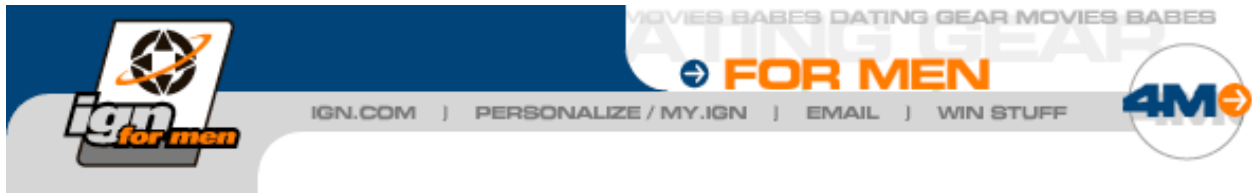


DEFENDING VENUS

the disputed boundary of Art and Pornography

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Classic Babe of the Day: Venus of Urbino

Come and gain a new appreciation for classic art with IGN For Men.

November 30, 1999

Classic Babe: Venus of Urbino

Painted By: Titian

Best Known For: Being naked.

Adam Says: I don't know what the reaction was to Titian's Venus of Urbino upon its completion in Renaissance-era Florence in 1538, but I imagine it was greeted with shock and disdain. Even today it's fairly shocking. It's been almost 500 years and this pudgy girl is still causing a commotion. Just goes to show you that no matter how shocking we think our society is now, it's all been done before.

Picture: Venus of Urbino (Picture copyright the original owner.)

Caption: Famous. Old. Naked

Yesterday's Classic Babe: Cher



FOR MEN POLL

What do you think of fine art now?

- Whatever, I'll still take 'Hustler' any day.
- I had no idea museums were full of smut. Point me to the nearest auction.

VOTE!

the Supreme Court... found works to be obscene if “they appealed to prurient interest in sex, were patently offensive to community standards relating to sex, and were utterly without redeeming social value.”

- the “Fanny Hill Test,” 1966 (Harrison/Gilbert)

One of the sources I used to research this paper, the provocative and entirely gorgeous art book Ars Erotica, is designated “in-house only” in the tri-college library system. Technically, this means the book can’t leave its home library; in my case, the book was transported from Bryn Mawr to Swarthmore, where I was allowed to check it out but not to take it out of the building. Initially, I didn’t give this situation a second thought, but then I read the following description of library practice in Lynda Nead’s article “The Female Nude”:

During [the 1970s] the British Library catalogued the 1976 edition of Kenneth Clark’s high-art survey, *The Nude*, in the general stacks, but relegated Arthur Goldsmith’s *The Nude in Photography*...to the special locked cases. The special cases are reserved for books that are prone to theft or damage and include commercial or titillating representations of sex (Nead 286)

I contacted several librarians to determine whether Ars Erotica is supposed to remain “in-house” because of its erotic content. The most reliable answer seems to be no. A large part of Bryn Mawr’s art collection is “in-house only” as a general policy: I was told that if the book circulated to Swarthmore it was not “in-house only,” and could indeed leave the library (my being told to leave it behind the circulation desk was apparently just a misunderstanding). However, a less informed librarian did tell me that art books are classified as “in-house only” selectively, and suggested (without any prompting from me) that this one was so designated because it is erotic and therefore “stealable.” So this rationale is on the tri-college library radar. The American Library Association officially prohibits restricting access to materials with questionable content, but makes an exception (as Nead describes) for items at risk of being damaged (http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/rest_mat.html) — erotic or pornographic materials are a central element in each category. At Swarthmore, books that need to be protected (many of which have replaced already destroyed copies) are kept in a locked area called Closed Stacks, but can be checked out normally. One of the ironies of this hubbub is that, as Donny Smith points out, “Pornography is one of the least-collected types of literature,” and most libraries have very little

erotic material. I would also like to note what I think is an interesting displacement or historical shift: understanding the public as rapacious pornophiles who the books must be protected from, rather than as moral citizens who must be protected from pornography. My point, in this lengthy example, is that the process of distinguishing between art and pornography permeates our everyday lives. It is a shaping factor of the social institutions we are intimate with — our libraries, schools, workplaces — and a regular target of legislation (from library policy to the Supreme Court). As such, this process also plays a role in constructing who we are as subjects.

Ars Erotica is a not-especially-scholarly survey of work within the “high art” tradition that has explicitly sexual content. It treats material ranging from the decorous erotics of classical and Renaissance art, to graphically sexual modernist and post-modern works that deliberately challenge and reconfigure the boundaries between art and the pornographic, to non-Western art operating within an entirely different system. The text opens with two interludes that provide a sort of origin story for pornography and its expulsion from the realm of high culture. The first moment the author describes is the work “I Modi,” a series of prints depicting different sexual positions (with accompanying poems), produced by two rather eminent artists associated with Raphael around 1524. After “I Modi” was published, the artists were forced to flee Rome to escape papal retribution. In addition to being pornographic (the first pornography, Rona Goffen claims [Intro 10]), the prints were also a political satire of the papal court. The second “turning point” is the discovery of a large body of classical erotic art in the excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum beginning in 1748. This constituted a crisis for the male “educated class,” who had to find a cultural space for this frankly sexual canon both within and insulated from the idealized artistic tradition. This paper will examine various perspectives on this crisis, broadly conceived as the necessity, which arose at a particular historical moment in relation to particular forms of domination, of structuring an opposition between Art and Pornography. The major claim that Ars Erotica makes is that this opposition is not as simple as it might seem. In this paper, I use the word “art” to refer to the privileged realm of “high culture” artistic production that Ars Erotica interprets.

The boundary between art and pornography is in fact notoriously slippery. Definitions of pornography which recite its specific features are usually based on one or more of the following six tenets:

- Pornography is in the image: it is defined by particular formal codes or tendencies
- Pornography is in the subject matter: all representations of naked women (for example) are pornographic
- Pornography depends on the artist’s intention: works intended to provoke sexual arousal are pornographic
- Pornography is a matter of reception: if an image evokes sexual arousal for someone/most people, it is pornographic
- Pornography is in the mode of production/distribution: erotic images that are mass produced and sold for profit are pornographic
- Pornography is about ideology: all works that exploit or objectify women’s bodies are pornographic, or, representations of sex “without redeeming social value” are pornographic

All six of these tenets are currently in circulation, and they should all seem vaguely intuitive. From what I have read, it is impossible to put them together into a definition that gives pornography a categorical coherence which completely distinguishes it from art. The situation is complicated by the fact that definitions of pornography are often tacit, rather than explicit. In general, we are satisfied with one Supreme Court justice’s standard: “I know it when I see it.”

The alternative to trying to formulate a positive definition of pornography is to define it differentially, in manifest opposition to art. I could posit the following sorts of distinctions based on my readings in theory and art history:

| ART | PORN |
|--|---|
| beneficial social role | harmful social role |
| depicts individuals | depicts objects |
| complex, invites interpretation | simple, transparent |
| may incite lust, but also other things | incites only lust |
| addresses all humans | addresses the fantasies of a male spectator |
| enduring, unique | disposable, mass produced |

passive, thoughtful spectator
appeals to the mind
cultural

spectator incited to action
appeals to the body
commercial

The salient feature of this dichotomy is that it offers a subjective and ideologically inflected demarcation of the two categories, rather than one that is objective or disinterested. It suggests that art and pornography are mutually constitutive terms invested with cultural values. One of the tensions of this opposition is that, while art and pornography are often set up as absolute opposites (as above), in practice they function more like two poles of a continuum. Other terms, like “erotic” or “sensual,” are mobilized to mediate between them. Even this sort of differential definition (like other important binaries) is not stable. Harkening back to the six tenets above, the first claim I would like to make is that, whatever definition of pornography seems to be operating at a discursive level, it is actually only possible to legitimately determine whether or not a work is pornographic on the basis of an ideological judgment. Therefore, since I take ideology to mean the imaginary concepts and relations on which material practices depend, all such classifications participate in political processes. This does not mean that we should stop making the distinction between art and pornography (as if we could). I do argue, however, that it is important to de-naturalize this distinction, and explore why and how it is called into play, in order to engage it in politically responsible ways. To broadly paraphrase Foucault, the more meaningful question is not Is this particular artwork pornographic? but Why do we so fervently ask whether this artwork is pornographic?

This paper deals primarily with two sets of texts: first, several essays from a recent anthology on Titian’s “Venus of Urbino.” This volume is conceived, in large part, as a response to art historical allegations that the painting was a sort of elite Renaissance porn. My reading of these essays is meant to demonstrate that it is impossible to “prove” that an (even obliquely) erotic artwork like the “Venus of Urbino” is or isn’t pornographic. Rather, the category of the pornographic can only be invoked or rejected as a strategic and ideologically motivated intervention

in the debate about the nature of art. In order to explore what is at stake in this debate, I turn to writers, outside the art historical mainstream, who attempt to demystify and historically/politically contextualize our investment in the sanctity of the artwork. Overall, their thesis is that the categories of art and pornography, as we understand them today, came into being simultaneously during Europe's transition to modernity, as an important part of the framework that allowed modernity's new forms of domination to take hold. Pornography is one of the place holders that make possible art's ideological function, and insofar as art and pornography are conceived in opposition to each other, they will always mutually implicate each other, constantly challenging their own supposedly essential character. This is why the debate over how to draw the line that separates them still rages intensely in contemporary civic life.

DEFENDING VENUS

there, against the wall, without obstructing rag or leaf, you may look upon the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses — Titian's Venus...[but] there she has a right to lie, for she is a work of art, and Art has its privileges... There are pictures of nude women which suggest no impure thought — I am well aware of that. I am not railing at such. What I am trying to emphasize is the fact that Titian's Venus is very far from being one of that sort... In truth it is too strong for any place but a public Art Gallery.

- Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad* (Rosand 38)

At the end of the introduction to Titian's "Venus of Urbino", the editor Rona Goffen identifies the book as a response to "the overly positive, reductionist approach" (Intro 17) of scholars like Charles Hope. The passage in dispute from Hope's article "Problems of Interpretation in Titian's Erotic Paintings" reads: "The implication is that these pictures [including the "Venus of Urbino"] were for the most part mere pin ups, and that the girls were seen as little more than sex objects" (Hope 119). The implication, that is, of a documented commercial genre of paintings of anonymous female nudes, with only the barest of mythological pretexts and often recycling the same models. Hope's argument that "in Venice itself there was a distinctive local tradition of erotic paintings which did not masquerade as anything else" (Hope 124) is part of his methodological call for "simplicity" in interpretation (as opposed to Panofsky-esque excesses of

iconography). He seems to suggest that art historical methodology provides strategies for artificially glossing over the self-evident erotic content of great works of art. As Goffen states, the “Venus” anthology addresses both components of this critique simultaneously; evidently art historical practice and questions of the pornographic are inextricably linked.

Earlier in the introduction, Goffen more obliquely marks another “equally reductive” tradition which the anthology responds to, a school of thought which would answer yes to the questions “‘Does a genre produced primarily by and for men necessarily demean women and alienate or exclude the female spectator/reader?’ And can we be certain that this confrontation of male subject/female object is necessarily implicit in all such images, the inevitable concomitant of the display of nude women?” (Intro 13). This is, of course, a reference to a mode of feminist art history that got underway in the 70’s, which attempted to problematize the idealization of the artistic canon by pointing out how it realizes fantasies of male power and excludes the desires and agency of women. In this critique, the female nude is inherently pornographic insofar as it objectifies the female body in order to gratify the male spectator’s libido. Linda Nochlin, who writes “The naked woman can inscribe only passive available flesh... as much as in any *Playboy* centerfold, arousal is the issue” (Nochlin 34, 36), is an acceptable example. If undoing this particular censure of the art nude is less central or more controversial within the “Venus” anthology’s project, it is nevertheless clearly on the radar.

In the introduction, before she explicitly refers to Hope, Goffen provides an extensive exploration of the question “Are Titian’s representations of women misogynistic? Or worse, are they pornographic illustrations?” (Intro 10), confirming that answering these questions (in the negative) is one of the book’s primary foci. Although her first claim is that pornography must be viewed as a phenomenon with a historical context, and therefore not as “inherently misogynistic,” her argument that Titian was not a pornographer is entirely based on the fact that his work has an almost feminist bent. Her characteristic rhetorical move is to cover all the bases: even if Titian were a pornographer, he wouldn’t necessarily be exploiting women, and anyway he’s not a pornographer because he empowers women. Specifically, she mobilizes a series of problematic (and modern!)

stereotypes of pornography (in opposition to “erotic art”) to make this claim: Titian’s art is not pornographic because it “involves mutual emotion, not just (sexual) activity,” it “may involve or inspire affection, respect, or empathy for the subject,” and “Titian’s women are never mere body without individuality” (Intro 11). Methodologically, the accusation is that “The modern beholder’s (sometimes prurient) response to the image is (wrongly) considered proof of Titian’s meaning” (Intro 12), rather than rightly subordinated to a historical analysis which would reveal the ways Titian “might assume a female voice to speak on [women’s] behalf” (Intro 12). In her critique, she does this, first of all, by emphasizing a Renaissance belief in “the magic of images” (which can “hear, speak, and see”) by giving Venus a reciprocal gaze (Intro 13, Sex 65). Her sexiness is in fact sexual agency, signifying her active consent to the marriage the painting celebrates. In my opinion, the fact that Titian uses cultural conventions of painting to construct the stabilizing fiction that his protagonist is a willing participant in a sexual and financial union she did not (in real life) choose can hardly be read as “empowering” Venus. Second of all, she points out that the “Venus of Urbino” is part of a misogynistically-framed tradition of using the beautiful woman as the ultimate analogue of beautiful art, expressing the fantasy (actually realized in the case of Apelles) that “The successful creation of the beautiful woman’s image will be rewarded by possession of the woman herself, the incarnation of beauty” (Intro 14). To counter this lascivious symbolism, Goffen offers the argument that Titian’s “feminine” focus on “color” (considered a secondary, emotional, dangerous property compared to “design”) in his style demonstrates his “sympathy” with his female subjects (Intro 15-16) — hardly a convincing rehabilitation of Titian. Again rhetorically accounting for the fact that the reader might not be buying it, she says we can be comforted by this “profound sympathy,” “Even if we assume that Titian was to some degree misogynistic” (Intro 15) (in spite of all her assurances that he isn’t). She makes this move most spectacularly in the final paragraph of this section, writing that “Titian was then not a pornographer, either high- or lowbrow. For the sake of argument, however, if one wishes to retain that much-repeated estimation of his art” one would apparently need to quote Susan Gubar at length to explain that “whether his women are pornographic and misogynistic or exalted and sublime,

Titian's subject is himself" (Intro 16). Interpreting "Titian's women" as figures for "masculine self-definition" through which he "converts his greatest trauma into his greatest thrill" (Intro 16) hardly constitutes (again) a palatable feminist reading. Ultimately, it seems that even Goffen herself is not sure she has convincingly resituated Titian outside the realm of pornography.

I would characterize the argument that I have just outlined, in its property of constantly trying to anticipate and placate all objections, as overdetermined. This overdetermination symptomizes the fact that it is impossible to prove that the "Venus of Urbino" isn't pornographic. Goffen's anxiety comes from a failure to understand the pornographic as an ideologically-inflected strategy for making cultural distinctions, rather than as a bounded category. She is most frank about what is at stake when she writes:

Doubtless it is impossible to examine such intimate and fundamental matters [as gender and sexuality] with complete disinterest; and admittedly, the very questions posed and the methodological stances taken predetermine, to some extent, the results. Nonetheless, the contextual approach to Titian's women is warranted, not to say required, by historic and aesthetic responsibility to a great master. (Intro 12-13)

Her objections to the idea of Venus as "pin up" are actually an interested defense of "great" art, rather than a disinterested exposure of factual error. Art historical methodology is figured as a tool for protecting (or, when done wrong, for destroying) the ideological integrity of high culture.

In her article, "Sex, Space, and Social History in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*," Goffen reiterates her position that it is only the erroneous assumption that sexuality is transhistorical that causes critics to deny the marital and therefore unpornographic character of the painting. If Venus "seems far too sexy to be chaste" (Sex 68), this sex appeal (down to the masturbatory gesture) is meant to promise the future sexual responsiveness and fertility of a child-bride. Strangely, although she acknowledges in the introduction that she is defending Titian, here this turns into a rehabilitation of Venus's moral character (negatively "redefined" by Manet's far smuttier painting "Olympia" [Sex 70]): while protagonists' like Venus "gazes may also be characterized as 'unambiguous sexual invitation'... the invitation is germane to the matrimonial context and in no

way promiscuous” (Sex 70). In fact, Goffen seems to pass her analysis off as feminist solely because she saves Venus from being a prostitute by making her a wife:

Perhaps this disjunction between the actual identity of the Renaissance bride and her ancient surrogate, the goddess of love, made female sexuality safer by distancing it, by shrouding it in classical fantasy. To deny Titian’s woman...her divinity is also to deny her sexual power: If she were merely a courtesan, her sexuality would be delimited by sixteenth-century Italian standards because its extramarital purpose is fornication, not gestation. (Sex 82)

I can’t help thinking that it is not only “sixteenth-century Italian standards” maligning “female sexuality” that are in play here. Goffen’s counter to Hope is based, most fundamentally, on an either/or logic: if the “Venus of Urbino” *is* a marriage painting, than it *isn’t* a “pin up.” However, the frank allusions to sexual possession and gratification that she identifies as conventional in marriage paintings undermine this absolute distinction between artistic and pornographic forms.

In his article “‘So-and-so Reclining on her Couch,’” David Rosand is far more willing to admit and put to use the ambiguity of the art/porn dichotomy. Like Goffen, he identifies the question of the “Venus of Urbino”’s illicitness as the central interpretive problem of the painting, one shaped by the retrospective commentary of “Olympia.” However, Rosand allows that art historians have a dubious tendency to “sublimate the sensual in the aesthetic” (Rosand 40), and that it was Olympia’s shocking morals that prompted the “Venus of Urbino” to be interpreted as a marriage picture celebrating the “fruitful passion of licit love” (Rosand 41) in the first place. Associating “Venus” with the tradition of paintings of anonymous “beautiful women...in various states of dishabille” that Hope maligns, Rosand acknowledges that, while their subjects were simultaneously “both goddess and courtesan,” their “primary appeal” was sexual (Rosand 47). Nonetheless, he is still careful to give this sexiness social sanction by again linking it with marriage, citing a contemporary who claimed that “‘lascivious pictures’ in the bedroom ‘...serve to arouse one and to make beautiful, healthy, and charming children’” (Rosand 48). Rosand’s ambivalence in this is also fundamentally involved with methodological dogma. He avers that

The picture operates on an equivocal scale of values, and from that very ambivalence derives its richness of experience. The image's direct appeal is blatant: a naked woman offering herself... And yet she is clothed in cultural convention... Indeed, it is out of the interplay of intellectual response and sexual fantasy, of social function and private satisfaction, that the possibilities of meaning in the *Venus of Urbino* emerge. (Rosand 54)

Daniel Arasse offers a similar reading in his anthologized article when he identifies in the painting a deliberate formal ambivalence that encourages the spectator to oscillate between the goddess and courtesan tropes in his responses to the image (Arasse 100). I find this sort of compromise quite convincing and progressive, but what makes it acceptable to Rosand is that it incorporates both first- and second-level interpretation in the Panofskian scheme. He castigates those who favor “simple” interpretation even more self-righteously than Goffen:

To call these images ‘mere pin-ups’ can only strike us as a rather perverse form of Venus envy... it represents a willful act of critical irresponsibility... Such reduction of meaning is predicated on a vacuation of the possibilities of meaning from the image, a denial of its cultural resonance. To deny a Renaissance picture of a nude woman her mythological grab is indeed to turn her out into the streets. (Rosand 49-50)

Rather than condemning Venus to life as a common streetwalker, Rosand offers a third-level interpretation that reads in the painting Titian’s drive to sexually possess his subject — which is arguably not a more favorable option for her. That aside, Rosand’s objection to Hope is not that he identifies the “Venus of Urbino” as essentially erotic, but that he doesn’t mitigate this eroticism with a higher level of meaning. Panofskian interpretation in itself validates erotic art as art, not pornography; the assumption Hope evokes is that pornographic art is the art too simple for interpretation. This raises the question of why, if iconographic interpretation is unique to art, a whole book is required to interpret the pornography out of a painting. Titian has been recognized for centuries as a great painter; it is hardly realistic to worry that he is going to plummet in anyone’s estimation to the level of *Penthouse* (or even more cheerful 50’s cheesecake). Why, then, do Goffen and Rosand still see labeling the “Venus of Urbino” a “pin up” as a dire threat to Titian, Venus, the discipline of art history, and perhaps to art itself?

the DISPUTED BOUNDARY

culture indefatigably tries, not to make what each raw person may like, the rule by which he fashions himself; but to draw ever nearer to a sense of what is indeed beautiful, graceful, and becoming, and to get the raw person to like that. And in the same way with respect to railroads and coal.

- Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, 1869 (35)

Given the amount of energy Goffen et al expend contesting the claim that the “Venus of Urbino” is pornographic, it is bemusing to find that the first essay in the “Venus” anthology, “Titian, Ovid, and Sixteenth Century Codes for Erotic Illustration,” by Carlo Ginzburg, actually aligns more closely with Hope’s argument to this effect. According to Ginzburg, “we cannot ignore that contemporaries viewed Titian’s mythological ‘poems’ as explicitly erotic paintings” (Ginzburg 28), and no “second layer of meaning” will neutralize this fact (Ginzburg 30) (he goes as far as saying that Titian is a bawdy “vernacular,” rather than a “humanistic,” painter [Ginzburg 31]). Ginzburg maintains that an unprecedented Church obsession with the dangers of erotic images played out in the sixteenth century. At this point, erotic images existed primarily as private works in the hands of the elite classes — paintings like Titian’s mythological nudes — and it was against these that the Church directed its censure. In the eyes of the Church, pornographic images functioned in the same manner as sacred images, which were a sort of religious propaganda: both were intended to stimulate a sentiment (either lust or religious fervor) (Ginzburg 26). The only difference was whether the sentiment aligned with religious doctrine and to what degree it was under Church control. Ginzburg also suggests that it was the “diffusion of the printing press and the increased circulation of images” (Ginzburg 33) among the lower classes that initially aroused the Church’s condemnatory focus on erotic images. Surprisingly, Ginzburg’s claims correspond closely with a large part of my argument in this section: that pornography is an ideological and political category closely tied to modern form of class conflict.

In Ways of Seeing, John Berger expresses this idea in a modern (versus Ginzburg’s historical) framework. Berger’s primary thesis is that art has an ideological function that the majority of discussions and uses of art naturalize:

when an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions about art...these assumptions obscure the past. They mystify rather than clarify...the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes (Berger 11)

Although “art is thought to be greater than commerce,... the art object, the ‘work of art’, is enveloped in an entirely bogus religiosity” (Berger 21), which is actually only a gauge of its market value. The market value of a work is in turn dependent on its certifiable historical authenticity (the work of art historians). Only the privileged are interested in art because “The majority take it as axiomatic that the museums are full of holy relics which refer to a mystery which excludes them, the mystery of unaccountable wealth” (Berger 24). Properly, the meaning of art should belong to everyone, not to “a few specialized experts who are the clerks of the nostalgia of a ruling class in decline” (Berger 32). Given the role of constructions of art in upholding class stratification, “the entire art of the past has now become a political issue” (Berger 33). The widespread appropriation of the imagery and visual language of oil painting by advertisements is one example of how the authority of art is used to maintain the status quo, in this case by helping to replace desires for meaningful personal transformation and social change with an infinite desire for commodities. Berger’s ideas here align with Ivan Gaskell’s assertion that “art and commerce are inextricably linked... Politics, aesthetics and commerce are simply inextricable under capitalism for *anyone*” (Vermeer 166, 171), as well as with Bourdieu’s recognition that “To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts...corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers” (Bourdieu 1028) (his theory of “distinction”).

Berger reads the development of oil painting as an art form (*the* art form) as a response to Europe’s transition to capitalism. He claims that the visual codes of this form were determined by its social role: to celebrate the materiality of what could be bought and therefore possessed, to participate in the commodification of the world and the legitimization of oligarchy. Inexplicably, however, Berger seems to protect a neutral or universal space for Great Art by maintaining that “exceptional” works escape the ideological burden of the tradition. He makes the same move in a chapter which deals specifically with the female nude. He situates the nude in art within a

misogynistic culture that always subjects women to an external, objectifying male gaze. The art nude and pornographic images of nude women both picture this objectification, and as such share the same visual conventions (Berger 55) — there is in fact little difference between them. One of the fatal tensions of the nude is that, while it is supposedly a glorifying analogue of generative male individualism, it blatantly denies individualism in its subject matter (Berger 62). To explain “exceptional” nudes, which alone don’t oppress their subjects, Berger reverses the usual hearty of “nude” and “naked” to privilege the latter. A naked woman is humanized precisely because she is not shrouded in the conventions that make her available to the male outsider’s gaze. Only a few have ever been painted: it is the male artist’s personal attachment to his model that makes them possible, and they depict his personal experience. If this weren’t problematic enough, the supreme example of this is Rubens’ portrait of his wife, in which (according to Berger) he chops her in half at her genitals in order to keep her for himself (Berger 61).

In “The Female Nude: Art, Pornography, and Sexuality,” Lynda Nead’s critique of Berger’s theory of the exceptional nude is that, since it is based on the deep love between the painter and his subject (usually his wife), it depends on the assumption that “Private relationships lie outside the domain of power,” and that “the relationship between the male artist and the female model, a heterosexual relationship, is inherently natural and good” (Nead 289). More fundamentally, Berger’s conflation of average oil paintings and pin ups is a problem because it doesn’t allow for the “historical or cultural specificity” (Nead 288) of each form, which have very different degrees of social investment. Although Berger’s work is an important first step toward denaturalizing art’s invisible marriage of aesthetic and moral values, a more detailed historical exploration is necessary. Rather than understanding pornography “as a discrete realm of representation” with no relationship to “other forms of cultural production,” or assuming that “*all* of patriarchal culture” is inherently pornographic, we “need to specify the ways in which pornography is held in place” (historically and currently) as a “discursive formation” (Nead 281-281). The female nude is a site of particularly intense conflict because it is simultaneously central and marginal, “the visual culmination of Renaissance idealism and humanism” which also “stands

at the edge of the art category, where it risks losing its respectability and spilling over into the pornographic” (Nead 282-283) — a reflection of the fact that it both signifies the highest values of our culture and encodes the hidden operation of its domination’s. Nead identifies the 70’s as a period of especially violent controversy about pornography because “moral regulation in the 1970’s took the form of the regulation of *representations* of sexuality as opposed to regulation of sexual behavior” (Nead 285).

To go backward in time, Carl B. Holmberg (in the chapter “Historic Texts of Beauty: The Problematics of Art, Erotica, and Pornography”) locates the beginnings of a schism between the artistic and the pornographic in the Platonic distrust of the senses and the art of persuasion (rhetoric). He identifies five conditions which reflect the Platonic schema that are still widely used to define art:

- art is logical and reasonable and engages the mind, not the senses
- the work of art is inherently beautiful; its value does not depend on how viewers experience it
- “good” art is art that edifies the mind (art that is didactic or has “redeeming social value”)
- art is produced deliberately by the work of an individual artistic genius
- art is judged by its inherent merit, not by its effectiveness at persuading an audience

In addition to being wishful and contradictory, these points encode art’s dependence on the opposing category of pornography or “low” culture in defining its boundaries. Again, it is art’s elitist social function that delimits it, not whether or not it is sexual in subject. This elitism surfaces in a related distrust of mass production: “Arousing artworks in the possession of the privileged have therefore been valorized as ‘erotica’ because, well-educated in the Western tradition that they are, they read the erotica with their minds... Once the same [or similar] images could be mass produced... [they] are considered pornography” because they are valued by the masses (who don’t know how to read them properly) for their sensual appeal (Holmberg 147).

Allison Pease offers an extremely extensive and coherent elaboration of the relationship of the art/pornography dichotomy to modern class inequality in her book Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity. Rather than hearkening back to Plato and Aristotle, she bases her explanation of the joint origins of art and pornography on a reading of Kant’s Critique of

Judgment, the seminal work of modern aesthetic philosophy. She identifies the primary difference between Platonic and modern aesthetics as the latter's critical focus on the subjective response to art (Pease 14). This focus is related to a "philosophical shift...towards an empirical, subject-based epistemology that privileged individual sense experience as the source and basis of all knowledge" (Pease 4) — a shift that was central to the transition to modernity and to capitalism's emphasis on free competition, meritocracy, and material objects. At the same time, the efforts of the bourgeois to establish a social order predicated on their authority depended on a disavowal of the very materiality on which the middle class was founded. To avoid submitting to the whims of a chaotic populace, under democracy, a social order based on the inherent fitness of the bourgeois elite to rule needed to be established, along with a new philosophical system to legitimize it. If the body and the senses were associated with the vulgarity of the body politic, the ability to transcend the body through rationality defined the cultivated. "Taste," in the sense of art appreciation, was invented as a signifier of this cultivation: it was universal, rational, autonomous (without any "use"), and most of all, disinterested. It was the man of wealth who was thought to be free from material concerns (disinterested) and therefore able to perceive and act on behalf of the common good. Taste was the bridge that allowed the bourgeois subject's individual sense experience to be directed outward to become the universal, rational, and therefore communal experience which defined the public sphere.

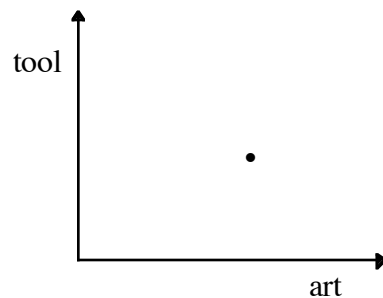
This mediation between the senses and the intellect which affirms the intellect's proper dominance is Kant's primary move, in Pease's reading. Kant was influenced by British notions of "taste" in formulating his theory of aesthetic pleasure, which defines the beautiful as that which offers subjective pleasure universally. The "finality of form" of the beautiful object promotes a pleasure which is disinterested and non-personal, and therefore universally communicable and founded on reflection rather than sense (Pease 22). We have an intuitive sense of this universal, disinterested pleasure because it obeys natural laws similar to those which govern morality; as such, those who can suppress personal sense experience to appreciate the universal can easily be interpreted as displaying a moral superiority. In Kant's schema, the beautiful is opposed to the agreeable, "which rests solely on private sensation and individual taste and so elides the

communal” (Pease 21). The agreeable is the pornographic — “what GRATIFIES a man” (Kant 49, Pease 22) without “redeeming social value.”

Paraphrasing Kant, Pease writes “The subject of the agreeable has an interest in that agreeable object” (Pease 22) — for her, it is the idea of “interest,” both sexual and commercial, that defines the category of the pornographic. As Adorno puts it, “the dignity of works of art depends on the magnitude of the interest from which they were wrested” (Pease 2). Early pornographic writings functioned as a form of political propaganda that used private sexual relations to satirize public hypocrisy. The emergence of our modern understanding of pornography was based on the privatization of porn: its conceptual transformation into a form of solitary sexual experience which worked against the creation of community, as well as its mass production and commodification. The “private interests” that porn represented were perceived as the most dire threat to social order under capitalism — the social order based on disinterested appraisal of the common good by the community of bourgeois subjects distinguished by their appreciation of art. As such, the opposition between art and pornography is one of the fundamental (and one of the most unstable) oppositions structuring modern culture.

What all the theorists I discussed in this section emphasize is the mutual formation and interdependence of modern class hierarchies and the art-porn binary, as well as the mutual formation and interdependence of its two terms, art and pornography. Focusing on the relationship between pornography and class oppression is not to deny pornography’s equally fundamental implication in the structures of gender oppression. Rather, it is to point out that the policing of gender and sexuality and their representations is intimately involved with the policing of the lower classes (and vice versa). Pornography is seen as a particularly virulent (and gendered) strain of “low” culture, but the particular distrust of pornography that I have outlined is continuous with the distrust of popular cultural productions in general. Part of the project of modern and post-modern art and theory has been to question the privileging of “high” over “low” culture and the assumptions this hierarchy invokes.

Ivan Gaskell’s current work focuses on art in relation to another category it is often opposed to: the category of “tool.” He argues that the sanctity the artwork is invested with in authoritative discourses on art, which is based on the transcendence of bodily perception and the partition of art from “use,” is a denial of the materiality of the art object. He identifies, in the problem of how to draw the line where art ends and tools begin, many of the same complications and contradictions that I have explored in the inextricability of art and pornography (in fact, porn could even be conceived of as a particular kind of tool) — including the intangible uses of art which were important to earlier definitions of it (and which its eroticism was and is perhaps a part of). Gaskell seems to suggest that rather than visualizing art and tool as opposite poles of a linear system, we should model their relationship more as a spectrum or continuum:



The dot represents the position of an object on the continuum at a particular time in a particular context: its tool value or art value might be given a greater emphasis in that context, but all objects always have at least some trace of both the tool and the artwork in them. I think this model may be fruitfully applied to the breakdown of the absolute opposition between art and pornography as well. Perhaps art historians like Gaskell would have less cause for alarm if they took on a methodological imperative to blur, not shore up the distinctions that reify art’s boundaries, and if instead of trying to make the “Venus” into either a virgin/bride/mother or a whore, they allowed her a place on the porn-art continuum.

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