


Pornography in Contemporary Society: *Insight Adult Books* in Bendigo

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This is the first of two essays about pornography in contemporary society from the perspective of Material Culture Studies (*Material culture and commodity culture* 2006). This first essay presents an analysis of *Insight Adult Books* in Bendigo. Adult bookshops are the traditional point of sale for pornography and, as such, maintain a controversial place within society. Pornography as a commodity in contemporary culture will be analysed in the next essay for this subject.

Several aspects of the shop will be described, providing an analysis of the architecture, interior design, products and customers. It will be argued that *Insight Adult Books* has a special status in Bendigo because of the controversial nature of pornography and that this special status is reflected in its architecture and interior design and vice versa that the design of the shop helps to reinforce the special particular of pornography.

The exterior of the shop does not provide many clues to the product that is being sold inside. There is no shop window displaying products and the name of the shop is displayed in small letters on the door, not directly visible from the street. Most prominent feature of the front is the logo, which carries a tripartite symbolism (Figure 1). The logo is a stylisation of the number 69, referring to the colloquial name for a commonly known sexual position. Another interpretation of the logo is two spermatozoa moving in a circular motion. At a different level, the logo refers to the Taoist *Taijǐ tú* , which symbolises balance and harmony. The logo is a complex representation of the nature of this shop: the number 69 signifies its sexual nature with the spermatozoa emphasising a male oriented sexuality. The logo refers to Taoist philosophy through its likeness to the *Taijǐ tú* symbol, emphasising a

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the United States, England and New Zealand that also use 'Insight' in their name.¹ These shops sell books about subjects related to the mind, such as meditation and astrology.² The link between these shops is, however, not only in name as the metaphysical bookshops also sell books about sexuality. The second part of the name *Insight Adult Books* is a euphemism for pornography from the time before video and electronic media and refers to the sexual nature of the shop, albeit not a direct one. It should be noted that most other shops selling pornography, such as the *Club X* franchise, are much less subtle about their purpose.

Both the logo and the name of the shop show how body-mind dualism, a central tenet throughout Western philosophy, works within society. The body, has since Plato (*Phaedrus 246C–D*), been identified with everything that is temporary, chaotic and immoral, while the mind has been identified with eternal order and everything that is good.³ Consequently, pornography is often considered immoral because of its focus on the carnal aspects of sexuality. The insight that is referred to in the name of the shop evokes ideas by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, who emphasised that mankind is driven by natural instincts, rather than a rational mind. The body is thus ethically neutral and has equal standing to the mind. The name and logo of the shop are designed to dissolve body-mind duality and construct pornography as balancing the physical and the mental.

A special feature of the shop is that to be able to enter it one first has to pass through a vestibule. A legal notice is displayed inside the vestibule, which informs the visitor about the explicit nature of the material on display inside. The formal notification removes all double meaning produced by the name and logo and prepares the visitor before entering the world of pornography. In some aspects, the architecture of the bookshop is reminiscent of sacred spaces, such as churches and temples. Sacred spaces are usually approached through a 'threshold' that divides sacred space from the outside world (Habel, O'Donoghue and Maddox 1993, 33). The threshold of *Insight Adult Books* is marked by the vestibule, a transitory zone which leads from the normal world into the world of pornography and eroticism. Another aspect of sacred spaces is that they transform people, enabling them to perform acts they would not otherwise engage in (Habel et al. 1993, 34). This also occurs in the adult bookstore where customers look at imagery which is not publicly available in the outside world. The analogy with sacred buildings is confirmed

¹www.insight-books.com, www.insightbooks.co.uk and www.insightbooks.co.nz.

²The term 'mind' is used as being synonymous with related concepts such as spirit and soul.

³<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Plat.+Phaedrus+246c>

by the Buddhist temple, situated a stone throw away from the shop. The temple is enclosed by a wall and is also entered through a vestibule. The vestibule is covered with paintings which emphasise the special nature of the space the visitor is about to enter. The architecture of the temple and the adult bookshop are similar, albeit with a reversed purpose. The temple is designed to protect the sacred nature of the interior from the outside world, while the adult bookstore is designed to protect the outside world from the material inside.

The Yellow Pages advertisement for *Insight Adult Books* states that the shop sells ‘marital aids’, lingerie, naughty novelties, leather goods, imported adult magazines, DVDs and videos (Figure 2).⁴ It is interesting to note that the ‘bookshop’ does not sell any books. The items usually referred to as pornography (magazines and films) appear on the bottom of the list, shifting the focus to those products that align with the cosmopolitan identity of the shop, established by the name and logo. The slogan at the bottom leaves, however, no room for interpretation as to the purpose of shop. The question whether the pleasure referred to in this advertisement is purely physical remains open. The majority of the products on display suggests that physical pleasure has primacy, as most of the retail space is reserved for X-rated movies, which are not known for their intellectual or spiritual qualities. Books about spiritual and emotional aspects of sexuality are not sold by *Insight Adult Books*, confirming that carnal pleasures are the main focus of this place.

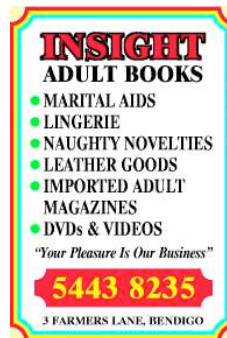


Figure 2: Yellow Pages Advertisement

The interior of the shop does not conform to the stereotypical idea of a dark and seedy gathering place for male perverts in trenchcoats. The shop is a long rectangular open space, painted in stark white with bright fluorescent lighting. All products, which predominantly consist of films, are placed along the long walls

⁴www.yellowpages.com.au

with a glass display case with sex toys in the centre of the shop. The explicit nature of the displayed products is in contrast with the clues provided by the logo and name of the shop. The interior does not deliver the promise of a place that provides insight or a balance between the physical and the spiritual. The shop is clinical and straight to the point, explicit photos of sexual activity and different varieties of sex toys confront the customer, leaving nothing to the imagination.

The products sold in *Insight Adult Books* focus on male sexuality, with a small section reserved for male gay pornography. Only the section with 'martial aids', consisting of massage oils, vibrators and the like, seems to provide for female customers. X-rated movies are, however, not exclusively watched by males. Recent research into Australian sexuality shows that one third of people who watch X-rated movies are female. The gender balance does, however, shift somewhat in terms of the use of sex toys. Twelve percent of men and fourteen percent of women indicated using sex toys for masturbation (Richters and Rissel 2005, 39). In recent years, adult stores have become more accessible and attitudes towards pornography have shifted, increasing the proportion of female pornography consumers (Kirk and Boyer 2002, Attwood 2002). The shop does not only cater to single people looking for solitary sexual stimulation. One wall contains a notice board where people can place advertisements. The notices on the board are mainly from couples seeking like-minded couples to engage in sexual activities. No data is available on the social class of the average visitor the shop. Traditionally, pornography consumption is associated with working class. The pornography consumer is considered by some to be a projection of upper-class fears about lower-class men: 'brutish, animal-like, sexually voracious' and this image is projected back on to pornography itself (Attwood 2002, 95). The age of the visitors is regulated by law and the above mentioned warning sign in the vestibule contains a legal notice informing the visitor that a minimum age of 18 applies for entry to this place. The type of product that can be sold in the shop are also regulated by that same law. In the state of Victoria, only R-rated films can be sold. The films on sale in the shop are, however, predominantly X-rated films, something that was observed in all adult shops visited for this essay. This deviation from the law shows that the acceptance of pornography in contemporary society is larger than the legislator has allowed for.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that the architecture of *Insight Adult Books* is determined by the special status of pornography in contemporary society and this special status enhanced by constructing a veil of secrecy and restricting the sale

of pornography to specially designed places. The name and logo of this shop are semiotically ambiguous and seek to move attention away from the physical aspects to more cosmopolitan ideas about sexuality. This message is, however, not continued inside the shop where the physical aspects of sexuality are emphasised. The shop forms a horizon of the acceptable within contemporary Australian society. In the next essay, pornography as a commodity will be analysed in more detail.

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