pictures and narratives, commodities to be consumed by the rich. Pornography unsurprisingly reproduced social inequalities.

The final section of the book deals with the emergence of a mass market in pornographic postcards at the end of the nineteenth century. Changing photographic technology put such imagery within the reach of even those on low incomes, and democratised the market. As long as this market was restricted to the upper classes, as Sigel says it was for much of the century, the content of pornography reflected their obsessions: libertinism, science and anthropology, inequality, domination and submission. With the explosion in the market for postcards, those who had been the objects of pornography now became its consumers. They could see themselves in the medium for the first time and could use it to ridicule the upper classes and their pretensions. However, in spite of this democratising and even liberating effect, representations of women and of other races continued to objectify and classify. Sigel argues that the conjunction of a mass market and continuing objectification of the other had paradoxical consequences. 'Hegemonic formulations of sexuality' (p. 154), which emphasised racial and sexual subordination, were more firmly implanted in western culture, while at the same time 'the subordinated' (p. 155) could gaze on themselves for the first time. They could develop the perversities which this pornography described more easily than before, and therefore could present a far more serious threat to the social order. This latter effect intensified anxieties over the consequences of pornography, and demanded that it be policed in more effective and rigorous ways.

This suggestive story raises a number of questions. The argument of the book broadly follows Kendrick's and Hunt's view of the changing nature of pornography. Sigel confirms the narrative which states that the political or satirical content of sexual imagery is gradually leached away over the course of the nineteenth century to be replaced by sex in itself, which in turn leads on to concerns about the availability of such material to a mass audience. However, her definition of pornography lacks rigour, and therefore points misleadingly in two directions - to both broad and narrow meanings of the genre. This is an important point, since it determines what kind of imagery, and what kind of anxieties the book should be about. It is obvious from reading the book that in practice Sigel's definition of pornography means material which depicts nudity or the sexual act; but although this might function as a qualified modern definition of pornography, it does not fulfil her ambition to take her definition from those used 'at the time'. For example, the later sections of the book focus on postcards, some of which depicted simple nudity. Clearly, not all imagery involving nudity was regarded as 'filth' or pornography by the Victorians.

In this sense, one of the strengths of the book - that it provides a close reading of particular texts and looks at pornography 'from the inside' - is also one of its weaknesses. Pornography, as Kendrick has argued emphatically, cannot only be defined by its content or we end up joining the American judge who could not define it, but knew it when he saw it. Pornography has to be, as Kendrick says, an essentially artificial category of representation that contains a variety of heterogeneous and not always sexually explicit material. It is also very difficult to come up with an adequate definition of what is pornographic without reference to legal definitions that applied at the time. Ignoring the changes to the laws of libel, obscenity, and sex offences removes a key element of 'social change' which went towards the separation of the pornographic and the obscene from other kinds of material with a similar content. This omission means that the selection of the archive for this book often seems arbitrary and unrelated to the actual meaning of obscenity which, for the Victorians, included not only sexual imagery, but also advertisements for abortifacients and birth control, not to mention a vast array of 'borderline' material. In this respect, the difference between what is obscene and what is pornographic - if there is one - would have been a helpful debate to explore with regard to

defining the object of study.

Famously, the Victorians defined *obscenity*, that is, illegal depictions of sexual and other matters, as material that had the capacity to 'deprave and corrupt'. This formulation, coined in *R v Hicklin* (1868), is inclusive of all sorts of material, and complicates the picture that Sigel paints. In particular, a wide definition of obscenity which takes in 'borderline' material defined under the law as illegal, as well as that which is overtly sexual, correspondingly expands the size of the market and the archive to be explored. One of the main contentions of the book is that pornography remained the property of the elite until the 1890s, but this is almost the opposite of Victorian opinion. As Lynda Nead has shown, the availability of obscene material to the masses was thought to be a problem from the 1840s onwards. Also, Sigel's view of this market is determined by her reading of low literacy rates as an indication of pornography consumption. To the contrary, Nead suggests that obscene material was available in a variety of different forms. Postcards that depicted anything from pictures of semi-naked dancing girls to women lacing up their boots were problematic because they were on display in the street or in shop windows. Moreover, the view of obscenity and pornography that informed the Obscene Publications Act (1857) was that such material was pervasive to the point of ubiquity. Prices in distributors' catalogues - another of Sigel's main sources as to availability - might also be a misleading source about who saw this material. Mayhew writes about street sellers who sold sealed packets of prints at 6d a go to customers, although in this case it was mainly a con, and the pictures turned out to be less explicit than their customers thought. Clearly, reading was not the only way to encounter obscenity, which in the imagination of the Victorians was a public and not a private problem.

This book contains many suggestive insights which, owing to its brevity (163 pages of main text), are not explored in enough detail to do them justice. In particular, it reiterates the point that pornography emerged alongside and was complicit with more authoritative forms of representation. Sometimes it was indistinguishable from its scientific cousins like anthropology and sexology. Henry Havelock Ellis' *Sexual Inversion* (London, 1897) was itself judged obscene and there was considerable crossover between sexology, anthropology and obscenity, a trinity exemplified by the work of French colonial doctor Jacobus X. A fuller treatment of these ambiguities and sources would have developed some of the interesting arguments made in the book.

The strength of this book lies in its close examination of particular texts, what they mean, and how they are structured, and it is less strong on their relation to 'social change' and on what counted as pornographic and obscene. Nevertheless, there is plenty of interesting material on the publication and distribution of pornography in the 1880s and 1890s. However, the book works much better as a reading of particular kinds of pornography than it does as an account of British society seen through that medium.

The author thanks Dr Cocks for his review and does not wish to comment further.

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