

Art and Pornography

Philosophical Essays

Edited by Hans Maes and Jerrold Levinson

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Pornography has been a hot subject in aesthetics in recent years. Can porn be art? If it can, should it? Can it be good art? Can it be distinguished from erotic art and if yes then on what criteria? What are its distinctive features and how should it be defined? What, if anything, is morally wrong with it and how does that impact its aesthetic value? What is the relation between pornography and the obscene? A number of papers addressing those questions have been published since the early 2000's, several conferences addressing the subject have been held, and now a book anthology follows.

Jerrold Levinson and Hans Maes have been in the very centre of the discussion, holding opposite views on whether pornography can be art. In the introduction they point out that pornography's bad reputation is largely responsible for the lack of interest aestheticians showed it in the past. It seems that even if there are some pornographic works which are aesthetically rewarding, and there is some art that flirts with porn, they are very rare. Philosophers of art only recently started asking why the overlap is so small, but once the discussion started it seemed to grow in popularity every day, and it's good to see some of its main topics explored more in depth in a book.

The editors set out to publish a collection which would provide a more complete account of the subject, inquiring into the possibility of aesthetic engagement with pornography, the role of imagination and emotion in its reception, issues related to depiction, fictional character, and the relation between its moral and aesthetic evaluation. Although the book introduces several new interesting subjects, it ends up largely expanding on the existing dispute regarding the (possibly false) distinction between art and porn. Maes' introductory paper usefully brings the reader up to date with the road so far, and the remainder of the first section adds new arguments for and against the possibility of pornographic art. The following two sections largely expand on this discussion: section two focuses on perception of pornography, on whether it is perceived as fiction, what is the structure of such perception, and what are the consequences of treating porn as fiction for its status as art. The third section explores issues related to the use of medium and differences between genres, providing more insight into pornography as a diverse and heterogeneous phenomenon.

The last section is quite loosely organised. Only Cooke's paper addresses all of 'Pornography, ethics and feminism', to argue that 'much of what critics find defective about porn is, as it were, all in the head' (251). Kania's chapter largely addresses issues discussed in the preceding sections, while Eaton and Schellekens focus more on feminist and moral critique of the nude and of voyeurism in art - although their arguments are interesting and have some connections to pornography, these connections are signalled rather than explored in detail.

The book succeeds in achieving some more general aims. In the past pornography might have been thought uninteresting or unworthy, but with this anthology it is established as a valid subject of philosophical enquiry. While the topic has certainly been approached without too many prudish concerns before, it is good to see the authors call more confidently for some less dated and more diverse examples (beside the much-used Schiele's drawings) which are more likely to be actually used as pornography by a wider audience. Following this, it seems that the days of treating pornography as a unified phenomenon are over, as the differences between sub-genres are brought to light. These general changes of approach are of vital importance, because they show that the subject has not been previously treated with due attention to its diversity. It now seems that many past criticisms, far from providing a full picture, in fact apply merely to a certain limited amount of pornographic works. The book thus successfully challenges some popular assumptions: it is no longer possible to simply hold that no porn at all can be art, or that all porn is necessarily morally flawed without begging the question against the more sophisticated examples and likely even whole sub-genres. The chapters by Christy Mag Uidhir and Henry John Pratt, and Petra van Brabandt and Jesse Prinz are particularly insightful in this respect. (Perhaps, as van Brabandt and Prinz seem to suggest, what was needed was a shift from discussing the pornography known to Western male philosophers, to all pornography.)

One question seems vital to the current discussion, and is rightly the single most addressed question in the anthology: are the ways in which art and pornography are appreciated compatible, and if so, what are the similarities and differences between them? A lot hinges on the answer. If the ways they are appreciated are found to be incompatible then the thesis that porn cannot be art would gain some support. The details of the similarities and differences might shed some light on why so little (if any) porn seems to be art, if and how one should evaluate it aesthetically, and perhaps even morally. A great deal of the discussion follows Levinson's claim that pornography cannot be art because, roughly, art is intended for aesthetic appreciation which necessarily involves attention to the medium (treating it as opaque) while pornography is aimed at sexual arousal which necessarily excludes attention to the medium (or requires treating the work as fully transparent). Although I agree with the majority of authors who criticise this view, one cannot deny that Levinson inspires a lively discussion. The only author in the anthology who at least partially supports the above thesis is Alex Neill. By drawing a comparison with Schopenhauer's opposing categories of the sublime and the charming, he argues that pornography which aims at charming the audience, cannot at the same time be viewed as art which has more to do with the sublime. Even he, however, admits that it is possible to keep the stimulation caused by the charming in check and at least at some times view it as art.

Other authors in this collection argue that a fusion of art and pornography is in fact perfectly possible. Maes provides a useful review of points raised previously against various versions of exclusivism and expands upon the issues he explored before. Davies claims that Levinson's position leads to very uncomfortable consequences: if being intended to be primarily appreciated for other than aesthetic qualities excluded pornography from the domain of art, then it would likewise exclude much of religious art. Todd argues that using the transparency claim as a basis for distinguishing porn from art is unjustified because 'there simply is no such thing as complete

transparency in film viewing', pornographic or otherwise (99). He further claims that nothing prevents pornography from being fictional and thus non-transparent, a point supported by abundant evidence provided by Mag Uidhir and Pratt (interestingly, Mag Uidhir previously defended his own form of exclusivism, but seems to have changed his views). Their paper discusses the edges of the genre: Tijuana bibles, hentai manga and slash fiction, all of which not only do not aim at medium transparency or try to emulate real life situations, but are (intended to be) extremely unrealistic and highly stylised. These sub-genres are successful in arousing their audience although, and sometimes precisely because, they draw attention to the medium. The chapter by van Brabandt and Prinz furthers this critique, showing that the exclusivist theories 'seem to reflect a limited knowledge of our experience with pornography' (168). Although the authors recognise that a vast majority of porn is not art and provide a very convincing explanation of why not, they show that there exists porn which not only can be art, but can be really good art precisely because of its explicit content and the arousal it causes. Completing this criticism, Michael Newall identifies three aesthetic affects characteristic of pornography which have the potential for making it a worthwhile art genre.

Levinson tries to answer some of the criticisms by claiming that the difference between appreciating things aesthetically and pornographically is more profound than that between aesthetic and religious approach - sexual arousal is said to be special in actually preventing one (probably due to its intensity) from focusing on aesthetic properties of works. The examples mentioned above, however, seem to show that this claim finds little support in reality - otherwise hentai manga and artistic pornography wouldn't exist. Two things strike me in this discussion. Firstly, 'it is impossible to focus on aesthetic properties of a work, or attend to its medium in the state of sexual arousal' is an empirical claim and as such doesn't require philosophical critique, but testing. Perhaps it is true that it is impossible for some people (perhaps the exclusivists are among them), but not all. I am currently running a study in which I hope to find evidence for or against this claim. Secondly, it seems that the very existence of porn, or at least porn with some aesthetic qualities proves that indeed it can be appreciated aesthetically - otherwise how would it be possible to edit it before publication? Surely an editor of a pornographic film must do precisely what Levinson thinks impossible: focus on whether the camera work is good, whether the soundtrack matches the action, etc, trying to adjust them to make the work even more arousing, i.e. manipulating the medium to better match the content. It can be safely assumed that not every editing is followed by sexual release, and if the editors can do it, it is not true that appreciating something pornographically necessarily prevents everyone from attending to its aesthetic features.

Another overarching subject in the book investigates the relationship between pornography and fiction. While some seem to think that unless pornography is fiction (i.e. is not transparent, requires imagination to be correctly perceived) it cannot be art, others think that too much of it is fictional and find this morally problematic. Todd explores the roles of fantasy and imagination in the reception of pornography, providing a useful analysis of how it can be fictional yet genuinely arousing, and why the arousal it causes does not have to prevent perceiving it aesthetically. Stock takes over, inquiring whether the reception of pornography involves *de se* imagining and provides an interesting account on its erotic properties. Nanay's paper returns to the notion of transparency to provide a case study of what is dubbed anti-pornography - highly distorted photographs of

naked models by Andre Kertesz. Although interesting, this text is guilty of once again assuming all pornography to be the same, and Nanay's analysis seems to add little to the discussions surrounding it.

Overall, 'Pornography & Art' is a very successful venture into a new region of aesthetics. It introduces its subject well, with Maes' and Eaton's chapters providing useful summaries of the past feminist and aesthetic approaches. The book not only joins in the existing discussion - it succeeds in setting new standards for it. Pornography was largely treated as a fairly homogeneous phenomenon in the past, but the insightful unpacking of the concept offered by the authors, the instructive examples and analyses of less straightforward works, the exploration of its sub-genres, and the attention given to artworks with clearly pornographic content, leave a much more varied and interesting landscape. Such diversification opens multiple new avenues for research, and as the dispute over whether pornography can be art strongly leans towards a positive answer, the book provides an inspiration for inquiring into the value, characteristics, creation and reception of pornographic art.

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