

Pornography and Real Sexuality, and Art

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1 REAL AND DEPICTED

We are confused today about pornography, not knowing whether we should be liberal towards it, and acknowledge the freedom of expression or should censor it on account of how we often feel offended and, perhaps humiliated by pornography. The confusion is due, I think, to the fact that we have come to identify pornography with sexuality. But they are worlds apart. Paradoxically, it is not difficult to see why, as I hope to make clear in this paper. A clear distinction between pornography and sexuality also supports my suggestion to introduce themes from pornography in art, so as to seriously address them in art practice.

Plato thought that real (platonic) love should be distinguished, no: separated from our sexual desires—because the latter concern our animal nature, and we on account of our rational nature should strive rather for moral knowledge of the other. Though the conclusion of this reasoning has my support, I could hardly agree less about its premiss. My view could be summarised



Figure 1: *Gustave Courbet, L'Origine du Monde, 1866 (Paris, Musée d'Orsay)*

Blonde Babe With Huge Round Melons Undressing And Dildo
Lovely Chloe Vevrier In Sexy White Dress Showing Boobs By
Natural Big Boobs Amateur Blonde Babe Taking A Shower
Sexy Latina Milf Lures Young Man To Her House For Great S
Renatka - Light Chubby Brabuster Mum From Polen In Bath
Nasty Redhead Jarmilla Refreshing Her Booty Ass And Juicy
Maya Devine Performs Pussy Penetration On Hard Cock
British Kelly Kay Strips Off Her Hottest Black Bra Showing H
Sexy Joana Cleaning House Completely Nude
Juicy Natural Boobies Of Blonde Czech Petra Dildoing Her P
Sexy Plump Babe Gets Naked For You
Big Tittied Milfs Are Fuckin The Shit Outta The Pool Man
Long Haired Brunette Playing Big Knocker In The Room
Japanese Sexy Girl With Huge Boobs Shows Her Sexy Body

Figure 2: *A pornography site's table of contents*

in saying that human persons are animals of a certain kind, and sexuality forms part and parcel of their nature, as do our moral interests—there is no principled contradiction between these two elements.

Basically, sexuality does not seem to require moral legitimation, because of its basis (conceptual, when not always actual) in biology. What would, however, require legitimation are those forms of sexuality that do not straightforwardly lead to new offspring.¹ Morality is no slave to biology, though, and human sexuality can be understood in terms other than procreation. I submit that sexuality be legitimated by reference to how in it we celebrate the communicability of our feelings—in a physiological manner, i.e. pre-linguistically. On the basis of this understanding of sexuality we can be “progressive” about sex and *still* require additional arguments for the acceptance of sex with children or animals, unsolicited sex and rape, and the paraphilias of the gaze: of narcissism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, frotteurism, and stalking. Just to be on the clear side: I don’t think these additional arguments are forthcoming. I see it fit to argue that pornography, too, is in want of additional legitimation and that that is not forthcoming either. The appeal to our fantasies—whether these are conscious or unconscious—will not suffice.

Sexuality is inherently good, and we are rightly fascinated by its occurrence and the pleasures it provides. However, the breach of the intimacy of real sex that is at stake in our pictures of it (no matter whether these are taken voluntarily or nonvoluntarily) can only be compensated by a re-

¹ Such as sex behind protective measures like condoms, diaphragms, or anti-conception pills, or homosexuality. Roger (? , 3) thinks “...that it need not be absurd to condemn homosexual intercourse, fornication, masturbation, or whatever ...”, but I think to condemn homosexuality *is* absurd, but for that, indeed, something more must be said. The legitimation of sexual agency on the basis of biology is as fallacious as is Plato’s disqualification.



(a) *Silver Shoes*, 1990



(b) *Ilona's House Ejaculation*, 1991

Figure 3: *Jeff Koons: Made in Heaven*, 1990, 1991

spectful attention to both the picture and the depicted, an attitude readily available and required in art practice. In museums—assuming churches are not available—perceptual fascination with the representation of sexual behaviour has its natural place. But let us begin with the fantasies.

I won't be coy with you. I have looked around on the internet searching for pornography long before I was researching for this paper.² But more recently I did it with an eye on philosophical analysis. Not surprisingly, of course, what I found, next to beautiful well-formed (often cosmetically constructed) women in exhibitional and inviting poses, was that pornography appeals to fantasies, mostly those in male heterosexuals.³ These fantasies may form the hidden motivators for one's sexual desires and feelings of arousal before and during sexual intercourse—when not these fantasies, then others. On the internet (or generally in pornography publications) they come depicted, and hence fixed. Secondly, these pictures are necessarily photographic,⁴ the net effect of which is: that they present us with fantasies that, for the sake of the photo, are turned into reality, at least for as long as it takes to take the photograph. This description is not critical about the effects of pornographic pictures, but about their nature: about how it is the photograph that requires

² To speak about pornography is always, and primarily so, to speak about oneself; feelings of shame are never far away. I know of no other subject matter that holds this grip on us—not even murder, it seems, well: murder committed, yes. The troubling aspect apparently is the experiential acquaintance—without the required moral behaviour. ³

Oh well, I haven't looked around on gay sites, so the ones I found referred to heterosexual male fantasies. ⁴ This necessity is both *historical*, as it assumes the advent of photography, and it is *conceptual* because it is about the viewers' beliefs that the depicted really exists and, secondly, that it really interacts with them: since the advent of photography, it would seem absurd to derive that kind of belief from a painting or literary text.



(a) *"it's done if I say it is"* (Zeno X Gallery)



(b) *Copper*

Figure 4: *Marlene Dumas*

the depicted scene to really happen. And as always, the more real a scene seems to be,⁵ the more effect its representation tends to have. Thus, in pornography, in order to stir our hidden fantasies, next to simply beautiful naked women (of certain appearances—which can and must, of course, be subject to debate) one finds pictures and films of horrible scenes. Young girls penetrated by long penises, one, two, or three at a time; women deeply penetrated in the mouth, gagging over ejaculated sperm. Need I go on? Pornography can be disgusting.

This disgust is directed neither at our fantasies nor at sex per se. I think one must be liberal with regard to people's fantasies, and one can be rather liberal concerning exactly what two people would find most exciting to do amongst each other.⁶ Surely, nothing in sexuality is as pure and innocent as a simple kiss, and it makes no sense to demand of any two people having sex that they refrain from fantasising even when those fantasies involve actions they wouldn't dare (for good reasons) to carry through. The very fact that they are not carried through is decisive. However, these fantasies that in

⁵ This is a general characteristic of art works of all kinds to do with how the nature of their material seeps through in the significance of the work. Try to imagine Bustah Rhymes singing a Beach Boys tune, or reversely. The nature of the singer is part of the meaning of the tune, it is part of what makes the tune convincing. (Can white men sing the blues?). See ? for further elaboration of this thesis. ⁶ There are, of course, constraints in the latter, the actual sexual event, but these depend on more normal moral considerations—about which, of course, debates can and must be held—but that is neutral to our understanding of the sexual scene.



Figure 5: *Caravaggio, Narcissus*

person-to-person sexuality are latent and contained tend to be realised in pornography.

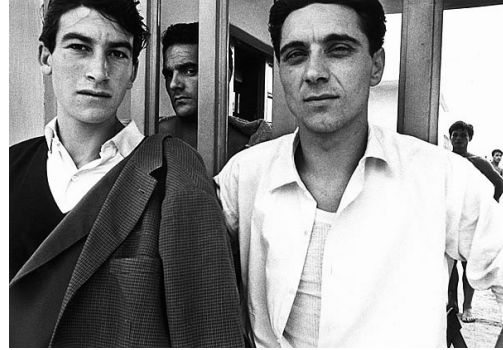
With the present-day ready availability of pornography on the internet, something is bound to go awry. I don't mean that a person masturbating on whatever he finds on the internet must of necessity turn into a rapist or a murdering pedophile. I do think, though, that such conduct in itself alienates him from communicative interaction with real persons, and, more crucially because this happens more secretly, from the proper role of his fantasies, which thrives on their implicit, covert nature. As motivational factors our fantasies are supposed to surface in socially acceptable behaviour. Having erotic fantasies is inherently good and motivating—as long as we don't jump to their realisation. That seems to me to be what psychological sanity, and sharing your lives with fellow humans is all about. I am sure some will feel triggered to vehemently debate this view, but such a debate would obliterate the real problem: the alienating hold that pornographic pictures have on us.

To explain the crucial difference between what is really happening and what is presented in its depiction, I submit that to perceive a thing with all of one's senses at the same time, i.e. by synchronous, polymodal perception, ensures that the thing exists, and that it exists here and now, before one.⁷ Sexuality, too, means primarily that one perceive another human being with all of one's senses. Sexuality proves the other's existence: in sexuality, one

⁷ In this thesis, I make free use of an argument developed by John ?, regarding the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. (The argument was developed further by Ian ?.) See also ?.



(a) *Gun*



(b) *Entrance to beach of Ostia Italy, 1956 (Lido de Ostia, 1959)*

Figure 6: *Art Photography: William Klein*

realises that the other is real; real, in every sense of the word, as a body, but also psychologically real, as a person.⁸ When we are unhappy about the sex, our disappointment concerns the persons involved, not just their (and our) physiology.

2 AESTHETIC INTEREST IN BODIES BELONGS IN MUSEUMS

If we are serious about watching people’s gorgeous bodies, then “boring” museums are the place to exhibit our pictures. Only there will one watch both the pictures and the depicted, i.e. will one watch bodies *whilst* acknowledging that the only reality one is confronted with is that of the picture itself.

According to Ovid’s myth in *Metamorphosis*, Narcissus, well-loved by his friends and family, when watching his own reflection in a river, turned so much in love with himself that he lost it altogether.⁹ He died of grief over the failures of his efforts to touch his reflection, and be touched by his mirror image in answer his advances. According to the story, his “Naiad sisters” never found a corpse to bury. Narcissus evaporated because of frustration over a reality proven virtual. This story fits pornography, not sexuality. The social correction that standardly inheres sexuality functions as a safety-valve against narcissist alienation.

So pornography is narcissist: a reduced perception. The other is perceived incompletely, like Narcissus’s mirror image, i.e. not with all senses

⁸ The core reality for moral considerations. Hence the deep need for a non-biological legitimization of certain types of sexuality and the success of my proposal. ⁹ ?, bk. 3, 335–521. See fig. ?? for a rendering of the watching Narcissus—he doesn’t seem frustrated as of yet.

synchronically.¹⁰ We perceive the body, but the person remains out of sight. Unlike in actual sex, the reality of ejaculation (or other type of sexual coming) corresponds here to the irreality of the other. The core of pornography is its auto-eroticism, an egotistic consumption, not the sharing of feeling.

What is confusing about pornography is its basis in photography, because that makes us think we are looking at real sexuality.¹¹ Roger Scruton once argued that photography itself already is pornographic, and inherently so, due to its causal-chemical relation to what it depicts, and the absence of subtle representational intentions.¹² We don't look *at* a photograph in search of the artist's vision about his subject, but look straight *through* it: at the depicted, which we know to have been real; and we have an interest in it, i.e. in their reality.¹³

Scruton's thesis that we always, i.e. necessarily, watch photographs with an interest in the existence of the depicted, removes the very distinction between pornography and mere photographs and leads to a restrictive characterisation of pornography as those photographs that show scenes of sexual intercourse. But, surely, not all photographs are problematic even if they can all be understood to induce an interest in their viewers in the depicted, rather than in the picture? Scruton's very identification of photography with pornography is so provocative precisely because it introduces a negative evaluation in our view on photography, but that negative evaluation is all but lost in the analogy, and it returns Scruton as a thinker having trouble with pictures of sexuality per se. In contrast, I submit that pornography should be characterised in terms of the typical use made of the pictures: pornography is used for sexual arousal and satisfaction. Whatever is on view in pornography is sacrificed, so to speak, to this ulterior aim. A pornographic picture is valued for its value as trigger, not for what is on it. So it is not simply characterised for its depiction of sexuality but for its sustaining this further use. To expand this possible further use to all photographs throws away the baby with the bath-water.

¹⁰ Striptease and prostitution come as close to real sexuality as pornography possibly can.

¹¹ Have you ever come across pornographic paintings? The closest I got was Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (fig. ??), but really only because it curiously presents us with an image known only from pornography. Painting is the house of visions and thoughts, not of realized pornographic fantasy. The same goes for literature. Literary works may contain themes derivative of pornography, e.g. Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Such works, however, remain in the sphere of imagination, the imagination of the reader. In ? it is argued that moral judgements about art should not concern the contents of a work, but the artistic merit with which they are presented. ¹² Scruton analyses the concept, or as he calls it, ideal photography, photography *qua* photography. In ?, 126. In the following I divert from an argument I developed in ?. ¹³ A notion borrowed from Immanuel Kant's argument that judgements of taste should be disinterested.



(a) *Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26th, 1992*



(b) *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, Feb 29. 1994*

Figure 7: *Art Photography: Rineke Dijkstra*

Scruton's thesis about photography, also, has been falsified by so-called art photographers, who depict people *as aware of* being addressed by the camera, and, through it, by the person operating it.¹⁴ Their photographs do show artistic intentions, and hence, the artist's vision.¹⁵ The photographer is present in the photograph, his existence is shown in the photograph by the gaze of the depicted. Exemplary cases are photographs of Diane Arbus, William Klein (Fig. ??), Rineke Dijkstra (Fig. ??). So I agree with Scruton that the problem with pornography is its failure to address (and show) the fact of representation, and I think photography has found a rebuttal of that criticism. Lastly, some photographs are meant to merely record events and to show their reality (journalistic photos), but some situations are such that a picture suggesting to show them breaches their intimacy, and pornographic pictures all fall in that category, as do pictures of dying people, or of mutilated

¹⁴ Of course, more can be said about the applicability of these arguments, and their subsidiaries, to photography. For one, Scruton's comparison of the transparency of photographs to that of windows has convincingly been undone by Gregory ?, 72–74, through the introduction of a distinction between egocentric and non-egocentric perception. ¹⁵ They are representational, in Scruton's sense. We see a person addressing a camera that is addressing them.

corpses.¹⁶

Can we then, or even: should we expect retrospective overview of the œuvres of pornography photographers in an art museum? Or will we keep seeing the depicted first and foremost? Even though this would simply introduce the stupidly shaven private parts into art, wouldn't we also, rather, expect a retrospective exhibition of one pornography actor or other: be it Chloe Vevrier, Linsey Dawn Macenzie, or Maya Devine, Kelly Kaye, what have you? Surely, the porn actor is never addressing the photographer, or, through him, the viewer, as the persons they are. So I don't think we should further the aims of pornography by making them salonfähig. But themes from pornography can and should enter art and art photography.¹⁷ Fortunately, examples of pornographic themes in art abound, think of Jeff Koons (Fig. ??), Robert Mapplethorpe, Marlene Dumas (fig. ??).

Photography proves the reality of the depicted, yes.¹⁸ But art is a practice prohibiting immoral conduct. So whatever reality is shown in its context, there would be means to inhibit it if it were as horrible as the scenes we find on the internet. What is required though is artistic merit.¹⁹ Also, whatever reality is shown is in a past and absent place and time—it is a presence before a camera, not one before the viewer.²⁰ It is by this same contrast between the viewer and the depicted that pornography should be distinguished as clearly as possible from sexuality.

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¹⁶ Where the exact limits are with regard to what counts as intimate, is, again, a case for the application of moral standards. (See note ??) ¹⁷ The reference to themes is intentional, as they will stop acting on us pornographically once they are in art practice.

¹⁸ Roland ? wrote about this as the reality effect, but it has more to do with the causal connection of the photograph with what it records, than with an awareness in the viewer. It is the proving power of photography that is applied to in the news, whether on television or in the papers. ¹⁹ See note ??.

²⁰ This is the case even where, as in performance art, what the artist does is done in front of an audience: we see the artist not as the person she is but as a persona of the performance.

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