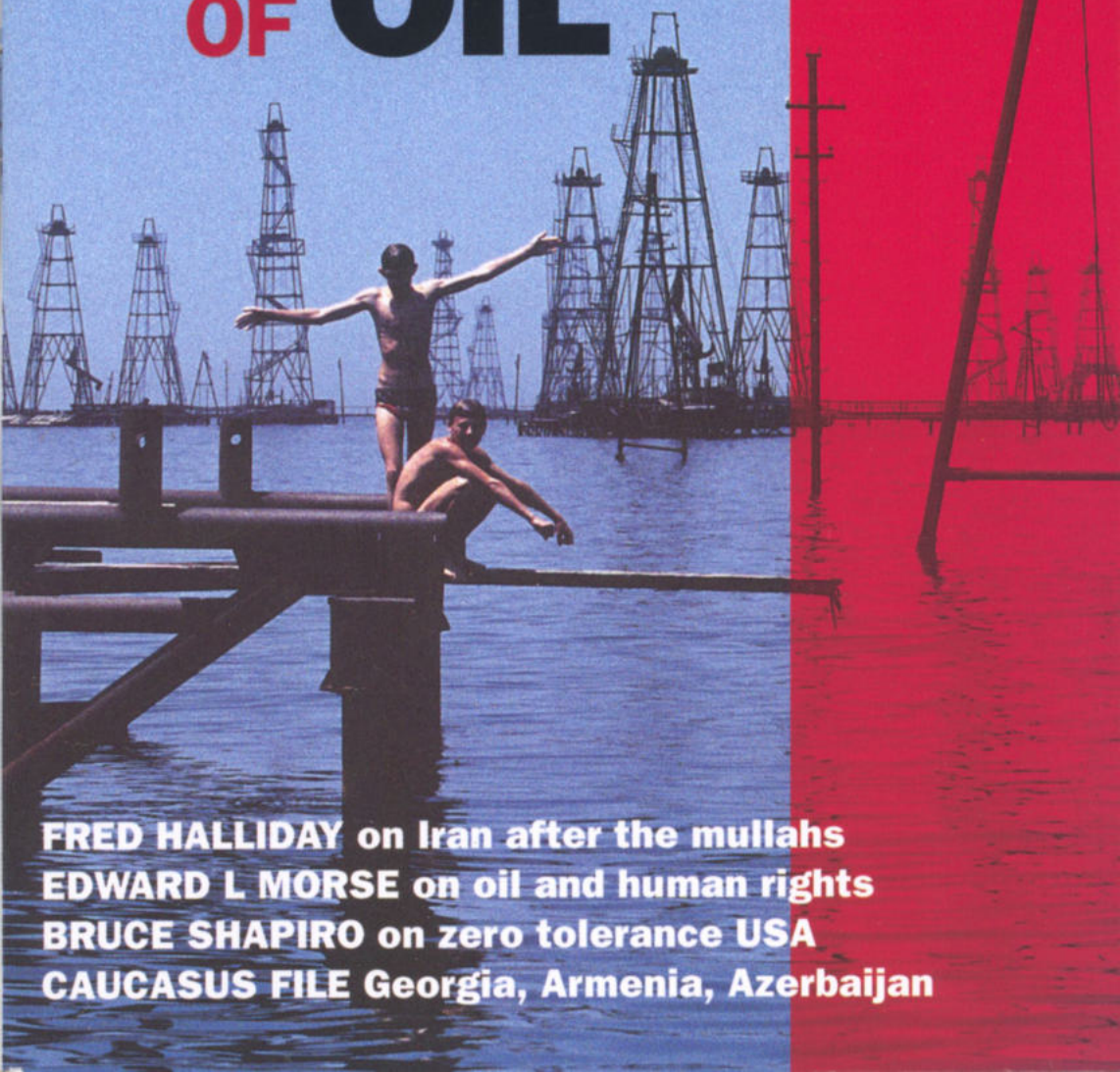


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On being censored

Art falls foul of a peculiarly British taboo

IT'S AN odd sensation: writing against censorship fairly frequently, then being censored oneself. The occasion? A new book of mine, *Ars Erotica*, is due shortly from a pair of very reputable publishers, one on either side of the Atlantic. The text is written, the illustrations chosen, the page layouts done. Suddenly the British publisher begins to agitate: he has been consulting his lawyers, and the lawyers are not happy. The problem is — er — largely the number of erections in the book. Photographic erections that is. Where paintings and drawings are concerned you can now print almost anything you like — though the further into the past you go the better. Group buggery on a Greek pot, for example, is perfectly OK. As it happens, I haven't chosen that particular illustration, largely because it has been so much published already.

But photographs — 'photographs less than 50 years old' — that's another matter altogether. There are a number of illustrations in the book which, it transpires, contravene two powerful taboos. The first is connected with the magic power of the camera. Though everyone now knows how easily, in the digital age, photographs can be altered or faked — that is, we accept, at least intellectually, that they can be as much 'fictions' as things which are drawn or painted — we still have a visceral reaction to them. Other forms of visual representation we see as acts of the imagination, even when we are told that the artist actually sat down before the event represented and scrutinised it thoroughly. But photographs! These seem to assure us that the erotic event in question actually took place, in the presence of a witness, and it is that that somehow disturbs the good order of society.

The other taboo is more peculiarly British: the erect penis, indeed even

the *suggestion* or the *possibility* of an erect penis, makes even perfectly sensible people in this country go all wobbly (quite the opposite in fact of the penis itself). The Japanese feel the same about female pubic hair, but nevertheless publish some of the most extravagant erotica in the world.

There has just been a delightful example of this British foible in the world of television advertising. A new TV commercial shows a girl who, we are assured, is wearing a perfume called Impulse. She walks into a class of artists painting a nude male model. The model notices her perfume and reacts. Though the actual physical result of his reaction is not shown, his expressions and body language make it quite clear what is happening. The result was immediately denounced by some self-appointed keeper of public morals as 'leading to cultural degeneration'. The phrase itself, of course, carries its own cultural echo.

Where my book was concerned, once the lawyers' protest had been made, a phase of negotiation began. How many erections could we save? Here is one, for instance, which first made its appearance in a book published in Britain in 1991 and which has been continuously in print ever since. Here is another: a new shot of a model whose likeness, with an even more impressive hard-on, appeared in another book published in Britain in 1995. Both books have been regularly sold in large general bookstores. No legal problems have ensued. Can we use those? No. Those were books addressed to a 'specialist' (read 'homosexual') audience. *Ars Erotica* is intended for the general public, and deals with a wide range of sexualities.

But *this* erection (the largest and most prominent of them all) is probably OK. The reason is that, while it looks more like a shot borrowed from a gay erotic magazine than any of the others, it is in fact the work of a celebrated American artist — none other than Andres Serrano, whose *Piss Christ* aroused controversy some time back (see *Index* 3/1996). Since then Serrano has gone up in the world: his work featured in the last Venice Biennale. The image chosen for my book was commissioned by a Dutch museum (the innovative Groninger Museum in Groningen) for its own permanent collection, and the transparency was supplied by them. If you are famous enough and official enough, the situation changes. You can probably depict what you like, even if you insist on using a camera to do it. Jeff Koons, after all, got away with explicit photographic scenes of coitus, not merely on the walls of art galleries, but in a couple of widely distributed books (see *Index* 2/1995).

In addition to the offending photographs, there is just one painting the British publisher is dying to get rid of. It shows *The Flagellation* and is from a series of Stations of the Cross by the New Mexican artist Delmas Howe (who is represented in the British Museum and also in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). The composition is very close to traditional versions of the subject — there is a resemblance to a famous Flagellation by the seventeenth century Bolognese painter Ludovico Carracci, which is even more violent, with the participants almost equally unclad. But in Howe's work the figures are wearing leather trappings which identify them as members of the modern gay S&M community. The connection between pain, pleasure and religious feeling is openly spelt out.

But there is another layer of irony, made even more ironic by the attempt to suppress the image. The Christ in Delmas Howe's Passion scene is a highly recognisable portrait — yes, I have met the model — of a man who, very recently, after a long lawsuit, received a six-figure settlement from the Roman Catholic diocese of Albuquerque as compensation for sexual abuse suffered at the hands of its priests when he was a child.

So far Howe's *Flagellation* is still in my book — at least as far as I know. But watch this space. □

Edward Lucie-Smith is a poet, writer and art critic. His most recent book is *ArToday* (Phaidon, 1996)