I N RECENT YEARS, LDS leaders have re-emphasized the dangers of pornography. In a review of some five hundred articles and speeches, social psychologist Marvin Ryting shows that LDS statements against pornography rose markedly between 1954 and 1970. Contemporary statements suggest that the trend has continued. President Gordon B. Hinckley has called pornography “enticing and habit forming” and President James E. Faust suggests it is “as addictive as cocaine or any illegal drug.” A recent Church News issue published a three-page alert about the “enslavement of pornography.” A 2004 LDS book about marriage contains a chapter on the “plague of pornography,” written by a social worker who specializes in pornography and cybersex.

At a time when Internet users are bombarded with unwanted sexual messages, this emphasis on the evils of pornography is doubtless seen by many Latter-day Saints as a timely prophetic warning. But is it more than mere hyperbole to call pornography “a vicious brew of slime and sleaze, the partaking of which only leads to misery, degradation, and addiction”? Does scientific research support characterizing pornography as enslavement and addiction? Or is this another example of what some authors have dubbed “Mormon erotophobia”?

PORNOGRAPHY AS ADDICTION

LDS LEADERS HAVE decried “exhibitions of nakedness, of obscenity, of vulgarity” at least since 1911, but it was in 1959 that Ezra Taft Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve first connected pornography and drug abuse. “There is a peculiar resemblance to narcotics addiction in exposure of juveniles to pornography,” he said in the October 1959 General Conference, quoting from a Senate subcommittee report. “There is the same pattern of progression. Once initiated into a knowledge of the unnatural, the impressionable young mind with the insatiable curiosity characteristic of those reaching for maturity inevitably hunts for something stronger, something with more ‘jolt,’ something imparting a greater thrill.”

Dormant for decades, the pornography and drugs connection resurfaced in Mormon discourse with the 1990 publication of Breaking the Cycle of Compulsive Behavior. The authors state, “The physical nature of a compulsive cycle is perhaps most obvious in substance abuse, where a recognizable chemical addiction exists, but we found close parallels to this type of addiction in behaviors as diverse as shoplifting and looking at pornography.” Two years later, during a General Conference priesthood session, President Gordon B. Hinckley read a letter from a convert who described his use of pornography as an addiction. “For most of my adult life I have been addicted to pornography,” the letter read. “I am ashamed to admit this. My addiction is as real as that of an alcoholic or a drug addict.”

LDS leaders also depict pornography as a gateway to horrible violent acts—even to sex crimes and murder. In 1990, LDS authors Blaine and Brenton Yorgason published a book in which they included Ted Bundy’s claims that his career as a serial killer started on the day he happened across soft-core pornography. A 1995 Church News story asserts not only that pornography is addictive as narcotics, but also that “it leads to other victims through the sick actions of the addict as he or she tries to act out his or her addiction through sexual abuse, rape or even murder.”

SCIENTISTS WEIGH IN

“For some people, pornography can be an addiction,” asserts Romel W. Mackelprang, professor of social sciences at Eastern Washington University. “But I would caution against overdramatizing it. I have seen pornography as an addiction, and I have seen it destroy people’s lives; but I become afraid if we send the message that anyone who uses it will become addicted.”

To define addiction, Mackelprang uses a model based on substance abuse, “We can only say there is addiction when (1) it causes some kind of problem to a person or to interpersonal relationships, and (2) when the person does not have one hundred percent control over the situation (e.g., they can’t really control when to stop).” Addiction does tend to become progressive, i.e., the person tends to use it more and more.

For Mackelprang, more dangerous than the possibility of addiction are the distorted messages that pornography sends: “It connects violence with sex. It objectifies people, and it creates a ‘myth of perpetual readiness,’ according to which women are always ready to have sex.”

“The majority of people who look at pornography probably don’t have any kind of psychiatric illness,” affirms Louis Moench, professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of Utah. “The large, large majority of those who watch pornography never become criminals, but some of them do.”

When talking about those who abuse pornography, Moench rejects the term addiction on the grounds that pornography has not been shown to produce effects that can be seen in CT or MRI scans. He prefers instead to talk about compulsion, i.e., a type of behavior that the person engages in repeatedly as an anxiety-reducer mechanism. According to Moench, “Many sex criminals are compulsive pornography watchers, but not all of them are. And you cannot say that they would not have become criminals had they not started watching pornography. That probably wouldn’t be a testable hypothesis.”

POORNOPHOGY OR EROTICA?

Many health professionals believe looking at erotic magazines or watching adult movies is normal and innocuous. Some suggest contexts in which pornography could be beneficial. Even bishops and stakes presidents have sometimes advised LDS married to try using adult films and magazines as an aid in solving sexual dysfunctions.

Mark and Lisa (not their real names) are an active LDS couple who married in the temple more than twenty years ago. They say the adult movies they occasionally watch do not qualify as pornography; because “they do not depict violence toward women.” They prefer the term erotica, and they see this as a small part in a wide range of things we have in our [sexual] menu.

“We use adult videos within the confines of our monogamous marriage, and neither of us feels a conflict with Church teachings,”

HUGO OLAIZ is SUNSTONE’s news editor.
says Lisa. “Growing up, Mark was very much damaged by his parents’ and the Church’s attitudes toward sex. But early in our marriage, we discovered that we did have sexually adventurous personalities, which made it very easy for us to decide to try different things. Watching erotica is one of them.”

Mark and Lisa believe that watching adult films together has actually strengthened their relationship as a couple. “If one of us had to hide our desires and curiosity, that would have put a huge wall between us. The fact that we feel safe exploring our sexuality together has made a happy marriage.”

**PORNOGRAPHY AND CENSORSHIP**

THERE IS AN important corollary to the LDS characterization of pornography as an addiction. If pornography is as dangerous as cocaine, as President Faust maintains, then it follows that it should be dealt with as with a controlled substance—a view many Saints are eager to support. In a 1994 *This People* report on immorality in the media, BYU political science professor Ralph Hancock argues that the First Amendment doesn’t prohibit limiting freedom of speech in order to protect the moral standards of a community. Hancock notes that “the majority of the [U.S. Supreme Court] has never failed to acknowledge the necessity to ‘balance’ [free speech] against other legitimate public interests.”

Mormons have supported many anti-pornography laws but have also been ridiculed for their penchant for censoring anything that could be perceived as immo— even world-renowned works of art. Brigham Young University made international news when it censored Rodin’s celebrated sculpture *The Kiss*. In 2001, during a “scorn porn” rally at the Utah state capitol, an Orem, Utah, high school sophomore cited Michelangelo’s *David* as a prototype of pornography.

How far can Mormon repression go? In his poem, “Negative Space,” Paul Swenson describes real-life efforts by two LDS-owned companies (ZCMI and the Deseret News) to censor nipples of mannequins and Tarzan comics, respectively. Swenson reflects on how deeply sexual self-repression is ingrained in the Mormon psyche: “Mormon mind regards nipples/ as purely negative space/ including male nipples.” While it wouldn’t be hard to come up with examples of Mormon literature that convey a sense of repressed or frustrated sexuality, rarely do we find Mormon artists and writers willing to celebrate the beauty of the naked body.

One of the few exceptions is Mormon artist Trevor Southey. The Spring 1993 issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* featured on its front and back covers a Southey painting entitled *Prodigal*, a tripod of male nudes. Controversy ensued, and editors Martha Sonntag Bradley and Alan Dale Roberts felt compelled to explain. Beauty, they reminded their readers, is in the eye of the beholder. Bradley and Roberts wrote of an occasion when a member of the Quorum of the Twelve criticized a “Days of ’47” Parade beauty queen for wearing only a bathing suit, President David O. McKay reportedly responded, “I don’t see anything that is not beautiful. Do you?”

LDS scholar Levi Peterson believes in a distinct difference between pornography and erotica. He advises Mormon writers: “Don’t be paralyzed by prudery. Don’t fall into the opposite excess of pornography . . . There is vitality in sexual imagery and obscenities. Shaped proportionally, they do not corrupt and vitiate a work of literature. Like a tributary river, they add to the swelling current of ideas, images, and emotions that makes the reading of good book a consummate experience.”

**NOTES**


8. President Joseph F. Smith used these words to condemn vaudeville theater during a General Conference address. *LDS Conference Report*, April 1911, 4–5.


15. Ibid.


