Abstract

Art and pornography are often thought to be mutually exclusive. The present article argues that this popular view is without adequate support. Section 1 looks at some of the classic ways of drawing the distinction between these two domains of representation. In Section 2, it is argued that the classic dichotomies (subjectivity versus objectification, the beautiful versus the smutty, contemplation versus arousal, the complex versus the one-dimensional, the original versus the formulaic, imagination versus fantasy) may help to illuminate the differences between certain prototypical instances of pornography and art, but will not serve to justify the claim that pornography and art are fundamentally incompatible. Section 3 considers those definitions of pornography that make an a priori distinction between pornographic and artistic representations. The difference between the ‘merely’ erotic and the pornographic is also discussed in this context. Section 4 provides a critical assessment of the most recent and elaborate arguments against the compatibility of pornography and art. Finally, in Section 5, a case is made for the existence of pornographic art, as a subcategory of erotic art.

In his authoritative study The Erotic Arts Peter Webb states firmly that ‘there is a clear dividing line between art and pornography’ (2) – a claim that was repeated more recently in Alyce Mahon’s Eroticism & Art (14) and Marina Wallace, Martin Kemp and Joanne Bernstein’s Seduced: Art & Sex from Antiquity to Now (15). These art historians assume, almost as a matter of course, that pornography and art, unlike eroticism and art, are incompatible. But are there good philosophical grounds for this assumption? What is it, really, that distinguishes art from pornography? This essay presents an overview of the philosophical debate surrounding this issue.

1. Irreconcilable Differences?

It will be useful to begin with some of the classic ways of drawing the distinction between art and pornography.

(i) Pornography is explicit and represents people as objects, while art invites us into the subjectivity of the represented person and relies on suggestion. This is one of the most popular ways of marking the difference – one that has figured prominently in accounts offered by Roger Scruton and Luc Bovens. According to the latter, it is precisely because art retains a suggestive character that it succeeds in drawing the viewer into the phenomenal qualities of what is depicted (215). As such, Bovens states, art reveals in concealing, whereas pornography conceals in revealing. Viewers of pornographic pictures become thoroughly acquainted with all kinds of anatomical detail, but what remains hidden is what it is like to be engaged in such sexual licentiousness (215). In the words of one commentator, pornography ‘is not interested in persons but in organs’ (Marcus 281). In art, Scruton points out, it is always the other way around. Even when sex or
sexuality is the subject of a work of art (his standard example is Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*), it is not the sexual organs but the face, as ‘window to the soul,’ that provides the focus of attention (‘Flesh from the Butcher’ 11; *Beauty* 149; *Sexual Desire* 154; ‘Shameless and Loveless’).

A related and no less popular way of drawing the distinction is to say that pornography focuses on sex that is aggressive, emotionless or alienated, whereas in art, and particularly in erotic art, love, passion and equality between partners are of crucial importance (Webb 2; J. Ellis 30; Steinem 31; Mahon 15; Ridington 27). In support of this view, authors often appeal to etymology. For while ‘erotic art’ ultimately derives from ‘eros’ (the Greek word for love or passion), indicating an integrated sexuality based on mutual affection, the term ‘pornography’ (whose etymological root is ‘porne’, meaning prostitute) reflects a dehumanized sexuality based on the exploitation of women (see, for example, Webb 2; Steinem 31). In line with this, Kingsley Amis and E.J. Howard even went so far as to formally recommend, in their essay for the 1972 Longford Committee on Pornography, that the word ‘love’ be forbidden in the title of any work of hard-core pornography so as to avoid any misconceptions regarding its content (158).

The question whether and in what way exactly pornography exploits, subordinates and objectifies women has generated a massive literature and a longstanding debate in moral philosophy and feminist theory. I will briefly return to this issue in Section 3, but since the aim of this essay is to investigate the artistic status and aesthetic dimension of pornography I will put the intricacies of that debate aside here. (Two classic essays on this topic are Nussbaum, ‘Objectification’ and Langton, ‘Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts’; the aesthetic presuppositions and implications of these moral issues are explored in Gracyk, ‘Pornography as Representation’; Leibowitz, ‘A Note on Feminist Theories of Representation’; Brown, ‘Art, Oppression, and the Autonomy of Aesthetics’; Tirrell, ‘Aesthetic Derogation’.)

(ii) Art is concerned with beauty, while pornography is non-aesthetic and ‘smutty’. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud famously observed that ‘the genitals themselves, the sight of which is always exciting, are hardly ever regarded as beautiful’ (83; see also H. Ellis 182). From this, it seems to follow that ‘we only get beauty if we do not depict the site of sexual pleasure directly’ (Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* 82). Another reason why pornography cannot be beautiful is offered by Roger Scruton (in line with the previous point): ‘The pornographic image is like a magic wand that turns subjects into objects, people into things – and thereby disenchants them, destroying the source of their beauty’ (*Beauty* 163). To further illuminate this, Scruton appeals to the distinction between ‘the nude’ and ‘the naked’ made famous by Kenneth Clark. The artistic nude constitutes, as the subtitle of Clark’s book indicates, a ‘Study in Ideal Form’: the body is beautifully shaped and framed by the conventions of art. The people in pornographic images are not nude, but naked. They are deprived of clothes, and as such exposed or exposing themselves in an embarrassing way.

(iii) Art is to be contemplated in and for itself, whereas the lustful feelings evoked by pornography make contemplation impossible. St. Augustine already noted how the ‘promptings of sensuality’ typically block out all other functions, including most notably our rational faculties (Blackburn 52), but it is Schopenhauer who drives the point home with regard to the ‘charming’ in art. When paintings are designed to excite lustful feelings in the beholder, he states firmly, aesthetic contemplation is abolished and the purpose of art is defeated (207–8). In his testimony to the Longford committee on pornography Kenneth Clark voiced a similar complaint:
To my mind art exists in the realm of contemplation ... the moment art becomes an incentive to action it loses its true character. That is my objection to painting with a communist programme, and it would also apply to pornography. (280)

Roger Scruton, who is of the same mind, also stresses that if a work of art ‘arouses the viewer, then this is an aesthetic defect, a “fall” into another kind of interest than that which has beauty as its target’ (Beauty 160).

(iv) While art is necessarily complex and multi-layered, pornography is one-dimensional. It has only one job to do and lacks the interpretive openness of art. Especially among art historians this appears a popular rational for separating art and pornography (see, for example, Webb 6; Mahon 14; Wallace et al. 15).

(v) Works of art possess originality, whereas in pornography, as Nabokov once put it, ‘action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés’ (313). One is presented with the same kind of stock roles, sexual acts, flimsy narratives over and over again. This is not just a contingent feature of pornography. Pornographic films, novels, magazines are inherently formulaic. Because the pornographer’s sole intent is sexual arousal, he has to insert as many sexually explicit scenes as possible, leaving no room for plot or character development. Moreover, the actual sum of possible sexual postures, gestures and consummations seems drastically limited. As George Steiner puts it, ‘the mathematics of sex stop somewhere around the region of soixante-neuf’ (203) – which explains the inescapable monotony of pornographic representations (see also Amis and Howard 153).

(vi) Pornography addresses a fantasy interest, while art addresses an interest of the imagination. Both artists and pornographers deal in fictional worlds, but the imaginative creations of artists offer us a way of perceiving and understanding the reality we actually live in. Pornographers, by contrast, simply seek to refashion reality as the compliant object of our desires and fantasies (Scruton, ‘Flesh from the Butcher’ 13; Beauty 104). Pornography depicts the world as its customers would want it to be: full of healthy, attractive men and women who seem to wish nothing more than to satisfy every possible sexual desire. As such, the pornographic universe is immune to constraints of plausibility, truth to life, or insight (Kieran, ‘Pornographic Art’ 39). It is a realm of pure wish fulfillment. For Gordon Graham, art offers the exact opposite: it ‘does not merely pander to taste but tries to educate it’ (160). Pornography is also often characterised as an enemy of imaginative activity. Steiner, for instance, accuses pornographers of doing our imagining for us and hence of showing no respect for the audience (210). While a poet (or painter) will invite the consciousness of the reader (or spectator) to collaborate with his own in what is basically a joint creative effort, the pornographer treats his audience as mere consumers whose imaginative means are set at nil.

2. Objections and Counterexamples

How successful are these attempts to differentiate art and pornography? The answer to this question will depend on how ambitious exactly one takes these attempts to be. If the aim is simply to articulate some of the ways in which works of art can be different from the standard products of the porn industry, then there is really very little to find fault with. One need only compare, say, Rembrandt’s Bathsheba at her Bath to Hustler Magazine to see almost every single point confirmed. In Hustler Magazine we find formulaic, smutty pictures that focus on sexual organs and serve only one purpose. The thoughts or personality of the women depicted are of no importance. They are presented only as objects of male fantasy. The contrast with Rembrandt’s painting could not be greater.
The artist depicts the moment where Bathsheba receives King David’s letter, asking her to come to the palace. Bathsheba realises what this entails – she will have to sleep with the King and betray her husband – and sadly foresees the deceit and suffering that will be caused by this (see Gaut 14–24 for a more detailed analysis of the work). All this is subtly visible in her facial expression, which is the central focus of the painting. Instead of taking up a voyeuristic, objectifying gaze (the way King David presumably saw her), Rembrandt’s work expresses a deep sympathy with this woman and her precarious situation, and it invites the spectator to reflect on the similar fate of so many other women. It is a multi-layered, serenely beautiful, supremely original work of art.

But most of the authors cited above aim to do more than just draw a contrast between such prototypical instances of art and pornography. They want to establish that art and pornography are mutually exclusive, so that if something is pornography it cannot be art and vice versa. But to make this claim convincing it obviously does not suffice to discuss examples that fit neatly into one of the two categories. Rather, one needs to show that the proposed distinctions are immune to counterexamples. That is, before drawing a definite and strict line between art and pornography based on the above dichotomies, we need to be convinced that the qualities ascribed to art are necessarily missing in pornography and, conversely, that there are no works of art that possess those features which supposedly disqualify pornography from the realm of art. That, I now want to argue, is a bridge too far. Counterexamples abound.

First, there are many works of pornography that actually possess the features exclusively ascribed to art in the list above. Examples that come to mind are films like All About Anna, made by Lars von Trier’s production company Zentropa, Molly Kiely’s graphic novel That Kind of Girl, or Dirty Diaries, a collection of Swedish movie shorts. All three belong to the rapidly growing subgenre of ‘female friendly pornography’ (or as the filmmakers of Dirty Diaries would have it, ‘feminist pornography’). Far from being formulaic, they have imaginative scenarios, featuring life-like characters in realistic situations. Much attention is paid to the personal experiences and the personality of the female leads, and ‘feelings, passions, sensuality, intimacy, and the lead-up must be emphasised’, as it says in Zentropa’s Puzzy Power Manifesto. Beauty is a primary concern. Moreover, these works have an educational and emancipatory purpose in that they aim to offer insights into female desire and sexuality (McEllroy chapter 6; Willis 172; see Waugh 150 for similar arguments in favour of gay porn).

There are also more general and fundamental objections against the above characterisation of pornography. Take the claim that pornography is one-dimensional. For Laura Kipnis, this idea is symptomatic of the prevalent desire among pornography commentators to vastly ‘undercomplicate’ the issue. The experience of pornography, she argues, is intensely complex and fraught with all the complications of personhood. Pornography, as she puts it, ‘is the royal road to the cultural psyche’ (118; this idea is central in many radical pro-pornography accounts, including Camille Paglia’s and Pat Califia’s). As such, pornographic novels, photographs or films have many potential uses beyond the classic one-handed one. They can and often do serve as means of social criticism and cultural critique (Posner 352–5 and Slade 293–4 also elaborate on the many different uses of pornography).

A similar argument was made by Susan Sontag in her famous defence of literary pornography. In this essay, with the telling title ‘The Pornographic Imagination’, Sontag also rejected the idea that pornography is necessarily unimaginative. Novels like The Story of O or Story of the Eye, she argues, are profound explorations of extreme states of human feeling and consciousness (42) and deserve to be ranked among the great achievements of
the imagination. Linda Williams, author of *Hard Core* and editor of *Porn Studies*, has made similar claims about pornographic cinema, pointing out that one seriously underestimates the imagination if one thinks that it can only operate in the absence of, or only at the slightest suggestion of sexual representation (*Screening Sex* 19; see also Blackburn 108).

Perhaps Freud was right when he said that the genital areas in themselves are hardly ever regarded as beautiful, but that does not mean that representations of the genital areas cannot be beautiful. The paintings by Freud’s own grandson, Lucian Freud, or some of Mapplethorpe’s photographs are testimony to this. Or think of the ‘classy’ photographs of Playboy magazine which, according to Jon Huer, demonstrate that ‘some pornography is as beautiful as many artworks that proudly wear the identification of art’ (186; see also Chaucer, *Reconcilable Differences: Confronting Beauty, Pornography, and the Future of Feminism*).

The claim that pornography, by focusing on a person’s body, necessarily precludes their first-person perspective has repeatedly been challenged by Matthew Kieran (*Pornographic Art* 43–4; *On Obscenity* 38–9). He argues that, far from being uninterested, we must actually take an interest in the depicted subject in order for sensuous thoughts and arousal to arise. That is precisely why characters in pornographic films and novels are usually given some sort of identity and are embedded in a narrative leading into specific sexual encounters. If the characters were straightaway represented in graphic sexual activity, it would be easier to see them just as bodies, as we might view animals copulating, but it would be harder to take a pornographic interest in them. Incidentally, some commentators have argued, *pace* Scruton, that it is ‘the nude’ and not ‘the naked’ which implies objectification and dehumanisation. According to John Berger, ‘to be naked is to be oneself,’ whereas a naked body has to be seen as an object on display for the spectator in order to become a ‘nude’ (Berger 54; Gracyk 108).

Second, there are many undisputed artworks that would fall on the ‘wrong’ side of the divide if the distinction were drawn along the lines suggested above. To begin with, it is obvious that not all works of art are (or are meant to be) beautiful. Equally obvious is that not all works of art ‘invite us into the subjectivity of another person’ (Scruton, *Beauty* 159). For instance, in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Lancelot*, Francesco Petrarch’s *Sonnets to Laura*, or the *Roman de la Rose*, the female is represented as an object of passion to be possessed, and her own autonomy and point of view are completely disregarded (Kieran, ‘Pornographic Art’ 43). When Roger Scruton praises the self-assured way in which the *Venus of Urbino* looks directly at the spectator, thereby signalling that she possesses her own body in a confident way instead of just being an object on display, he conveniently disregards other masterpieces by Titian, such as *Venus and Adonis, Bacchanal of the Andrians* and *Danae and the Shower of Gold*, where quite the opposite is true. In this regard, one could also point to more recent and more explicit works by Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein or Hans Bellmer where women and young girls are unmistakably objectified and remain without agency (Mey 22).

Kenneth Clark claims that art loses its true character when it becomes an incentive to action, but clearly overlooks the fact that, besides communist posters, there are numerous religious paintings or politically inspired novels that call on people to change their lives and that we wouldn’t want to deny the status of art. Similarly, Scruton believes that a work of art should never arouse the viewer or reader. But if one were to use this as a criterion to exclude pornography from the realm of art, one would also have to exclude undisputed erotic masterpieces such as D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, Gustave Courbet’s *The Sleep* or Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris*. Surely, that is too high a price to pay.

© 2011 The Author
Philosophy Compass © 2011 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Finally, there is the claim that pornography cannot be art because it is formulaic. One can reply to this argument in a number of ways. The simplest is to point out that being formulaic does not preclude a work from realising other artistic values or additional aspects of expressivity (Kieran, ‘Pornographic Art’ 37). But one could also argue that being formulaic is not necessarily an artistically bad-making feature. For example, John Ford’s The Searchers has nearly all the formulaic features of a standard Western, but is not a worse film because of that (Kieran, ‘Pornographic Art’ 38). The same set of responses is available when facing criticism of the fantasy character of pornography. First, the fantastical nature of certain representations does not preclude them from realising other artistic values, or even from being ‘true to life’. Klimt’s nude studies, for example, are inherently fantastical in so far as they portray idealised, blank and even somnambulant young women, but as studies in sexual self-absorption they do not fail to be true to life (Kieran, ‘Pornographic Art’ 40). Moreover, being fantastical is not necessarily an artistically bad-making feature. In the words of Susan Sontag, an account

that faults a work for being rooted in ‘fantasy’ rather than in the realistic rendering of how life-like persons in familiar situations live with each other couldn’t even handle such venerable conventions as the pastoral, which depicts relations between people that are certainly reductive, vapid, and unconvincing. (41)

3. Definitional Concerns

The dichotomies presented in Section 1 can help to illuminate the differences between certain prototypical instances of pornography and art, but they will not serve to justify the claim that pornography and art are mutually exclusive. Of course, pornographic works might be said to have, by definition, no significant artistic or aesthetic aspect. Jerrold Levinson suggested as much in his earliest paper on the topic (‘Erotic Art’ 408). Likewise, George P. Elliott defines pornography as ‘the representation of directly or indirectly erotic acts with an intrusive vividness which offends decency without aesthetic justification’ (74–5) and Fred Berger thinks it involves work ‘which explicitly depicts sexual activity or arousal in a manner having little or no artistic or literary value’ (184). By adding phrases like ‘without aesthetic justification’ or ‘having no artistic value’ these authors simply stipulate that nothing can succeed as both art and pornography.

Definitions of this kind inevitably bring to mind certain legal descriptions of obscenity such as the U.S. Supreme Court’s notorious Miller test, set forth in Miller v. California (1973). This test proposed a three-pronged criterion for obscenity: x is obscene if (1) it is found appealing to the prurient interest by an average person applying contemporary community standards, (2) it depicts sexual conduct, specifically defined by the applicable state law, in a patently offensive way and (3) taken as a whole, it lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. The Miller test has proved problematic in many respects, one of its most evident flaws being the conflation of two ideas – the pornographic and the obscene. Martha Nussbaum (Hiding from Humanity), Jon Huer (Art, Beauty, and Pornography), Kerstin Mey (Art & Obscenity) and others have pointed out that the category of obscenity includes many non-sexual instances of transgression, excess or taboo and is thus considerably broader than the category of pornography. Recent philosophical attempts to define the obscene have taken this insight on board – allowing for non-pornographic obscenities as well as pornography that is not obscene. Some of these accounts also do not exclude the possibility of obscene art (e.g. Kieran, ‘On Obscenity’).
Yet, what to think of definitions that exclude the possibility of pornographic art by reserving the term ‘pornography’ exclusively for representations that have no aesthetic or artistic value? In answering this question it may be helpful to look at a corresponding issue in moral debates on pornography, where some authors have proposed to use the term ‘pornography’ only for those sexually explicit representations that are considered morally objectionable. Examples of such normative characterisations are to be found in MacKinnon (‘the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and words’ 176), Brownmiller (‘the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda’ 394) and Russell (‘material that combines sex and/or the exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to endorse, condone, or encourage such behaviour’ 3).

Susan Dwyer (‘Pornography’) has argued that normative characterisations of this kind are ideally suited to motivate people into doing (or not doing) certain things. In her terminology, a normative characterisation is ideal to perform the ‘strategic function’ of language. For instance, if you wish to convince the local authorities to ban pornography from newsstands, then a normative characterisation will prove a powerful tool. Local officials will certainly be hard-pressed to fail to be at least a little motivated to remove instances of undiluted anti-female propaganda from public view. However, if you wish to use words simply to pick out things in the world for further investigation, that is, to perform the ‘identification function’ of language, then a descriptive, value-neutral characterisation is needed. So, she argues, a philosophical enquiry into the moral status of pornography should start with a value-neutral description of what pornography is. Only once we know what it is are we in a position to evaluate its moral status. Similarly, one could say that a philosophical enquiry into the artistic status (or aesthetic dimension) of pornography should start with a value-neutral characterisation of pornography. Indeed, the philosophical debate about whether or not pornography can be art would simply be a non-starter with a normative definition like the ones proposed by Elliott or Berger.

That being said, an adequate (value-neutral) definition of pornography that captures as much of the extension as possible of what we ordinarily think counts as pornography is not easy to find. When Bernard Williams chaired the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship in the 1970s he proposed the following definition:

a pornographic representation is one that combines two features: it has a certain function or intention, to arouse its audience sexually, and also has a certain content, explicit representations of sexual material (organs, postures, activity, etc.). (8.2)

Despite its vagueness (when exactly is a representation sexually explicit? is it the acquired or intended function of the representation that counts?) this is still one of the best definitions to date (Kieran, Dwyer and Linda Williams all support a similar definition). The first condition is needed because there are sexually explicit representations that we would not ordinarily label as pornography, e.g. didactic illustrations in medical handbooks or documentaries of sex workers. The second condition is added mainly to distinguish pornographic representations from those that are ‘merely’ erotic.

The first condition, though absent in Elliot’s and Berger’s definition, is fairly uncontested nowadays. The second condition is more controversial. Levinson, for example, argues that some erotic paintings and photographs are just as explicit or even more explicit than pornographic pictures. He therefore proposes a different way of distinguishing between the two. According to Levinson, pornographic representations are essentially aimed at sexual arousal, whereas erotic images are aimed at sexual stimulation. The former he describes as ‘the physiological state that is prelude and prerequisite to sexual release’ whereas the latter should be understood as ‘the inducing of sexual thoughts, feelings,
imaginings, or desires’ (‘Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures’ 229). However, given that sexual feelings, thoughts and desires are typically accompanied by and conducive of sexual arousal, it is hard to see how this distinction is more plausible and useful than the one it seeks to replace.

Another objection against the second condition has been raised by both Michael Rea and Christy Mag Uidhir. The fact that magazines directed at bondage fetishists need not be explicit to be arousing seems to indicate that sexual explicitness is not a necessary condition for something to count as pornography. But this is hardly a knock-down argument. For why not call non-explicit bondage pictures ‘erotic’, just like we call the suggestive, but non-explicit pictures of models in lingerie ‘erotic’ but not ‘pornographic’? Surely, the fact that a model is wearing leather instead of lace cannot make all that much difference?

It is worth noting in this respect that some of the alternative definitions of pornography, while seemingly value-neutral, on closer inspection turn out to be normative. Michael Rea’s own elaborate and intricate definition is a case in point. According to Rea, x is pornography if and only if it is reasonable to believe that x will be used (or treated) as pornography by most of the audience for which it was produced. He then goes on to specify what it means to use something as pornography. He lists four conditions, including the following:

if S’s desire to be sexually aroused or gratified by the communicative content of x were no longer among S’s reasons for attending to that content, S would have at most a weak desire to attend to x’s content. (120)

This seems an oblique way of saying that something will not count as pornography if it has sufficient artistic value to support and sustain the audience’s attention independent of any sexual interest. (For a different objection against his account, see Sonderholm). Thus, his definition is not as value-neutral as it purports to be.

For our purposes, whether or not one is willing to adopt the second condition of Williams’s definition is not such a pressing matter because nothing in the debate on the artistic potential of pornography really turns on that issue. It is not the fact that pornography is sexually explicit, but rather the fact that it aims to bring about sexual arousal that is considered to be the big stumbling block for any artistic redemption of pornography. In the next section, I will discuss the most recent arguments put forward by philosophers who believe not just that there are important differences between standard examples of pornography and art, but that art and pornography are fundamentally incompatible.

4. The Current Debate

The argument of Jerrold Levinson’s latest and much discussed paper on the topic can be summarised as follows:

(i) Art is centrally aimed at aesthetic experience, which essentially involves attention to form/vehicle/medium/manner, and so entails treating images as in part opaque.
(ii) Pornography is centrally aimed at sexual arousal, which essentially excludes attention to form/vehicle/medium/manner, and so entails treating images as wholly transparent.
(iii) Aesthetic experience and sexual arousal are incompatible.
(iv) Nothing can be both art and pornography. Or, at least, nothing can be coherently projected as both art and pornography.
Critics have pointed out that this argument is both invalid and unsound. First, the conclusion only follows from the premises if it is further assumed that one cannot coherently and successfully aim at two incompatible audience responses. Yet, this assumption seems unwarranted. One can (coherently and successfully) aim at incompatible audience responses, as long as one does not expect these responses to be elicited at the same time, in the same audience, by the same part of the work. Accordingly, it does not appear impossible or incoherent to create something that qualifies as both art and pornography. For illustrations and a detailed elaboration of these three possible scenarios, see Maes (forthcoming).

Secondly, each of the proposed premises is dubious in its own right. For instance, many will dispute the claim that all art is centrally aimed at aesthetic experience or that aesthetic experience necessarily involves attention to formal features (De Clercq 95; Irvin 39). Moreover, it is difficult to see how the first premise fits with Levinson’s own intentional historical definition of art, just as there is a striking tension between the second premise and Levinson’s own Wollheimean account of depiction (as is argued in Maes 2009). When there are serious doubts about premise one and two, premise three will naturally come under pressure as well. Philosophers such as Richard Shusterman have even argued that an erotic experience involving sexual arousal, far from being incompatible with an aesthetic experience, can actually constitute an aesthetic experience in its own right (‘Aesthetic Experience’ 90–3).

Levinson’s argument may be defective, but most participants in the debate still share his sceptical view regarding the artistic potential of pornography. Both Christy Mag Uidhir and Christopher Bartel have recently put forward new arguments in support of the sceptical thesis and, to avoid the sort of objections that Levinson faced, they have tried to steer clear of any substantial definition of art or pornography.

Instead of focusing on the nature of art and pornography, Bartel draws a contrast between what he calls an artistic and a pornographic interest. An artistic interest, he explains (taking his cue from Levinson), ‘requires one to take an interest in the formal qualities of the work, and a pornographic interest ignores these qualities in order to attend to the content of the work solely’ (163). From this, he concludes that a work will never excite or reward one’s artistic interest by virtue of its exciting or rewarding one’s pornographic interest. As a consequence, the only interesting version of the ‘pro-pornographic-art’ view – the version which holds that some works have artistic value by virtue of having some pornographic content – is false. The first thing to note here is that the sceptical thesis is considerably weakened in Bartel’s account since he readily acknowledges that a work can reward an artistic interest independent of its having pornographic content. Furthermore, while Bartel avoids making any contentious claims about the essence or nature of art and pornography, his claims about what it is to take a pornographic or an artistic interest in something appear no less contentious. Why would the former require one to take an exclusive interest in the content of a work, or the latter require one to treat the medium as (partly) opaque? Bartel’s paper offers no compelling evidence in favour of either one of these claims. As such, even his relatively modest form of scepticism seems unfounded.

Mag Uidhir’s ‘anti-pornographic-art’ stance is more radical, as his choice of a title reveals. In ‘Why Pornography Can’t Be Art’ he justifies his uncompromising position as follows:

(1) If something is pornography, then that something has the purpose of sexual arousal (of some audience).
(2) If something is pornography, then that something has the purpose of sexual arousal and that purpose is manner inspecific.

(3) If something is art, then if that something has a purpose, then that purpose is manner specific.

(4) If something is art, then if that something has the purpose of sexual arousal, then that purpose is manner specific.

(5) A purpose cannot be both manner specific and manner inspecific.

(6) Therefore, if something is pornography, then it is not art. (194)

A purpose is manner specific if it is essentially constituted both by an action (or state of affairs) and a manner, such that the purpose is to perform that action (or bring about that state of affairs) in that particular manner (194).

By showing that the success conditions for art and pornography are fundamentally different, Mag Uidhir hopes to demonstrate that the two categories are radically separate. Basically, premise (4) states that, for something to count as a sexually arousing work of art, i.e. a work of art that fulfils its purpose of bringing about sexual arousal, it needs to bring about sexual arousal in the prescribed way. Premise (2), by contrast, specifies that for something to count as a successful work of pornography, i.e. a work of pornography that fulfils its purpose, it needs to bring about sexual arousal, period. The question, however, is whether this suffices to establish that there can be no overlap between the two categories. Several commentators have argued that it does not (Maes (forthcoming), Vasilaki 2010). In order to show that something cannot legitimately fall under both categories, it is not enough to argue that their respective success conditions are different. One needs to show that it is impossible for a particular object to fulfil both success conditions. Mag Uidhir’s argument falls short in this respect. Not only is it possible for a particular work to satisfy both success conditions, but satisfying the success conditions for sexually arousing art even seems to entail satisfying the stated success conditions for pornography. Take any picture that brings about sexual arousal in the prescribed way (and we can take this to mean whatever Mag Uidhir wants it to mean). Such a picture will have fulfilled the success condition for sexually arousing art (‘for something to count as a sexually arousing work of art, it needs to brings about sexual arousal in the prescribed way’) as well as the success condition for pornography (‘for something to count as a successful work of pornography it needs to bring about sexual arousal, period’).

5. Pornographic Art

The arguments put forward by Levinson, Bartel and Mag Uidhir, though more elaborate and sophisticated than the ones cited in Section 1, fail to establish that art and pornography are mutually exclusive. There may of course be other arguments that we have not considered yet. But it is very doubtful whether these will prove more successful. After all, any argument that holds that there is no middle ground between the domains of art and pornography will look suspicious from the start if one believes, as I do, that there already are works of pornographic art that confidently occupy that middle ground (a belief shared and affirmed by, among others, Morse Peckham, Art and Pornography; Peter Michelson Speaking the Unspeakable; Matthew Kieran, ‘Pornographic Art’).

When I say that there already are works of pornographic art, I do not just mean works of art that mimic or make reference to pornography, without themselves actually being pornography (Thomas Ruff’s nude photographs, Jeff Koons’s statuettes, Marlene Dumas’s paintings, Fiona Banner’s text pieces, Ghada Amer’s embroidery come to mind). I am
rather thinking of works like Pauline Réage’s novel *Histoire d’O*, Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie’s graphic novel *Lost Girls*, Nagisa Ōshima’s film *In the Realm of the Senses*, Kitagawa Utamaro’s woodblock print *Woman with man with black cloth and food service* or Mapplethorpe’s photograph *Jim and Tom, Sausalito* (for more examples, see Maes forthcoming). Whichever (value-neutral) definition of pornography one decides to adopt, these works will likely qualify as pornography. At the same time, however, they have been hailed as major works of art or literature. As such, they overcome the supposedly irreconcilable dilemma between art and pornography – a fact which has been recognised by art critics and theorists. For instance, Linda Williams calls *In the Realm of the Senses* ‘the first example of feature-length narrative cinema anywhere in the world to succeed as both art and pornography’ (183). Arthur Danto underlines the fact that Mapplethorpe ‘achieves images that are beautiful and exciting at once: pornography and art in the same striking photographs’ (*The Abuse of Beauty* 82). Douglas Wolk says of *Lost Girls*: ‘It is … beautiful, literary and moving. It’s also bluntly pornographic, with explicit sex scenes on almost every page’. According to Susan Sontag, *The Story of O* shows that ‘works of pornography can belong to literature’ (44).

Better than any abstract argument, these works show that the notion ‘pornographic art’ is not an oxymoron but designates a legitimate artistic category. So, instead of trying to draw a sharp line between the categories of art and pornography, it seems more promising, as far as future research is concerned, to explore the common ground they share and to critically investigate the aesthetically and sexually stimulating works that fall under both headings.

**Short Biography**

Hans Maes received his PhD from the University of Leuven, Belgium, and conducted postdoctoral research at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and University of Maryland, USA. He is currently Lecturer in History and Philosophy of Art at the University of Kent and member of the Aesthetics Research Group (<http://www.aesthetics-research.org>). He has authored papers on a variety of subjects in aesthetics, including the role of intention in the interpretation of art, the notion of free beauty and the relation between art and pornography. The latter will be the subject of an essay collection, co-edited with Jerrold Levinson and forthcoming with Oxford University Press. In 2010, he was elected President of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics.

**Note**

* Correspondence: History and Philosophy of Art, University of Kent, Jarman Building, Canterbury CT2 7UG, UK. Email: h.maes@kent.ac.uk.

**Works Cited**


© 2011 The Author 
Philosophy Compass © 2011 Blackwell Publishing Ltd