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Censorship and Pornography in Canada: Perspectives for the Feminist Regulation of Pornography

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Abstract

Reflecting a growing concern over the availability of pornography, the 1980s have witnessed growing demands for censorship through anti-pornography legislation. As appealing as this strategy may appear, however, it has divided feminists. While radical feminists advocate censorship on the grounds that pornography encourages violence against women, others emphasize that freedom of expression is central to the struggle for new definitions of

sexuality and forms of sexual expression. In exploring these debates, Currie puts the question of whether we should have censorship put aside in order to explore whether we can have censorship as a meaningful feminist practice. Drawing upon her experience on the British Columbia Periodical Review Board, the author uses a semiotic approach to identify the ways in which censorship is often unable to produce the intended effect. Currie argues that this is because the problem of pornography does not lie simply in the consumption of pornography, but also in the conditions and relations of its production. She thus discusses how censorship can be viewed as a symptom of, rather than a solution to, the problem of pornography. Implications which this approach has for the way in which we currently think about "freedom of expression" versus the (potential) harm of pornography are outlined.

As in many countries, a sense of growing concern over pornography has been a feature of the 1980s in Canada. In part, this concern reflects the availability of pornography during this period: Chester and Dickey (1988:273) estimate that the pornography industry grosses \$10 billion a year. More importantly, however, the politicization of the Women's Movement has placed pornography on the policy agenda. In contrast to the 'sexual liberationists' who endorse pornography as the depiction of natural self-expression, feminists have contextualized pornographic texts within the social reality of gender inequality. In doing so, what they identify is not natural pleasure, but the expression of male power and violence against women. It is from this perspective that the call for more stringent regulation through censorship¹