Bonnie Sherr Klein's Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography

Not a Love Story is a sensitive and serious feminist essay film. Sherr Klein directed the film, with a major contribution by Linda Lee Tracey, for the National Film Board's Studio D. It was a film that made the rounds of feminist film festivals. The film affects us with its grasp of the ruthlessness and violence of our pornographers' lives. The film introduces us to a world of subversive excess.

In this light, Klein sensibly includes male victims of this pornographic abuse of women. One men is the innocent of the film and introduces the notion of torturing and dominating the female form. The implicit theme of this monstrous machinery is that women are objects of sadistic violation.

Klein's larger point, and the principle on which her material is organized, is that pornography exploits a pervasive influence. Obviously one is affected if one participates in the sexuality business: so Linda Lee Tracey quip. One is more significantly affected if one catches on to the exploitation of others: hence the interviews with merchants and clients of scenes.

But Klein's key observation is that porn damages people who never experience the thing itself. For even non-inducers are affected by the recurring theme of the business of sex: and no one who doesn't wash over from hard-core to soft. Worse, we all think about the puzzles of thought, associations, reflexes, that dominate this imagery pornographers produce.

This attack upon pornography has been censored by the Ontario Censor Board (although one uncensored version was shown at the National Film Board's Studio D Festival). So the film suffers the irrational fate of Al Razia's A Message from the Man for Women or in Ontario. The porn flowed on, but a warning sign against the porn was censored.

On the front, there has been some newspaper editorializing against the NFB spending taxpayers' money on a film about pornography. I've actually read the film as a sign of slashed wrists, that a woman's spirit may lead us to see a heart-breaking film. I've actually read the film as a sign of slashed wrists. If it makes the prison more humane and less brutish, it is a powerful metaphor for women's liberation.
**Not a Love Story...**

(Haft view)

Hey Maester, Wanna See a Dirty Picture? If you do, Not a Love Story fits the bill, even though it obviously wasn’t intended that way. One has to admire the courage and determination of the women who made this film, on a topic which is so controversial and laden with emotional charge. Just the mention of the word pornography sets off an extreme reaction - either pro or con - in most people. And until now, few people have been willing or even dared to enter this arena and open it up to public scrutiny. This film, which opened at the Toronto Film Festival in September, has already triggered vociferous response from critics, and is likely to generate a lot more.

The film is a very thorough, objective overview of what pornography is all about. It shows the most explicit sex shots available anywhere - the strippers, the peep shows, the live sex acts and the incredible violence. We see the filmmaker interviewing and eliciting the reactions of purveyors, sellers, a research scientist, various women authors who have written books and attempted analysis of the subject, and anti-pornography groups. And at the end of the film the audience knows that, indeed, pornography is alive and well and has its headquarters on 42nd Street in New York.

The audience is expected to draw its own conclusions about what it means, presumably by identifying with the discovery process of the filmmaker. But somehow, although director Bonnie Klein has made her own personal foray into the big bad world and come out unscathed yet appropriately offended, the audience is left out in the cold. Untouchable.

The message is unclear. Is this really a pornographic film disguised under the cloak of education? Or is this a pro-censorship film disguised as a dirty picture? How do the critics and commentators call it a dirty picture, while others are staunchly defending the right to see whatever they choose? Can one understand the dilemma facing censor boards, is this film anything other than 42nd Street revisited? One can understand the dilemma facing censor boards, is this film anything other than 42nd Street revisited? One can understand the dilemma facing censor boards, is this film anything other than 42nd Street revisited? One can understand the dilemma facing censor boards, is this film anything other than 42nd Street revisited? One can understand the dilemma facing censor boards, is this film anything other than 42nd Street revisited?

At the heart of all pornography lies the distancing and dehumanization of its hapless victims. In Not a Love Story the divisions between "Us" and "Them" are clearly maintained, "Us": the straight, respectable, slightly puritanical but liberal world; "Them": those nameless bodies who appear to enjoy having a revoler, like some kind of surrogate penis shoved into any available orifice. They don’t seem any more real to us than if we ourselves, had gone down to Times Square for a peek. But we are left wondering vaguely, "How could they do this to themselves?" Instead one could be asking: "What are the forces which coerced these women into such positions?" or: "Are these acts really being performed voluntarily and with pleasure, as they appear?"

The film just doesn’t focus on the real issues of pornography. It is not just a phenomenon affecting the woman shown in the film: bound, gagged and strung to the ceiling by her ankles inside a cage. Through the power and influence of the various media which disseminate her presence, she becomes a pervasive force in our everyday life - as a representative of all women. The way she is seen has a profound effect on the way all women are seen, by themselves and by the men and other women to whom they relate. If as pornography suggests, women enjoy this kind of degradation, what is the message for both men and women about "normal" sexual behaviour? How can women react to this increasingly widespread image of themselves as submissive masochists, especially when most women do not feel this way?

The film is doubly tragic because it had within it the seeds for making these personal connections clear, and the potential for real drama. If the filmmaker hadn’t been so mesmerized by her own discoveries, she might have focused on the experience of Linda Lee Tracey, the stripper with the humorous act who, throughout the course of this film, went through the painful discovery of alienation from her own body. During sequences in which she appears, her humanity shines through and saves the film from being another re-run of dirty pictures. But the audience never gets enough.

Klein’s intrusive presence in her own film prevented the real drama which might have occurred between Robin Morgan, the feminist author, and Linda Lee. All we get to see was Linda Lee’s tears in the background - somehow an interesting sideline? What really happened there? What was she feeling and why? Why didn’t we get to find out? Linda Lee’s experience was real, dynamic and immediate. It had the power to touch all of us in a profoundly personal way because she actually felt the anguish of what it means to be objectified and degraded through pornography. The unfolding of Linda Lee’s story had the potential to bring us to our own recognition of this agony and to allow us a better understanding of what pornography does to its victims. But the filmmaker missed the boat.

Klein failed to recognize the drama that was actually taking place during the shooting of this film. In scene towards the end of the film, Linda Lee decides she will pose for pornographic photographer Suze Randall. She wants to know for herself what it feels like to pose for a camera. Although she has no intention of having an actual "pussy shot," she finds herself unable to resist Randall’s demands and submits to having her pudendum moistened and captured on film.

What the viewer does not see, I learned later, was that Linda Lee told Randall afterwards of her total mortification at this feeling of herself-as-thing. The photographer despite her years of experience in this market, apparently had no idea she was a partner to this dehumanization. She had always assumed, like pornography suggests, that her subjects enjoyed it, and wept at Linda Lee’s revelation. Linda Lee found herself consoling the disconcerted woman instead of worrying about her own feelings.

However, the audience of Not a Love Story was robbed of this moment. The camera was turned off right after Linda Lee’s photograph was taken! Viewers don’t find out how Linda Lee feels about her experience until she shares it with the filmmaker in a following scene. This scene, however, appears contrived and one is left wondering if Linda Lee’s recognition of her own humiliation is a prerequisite for being welcomed into the "Us" camp with a hug.

The filmmaker - on - camera genre should perhaps be called into question. How relevant is the director’s middle-Canadian perspective to the audience’s understanding of pornography? Does it tell us anything about why pornography is so popular and how it affects our lives? One cannot help but suspect that this self-indulgent method is a reflection of an inability to present the subject in a more meaningful and imaginative way. The message of the film seems to be telling us that the effect of pornographic images is grim. Yet, the superficial approach to the subject does nothing to obviate this effect. In fact, it interferes with a more interesting, real-life story. The intentions may have been pure, but the result is still pornographic.

Kate Jansen

* "More hardcore peep shows in North America than MacDonald’s outlets." Bonnie Klein, Linda Lee Tracey, Suze Randall