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Page 11

SEX, VIOLENCE AND THE MEDIA by H. J. Eysenck and D. K. B. Nias. Maurice Temple Smith, £5.95

It is fashionable, but profoundly mistaken, to link sex and violence in debating the influence of the media (the title of a book I reviewed in *The Freethinker* for June 1978 did the same thing). Manifestations of human violence are usually deplorable; manifestations of sexuality are deplored, but usually wrongly. Treating the two from one standpoint is a manifestation of sex hate. That is not the only defect of this book.

The authors are psychologists of the behaviourist persuasion. They belong to a school that believes in manipulating people, and also in manipulating their environment. Other manipulators (such as the media) arouse their suspicion. Psychologists alone (they tell us) are fitted to experiment in this field and judge the results. They present some interesting findings, but end by falling from their pedestal of scientific objectivity. On the way they frequently contradict themselves. Here is one example.

The Thouless law (we are told on page 97) lays down that doubtful personal beliefs (such as belief in the harmful effect of pornography) tend to be held, or rejected, with extreme rather than intermediate degrees of certainty. There is a polarization effect. Indicating no awareness of the inconsistency, Eysenck and Nias present (on page 240) the results of a large-scale experiment suggesting that in this field the spectrum of opinion goes "right across the board, from one extreme of permissiveness to the other extreme of puritanism, without a break anywhere." Which is one to believe?

In man's evolution, the primitive paleocortex or lower brain (concerned with emotions and other elemental feelings) became enveloped by the neocortex (introducing rational thought, self-consciousness and adaptability). "We thus have two largely separate and independent systems controlling behaviour, the old-fashioned, primitive, but very powerful emotional-conditioned system, and the new-fangled, recent, cognitive system". Opposition between these systems produces neurosis. I am not competent to judge the scientific truth of this hypothesis; but I note that it puts down sexuality and emotion by depositing them firmly with the lower, primitive cortex. It does the same for aggression, but what would the human race have achieved for itself if not powered by these forces?

The research findings presented in this book derive from three types of study. *Field studies* report....

Page 12

.....on behaviour which occurs naturally. Results vary from study to study "and are generally inconclusive". *Experimental field studies* are designed by researchers who manipulate the factors occurring naturally. "Researchers have not yet explicitly designed experimental field studies on the effects of pornography". *Laboratory experiments* have scientific vigour, but are wholly artificial. They reveal that after exposure to erotica both sexes exhibit changes. "For males, these changes included a decrease in the tendency to feel composed, innerly calm, interested and friendly.

For females, the changes included a decrease in the tendency to feel composed, unconcerned, lazy and interested. Relative to males, the females were more likely to report changes in the direction of feeling shocked, irritated and disgusted". One study noted "a decrease in mirth".

book confirms it. We all know that looking at sexually explicit material can arouse us. Again, this book confirms it. If asked, most people would answer that these effects are complicated and work in both directions. Our authors agree. "The issue is very complex, with pornography having a mixture of good, bad and unknown effects". The same, they tell us, applies to violence. The obvious is scientifically confirmed.

To be fair, our authors do give some useful technical instruction about the precise ways media exposure may influence people. These include: *desensitization* (counter-conditioning), *modelling* (the desire to imitate), *identification* (the image corresponds to something we were, or want to be), *disinhibition* (public acceptance of what we thought forbidden frees our desires), *triggering* (the compressed emotional spring is released), *catharsis* (respected by the ancient Greeks but not by Eysenck and Nias), *substitution* (giving us a "respectable" equivalent to what we desire serves as a safety-valve), and *satiation* (over-exposure to safe equivalents drains desire).

As we shall see, the book ends with a specific, firm recommendation. How odd then that it abounds with contradictory findings. One study finds that the more children watch TV the less aggressive they are found to be. The explanation is simple. Active children watch fewer programmes than passive children! A spate of burglaries followed the TV showing of *Break-in*. Was this a degenerate crime thriller? No. It was a programme designed to help citizens protect their property by demonstrating the techniques used by burglars! A 1976 study by Gerbner and Gross found that constant exposure to TV will give people the impression that the world is a more violent place than it really is, and that this will cause them anxiety and encourage paranoid feelings about their fellow-citizens. It sounds reasonable, but is attacked by Eysenck and Nias. Evidence for the first part of the theory has not been established, they tell us. "

The second part of the theory conflicts with the "desensitization" evidence that exposure to TV violence leads to a decrease rather than an increase in anxiety. When the only competent guides disagree, what are the rest of us to think?

That a show of violence may be socially *beneficial* because of its aversive effect is admitted by our authors. Some people at least may be pushed by it in the opposite direction: "disliking violence even more than they did before, being brought face to face with its ugly consequences". It is the same with sex. Exposed to "perverted" sex in one study, subjects experienced an attitude change with "the realization that unconventional sex, specifically group sex and homosexuality was not for them". The Weber-Fechner law shows the futility of attempts at social control. Perception of stimuli (visual, tactile, auditory etc) is a function of the amount of similar stimulation experienced on previous occasions. A single candle lit in a room where 100 candles burn will be unperceived; in a totally dark room it will transform the scene. "Even a single exposure to pornography may have a lasting effect on sexual attitudes and behaviour". One thing can be guaranteed. Whatever social controls may be imposed on pornography, no one will pass through life without exposure to it-and that is likely to arrive in childhood.

The fact that the findings of psychologists are inconsistent and even contradictory does not prevent Eysenck and Nias from deserting in the final chapter their role as scientists and proffering political advice. They emerge as prejudiced human beings; their innate conviction being that *l'appetit vient en mangeant*. Scruples are felt: "These recommendations inevitably imply certain social value judgments; in this the present chapter differs from those that precede it".

The main recommendation (on page 255) is for more censorship. "Such censorship already exists, to some extent, but it needs to be strengthened. . ." A little earlier (on page 219) the authors had recorded a reverse conclusion: "If the aim of censorship is to reduce arousal, then it appears to have the opposite effect".

The book proposes an ingenious new system of censorship. Instead of vague formulas like the "deprave and corrupt" test of the present law, the authors urge scientific precision. A chart allocates penalty points according to what is depicted in the material under examination. "Manual manipulation of female breast, over clothes" rates 4.5 points, while the tricky feat of "Sexual intercourse, man behind woman" attracts 12.2. (If the copulators are face to face their rating drops to 8.3). Top score of 15.0 is awarded to "Mutual oral manipulation of genitals to mutual orgasm". The authors concede that their scale would need to be modified to.....

Page 13

.....account for elements such as use of force or the tender age of participants. Naively they say "there is no difficulty in that". Can scientific foolishness go further?

The truth is that we are all conditioned by everything we experience. Television, films, books form part of our environment. The complex effect of the lifetime environment is beyond computation. Those who claim the right to manipulate our experience of life by censorship bear a heavy onus of proof. All this book shows is that they are still far from discharging it.

FRANCIS BENNION