

The Freethinker - Vol 103 No. 1983

Page 42

Review

The Influence of Pornography on Behaviour Edited by Maurice Yaffe and Edward C. Nelson.
Academic Press, £14

If confronted with a book about the influence of Horlicks on behaviour, what should we expect? We might start by feeling surprised that Horlicks, that noted soporific, had any influence at all on behaviour. Then we would reflect that because someone has written a book on the subject there must be something in it. People do not write books for nothing. So we would look forward to reading a balanced treatment, setting forth the good things about Horlicks and (if any) the bad.

A reader with such expectations about this book will be disappointed. It is solely concerned with the bad things about pornography. We all know what they are. Porn (or so the law maintains) depraves and corrupts the consumer. That is no doubt his own fault. But then porn affronts and outrages those who unwillingly encounter it. That is not their fault, and they need protection. Finally, and worst, porn (so it is said) may inflame the consumer to such an extent that he is impelled to rush forth and commit a rape or other violation.

Are there any good things about porn? If there are, or even if there might possibly be, you won't find them discussed here. There are ten learned contributors, but not one of them tells us how the quality of porn might be improved so as to

Page 43

increase the consumer's sexual satisfaction, or further abate his neurotic disorder, or even administer an increased quota of innocent pleasure. As ever, the impulse is either to attack porn mantled in virtue or defend it with ashen face, guiltily. In between it is true there are the scientists who discuss porn scientifically, as one might with averted eyes dissect a tapeworm.

Does it matter? Yes. It matters because here we are in the realm of oppression. We are in that area where interferers stop other people doing what they want. The interferers operate nowadays in one of two ways: the first respectable, the other disreputable.

The respectable way of porn-prevention is by democratically enacted law. You may not agree with the law-but at least you have the comfort of knowing that it is the product of the best system mankind has yet been able to devise for enabling a society to govern itself.

The disreputable way is by the fashionable but despotic medium of anarchic direct action. Self-opinionated busybodies in ever-increasing numbers take it upon themselves to bypass democracy. There is a crude form of tyranny, and if it should succeed in establishing itself we can say goodbye to free government. No philosophic distinction is to be found between a lynch mob of the Ku-Klux-Klan and a sex-shop burning mob of Women Against Rape.

This collection of essays is directed to behavioural psychologists, criminologists, social scientists, lawyers, art historians and politicians, among others. A mixed target indeed. So we have Peter Webb telling the art historians that most large museums possess (but of course do not display) trays of stone penises hacked by Victorian curators from dug-up classical statuary. We have Edward C. Nelson explaining to the behavioural psychologists that some fortunate males can consistently produce fairly large erectile responses to self-induced sexual fantasies. Neither fact, absorbing though it is, has much to do with the influence of pornography on behaviour. This is true of a great deal of the material assembled here.

There are other disparities. The content of many of the pieces overlaps, and the editorial control is generally lax. Some of the contributions are well-written (for example an elegant defence of freedom of speech by Antony Grey); while others are not (here one might pick out a piece on sex education by Dorothy M. Dallas, whose prose style resembles but is slightly inferior to that of Mary Whitehouse).

Nevertheless there are some good things. The most substantial contribution, taking up nearly one-third of the book, is an impressive review of the psychological literature by Edward C. Nelson. One of his findings as to the effect of pornography on behaviour should cause the direct action brigade to ponder:

. . . these studies suggest that individuals who deal with provocation and stress through some form of direct action rather than thought are more likely to be adversely affected by portrayals of sexual violence and to engage in actual assaultive behaviours such as rape.

The book is short on conclusions. Pornography (defined by one contributor as "books you read with one hand") does not have a single set of consequences. Even for those who use it frequently, it can form only a tiny proportion of the mass of their lifetime experience. The book does not succeed in answering the question implied by its title, but that failure should surprise no one.

FRANCIS BENNION