

## The End of Sex?

Pornography is changing the nature of physical affection

In 2006, it seems impossible to write with any certainty about most things: the changing balance in international relations; the precise implications of global warming; who will win this summer's World Cup finals in Germany. But one thing does appear concrete: pornography, for so long a relatively unrecognized and unimportant phenomenon, appears to have become the industrialized world's number one cultural product.

If that strikes you as surprising, then the following information should be instructive. Pornography is now globally worth \$57 billion, with the United States - porn's spiritual home - accounting for \$12 billion (by comparison, Hollywood is worth a mere \$10 billion). In the United States, a conservative estimate of new pornographic movie production is 50 new movies a day, and more than 500 million porno films are rented every year. The latter figure of course excludes telephone sex - 250,000 Americans pay for this daily - and Internet porn, which is estimated to be worth at least \$1 billion globally and generates an astonishing 70 percent of all revenues earned by online content providers.

Add into the mix all the pornography available on television, mobile phones, in "table-dancing" clubs - these are extremely popular in the United States and the United Kingdom, with there being around 700 such bars in Manhattan alone - and it seems that porn is beyond ubiquitous. One American cultural commentator recently concluded that the Western world has become "pornified"; with hardcore material easily procurable from the kiosks of Athens to the humble desktop in Cambridge, it is very hard to argue with this contention.

But what does this actually mean? Is this mushrooming of manufactured sex a positive or negative development? What significance, if any, does it have for sex itself?

In fact, the pornographization of both public and private space has consequences so profound that it arguably already has changed the very nature of sex in five key ways.

Firstly, porn has seeped into the rest of popular culture, significantly altering how people think about sex. For example, an average hour on the three major American television networks - ABC, CBS and NBC - yield some 15 sexual acts, words and innuendos, or one every four minutes. Globally popular teleseries such as *Sex in the City* and even teen dramas such as *The O.C.* feature footage and/or storylines clearly influenced by pornography.

Strippers and prostitutes are featured with regularity in video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*. Overt sexual imagery is now used to sell everything from cars to alcoholic beverages. Arguably the most famous pornographic logo of all, the Playboy bunny, has now become a favorite of girls in their early teenage years and younger, who sport the logo on official badges, satchels and clothing.

The most obvious consequence of this is that women, and girls in their teens and twenties in particular, are regarded by many - including themselves - as little more than extras on a porn movie set. They are expected to be permanently sexually available in a way that renders any concern over the issue of consent to secondary importance. For example, as the pornography industry started to explode in the mid-1990s, a survey of U.S. college girls showed that 69.8 percent of them had been "verbally coerced" into having "unwanted sex"; in the United Kingdom in 2006, 33 percent of all women say that they have been forced into sex.

In other words, rape has been normalized, a trend which is reflected in ever more lenient prosecution and sentencing procedures. Moreover, women are increasingly expected to agree to practices - such as anal sex and faux lesbianism - which the vast majority of them find of no pleasure or even profoundly repulsive.

Secondly, pornography has made sex more violent. In a study detailed in David G. Myers's authoritative tome "The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty," Illinois psychologist David Duncan randomly selected 50 pornographic movies from a local video store, and broke them down by scene. The average movie contained 18 scenes, 20 percent of which contained violence and 30 percent of which contained "acts of degradation."

On the Internet, things are even more extreme. A search for "sex + toys + torture" in Google yielded 4.85 million results. Journalist Lila Rajiva and academic Susan L. Brison are just two of many to have noted that a large number of the pictures that were flashed round the world from American-run prisons in Iraq were virtually indistinguishable from hardcore pornography, a fact that has not been lost on many commentators in the United States, from Rush Limbaugh to Frank Rich of *The New York Times*.

A Denmark-based sex site vaunts pages with titles like "needle torture," "pregnant bondage" and "drunk from the toilet"; a favorable review of products available from UK high street sex shop chain Ann Summers observes that "some of them look like instruments of torture...some of them are." In a relatively recent issue (Dec. 15-22, 2004), *Time Out*, a London listings and lifestyle magazine, enthused about the latest sexual practices going on in the suburbs of Britain's biggest city, including the rubbing of thorns into genitalia, the insertion of pre-frozen human feces into the anus and other similar trends whose relation to torture seems much stronger than to sex as conventionally understood by most people.

Thirdly, there has been a substantial shift in women's perceptions of self as a result of pornography: increasingly, they are unhappy with their most obviously female biological features, and are resorting to plastic surgery to change them. Breast augmentation is now the third most common surgical operation in the United States, with 291,000 operations carried out in 2005, despite concerns over the safety of such procedures; in the United Kingdom, the number of breast enlargement operations carried out rose by 51.4 percent in one year to 5,655 in 2005.

There has been a pronounced rise in the number of surgical interventions in the labial region, too: the hunt for the so-called "designer vagina" has been almost entirely fueled by pornography, as a specialist in this area, Dr Ronald Blatt, medical director of the Manhattan Centre for Vaginal Surgery, matter-of-factly explained to MSNBC.com in June 2005: "People have suggested that they've looked at Playboy or Penthouse... They come in and say, 'Make it look like that.'"

This reflects a frightening level of insecurity amongst women about some of the most essential parts of their being, but it is a result that is not surprising given the results of another study by Texas A&M researcher Wendy Stock (1995). In a survey of 500 women who had recently viewed pornography, 42 percent said they felt bad about their bodies, 33 percent said that they felt sexually inadequate and 25 percent viewed sex as if it was a performance.

Fourthly, sex has been sped up beyond all recognition. An oft-quoted mid-1990s paper by Hans Bernd-Brosius found that sex in pornographic movies of the 1980s generally lasted around five and a half minutes from first touch to graphic orgasm. In the era of the Internet and mobile telephony, porn has reduced sex to clip-size, something to be downloaded from server to wireless device, increasingly on the move: McSex.

This is not just unrealistic, but again, fatal to women's sexual fulfillment. As most cultures around the world have long known, the overwhelming majority of women thrive on sex that is focused, gentle and replete with physical and verbal stimulation, including kissing, caressing and conversation. In many Eastern cultures, including Hindu, Japanese and Islamic, foreplay - yes, that word - is not just recommended: it is a religious requirement. But pornography is turning thoughtful, loving intercourse into an historical curiosity.

Given all this, the fifth consequence of the massive and unprecedented pornographization of the developed world does not come as too much of a shock: there is a lot less of the real article about. We live, as the Swedish academics Jonas Ridderstrale and Kjell Nordstrom have acerbically summarized, in an era in which Viagra is literally more valuable than gold: the drug for men who cannot otherwise get an erection costs \$11,766 per pound, while gold is a merely \$4,827 (at 2000 prices). The Guardian (23 April 2006) reports that a new generation of drugs, due to hit world markets in three years, promises not just sexual arousal, but a feeling of eagerness and enthusiasm about sex; apparently, this too is something that now needs to be manufactured.

In fact, those doing research in this area cannot fail to notice the glut of surveys which report almost uniformly that people are not interested in sex: they are too tired, disillusioned and insecure about sex to enjoy it. And many of these people are now coalescing into what is a very new social category: that of the "asexual." Asexuality - the condition was the subject of an October 2004 edition of New Scientist - is where an affected person feels no inclination to interact sexually. With anyone. Ever. And if that sounds extreme, then it should be noted that asexuals have come from nowhere to occupy their own distinct and growing place in the sexual continuum: estimates in the United Kingdom and the United States show that between 1 percent and 3 percent of the population is now asexual.

In his much-misunderstood tome, "The End of History and the Last Man," Francis Fukuyama recounts that Alexandre Kojève, whom Fukuyama regards as Hegel's greatest interpreter of the 20th century, believed that once humankind had reached the promised land of material satisfaction, they would essentially revert to a stage of animality, where they "would indulge in love like adult beasts." Thanks to porn, it would appear that we have surpassed this stage. Modern sex is increasingly coercive, violent, demeaning and empty. And for this, all of us - men and women - are paying a scarcely imaginable price. ■

**For more information labia surgery visit the website of Dr. Ronald Blatt at: <http://www.centerforvaginalsurgery.com>**