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OUTLOOK

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PEACE &
DEVELOPMENT



The Pope gives Liberation Theology a Lift

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Religion on the rocks at the ABC?
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Violence against women in films

Responding to the male violence of our visual culture

One aspect of the debate over whether film and television cause violence which has been overlooked until now is highlighted in this article by PETER BENTLEY of the National Catholic Research Council.

WHAT can be done about the increasing level of violence in our society? Why is it happening?

Those questions were posed by Barbara Mead in an article entitled 'The Christian Response to the Violent Society' which appeared in the *Catholic Leader* last year.

The primary answer she gave was related to the excessive alienation of certain individuals from society and their reaction to that alienation.

It seems to me that television, film and video can increase the isolation and alienation of the individual — although whether this leads to violence is another matter.

But there is another aspect to this discussion which Columban Father Cyril Halley takes up when he points to the high incidence of male violence. He notes that the perpetrators of unspecific 'mindless' violence are usually males.

'At present it seems that legislation, academic debate and public hysteria is not preventing the production of films with violent sexual images. Many groups are providing information and promoting awareness, but it seems that the majority of people are still unaware of the manipulative power of the visual medium.'

'Obviously our culture, and especially the inculturation process encourages a considerable degree of various types of violence by young males', says Fr Halley,



Violence against women 'seems to work' in Brian De Palma's films

giving as examples competitive sports, motor 'accidents' and for older males, ruthless business and political activities.

'It is also a factor that often the victims of this kind of violence are young girls or women', he says, going on to point out that 'rarely does the *male* characteristic of the violence receive specific attention'. This is something I want to comment on as it appears in the medium of films.

Even in the current debate about video censorship there has been little attention paid to the phenomenon evident in sexually violent videos that they invariably depict male violence.

The intensity of our 'visual lifestyle' has prompted ongoing debate about the type of material presented and its availability. Interestingly, while this debate occurs in the other forms of mass communication, in the second half of the 20th century, film has been the area in which the debate has centred.

The coming of motion pictures in this century means our imagination is no longer needed. Cinema and the television can show us more than we could imagine. While in former times readers of the Bible would have had to create their own visual image of the rape of Tamar or the atrocities committed on the unnamed concubine from Bethlehem, today the written word would be replaced by an explicit visual picture.

The images of sexual violence in the Bible should make us aware of the continuing theme of sexual violence against women throughout history. This theme is now realised in graphic detail on the screen. Tamar is only being remembered by further rape and the concubine is being abused and mutilated in even more bizarre and horrific ways.

Though men are also the victims of violence on the screen it is rare for these attacks to occur in a sexual or erotic

context. Women are the main subjects of sexual violence on the screen.

There has been considerable debate about the nature of pornography. Usually researchers distinguish between pornography which depicts sexual explicitness and violent pornography which depicts coercive sex and/or fuses sexual and physically violent elements.

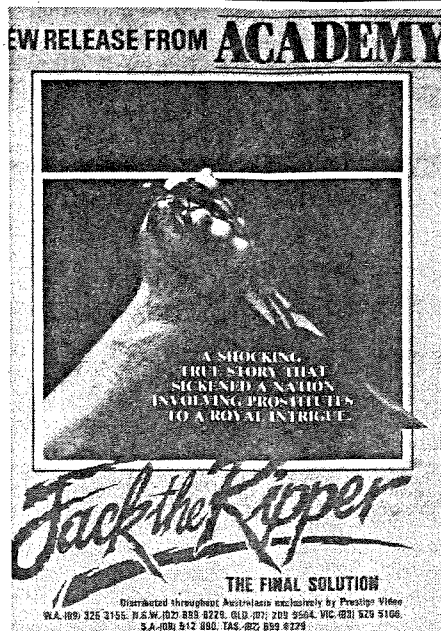
Edward Donnerstein and Daniel Linz have found two categories in films which depict violent pornography. There are those films which show rape and sexual assault against women in the context of enjoyment and there are the films in which the violence is set in a sexual context and there is no obvious enjoyment. Typically a woman in the second category would be slashed and sliced while nude, undressing or wearing little clothing.

The debate about sexual violence and its link to pornography is part of the wider debate concerning censorship. Feminists, libertarians and social researchers represent the main secular proponents in the debate. Though many Christians have links with one or more of these groups, there are essentially distinct Christian approaches to the debate.

'By 1985 over 900 studies had been completed and the overwhelming majority indicated that pornography had a harmful effect. Donnerstein and Malamuth have found that after prolonged depiction of violent sexual scenes their subjects became less sympathetic towards rape and sexual assault victims.'

Feminists have traditionally been pro-censorship because of their opposition to pornography. Generally feminists would be in favour of restricting films which depict subjects such as those mentioned by Donnerstein and Linz in their survey of sexually violent films. Their main reason for opposing these films would be the depiction of violence against women and the possible effect that this visual direction could have on the viewer.

The nature and extent of exploitation or sexploitation (as it is termed in the sex film trade), is also a major concern for feminists. In Australia the debate about exploitation has recently been revived because of media presentation of real life crimes of sexual violence. The Anita Cobby murder and other stereotyped 'archetypal stories' can be contrasted with



media depiction of sexual crimes committed on the less appealing women. It is possible that a movie will be made about the Anita Cobby murder and trial or perhaps someone will make an explicit film detailing the activities of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. In the film industry there is unlimited potential for exploiting publishing interest.

This exploitation can be contrasted with feminist productions like *Broken Mirrors* by Dutch director Marleen Gorris. Sexual violence is still depicted in this film, but the erotic context is removed.

Champions of free expression and libertarianism stress the ideals of choice and freedom from censorship. Al Goldstein the publisher of *Screw* magazine believes that people have the right to watch what they like (though he is opposed to 'kiddie porn' and is not into violent pornography). The Adult Video Association of Australia conducted a campaign in Australia for X-Rated videos under the slogan of 'Keep Fred Nile Out Of Your Bedroom'. There is, however, no simple choice available in this matter at present. The relatively easy access to violent/sex videos and in America to cable TV raise further questions about consent and ages for viewing.

The third group mentioned have provided data, research and experiments on the subject of pornography. By 1985 over 900 studies had been completed and the overwhelming majority indicated that pornography had a harmful effect. Donnerstein and Malamuth have found that after prolonged depiction of violent sexual scenes their subjects became less sympathetic toward rape and sexual assault victims.

This change did not occur in trials where only sexually explicit films were shown. They have concluded that the aspect of violence and not sexual explicitness is the key factor in desensitization. The aspect of

desensitization appears to be well documented, but a significant correlation between the viewing of sexually violent films and the committing of crimes in real life has not been established. The debate has not really progressed much past the controversy surrounding Ian Brady's extensive collection of books on sex and sadism. Did Brady commit sadistic crimes because of the influence of these books or was he a collector of these books because of a sadistic personality?

Even though the subject is becoming more controversial, the depiction of sexual violence against women in films is not decreasing. The increasing development of special effects is making even more bizarre violent situations possible. In the last few years several films have stood out amongst all the horror violent films made.

Brian De Palma has been one of the main directors at the centre of this 'genre'. De Palma's 'whole cinematic vocabulary revolves around sexualised images of violence'. In *Dressed To Kill* Angie Dickinson is slashed to death with a straight edged razor. The razor provided a terrifying picture of disfigurement. De Palma believes that disfigurement is a fate almost worse than death for sexually attractive women.

Body Double contains a sequence of equal terror. The killer is using a drill to open a safe when he is confronted by his female victim. She is drilled to the floor in a manner obvious for its phallic dimension.

De Palma will not accept that anyone could be so influenced by his movies that they could commit a real crime. He has stated that 'anyone who's had contact with true violence knows there's absolutely no connection with artistic violence', and that 'women, over the history of Western Culture, seem to be more vulnerable than men . . . I don't particularly want to chop up women but it seems to work'. Other directors have not been as subtle as De Palma.

The Mad Butcher, is a film about the 'gentle village butcher . . . plagued by sexual fantasies. One by one, the beautiful women who resist his amorous advances vanish. But How?' Another film *Microwave Massacre* brings the butcher to the modern age.

An interesting and challenging film *Blue Velvet* depicts certain aspects of sado-masochism. Though it is not a sensationalist film there are disturbing elements. It may uncover corruption in small town America, but it provides few answers to the depth of depravity portrayed.

Angel Heart depicts sexual violence against men and women, but the context for one female victim is an R-Rated sexual scene. The male victims are not depicted naked or in an erotic fashion.

A more perverse style can be seen in the Australian movie *Slate, Wyn and Me*. The female hostage is held continually in a

confusing tension. At certain times she is in fear of being sexually attacked by her bank robber captors and at other time she is in love with them and enjoying their company. The implicit threat of violence and the depiction of a woman being stimulated in a violent context is just as disturbing as a blatantly violent film. All these films mentioned contain stereotyped presentations and help to reinforce myths about rape and domestic violence.

'Though men are also the victims of violence on the screen it is rare for these attacks to occur in a sexual or erotic context. Women are the main subjects of sexual violence on the screen.'

There has been a significant response to the general issue of pornography, but the aspect of violent pornography has only recently been addressed. Fundamentalists' concern with anything sexual has placed them at the front of the general debate about pornography.

Marcia Pally has commented that 'various churches have been warning us against the dangers of carnality since Augustine . . . The feminist protest took off in the mid-Seventies when women, fresh from the abortion victory, turned their energies to rape and battery . . . "Porn is the theory, rape is the practice", became the slogan. Interestingly many feminists and fundamentalist Christians are united in their opposition to pornography.

Ted Jelen has shown that their union however is based on different rationales. Conservative Christians believe that pornography will ultimately break down the family and morality, while feminists are more concerned with the 'alleged exploitative effects on women'. Alan M. Dershowitz has indicated that this alliance has promoted Jerry Falwell to condemn pornography as violence against women as well as being plain godlessness.

At present it seems that legislation, academic debate and public hysteria is not preventing the production of films with violent sexual messages. Many groups are providing information and promoting awareness, but it appears that the majority of people are still unaware of the manipulative power of the visual medium.

People need to be aware of the problems violent pornography is causing. Reality is possibly being confused with fantasy and vice versa. People are being desensitized to suffering and evil. Individual responsibility and compassion are being diffused.

Christians should be encouraging change and conducting a prophetic ministry, but our reasons for entering the debate should be re-thought. We should not preach from a position of self-righteous indignation or spend all our time co-ordinating and evaluating research projects. Does our approach stem from our belief that every person is made in the image of God? If we participate in or promote the violation of that image we break down our relationship with God and debase ourselves and our relationship with others.

The sexual imbalance will only be redressed if more people become aware of the manipulative reality of the visual medium. Concerned Christians should help to develop discriminating frameworks which allow for the proper discernment of false values and enable the viewer to evaluate films and television for their content, message and presentations of values. ■

Three important new books from



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR OVERSEAS AID

(INCORPORATED IN THE ACT)

1. Bill Hayden, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, writes 'ACFOA's latest publication, *Life After Debt: The International Isolation of Kampuchea*, is a valuable contribution to debate on the critical issue of international debt . . . *Life After Debt* explores the possibility of remedy . . . I have already drawn this book to the attention of colleagues overseas, and I can highly recommend it'.

Life After Debt was written by Les Andrews, Lyle Bastin and Greg Barrett under the direction of ACFOA's development issues study group, which includes Dr Cherry Gertzel, Professor John Neville, John Langmore MP and Senator Richard Alston.

Available from ACFOA, GPO Box 1562, Canberra City, ACT, 2601.

2. *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* by Eva Mysliwiec was launched on February 17 in New York, London, Tokyo and Canberra (at the National Press Club). 'I trust it has a very wide circulation' writes Sir Robert Jackson, the former UN Under-Secretary General, in his preface.

Eva Mysliwiec is a distinguished American academic who spent some years in Kampuchea as field director for Oxfam, UK. She was commissioned to write the book by non-government aid organisations in Europe, North America, Japan and Australia.

At a meeting in Amsterdam in September 1986 they decided to make it part of a world-wide protest against the poverty of international politics, which has condemned Kampuchea to be the only Third World country denied development aid from the UN and the West, because they refuse to recognise the government in Phnom Penh.

This thoughtful, challenging book is available from ACFOA, GPO Box 1562, Canberra City, ACT 2601 for \$12 including postage.

3. *Shelter for the Homeless: Asian-Pacific Needs and Australian Responses* by Dr John Conroy is the first book to bring together the two elements which determine the lives of millions within our region.

Dr Conroy is an economist who has worked in Papua New Guinea, the USA, Australia and Indonesia, where he is now a consultant on urban policy issues with the Ministry of Population and Environment.

His important book has just been published by the Australian Institute of Urban Studies and the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, with assistance from the Federal Government under its program for the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

It is available from ACFOA, GPO Box 1562, Canberra City, ACT 2601 for \$7 including postage.