

Arguments on the censorship of pornography philosophy essay



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What is pornography? What qualifies material as pornographic? Should it be censored or uncensored? These are some of the questions posed in the long, controversial history of pornography. Coming from the Greek pornographos, an adjective for writing about prostitutes, pornography has changed considerably since its inception into modern language in 1858.[1] While its etymology may confuse the American reader, Margaret Atwood's essay, "Pornography," which will be examined later in this essay, informs us that in other countries, such as Finland, pornography stays true to its roots, focusing on prostitutes. Conversely, in the U. S, the term "pornographic" can refer to either of two similarly slippery concepts, the erotic or the obscene, or "soft-core" and "hard-core" pornography. What qualifies pornography as obscene, or "hardcore?" U. S. Supreme Court Justice Stewart perpetuated the ambiguity of the term in the 1964 Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio* stating, "I cannot define pornography, but I know it when I see it" (United States). Modern day dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster, define pornography as "material (as books or a photograph) that depicts erotic behavior and is intended to cause sexual excitement" (Merriam-Webster). This definition is still quite unclear, as it doesn't stipulate whether the material can have artistic value or whether it must be violent in nature-it just has to possess eroticism.

Beyond its definition, whether or not it should be censored or disallowed has been hotly debated throughout history. Its increasingly violent nature has certainly fed the fire in the latter part of the 20th century, so much so that many intellectuals have turned their attention to the topic. Susan Jacoby,

Susan Brownmiller, and Margaret Atwood are three such intellectuals who have written essays, even books, on the contentious subject.

Susan Brownmiller's essay, "Let's Put Pornography Back in the Closet," illustrates her feminist view towards what is considered "hard-core" pornographic material. Her claim is that without restriction, the First Amendment has allowed women to be perceived by the public as objects.

In Brownmiller's opinion, the nation abuses their First Amendment right to free speech, with regard to "hard-core" pornography. According to her, despite the fact obscenity laws are in existence, courts have ruled certain sexually explicit content not to be obscene many times over. She reinforces her point with examples from *Miller v. California*.

Next, she considers the argument made by Justice Douglas in his dissent to the same case that no one is "compelled to look" (Brownmiller 54) at sexually explicit material. She counters by pointing out the fact that newsstands carry such material in plain sight. Furthermore, she announces that failure in the case to define "hard-core" was "a mistake" (54).

Her view is that graphic sexual content is obscene when it degrades women, though she believes that "explicit sexual material has its place in literature, art, science, and education" (53). Sexual material with an educational or objective purpose, such as art or an anatomy textbook is acceptable, so long as women are not demeaned or dehumanized. She again challenges Justice Douglas and then Justice Earl Warren, who believe that "... any obscenity law is a serious abridgement of free speech" (54), by rebutting that we have

lived with many free-speech infringements, such as false claims, which threaten societal values much like pornography.

Her final act is to clarify: she is not requesting that “hard-core” pornography be banned, but removed from her sight.

To begin her essay, “A First Amendment Junkie,” Susan Jacoby points out that while most Feminists support the first amendment, many of them oppose pornography in general. In doing so, she argues, they take the position of those who oppose ERA and abortion, among other causes of the feminist movement. She then looks at the convictions of Larry Flynt, the publisher of Hustler magazine, and Harry Reems, who were both convicted on obscenity charges, yet not backed by feminists who support the First Amendment.

Jacoby then argues that pornography can hardly be deemed more offensive than Nazism, which is also protected by the First Amendment.

Next, Jacoby takes on the argument that the First Amendment is refuted by kiddie porn by submitting that kiddie porn is an issue of child abuse, not the First Amendment. Also, she counters the argument made by feminists that censorship of pornography is more sensible than other forms of censorship, by pointing out that some nude depictions are attractive to some women and offensive to others. In fact, she says, if feminists censor girlie magazines, they will be unintentionally aiding opponents of their own movement to censor discussion of abortion, rape, etc.

She says that feminists, like other potential censors, want to use the power of the state to achieve their ideal society, abandoning the democratic process. This desire, she argues, is taking responsibility from individuals and giving them to institutions. In her opinion, in the case of keeping young people from equating sex and violence, parents should be responsible, not the government.

Margaret Atwood's essay "Pornography" deals with the difference between erotic and violent pornography. While at an international writers conference in Finland, Atwood gives a brief dissertation on what she perceived to be a link between political repression and pornography. Her opinion was not well received, and she was confronted by male journalists who asserted that she is a prude. She became heated, but was relieved when she found out that her idea of pornography and their idea of pornography are completely different. In Finland, pornography comprises of graphic depictions of whores. To Atwood, pornography means depictions of violent sexual acts, such as rape.

She finds that the pornography she is referring to is exclusive to the United States. She then explains another experience in which she was taking calls on a radio show about her book, *Bodily Harm*, which exposes violent pornography, and found that most of the callers were not okay with any depictions of the female body, let alone pornography. Their arguments were religiously charged; they believed that God did not approve of the female body or sex of any kind.

From these examples, Atwood illustrates what she sees to be the two extremes of the pornography debate, which, in turn, illustrate the necessity of clearly defining pornography. Regardless, however, she recognizes the negative effect that pornography has on the sexuality of young men, who replicate it. Her final point is that despite the crooked ideas “hard-core” pornography puts into the heads of its young or inexperienced viewers, a sensible person should be able to differentiate between harmless pornography and violent sexual acts.

Each of these essays is similar in that their respective authors essentially share the same opinion of pornography: “hard-core,” or “obscene,” pornography is bad for society. While Atwood has the sense to outright define pornography for the purpose of her essay, Brownmiller and Jacoby weave it into theirs. All three of these authors acknowledge the line between obscene and erotic pornography and view immoral pornography to be of the “hard-core” kind. Atwood goes into much detail as she explains the contents of said pornography: “... women getting their nipples snipped off with garden shears, having meat hooks stuck into their vaginas, being disemboweled ...” (Atwood 2-3).

Brownmiller’s essay is a cut-and-dry appeal for the removal of “hard-core” and degrading pornography from public view. Though she insists that she is not saying “Ban the bad ones” (Brownmiller 54), or trying to have it censored, disallowing any material from public view qualifies as censorship. In this way, her argument differs from Atwood’s or Jacoby’s. Though they recognize the lewd nature and harmful effect of “hard-core” pornography, they do not call for its removal for their own reasons: Atwood, much like <https://assignbuster.com/arguments-on-the-censorship-of-pornography-philosophy-essay/>

Brownmiller, seems to feel that erotic material is acceptable and, because it is part of pornography as a whole, doesn't want pornography to be censored. She states that "... we as a society are going to have to make some informed and responsible decisions about how to deal with it" (4). Jacoby, on the other hand, defends the entire spectrum of pornography (though she may not agree with most of it), citing the First Amendment.

In my judgment, Margaret Atwood's essay makes the issue crystal clear. While there is a strong case for censorship and an equally strong case against it, it is Atwood's essay that tips the scale, though she doesn't explicitly argue one way or the other. It is my opinion that if action can be taken, then any pornography that qualifies as violent or contains brutal behavior towards women should be censored. I cite Finland as my first example, as did Atwood: in Finland violent pornography is barred from movies or television. As Atwood points out in her essay, studies show that violent pornography rouses men to brutal behavior towards women, and vice versa. In short, men emulate the sexual behavior they see on television or in movies. In 1970, Berl Kutchinsky of Denmark found that a relaxation of pornography laws coincided with an increase in reports of rape to police. [2]Therefore, the less exposure men have to pornographic material depicting rape, the less likely the occurrence thereof.

In addition, as Atwood brings to our attention in her essay, there are many young men who gain the bulk of their education on sex from pornography. This is concerning because those who have access to the young men that Atwood mentions in her essay that are being educated about sex through pornography will subscribe to the "propaganda device" (Atwood 3) that is "<https://assignbuster.com/arguments-on-the-censorship-of-pornography-philosophy-essay/>

hard-core" pornography. Instead of treating their sexual partners or women in general as objects, they treat them as