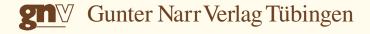# Penetrating Language

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Pornography

von Georg Marko

Penetrating Language

AAA

Buchreihe zu den Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Herausgegeben von Walter Bernhart, Peter Bierbaumer, Alwin Fill, Gudrun Grabher, Arno Heller, Walter Hölbling, Allan James, Bernhard Kettemann, Christian Mair, Annemarie Peltzer-Karpf, Werner Wolf und Wolfgang Zach

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Georg Marko

Penetrating Language

A Critical Discourse Analysis
of Pornography

Stadt **G R A Z** *Wissenschaft*

Das Land
Steiermark
➔ Wissenschaft

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Prologue

Chorus: What are you doing here?

Me: Adding the last strokes to this book, the publication of my PhD dissertation.

Chorus: What is it about?

Me: The language of pornography.

Chorus: Why pornography?

Me: Because it is a culturally contested topic. I have always wanted to do research the results of which could have some social and political significance. Secondly, I wanted to write about something considered interesting by a wider audience so as to make people who are normally unaware of the workings of language get interested in a method of linguistic analysis that could prove beneficial for their everyday lives.

Chorus: And why *language*?

Me: I think that a linguistic approach to social phenomena such as pornography can shed some new light on old issues.

Chorus: Why have you chosen the title *Penetrating Language*?

Me: Because… well, probably because *Flying planes can be dangerous*.

Chorus: Huh???

Me: Who or what is doing the penetrating and who or what is being penetrated? And what is penetration anyway?

Chorus: I have seen that your data is taken from magazines bought in 1995 – and this book is published in 2008. Why the large time gap?

Me: If you just look at the finished product, it may be hard to see the long and chequered development behind it – even though some of the inconsistencies you will without doubt detect point to this. When I collected data in England and the United States during research stays there in 1994 and 1995, the focus of my

study was much vaguer and broader. Selecting the best re-
search objects (pornographic short stories), the appropriate
methodology (corpus analysis), and the ideal analytical frame-
work (Critical Discourse Analysis) then took some time. Pre-
paring the corpus (which meant painstakingly typing hundreds
of pornography stories) and developing my own approach to
Critical Discourse Analysis – I realized that I had to deviate
from its trodden paths – delayed my full dedication to the pro-
ject further.

Chorus: Isn't it a historical study then?

Me: Pornography has certainly changed in the last decade, par-
ticularly considering that the time span between the mid-1990s
and 2008 includes the rise of the Internet, which especially
affected the accessibility of erotic discourses considerably. On
the other hand, I suppose that my approach, focusing on funda-
mental patterns of ideas and attitudes in discourses, can reveal
more permanent properties of pornography.

Chorus: What is it like to collect data in a project on pornography?

Me: Tedious and emotionally exhausting because I do not have the
self-confidence to simply walk into an adult bookshop and
quickly find what I am looking for. It literally took me hours to
enter and then I also spent a lot of time in the shops, always
keeping my gaze downwards in order not to acknowledge that I
was actually there. I always felt like telling everybody, "Well, I
am doing research on pornography, I am not buying it for the
sexual value," but then I was not sure how they would have
taken this. I wanted to limit my visits and I therefore bought as
much as was available in the field I was interested in and as
much as I could afford. Anonymous orders via the Internet
were not an option at the time. I subscribed to one magazine,
but that was just to get started right at the beginning and
seemed not a viable solution for all the material.

Chorus: Are you afraid that your research will be misunderstood? Just
think of some of the reactions to your talks on the subject and
remember the magazine using the headline "First porn doctor."

Me: There are several paths of misunderstanding, some of which I
have already experienced. Some people (interestingly mainly
men) in the academia seem to equate the analysis of a social
phenomenon with the endorsement of the latter, thus deeming

my topic inappropriate. Interestingly, I had similar reactions from non-academics, but here the evaluation was positive. Many males, on learning what I was studying, said, "You've come to the right man." They automatically assumed that I, as a male, would necessarily try to flesh out the juicy details of the language of pornography. It was impossible for them to imagine that what I was doing could be critical and distanced to the object. It gave me a new (and not really appreciated) street credibility.

Chorus: Could the book be read as pornography itself so that readers could be disgusted, embarrassed or even aroused?

Me: I am positive that the seriousness and rigidity of my analytic approach as well as the style of data presentation will mitigate such effects and that they will also discourage using quotes as porn proper (and, well, there are cheaper forms available). It is important to find a balance between curiosity – I guess most readers will be interested in what pornography may look like – and a scientifically distanced perspective. The curiosity should make it easier to delve into the book. But eventually, it is important to bear in mind that the analyses serve to answer crucial social and political questions and do not simply present the language of pornography, exhibiting it as fascinating and/or disgusting phenomenon.

Chorus: What about the scientific community? I have got the feeling that many will see your approach as half-hearted, doing CDA, but focusing almost exclusively on textual dimensions, and using quantitatively-oriented corpus linguistics without applying proper statistical procedures and without paying too much attention to representativeness.

Me: I accept these critical points without denying that I am dissatisfied with how I handled them. To a certain extent, the project was too ambitious right from the start, especially for a single researcher. But I decided to carry on despite these weaknesses because I think that the research still yields very interesting insights into the discourse of pornography and its potential ideological implications and secondly because I wanted to show what a large-scale, strictly data-based study in Critical Discourse Analysis could look like, demonstrating what might go wrong and where there is room for improvement in the process.

The research process was like an incomplete hermeneutic circle: I had a vague idea, I decided on a method and an approach, I collected material, the idea became more concrete, the method and the approach were refined… but at a certain stage it was – for mundane reasons – not possible to go back and collect more material. So particularly in the area of corpus analysis I got stuck at a certain point. I am well aware that compiling a corpus by simply including as much as is easily available within a short time span, accepting that a comparative corpus is only a third of the length of the main corpus et cetera must seem inexcusably naïve, at best. Anyway, I am walking the thin line between originality, ambition and insanity.

Chorus: Wasn't the book longer? Where has all the data gone? And the glossary?

Me: I 'outsourced' these parts to reduce the length of the book. But you can find all the data and the glossary on my homepage at http://www.uni-graz.at/georg.marko.

Chorus: Is this the first book you have written yourself.

Me: Yes. I have edited a few volumes, but no work produced entirely on my own. Well, and then this is not really true either because I may have done the research and the writing, but there are a few people who have indirectly contributed by providing valuable critical feedback, most notably my two supervisors Professor Alwin Fill and Professor Bernhard Kettemann – all hat tipping to them – and by supporting me in all possible ways in the publication process, most notably Angelika Pfaller and Susanne Fischer at Gunter Narr Verlag. And then there are of course those who created the social, financial and emotional environment and atmosphere necessary to live and prosper and do such work. So all thanks and more to my parents, my sisters, my grandmother, all my family and friends and the great sunbears of this world.

… hey… what are you doing there?

Chorus: Don't worry – we are just turning the page to get it started…

Introduction

Does pornography objectify women, representing them as passive mindless things at the mercy of male sexual agents, or does it dive into women's sexual subjectivities, revealing their innermost thoughts, desires and sensations? Does pornography subjugate women farther under the patriarchal yoke, or is it a potential path of female emancipation? Does pornography corrupt the values our society is built on or does it reveal the hypocrisy of traditional morality? Does pornography put sexuality above love, thus *destroying* relationships, or does it provide a remedy for sexual problems, thus *saving* relationships? Does pornography cause sex crimes or does it provide a safety valve for potential sexual assaultants?

There are a host of questions in the discussion on pornography, questions that are evidence of the fact that it represents an ideal stage for cultural struggles over – among other things – sexuality, gender, morality, and representations. Although answers to these questions are primarily informed by deeply rooted ideological views of sexual morality, the different camps have never been reluctant to cite scientific studies corroborating their positions. Research into pornography therefore plays a seminal role in the debate, even if walking on ideologically swampy ground.

This book presents further research into pornography. Like the research that has been done before, it tries to find answers to some of the questions emerging from the socio-political debate, in particular those centring on the issue of objectification. Unlike prior research, however, it starts at the very thing that constitutes pornography, namely at language. It is the first large-scale study of pornography in the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA). CDA assumes that being exposed to language and particular ways of using language has an effect on the receivers' knowledge and views of the world. By focusing on the 'nitty gritty' details of the language used in a large collection of pornographic short stories, I will therefore reveal aspects likely to be contained in the conceptions of the world or, more specifically, of sexuality and female and male sexual roles created in consumers of pornography, partly in comparison to those of consumers of the allegedly softer form of sexual representation, namely of erotica.

The book also has a secondary objective: Critical Discourse Analysis may be solidly founded on a set of social goals but it still sadly lacks a common linguistic metatheory and methodology. Authors of book-length analyses therefore are also confronted with the task of contributing to CDA's metatheoretical and methodological basis (cf. Fowler 1996: 8f.). Such a contribution involves making fundamental principles explicit and discussing them as well as using the analyses to demonstrate their relevance and feasibility. In the process, the analyses are also intended to evidence how a quantitatively-oriented linguistic discourse analysis of sexual texts may provide an alternative route to the scientific study of sexuality, going beyond the sexological paradigm of laboratory experiments and questionnaire surveys, but without resorting to intuitive speculation.

A caveat: the methodological and metatheoretical (side)focus does not imply that I will present the study as a perfect model. On the contrary, I will try to be as critical as possible, making shortcomings, errors, misconceptions, inconsistencies and other types of 'incubi' haunting science as explicit as possible.

The book is divided into two large parts, the first one dedicated to the theoretical background and the second one to the analyses proper. Part 1 proceeds from a description of the pornography debate and a review of research into pornography and its methodologies to the introduction of Critical Discourse Analysis as a valuable and viable alternative approach. It further outlines the basic features of CDA as used in my research. Part 1 ends in a set of hypotheses.

Part 2 takes up the hypotheses and examines whether they can be upheld in an analysis of a corpus of pornographic short stories and a comparative analysis of a corpus of erotica.

PART 1:

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

I   Discussing Pornography: Why People are Arguing about Pornography

> Their basic query is not what about equality but what about orgasm.
>
> Catharine MacKinnon (1992b: 134)

There has always been a heated controversy over pornography, raising many issues viewed and approached very differently. A study of pornographic representations cannot afford to ignore these discussions because no matter what my intentions are, simply by studying the phenomenon I am entering the debate. A thorough presentation of why and how pornography has become a topic so fiercely and controversially discussed, which aspects have come to the fore and appear to be particularly relevant and delicate, and which groups have participated in the debate will pave the way for an analysis which is not purely and blindfoldedly academic but which is aware of its social role, its obligations and its responsibilities. This chapter is intended to fulfil these requirements.

After presenting my own definition of pornography, I will describe the issues that are at the core of the matter and on which the four main camps strongly disagree.

1   Defining pornography

Justice Potter Stewart, unable to come up with his own definition of pornography, resorted to the infamous characterization, "I know it, when I see it" (Johann/Osanka 1989: 3). This is an indication that, though we may have an intuitive grasp of the concept of pornography, defining it is not as straightforward a task. It no longer simply is the writing (-*graphy*) of prostitutes (*porno-*) (cf. Linz/Malamuth 1993: 2), as its etymology suggests, but today's pornography is a complex social phenomenon.

Although past centuries saw texts and art with aspects that could be classified as pornographic (cf. Kendrick 1987, Hunt 1993, McNair 1996, Tang 1999), these artefacts lacked many of the features of current pornography, which have only emerged in the 20th century and particularly since the sexual revolution of the 1960s as a result of technological progress and the changing cultural climate. I will restrict myself to pornography as a contemporary phenomenon in my study.

In the following, I will give six defining features of pornography that distinguish it from similar cultural products.

1.1   Ontological status

Pornography is not a sexual practice itself, it is just a common way of talking or writing about sexual practices, a common way of *representing* sexual practices. Pornography is thus, to use the technical term, a sexual **discourse**[1] (cf. Cameron 1990a, 1992a, Cameron/Frazer 1992, Hardy 1998), with the headword in *pornography* being *graphy*, i.e. the writing, rather than *porno*, i.e. the whores (cf. Kappeler 1986: 2).

Although I consider this an essential feature of pornography, it has to be mentioned that the difference between represented practices and practices proper is becoming more and more blurred and there are many that say a discourse can also become a sexual practice in itself (cf. Baudrillard 1990: 28ff., MacKinnon 1992a: 462, both cit. in Bristow 1997: 145, 153). The borderline becomes particularly fuzzy with telephone sex or interactive sex chats on the Internet.

1.2   Content

Pornography's content is first and foremost sexual explicitness, i.e. the immediate and unmitigated description of the physical, physiological and perceptive (i.e. what it looks like and what it 'feels like') details of sexuality (cf. Williams 1979: 103, cit. in Einsiedel 1988: 109). Although other material, e.g. 'high' literature on sex or erotica, might also feature unmasked sexuality, pornography usually exceeds it in the sheer quantity of sexually explicit scenes (by three to eighteen times, according to a content analysis by Smith 1976: 19f.).

1.3   Intention (on a primary level)

Pornography's main (and perhaps its sole) intention is to arouse readers (cf. Williams 1979: 103, cit. in Einsiedel 1988: 109, Soble 1985: 8, Christensen 1990: 1, McNair 1996: 57). Unlike other sexual discourses such as educational material or erotica, pornography lacks any culturally revered aspects: it does neither impart scientific knowledge of sexuality nor does it have any aesthetic or literary pretensions (cf. *Attorney*

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[1] For the time being, it suffices to define a discourse as a common way of representing things such as sexual practices (but see section III.1.2).

General's Commission on Pornography and Obscenity: Final Report 1986, cit. in McNair 1996: 55). As a consequence, pornography is usually limited to certain forms of use: it is likely to be included in masturbation or in other sexual activity's initial phase (cf. *Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* 1970: 266, cit. in Hunter/ Saunders/Williamson 1993: 227, Masters/Johnson/Kolodny 1992: 354).

1.4   Intention (on a secondary level)

On a secondary level, pornography is intended to yield profits for the producer. It thus is a commercial, mass-marketed product, unlike, for example, AIDS information leaflets. (For a detailed analysis of the economic sides of pornography, cf. Hebditch/Anning 1988, Johann/ Osanka 1989: ch. 2 & 3, Itzin 1992a, Dines 1995, 1998a, Lane 2000.)

1.5   Semiotic modes

Having always been fast in colonizing new technologies of communication (cf. McNair 1996: 44), pornography comes in many formats/media combining verbal, visual and auditory semiotic modes: as books, magazines, comic books, videotapes, audiotapes, interactive CD-ROMs, and Internet sites. This distinguishes it from erotica, which usually are just published as books.

1.6   Contextual features

Pornography has typical contextual features concerning appearance and places of dissemination. It usually comes in packaging featuring pictures of nude women, whether book, videotape, or CD-ROM, and it is restricted to particular places, namely to adult shops or to certain areas in general shops, e.g. corner top shelves of newsagents, or specially signed areas in video shops.

Particularly conservatives and feminists have mentioned further distinctive features, mainly concerned with potential effects on community morality and the users' social environment. Pornography is thus defined as perverted and obscene or degrading and humiliating to women (cf. Segal 1990: 30, Dworkin/MacKinnon 1988: 138f., cit. in Russo 1998a: 14). To include such aspects in a definition, however, weakens any argumentation critical of pornography since the latter's negative effects are quasi *a priori* proved. The argumentation is in danger of

becoming circular, and empirical studies would be rendered meaningless and thus redundant. If pornography is defined, for instance, as misogynist, then we cannot find it to be non-sexist through research (a female form would also be inconceivable by definition). Dines and Jensen (1998b: 65) are right in claiming that it is the task of research to show that pornography in the former sense has the features attributed to it by feminists and/or conservatives.

I will not distinguish between different forms of pornography on the basis of explicitness and uncommonness of the practices represented in this book. The distinction between **hard-core** and **soft-core** (cf. Easton 1994: xvi, Hardy 1998: 50, Dines 1998a: 63) might be economically and legally justified – hard-core pornography, for instance, is practically excluded from mainstream distribution outlets in the United States (cf. Dines 1998a: 54) and, in its visual form, prohibited in Britain (cf. Hardy 1998: 51). But from my point of view, the differentiation is a matter of degree and therefore not useful in my project. Besides, it is only valid in pictorial pornography, which means the distinctions mentioned do not apply to written material (cf. Ellis 1988, cit. in Hardy 1998: 50).

The above definition of pornography should be sufficient for prototypically characterizing the object of discussion and analysis and has informed my selection of the data for my project. Although there are borderline cases, they will not figure prominently in my study.

2   The issue and the camps

Opinions are widely divided about many aspects of pornography: about its aesthetic and literary values, its educational usefulness, or its status as a multi-million dollar business. What is at the heart of the debate about pornography, however, are its possible harmful effects: Can porno-graphy trigger patterns of thinking and/or behaviour harmful to society as a whole or to particular groups within society, undermining public morality and/or working in favour of the more powerful social groups?

The delicate nature of pornography's harmfulness – and the reason why it has attracted more attention than that of other media supposed to manipulate their consumers – also lies in its unique link to sexual pleasure. Particularly feminists are afraid that sexualizing the negative effects mitigates them in the consumers' eyes, making them seem less serious – after all, what turns people on cannot be that bad (cf. Kappeler 1986, Itzin 1992a, Russo 1998a). But there is also a second, more general consequence of the connection to sexuality: deprived of its

procreative and purist-religious significance, sexuality has become a major factor in the search for identities in modernity. How I act sexually has become part of how I (choose to) see myself (cf. Baird/Rosenbaum 1991a, Giddens 1992). Anything sexual will therefore be interpreted as going right to the core of one's identity, strongly interacting with other features, particularly with gender and religious and moral affiliations, but also with race and age. This entails that there is a lot at stake in talking about sexuality, or, in other words, sexuality assigns a particular urgency and acuteness to a question.

Generally speaking, we can distinguish the following four camps in the pornography debate:

a.   Christian moralists

b.   Liberals

c.   Anti-pornography feminists

d.   Anti-censorship feminists

They all agree that pornography is harmful if it can make people think, feel and do what they would otherwise not think, feel and do, what might have severe negative consequences for particular individuals (including sexual violence), what might create a cultural atmosphere hostile to certain social groups, and/or what might undermine public morality in general (with the last aspect not of equal relevance to all groups). But to have this negative impact, pornography firstly must contain problematic ideas and secondly there must be a way that the latter influence consumers' minds and acts. The groups' conceptions of these two aspects are radically different, resting on their views on:

i.   Sexual morality

If we have a clear conception of what constitutes morally good sexuality, e.g. that there should be only two participants, then we will reject depictions of sex that deviate from our norm. If our conception of morality is broad and relativist ('everybody should do as they please'), then we will consider most representations of sexuality harmless.

ii.   Language

If we do not believe that linguistic and other semiotic representations, i.e. texts in the broadest sense of the word, have any powerful and consistent effects on people's minds then we consequently will not consider pornography to cause harm. Assuming, on the other hand, that such representations do have an impact on knowledge and action, we

will assign more power to pornography in the dissemination of certain ideas about sexuality and in the formation of certain behavioural patterns in its consumers.

The perspectives that the four camps take on these two issues directly lead to conclusions concerning the need for political and legal measures in connection with porn.

iii.   **Regulation**

The discussion about how to handle pornography legally and politically has mainly centred on the principle of free speech (the First Amendment to the American constitution, cf. Hunter/Saunders/Williamson 1993: 199, Easton 1994: ch. 6 and 10; other countries have similar principles, even if not constitutionally manifested, e.g. in Britain, cf. Easton 1994: 122). The question is whether regulating pornography amounts to a violation of the individual's right to express what s/he thinks or whether there are aspects that disqualify pornography as a free speech case, comparable to incitement to hate, lying, or libel, where the amount of harm justifies the overruling of the freedom of speech (cf. Baird/Rosenbaum 1991a: 12, Hunter/Saunders/Williamson 1993: 199, Easton 1994: 62-64).

The importance of pornography as a political and legal issue is documented by the fact that there have been various commissions to lead investigations into the field (cf. Einsiedel 1988, Johann/Osanka 1989: ch. 13). The first American commission (Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, cf. *Report of the Commission* 1970) and the British one (Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship, cf. Williams 1979) reflected the liberal atmosphere of the time, finding pornography not to be harmful and therefore pleading for a deregulation of laws (cf. Johann/ Osanka 1989: 437ff.). By contrast, the 1986 Attorney General's Commission on Pornography and Obscenity in the USA (cf. *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography and Obscenity: Final Report* 1986), in the conservative climate of the Reagan era, came to a different conclusion (cf. Berger/Searles/Cottle 1992: 25, Lisa Duggan, in Carmen et al. 1986: 16).

These three aspects capture the central differences between the four groups. But there are three further topics, which partly logically follow from the positions on the first three issues but are still highly relevant.

iv.   **Positive effects**

Although the issue in the debate is harmfulness, there has always been mention of possible positive effects that pornography may have, particularly by those groups that are not strongly opposed to it.

v.   **Alternatives**

Depending on the conception of what is wrong with pornography, there can be suggestions for improving it, mitigating or erasing its negative sides without, however, constraining some of its basic features (e.g. the sexual explicitness).

vi.   **Sex workers**

Many theorists and activists have voiced concerns about those women and men working in the porn industry or, more generally, in the sex industry and about possible hardships they have to endure in modelling and acting.

The four camps have adduced different studies to corroborate their positions. As I will dedicate a whole chapter to what kind of research has been conducted to prove or disprove hypotheses concerning the effects of pornography on users and their environment, I will not mention research issues in the description of the different camps.

I will now characterize the positions of the four main camps particularly with regard to the six points described above.

2.1   Christian moralists

> For those who believe in God, in His absolute supremacy as the Creator and Lawgiver of life, in the dignity and destiny which He has conferred upon the human person, in the moral code that governs sexual activity – for those who believe in these "things," no argument against pornography should be necessary.
>
> Charles H. Keating, Jr. (1991: 28)

The Christian moralist or conservative views on pornography are particularly common among those with strong religious affiliations. It was the dominant anti-pornography position up to the 1960s and was regaining ground in the 1980s with the conservative backlash of the Reagan-and-Thatcher era in the US and the UK.

2.1.1 Sexual morality

At the core of the conservative argumentation is the belief that moral principles are not relative – i.e. everybody should do as they please – but absolute. These *a priori* moral laws apply universally, which means they are valid for everybody everywhere at any time, mostly because they are seen as God-given or, secularly speaking, as logically deducible or nature-given (cf. Linz/Malamuth 1993: 7f.).

Christian moralists interpret sexuality as God's gift and there are absolute moral laws regulating it. Any social practice violating these laws is perverse, obscene and/or pathological – hence the moralists' objection to 'unusual' sexual practices, to homosexuality, to promiscuity, and to artificial contraception. Generally, positive sexuality consists of penile-vaginal intercourse of husband and wife within marriage with the purpose or possible effect of conception. In less rigid views, sexuality is also positive if it does not (only) serve the satisfaction of immediate bodily desires but is the expression of the love between two human beings. As a consequence of the greater stress on the spiritual dimension of the human being, any overemphasis on bodily matters is rejected and recreational sex is regarded with suspicion. Hence sexual abstinence is highly esteemed (cf. Linz/Malamuth 1993: 7f., 16ff.).

2.1.2 Language

Christian moralists, without much theoretical ado, assume that what we read and watch will affect our thinking and our behaviour in an immediate one-to-one fashion. The conception of the effects is rather mechanistic and passive, as can be seen from the similes adduced in connection with pornographic representations, namely that of infection with a disease or poisoning (cf. LaHaye 1991: 181).

Against this background, pornography must be regarded as dangerous and harmful. It features views of sexuality that conservatives do not condone and which they find might, if widely accepted, threaten the social-religious institutions of marriage and the family and thus the very fabric of our society. And widely accepted they will be because representations are considered to be extremely influential on the consumer. He will passively adopt perverse views through his consumption, he will act accordingly, and he will thus become the agent in the moral corruption of the world.

Pornography thus practically undermines the concepts of love, affection, commitment and fidelity, even ridicules them and emancipates sex from love and shame (cf. Drakeford/Hamm 1973, cit. in Johann/

Osanka 1989: 23, Parker 1991: 184). Or, in John H. Court's words (1985; cit. in Johann/Osanka 1989: 262), in its effects pornography is

life		social
relationship		environment
family		community
human	**ANTI-**	culture
woman		conscience
children		God
sex		

The promotion of the dissociation of physical sex from its emotional and social context is something that probably not only Christian conservatives bemoan but which other groups – including women-oriented groups – also find problematic. So although the conservative position is often polemically described as extremist, there are elements that can be found elsewhere, too (and probably are relatively widespread).

2.1.3 Regulation

As far as the legal side of the issue is concerned, conservatives are in favour of the state legally intervening, censoring material that constitutes a danger to public morality. The instruments of censorship are **obscenity laws**. These are criminal laws focusing on *obscene* material rather than on pornography *per se*. Obscenity laws were introduced to exempt material from the right to free speech on the grounds that it corrupted and depraved consumers, violated accepted community standards of decency, and just served prurient interests. These laws are still in power in both Britain and the United States, though in the 20th century – the 1960 acquittal of Penguin Books for publishing a full version of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* playing an important role here (cf. Hunter/Saunders/Williamson 1993: 148ff.) – they were mitigated by amendments or interpretations to the effect that literary, artistic, educational or scientific values qualify an otherwise obscene work to go scathless (cf. Dunn 1987: 394f., Hunter/Saunders/Williamson 1993: ch. 5 and 7, Easton 1994: ch. 12).

The fuzzy concepts contained in obscenity laws – *prurient interests*, *accepted community standards of decency*, etc. – have always left room for interpretation for executive organs and courts. It is my impression that conservatives assume that common sense ethics will fill the gaps left by this fuzziness and that obscenity laws thus indirectly serve their views on morality. They will therefore leave the laws in place.

2.1.4 Alternatives/Positive effects/Sex workers

For hard-sot conservatives the problem is obscenity and they subsume all sexually explicit representations under it. Consequently, criticism does not only encompass pornography as the most extreme form of sexual explicitness but extends to erotica and also to information material distributed at schools and elsewhere on topics such as contraception, abortion, or homosexuality. There are no alternative routes designed: sexual expression should preferably be suppressed.

It does not come as a surprise that Christian moralists do not deal with possible positive effects of pornography: there simply are none. They are not concerned about those working in the sex industry either. The latter are more or less assumed to have been seduced.

2.2   Liberals

> My personal sexual revolution will come when I do what I really
> want to do sexually, don't do what I don't want to do, let others
> do what they want to do, with a whole heart.
>
> Sallie Tisdale (1995: 247)

Liberal positions on pornography have probably always existed alongside conservative ones, functioning as their antagonists. They have, however, come strongly to the fore in the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Contrary to Hunter, Saunders and Williamson's claim (1993: 162), liberalism is a relatively heterogeneous position in the debate with views ranging from the libertine appreciation of pornography to a mere rejection of its legal regulation. I will include divergences where necessary.

2.2.1 Sexual morality

Liberal morality is generally relativistic and individualistic. *Relativistic* means that no superordinate authority determines what is really good or bad. So values do not exist in the outside world but just for the individuals who have them. *Individualistic* means that the main concern is the freedom of individuals, who should be able to fulfil their potential and live according to their own needs and desires as long as their actions do not infringe the liberties of others (John Stuart Mill's harm principle, cf. Easton 1994: 1ff.).

For sexual morality this entails that everybody has the right to engage in any form of sexuality they like as long as no one is involved against their own free will. For some, sex is impossible without the

social context of a loving long-term relationship, for others it is a purely bodily pleasure best enjoyed without any commitments. We might prefer one lifestyle to the other but we are not in a position to judge whether one is better than the other. And neither the state nor any other institution is entitled to intervene in this private matter unless a sexual practice involves non-consenting partners or harm to other people.

Liberals tend to have a very positive view of sexuality. This is partly a result of their biologistic conception of it. Sex is regarded as a natural, biologically-given drive. From the naturalness of sexuality liberals derive the maxim to view it as positive and fundamentally good. We should therefore rejoice in sexuality and its diversity instead of despising or even prosecuting anyone who has chosen a different set of sexual practices for her/himself (liberals do not see a contradiction in sexuality's biological foundation and the diversity of sexual lifestyles).

2.2.2 Language

Like conservatives, liberals have a rather simplistic common sense view of the power of language. Fiction – and pornography obviously is subsumed under this category – is "non-propositional" (Soble 1991: 96), i.e. not asserting anything about reality. Since recipients are aware of its fictitious nature, porn is incapable of influencing consumers' views of reality, let alone their behaviour. It is thus more a sort of daydreaming (cf. Gagnon 1977, Schmidt 1985: 20-22, both cit. in Ertel 1990: 86).

For liberals, pornography is thus the representation of diverse sexual practices, reflecting individuals' diverse sexual tastes. The sexual acts depicted in pornography are generally not seen as problematic: non-consenting and extraordinary sex is rare and, if represented, it is usually part of a ritualized form of behaviour such as sado-masochism, which is violence and dominance played out and not enacted (cf. Michelson 1986: 168, Smith 1993: 82, Rubin 1995: 245f.). And consenting sex, in whatever form it is practised, can only be criticized by those believing in absolute sexual values. Pornography, furthermore, just evokes sexual fantasies, but as an apparently fictitious discourse it does not affect us in our sexual behaviour. In sum, pornography does not – or has yet to be proved to – cause harm.

2.2.3 Regulation

Against this background, it does not come as a surprise that liberals favour legal deregulation of pornography. No official institution should decide what people are to watch or read but the latter should take the