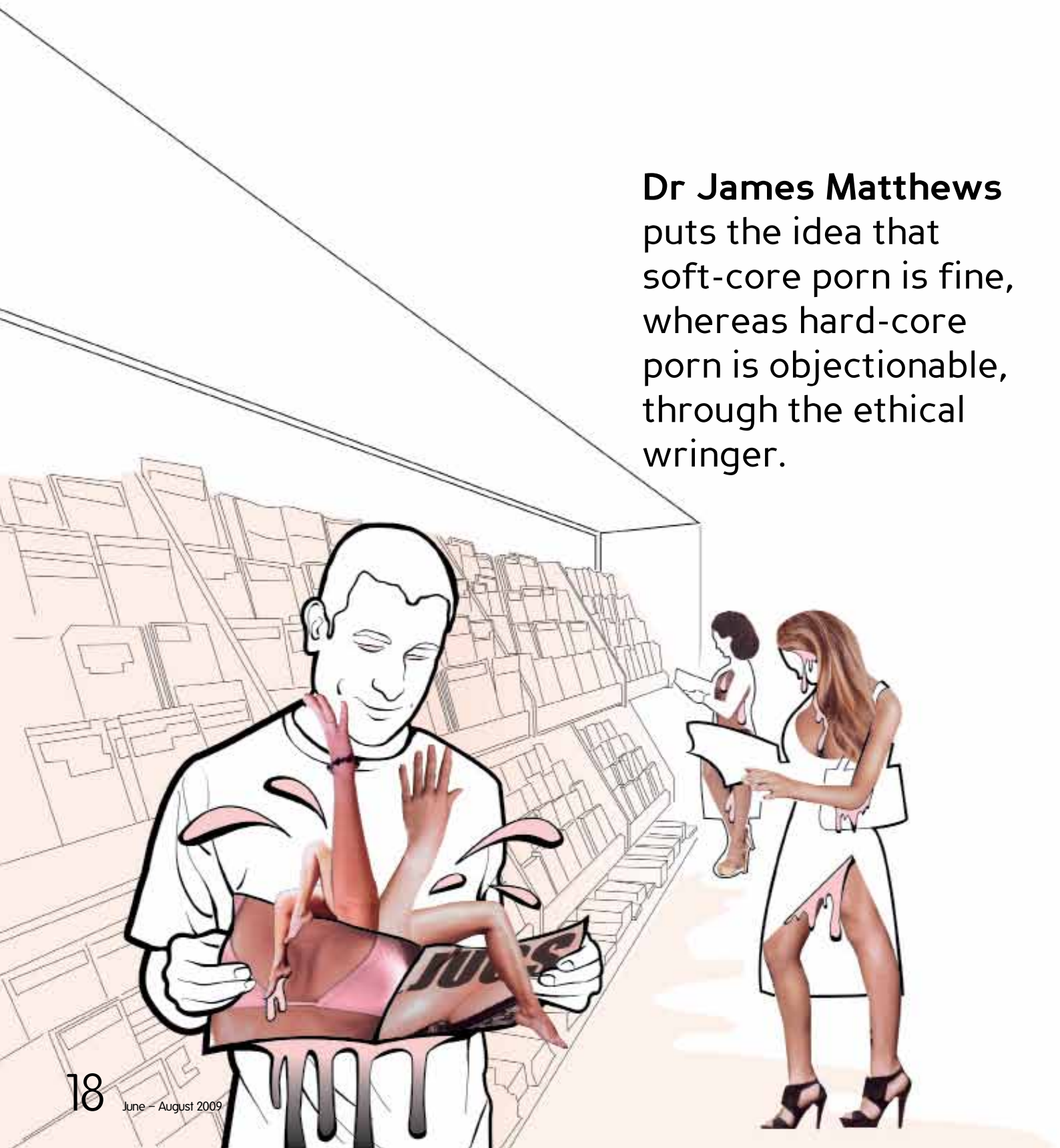


Hard and soft-core

Dr James Matthews puts the idea that soft-core porn is fine, whereas hard-core porn is objectionable, through the ethical wringer.





ethics

‘Regardless of what we think ourselves, we tend to think that *other people think* pornography is objectionable.’

Fifteen years ago, a large-scale survey asked retailers which magazines they sold, as well as asking readers which magazines they bought. Retailers reported that, apart from newspapers, ‘top shelf’ magazines were their biggest seller by a considerable margin. Meanwhile, zero per cent of surveyed readers said they bought them. How could this be? It might just be conceivable that somehow no one who bought top shelf magazines was surveyed, but it is surely more plausible that some of those surveyed were not telling the whole truth. Why would they conceal their purchases? Perhaps because, regardless of what we think ourselves, we tend to think that *other people think* pornography is objectionable.

Shamelessly soft-core

While it is difficult to isolate one overriding objection in people’s everyday attitudes to pornography, it does appear that most objections are aimed at the explicit end of the spectrum. People do not seem to agree *why* porn might be objectionable, but the intuition that hard-core might be objectionable, whereas soft-core is definitely fine, is widespread.

To repeat this survey today would be interesting, given the proliferation of soft-core lads’ mags since the early 90s. I’ve no idea whether these magazines outsell the top shelf, but I expect more than zero per cent of their readers would admit to buying them, precisely because these magazines are soft-core enough to avoid the label *pornography*. Presumably, for most of their readers, there is no shame involved in admitting to reading them.

But why would anyone think certain erotic images, soft-core or hard-core, objectionable at all?

Thanatica, and everything else

American philosopher of science Helen Longino raised an interesting alternative to the ‘hard-core bad’/‘soft-core okay’

assumption. She suggested that materials intended to arouse could be classed *thanatica* – from the Greek for death, images that harm or are degrading to the subject, or as *erotica* – from the Greek for love, which would cover pretty much everything else.

Does this give us any grounds to think that some soft-core might be objectionable? Here I want to separate this question from issues to do with censorship and free speech. We might think that soft-core images are acceptable in the sense that they should not be censored, because objections to encroaching legal paternalism mean that censorship ought to be reserved for only the worst material. That seems right to me. But that argument doesn’t touch on whether soft-core images may be *ethically* objectionable. It just says that regardless how objectionable you think such images are, they shouldn’t be subject to legal censorship.

Considerations of harm

Let’s start with the thought that pornography harms women (or men, if the subjects are men). The issue of *direct harm* is straightforward: if participants are raped, tortured, assaulted, or obviously coerced, the violence is doubly objectionable – both in the repulsive treatment someone suffers *and* that it is displayed for the viewer’s arousal.

Yet, borderline cases quickly emerge. What about images of bondage and discipline where the victim is clearly willing? And what if the action is entirely faked, such as in the case of illustration? A cartoon of Homer Simpson violently sexually assaulting Marge *directly* harms only Matt Groening’s intellectual property rights. If we want to say that such images, distasteful as they are, are *harmful*, we’ll need a jolly good argument about the point at which something is so offensive that it harms others.

The difficulty here is that the harmfulness of an image



‘It’s clearly far less offensive to stare at someone in a pervy way than it is to chop off their arms.’

depends less on the nature of the image and more on the motivation of the viewer. This is why, for instance, convicted sex offenders possessing certain types of explicit images would be considered a risk sign for reoffending, but law-abiding types possessing the same images would be considered harmless. The very existence of certain types of pornography may be a reflection of attitudes towards women in society at large, but no one can say for sure that pornography causes people not already in the grip of such attitudes to take them up, or indeed encourages one to act on one’s beliefs if one is not already inclined to do so.

Considerations of harm should lead us to rethink the ‘hard-core bad’ side of the ‘hard-core bad’/‘soft-core okay’ distinction. There is plenty of extremely explicit material produced by professionals or willing exhibitionists that provide healthy avenues for sexual satisfaction for many. For example, there are websites where married couples share very explicit films of their sex lives with the world. But considerations of harm don’t test the attitude that there’s nothing objectionable about soft-core images, because it seems unlikely that anyone is directly harmed when oiled celebrities hump the floor.

Harmful versus degrading

It seems more accurate to say that fictional depictions of sexual violence are not wrong because they are harmful, but because they are degrading, to the subject. Here it is very difficult to say this applies to soft-core without reaching a high-minded conclusion where *any* depiction of nudity is deemed degrading in some kind of weird Puritanism that rules out all nudes in the history of art as well as *Page 3*. If we say that a Renaissance nude is of greater aesthetic value than a spread in *Zoo*, the conclusion seems arbitrarily snobbish.

But one might say that the popularity of lads’ mags is symptomatic of, and has some role in normalising attitudes about sex and women’s bodies that many women find

objectionable and difficult to live with. Of course, Renaissance art doubtless reflects attitudes to women that are hardly better, but those attitudes aren’t ones we have to live with now.

Just looking?

It’s plausible there is something to this objection. For example, images in soft-core are offered as an opportunity for the reader to check out bodies, and that is all. The models are rarely in any sort of sexual pose into which the reader can enter imaginatively: the eroticism of the image is solely in the simple act of ogling the body. This may be said to invite a way of looking at women in real life that many women find both uncomfortable and rude. Most people can distinguish between an appreciation of beauty and a pervy stare, and even though there is nothing harmful about the latter it can still be said that the discomfort it causes renders the stare objectionable. *If soft-core does help normalise such behaviour, the objection to the behaviour carries over to the images themselves.*

The moneyshot

None of this is to say that soft-core is – if we are indeed convinced that it is ethically objectionable – on a par with murder, rape, and other clearly wrong actions. It’s clearly far less offensive to stare at someone in a pervy way than it is to chop off their arms. What I’ve tried to suggest is that, nevertheless, soft-core is not beyond ethical criticism because it is soft-core, nor should hard-core necessarily be deemed objectionable simply because it is hard-core.

Of course, everything I’ve said could equally apply to images of men. On this matter I think it would be interesting to know what the editor of this magazine thinks.

Dr James Matthews is writing here under a pseudonym. He lectures in philosophy at a UK university and is a fan of sleeping bags with arms and legs.



What about images of men?

Filament responds

Understanding ethical objections to pornography is not optional in this industry, and in my view there is no reason to exclude images of men – soft- or hard-core – from ethical consideration.

The message of this article is that some soft-core might be ethically objectionable just as some hard-core is, but also that some soft-core and some hard-core might not be objectionable, and may even be said to promote positive sexual values. I think a lot about how to make sure Filament is always in the latter camp. For example, we ask our models about who they are, not what they're like in bed. We also use a lot of direct gaze in our images, which as well as being dead sexy, could be said more to promote eye contact than ogling.

I think the world would be a better place with more erotic images that are sexual and human, but we don't claim the moral high ground. If you think we could improve on this, tell us.

Suraya Sidhu Singh, Editor

