

Not a Love Story: A dissenting opinion

by Ken Burke

This year's example of the idiotic Ontario censor board's ability to give enormous publicity to the films that don't appeal to their weird idea of "morality" has created the largest social stir that a movie has in a long time across Canada. **Not A Love Story** has done just about all its makers could want - create a national forum for the discussion of pornography. However, although a film like this attempts to disturb the audience in its images and statements, there was a good deal in the documentary that disturbed me - and not in the way that the movie intended.

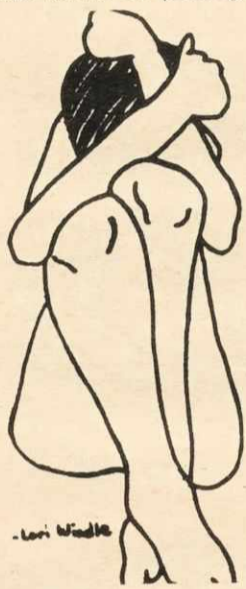
In an issue as loaded as the role of pornography in our society, the easiest trap to fall into is to make the subject "easy". The supporters of pornography will routinely say that it's only harmless fantasies, all "play-play" as Suze Randall, a female who photographs females for **Hustler** magazine, states in an interview during the film. That, as this film makes abundantly clear, is bullshit. But, on the other side of this argument, it's far too easy to dismiss everything which can be lumped in under the qualification of "pornography" as inherently evil and an aberration of the human race, without actually taking the time to understand the phenomenon, what it means, especially WHY.

The latter is where **Not A Love Story** ultimately failed. In a film that is deceptively "open-minded", many generalizations, which most accept but should in reality question, are used and supported by the choice of material in the film. Nothing is very clearly defined, leaving the film's arguments blurred and subjective, and clear definitions at **least** are what is necessary BEFORE any reasonable look can be taken at anything this important.

Certain definitions are implicit through the choice of material for the film, though. To Bonnie Sherr Klein, the film's director, pornography is everything from a semi-nude calendar girl to the extreme extremes of horrifyingly sadistic S&M peep shows which sear the eye and soul to watch, and everything in between (likely a whole lot more). To Klein, everything is the same - the forms of pornography are a progression where all, being connected, are equally morally and spiritually reprehensible. All eventually lead to the "imprisonment of the heart", as poet Susan Griffin describes, as sadomasochistic images from pornographic magazines are flashed on the screen. As pornography is the visual and/or verbal expression of the fantasies of the viewer, pornography adds additional weight to these ideas by giving them a kind of reality that is enough to inspire sexual assaults in the extreme and entrenched sexist attitudes in the other cases. This sexist attitude is arrived at through the portrayal of women as objects in the pornography.

This association of male sexual fantasies with not only sexist, but truly dangerous and

SICK images from pornography, effectively does group all pornography in the "evil" category. It also assumes a hell of a lot concerning the male fantasies and the men doing the fantasizing - effectively all men on the planet - implying that the male fantasies that make even the mildest forms of pornography attractive are related to male superiority and the sexism inherent in men. The film's message is clear and true concerning the forms of pornography



shown in (explicit) detail on the screen - I definitely agree that a hell of a lot have no place in a human society such as we like to think we have. BUT... what the film **TOTALLY** ignores is the fact that, just as not all men (and their fantasies) are the same, so the effect that certain kinds of pornography have on men is different, and that there **is** difference between kinds of pornography.

The film itself implied this difference at one point, then hastily dropped it, obviously having felt that it had dealt with it far enough, or that it was a minor point. But it is, instead, a major part of the whole idea of pornography. Kate Millet, a poet and artist of erotic art, in an interview at an early point in the film, criticizes the cold, unemotional and harming effect that most pornography has. "We got pornography", she says, "and what we needed was eroticism". She sees pornography as projecting "a whole new set of negative attitudes about sex", while eroticism provides a more healthy awareness, with compassion and love involved.

I agree with her, but not if the film's all-encompassing definition of pornography is the same as what she sees as pornography, and I suspect it is not. I have seen much which would both fall in under the category of "pornography" and which I also consider to be "erotic", leading to fantasies which project something more emotionally equal in a relationship than a cold, hateful fuck. The same is true with most people who I know are shamelessly romantic, have sexual fantasies, and find some types of pornography appealing as well. To these people (and me!) the hateful and bitter pornographic visions of cruelty in **Not A Love Story** are alien and painful to watch, as our ideals are assaulted as

much as someone to whom all pornography is disgusting.

All of the images chosen from pornography could be considered erotic (and thus justified). In fact, they are so decidedly, desperately UNEROTIC as to condemn almost any depiction of explicit sex or nudity along with them, truly giving no "hope" for emotional warmth in pornography. One reviewer stated while discussing this film that "pornography is opposed to eroticism" (Maurice Yacowar, in **CINEMA CANADA**), and that's understandable after viewing the sexual carnage in the film. But the nude male and/or female body (and any combination of the same) is **NOT** necessarily "pornographic" as opposed to "erotic".

Of course, "erotic" pornography is a rarity, compared to the flood of negative images, but it exists, and I suspect that it was ignored by the film out of the need to have a tidy case against the true villains of sexual degradation. Its effect (the tidy case) is to link many erotic works with pornographic ones and blindly condemn. In feature films, for instance, the works of Oshima Nagisa (such as **AI NO CORRIDA**) are extremely sexually explicit and would be considered "hard-core pornography" by many, but also (from stills I have seen from them) possess a lyric beauty and serve as part of an intelligent examination of human nature which his films attempt to provide. He is respected as a first-rank director in Europe and among critical circles in the U.S., but his films will never reach Halifax town for many a moon because

of their "pornographic" content.

The question of pornography-as-art is sidestepped as well, by giving the pornographic feature film industry very little emphasis in favour of the peep show variety of "films" that are as subtle as an all-day cold shower (and about as stimulating, to normal human beings). Other examples of the film's one-argument approach to the issue can be found in the spokes-people for pro and anti-pornography. Ms. Klein has arranged an impressive list of feminist poets and authors on the subject of pornography and women (Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin among others) as well as researchers to demonstrate the effect of the pornographic images which have been presented on the male attracted to them. The spokesmen for pornography of any kind are either a smug publisher of Canada's biggest pornographic magazine chain, a photographer who prattles on about "making a pussy into a flower", or the sleazy inhabitants and owners of the 42nd Street New York peep shows. Not that there aren't intelligent proponents of erotic pornography around - some of the most respected film and theatre critics in the U.S. have written articles on the merits of (some) pornography in the *New Yorker*, the *Village Voice*, and *Film Comment* - but none appear in this film. I doubt if any were asked.

With regards to solutions, the film thankfully sidesteps the issue of banning (some women's groups go that far in their crusade), although to the audience this may seem a good

suggestion. But censorship is **NOT** the way. The logical (and best, to my mind) solution is that of the San Francisco group of Women Against Violence Against Women in their picketing of downtown sex shops. By forcing confrontation, the women have a chance of making the customers of these shops realize what they are doing and what it actually means. One of the best scenes in film involves the women demonstrators talking as the puzzled, awkward face of a show "barker" peers from around a corner. In some way, that encounter must have made him think, and that's the first step. Pornography mirrors the attitudes of parts of society - those attitudes have to change before pornography (pornography as opposed to eroticism) can be eliminated. There are no easy solutions, and neither are there any easy definitions of the problem, but the important thing is to let reason win out over emotion, and soon hope may begin to arrive.

continued from page 15

Elvis with defined arrogance. The band rocks with pleasure.

Almost Blue is recommended listening. It is certainly different from Elvis's past releases. There are no new pop touches on it, though that unmistakable Costello sound is always there. Instead, it is a tribute to country music with Costello and the Attractions giving some refreshing and vigorous performances of songs that Elvis loves and respects. It has guts and power and no matter what its downfalls may be, when it moves, it really moves.

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