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## Pornography and Disgust

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## Pornography and Disgust

*Laurent Stern*

### Abstract

Disgust about material objects and moral behavior are both at issue in understanding pornography. Previous debates were fueled primarily by moral disgust. Erotic art may elicit moral disgust, but only hard-core pornography elicits material disgust. I discuss the role of attraction and aversion in labeling artworks pornographic. Since we always have a choice between acknowledging and ignoring a disgust elicitor, aversion may be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for such a label. In submitting our choice to rational critique, we must ask: what do we accept as a consequence of the claim that that  $x$  is disgusting? Relying on moral disgust, the traditionalist's verdict that  $x$  is pornographic can be grounded exclusively in his report that for him  $x$  is a disgust elicitor. The skeptic must submit all disgust elicitors to rational critique. As a result of such a critique, the skeptic may agree (or disagree) with the traditionalist that  $x$  is pornographic. Also, the skeptic may decide that  $x$  provides pleasure despite or because of its painful aspect. A weak defense of the distinction between works of pornography and erotic artworks is offered with the help of examples; a stronger and more speculative defense of the distinction relies on the connection between material disgust elicitors and death.

### Keywords

anxious object, erotic art, hard-core pornography, material disgust, moral disgust, object used *as* pornography, obscene, pornographic, 'pornography' (pornography in scare-quotes), rational critique, seeing-in, shocking

### 1. Introduction

Recent work on the concept of disgust helps us understand hard-core pornography. Disgust about material objects and moral behavior can be easily distinguished: in its primary sense disgust relates to "animals (including humans), their parts, waste products, or objects that resemble any of these, or are disgusting by virtue of their association with any of them."<sup>[1]</sup> We speak about moral disgust in a secondary or metaphorical sense. When talking about disgust, these two senses were not always distinguished. While both will help us to understand pornography, previous debates were fueled primarily by moral disgust. By reflecting on hard-core pornography that provokes moral disgust alone, we will provide a way to understand pornography in the context of material disgust. The burden of this paper is to offer a clear demarcation between erotic art and hard-core pornography. Only the latter elicits material disgust.

"Pornography" and "pornographic" are relatively new terms that were introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century to replace "obscenity" and "obscene." Reference to aversion, repulsion or disgust assimilates "pornography" and

"pornographic" to the older terms. Contrary to holders of fundamentalist or sectarian religious views, we must not rely on references to nudity or explicit sexual content, since both are displayed in some great artworks, and we would reject the claim that they are pornographic. Many artworks have been used *as* pornography,<sup>[2]</sup> and some have been called pornographic. While skepticism is warranted about claims that an object is both art and pornography, it would be dogmatic and unwise to suggest here that art *cannot* be pornography or *vice versa*.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. Controversial verdicts

Justice Potter Stewart seemed to accept failure about defining "hard-core pornography" when writing in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184, (1964):

I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.

Contrary to his claims, Stewart's words can lead us if not to a definition of pornography, then to a way of understanding what it means to deem a work purporting to be art or literature pornographic.

On what grounds could Stewart say that he knows pornography when he sees it? We all *can* know it when seeing pornography. This does not imply that we *do* know it or that we are not mistaken. In fact, Stewart's words were written in support of overturning the Ohio Supreme Court's verdict. So, how did he know that Louis Malle's movie *Les Amants* (1958) was not pornographic, and hence entitled to protection against censorship? How do *we* know that it is not pornographic?

We must monitor our reactions while watching the film, and afterwards submit the movie to reappraisal or rational critique. These conditions are not self-evident. Ordinarily when seeing a work of visual art or reading a literary work, we must reflect on what we have seen or read before pronouncing critical judgment. Yet, even when we are acting as critics, reflection on how we experience that work is not required. However, only such reflection will support our claim about the pornographic nature of that work.

When we pronounce the verdict that a given work is (or is not) pornographic, we provide information about ourselves. Still, two judges or two critics may come to accept contrary verdicts. And when engaged in the debate about two contraries, we will reject one verdict. Moreover, we will criticize the judge or critic whose verdict we reject, because he let himself be misguided by reflection on his own experience while examining that work. He succeeded in telling us *only* about himself rather than about the nature of the work; and there is hardly anything more damning about a judge or critic whose judgment we reject.

## 3. Attraction and repulsion

Pornography is driven by curiosity, which is fueled by our

desire to learn about the lives of others regardless of whether we encounter them in our own world or in the imaginary world of realist art or literature. Without such curiosity we could not be drawn to a work that could be pornographic. In experiencing that work and in reflecting on our own experience we become aware of our delight, disgust, or both delight and disgust. The mixed reactions of attraction and aversion are somewhere between pure delight and pure disgust. Excluding cases of our rejection of works purporting to be art from lack of interest or dissatisfaction with the ways they satisfy our curiosity, we are accustomed to responding in the context of art or literature not only to what it is about, but also to how its subject matter is presented. Since each of us must decide whether a work is or is not pornographic, it is possible that some will decide that no work is both art and pornography, while others will hold that some works can be both.

We are on the right path in identifying pornography when in reflecting on our experience of an artwork we find that we were drawn into its fictional world. We were no longer spectators looking at that world, but in our imagination were drawn into participating in its activities. Spectators or even the most reprehensible voyeurs are always outside of what they observe. Within that world we are confronting pornography only if we experience both attraction and aversion.

These markers are not unique to experiencing pornography; they are shared with other forms of art. For example: according to Noël Carroll, the enjoyment of horror is also driven by curiosity and the experience of both delight and disgust; and Carolyn Korsmeyer<sup>[4]</sup> has drawn attention to "the mystery of why seemingly normal human beings seek out experiences that deliver unpleasantness, even pain," and to the solutions of this "paradox of aversion." Even if all markers for pornography are common to at least one other art form, they are useful to understand what pornography is. Neither singly nor jointly do they provide a definition of pornography.

Contradicting your judgment, I may claim that a given artwork is not pornographic. At issue is what either of us calls attractive or repulsive, or both. According to Malle's account, the Archbishop of Venice denounced *Les Amants* as obscene without seeing it. His failure to see it seems to disqualify his judgment. But we must not prematurely reject this judgment, for its grounds will turn out to be important. Besides, had he seen this movie he would have reached the same verdict. However, we must assume that the Supreme Court judges of the State of Ohio had seen this movie before rendering their verdict. They too denounced it as obscene. What did they find objectionable?

They objected to the story told in this movie from a moral point of view: a mother leaves her husband and the young daughter she loves for a man she met only a few hours earlier and with whom she fell in love. This film is not erotic; it is about the powers of love at first sight. If you happen to agree with the moral judgment of the Archbishop or the majority of the Ohio Supreme Court judges, then you will reject the movie on moral grounds. You may counsel others to avoid it or you may call it 'pornographic.'<sup>[5]</sup>

Your moral judgment may induce you to develop aversion, displeasure, even disgust when confronted with this movie. We must ask, are feelings of aversion, uniquely rooted in moral judgments, sufficient for labeling visual artworks pornography? In trying to answer this question neither an affirmative nor a negative answer provides guidance for deciding whether a work is pornographic.

You may prefer an affirmative answer. Suppose a judge or a critic addressing the topic of censorship argues: I am disgusted by  $x$ , hence  $x$  must be condemned as pornography on moral grounds. His opponent could respond: I am delighted by  $y$ ; hence  $y$  must be celebrated on moral grounds. Both arguments must be rejected, for we may be prompted to reject these conclusions while accepting their premises. What is this movie about? The Archbishop's verdict can be disqualified on two grounds. Without seeing it, he could not know how this movie presents what it is about. And even if he had seen it and had agreed with the subsequent judgment of the Ohio Supreme Court, his verdict would be disqualified. For the Archbishop and the majority of the Ohio Supreme Court judges failed to realize that the way in which this movie presents its subject radically changes that subject. We may acknowledge the Archbishop's or the Ohio Supreme Court's moral concerns, or we may reject them. Either way, moral concerns will not transform a movie about love into an erotic movie, or into an obscene or pornographic one.

Still, if you believe that feelings of aversion uniquely grounded in moral judgments are *sufficient* for claiming that a work is pornographic, you will dig in your heels, and dismiss my contrary arguments. My answer to you is negative. I have admitted that aversion is *necessary* for designating a given work pornographic. As a conciliatory gesture to the most dogmatic views—exemplified by the judgment of religious extremists—I am even willing to add that the aversion can be uniquely grounded in moral judgments. However, unless we are dealing with pornographic works, my necessary condition cannot be transformed into a sufficient condition. I may be tolerant of your idiosyncratic judgment about what you consider disgusting and at the same time dismiss your judgment that the work you examined is pornographic. You may have developed disgust when you were confronted with *Les Amants* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, but this does not mean that they are pornographic. Anyone who does not share your idiosyncratic tastes will resist that judgment.

#### **4. Can there be experts on pornography?**

It could be argued that if pornography invites viewers or readers to focus on its subject matter and excludes concern with its aesthetic characteristics, then we have a clear demarcation between pornography and great art, and maybe even between pornography and insignificant art. Arguments derived from the defining characteristics of art or pornography should be resisted: they do not teach us anything new either about art or about pornography. Nor do they illuminate the wide variety of experiences reported about erotic art or literature.

In a discussion between two skeptical critics who hold similar views in matters of morals, politics, and aesthetics, one

reports that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a pornographic work, while the other disagrees with this claim. So, how do we bridge the gap between information about a critic to the object of his critique? If we agree that the work is not pornographic, then our own judgment merely reinforces the verdict of others. Our examination of the work ends, and we can only add that those who contradict our judgment testify against themselves, because they have substituted what was in their own minds about an object for the nature of that object. Only if we agree that the work is pornographic must we bridge the gap between the critic and the object of his critique. The burden of proof is on the critic who judges a work pornographic.

In agreeing with that critic and in accepting the burden of proof, we must avoid inadequate strategies. We cannot argue that a work is pornographic because it was solely created to satisfy salacious interests. For artworks that were created to satisfy such interests could turn out to be not at all pornographic. And there are many works we may wish to label pornographic even without knowing their creators' intentions. Also, issues of censorship and pornography must be kept apart, for there may be good reasons for prohibiting the admission of juvenile spectators to the exhibition of certain artworks, even if we do not consider them pornographic. Finally, and most importantly, critics and aestheticians cannot refer judgment to others—such as reasonable persons of average sensibility—when deciding whether a work is pornographic. This strategy is open only to judges who must rule on issues of censorship. Critics of artworks must rely on their own judgment, and in pronouncing their verdict must invite their audience to agree with that verdict. They abdicate their position as critics, if they rely on the judgment of others when deciding whether an artwork is pornographic.

When we disagree with a critic who calls a work pornographic, we withdraw our confidence in his judgment in all matters relating to pornography. For we reject his idiosyncratic judgment while reporting aversion or disgust when he was confronted with the object he examined. At issue is not the veracity of his report, but only that he failed to submit this report to what I shall call "rational critique."

## **5. Rational critique**

In such a critique we become aware that we always have the choice of setting aside a given disgust elicitor. I may ignore or reject from consideration the disgusting features of an object that you acknowledge. Even if that object is a disgust elicitor for both of us, we always have a choice about the conclusions we draw from a disgust response. My response may be embedded in a more complex reaction than yours (or the other way around). One of us may appreciate that object either *despite* or *because* of its disgusting features. Among earlier writers on disgust, the failure to submit reports of disgust to critique was common; its traces can be found even in writings that became central to the contemporary debates on disgust. Two examples deserve to be mentioned: Aurel Kolnai's philosophical monograph on disgust, *Der Ekel*<sup>[6]</sup> (1929), and the paper by the psychologist and psychoanalyst Andras Angyal, "Disgust and Related Aversions."<sup>[7]</sup> Both

mention questionable disgust elicitors[8] that fail the test of rational critique.[9] From their failure we can infer that wholly idiosyncratic disgust elicitors must be ignored.

Subsequently, writers on disgust primarily chose examples showing the cross-cultural relevance of disgust elicitors. Work in this tradition is important because we may find that more than one disgust elicitor is innate. While I would welcome such a finding, I now urge that we consider the cultural background of the disgust elicitors, as Martha Nussbaum has argued. She was the first writer on disgust who insisted on submitting (sincere) reports of being disgusted to rational critique.[10] When you say that you are disgusted by  $x$ , we ask, what you accept as a consequence of this claim. We learn from our elders, caregivers and members of our group what to label disgusting. The consequence of accepting their teaching is often (but not always) beneficial.

There are no good reasons for doubting your sincere reports of being disgusted by  $x$ . Accepting and internalizing idiosyncratic disgust elicitors is harmful only when this leads to socially pernicious conclusions. Still, your reaction to  $x$  is subject to debate only if it reveals to others something about the nature of  $x$ . Only if your judgment is irrelevant can we claim that it doesn't reveal anything about the object of our disagreement. Upon learning about the plot of *Les Amants* or seeing that movie, the Archbishop of Venice, and the Ohio Supreme Court judges did find what they considered a disgust elicitor: Jeanne, the character played by Jeanne Moreau, abandons not only her husband for the man she met a few hours earlier, but also the daughter she loves. Her transgression is unpardonable. Instead of receiving their just punishment, the lovers depart to enjoy their newly found bliss.

According to the dogmatic defender of traditional moral or religious values, this movie advocates disgusting behavior that satisfies the sufficient condition for being called pornographic.[11] Even skeptics in moral and religious matters find the mother's behavior shocking, and admit that the necessary conditions are met for calling it 'pornographic'. Doubt about this topic can be easily overcome by asking whether or not Jeanne will be proud of having abandoned her daughter. The short answer is no. But there is common ground between the traditionalist and the skeptic. Without that there cannot be a debate. The skeptic's shock is grounded on aversion to Jeanne's behavior. While the skeptic's admission that it is shocking, permits and facilitates further interpretation, the traditionalist's verdict that it is pornographic ends all effort at interpretation. The skeptic has good reasons to believe that he has a deeper understanding of the moral issues presented in this movie than the traditionalist.

The traditionalist's verdict that a given work  $x$  is pornographic can be grounded exclusively in his sincere report that *for him* it is a disgust elicitor. From his viewpoint the sufficient conditions for calling it pornographic have been met, even if he relies exclusively on moral disgust. The skeptic needs more to reach his verdict. As long as he relies only on moral disgust, his views can be differentiated from those of the traditionalist only if he submits them to rational critique. For

regardless of whether he relies on moral or material disgust, rational critique provides a fundamental choice to ignore or acknowledge the disgust elicitor. Only disgust based on what the skeptic considers idiosyncratic taste deserves to be ignored. For the verdict based on such taste does not hit the target of its critique. If the work does not meet the skeptic's necessary condition of being pornographic, if it is not even shocking, he will dismiss his opponent's verdict, since it does not reveal anything about the work. Given the traditionalist's irrelevant judgment, he ceases to be a valid conversation partner for the skeptic.

By acknowledging the disgust elicitor, the skeptic is provided with three choices. First, he may decide that any redeeming feature or aesthetic value ascribed to *x* is vitiated by the disgust elicitor. In this case the skeptic will agree with the traditionalist's verdict that the work is pornographic. Second, if the aesthetic value ascribed to the work overrides the aversion caused by the disgust elicitor, the skeptic may decide that disgust is a price worth paying for the pleasure provided by the work, that it provides pleasure *despite* its painful aspect. Third, he may decide that it provides pleasure *because* of its painful aspect. This alternative exemplifies what Matthew Strohl describes as strong ambivalence: "a complex experience has the pleasure structure partly in virtue of one or more of its elements (complex or atomic) having the pain structure."[\[12\]](#)

In acknowledging that the work contains a disgust elicitor while rejecting the claim that it is pornographic, the skeptic suggests that it satisfies only the necessary condition of pornography. The traditionalist's pornography is the skeptic's shocking work of art or literature. The following example illuminates three different uses of the word "pornography": Senator Jesse Helms called some of Robert Mapplethorpe's works pornography in the ordinary sense of the word. When the photographer introduced himself by saying, "I am Robert Mapplethorpe the pornographic photographer," irony was evident. When Arthur Danto used scare quotes in referring to Mapplethorpe's 'pornographic' work, he wanted to draw attention to its shocking quality.

When professional critics or art historians speak about the erotic content of an "anxious object" or its "shocking quality," they inform their audience of connoisseurs that the interest of these works is not exhausted by what the untutored amateur can see.[\[13\]](#) For the untutored, Cézanne's apples were just decorative elements; when asked what they saw, they would have answered: apples. For connoisseurs it was easy to see that these apples had a disturbing quality in Cézanne's paintings. Yet, even they needed a specialist's help for seeing in[\[14\]](#) these anxious objects female breasts.[\[15\]](#) Without such help they could not articulate what was disturbing in these paintings. Examples of anxious objects can be found even in the context of non-figurative art. Visitors to the Willem de Kooning Retrospective Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (2011/12) read the curator's note attached to the late paintings: "the works evoke constantly changing, swelling and contracting spaces." Where untutored amateurs see only decorative elements in these paintings, connoisseurs see their disturbing quality, but they too must be prompted by



professional critics to see-in these paintings male sexual organs.[16]

Robert Mapplethorpe, Larry Clark and David Hamilton are not pornographic photographers. A fundamental element in some of their works is the sexually explicit shocking quality. Had they failed to create such anxious objects, they would have been unable to say what they wanted to say. The difference between sexually explicit anxious objects and pornography is unavailable to the untutored amateur. While in Cézanne's apples and de Kooning's drawings he only sees decorative objects, in the photographers' sexually explicit works he only sees pornography.

Fortunately, the untutored amateur is unable to see the shocking quality in Cézanne's and de Kooning's anxious objects. For he would react to their work as he responds to the work of Mapplethorpe or Malle's *Les Amants*. Misled into believing that the sufficient condition for calling them pornography has been met, he may even call for censoring these works. Professional critics and connoisseurs can only admit that these works meet the necessary condition of pornography — at most they are pornography in scare quotes. By focusing on cases where critics or historians of art drew attention to the shocking quality of certain artworks we have gained a preliminary foothold for understanding pornography without scare quotes. We will find the sufficient conditions that must be satisfied for a work to be called pornography in the context of issues raised by material disgust.

## 6. Disgust

Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin suggested as markers of pornography:

...the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words that also includes one or more the following: (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy humiliation or pain; (iii) women are presented as sexual objects experiencing sexual pleasure in rape, incest or other sexual assault; (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up, cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; (v) women are presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility or display; (vi) women's body parts — including but not limited to vaginas, breasts or buttocks — are exhibited by being reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are being penetrated by objects or animals; or (viii) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, humiliation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual.[17]

These markers could be suitably extended to cover men, children, and transsexuals. Moral or material disgust would be *my* initial reaction when presented with a work exhibiting any of these markers. In favorable cases such an initial reaction would be superseded by a more complex reaction. If so, I will

revise my judgment, and argue that I am confronting a work that is *shocking*, but not pornographic. Three more points:

First, most reports about being disgusted are subjective. If your list of disgust elicitors is incompatible with mine, then we will call each other's judgment idiosyncratic. Disgust is such a strong response that minimally competent critics or judges are not mistaken when they claim they are disgusted. Erotic art or literature is not a disgust elicitor in my judgment: McKinnon and Dworkin agree on this point.<sup>[18]</sup> Suppose that in your judgment such art or literature is a disgust elicitor. Your reaction must be submitted to rational critique, just as the reactions of those who are disgusted when encountering homosexuals, Jews, or Blacks must be submitted to rational critique. Homophobia or racism does not provide exemption from the obligation to respect the rights of others. Moral or material disgust must be set aside when judging by standards of justice. Similarly, when we attribute aesthetic value to a work of art or literature that we examine, moral disgust must be set aside, while material disgust plays an important role.

Second, the display of erotic art may be *inappropriate* in certain circumstances. For example, it would be inappropriate for a dealer located next to a High School to display reproductions of great erotic art from the European, Indian or Japanese tradition in his windows. In designating a given work pornographic, we draw attention to its objective features rather than to the appropriateness of its display.

Third, at this stage caution is required. As soon as I admit that your report of being disgusted by *x* is part of the evidence about its nature, I must ask whether the lists of our material disgust elicitors are commensurable. If upon investigation it turns out that your list is incompatible with mine, I cannot accept your counsel that the work is pornographic: henceforth, your views about pornography become unusable to *me*.

## **7. Disgust and death**

Hard-core pornography without scare quotes is omnipresent on the Internet. The display of naked bodies or body parts engaged in sexual activities at first may only have a titillating effect, without eliciting either moral or material disgust. Since responses to disgust elicitors are subjective, some viewers will not be disgusted by every picture, video or film displayed on the Internet labeled "pornography." Others will not respond with aversion to any such display. For most others, moral disgust arises during or after viewing. Typically, they worry about doing what they ought not to be doing. From there, a short step may lead to material disgust. Fascinated by the display of body parts that are among the least expressive of a person's inner life or character, they become aware of witnessing a mindless or mechanical activity. The expression of emotions, care, tenderness, or love for the partner in the displayed activity is contrary to the pornographers' concern. Grunts, groans and one-syllable words are occasionally heard as a reminder that this is not the encounter of brute animals. One extreme reaction to the excitement generated leads to fantasizing about participating in the action in order to achieve solitary or shared pleasure. At the other extreme, disgust cuts short the excitement.

Average viewers and readers of pornography are found somewhere between the two extremes: fantasizing participation and, short of rejection, experiencing extreme disgust. Before concluding that they actually are confronting pornography, we must submit their judgment to rational critique. For they may be perceiving a merely shocking artwork *as* pornography; they may be confronting what only satisfies pornography's necessary, but not its sufficient, condition.

At this stage the reader may expect that I will provide an example of pornography. I will not do so because any example by another person can be dismissed as merely revealing that person's idiosyncratic disgust elicitors. Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976)[\[19\]](#) is a better guide to understand pornography than the videos available on the Internet, because in addition to its social and political aims this movie is an extended meditation on pornography. Once we submit it to rational critique, the segments that seemed pornographic turn out to be merely shocking.

This movie is about dated historical events. The narrative leads the viewer through the different stages of pornography, from moral to material disgust, and from there to death. It starts with a woman named Sada Abe who is working as a maid at the inn of Kichizo Ishida. They become lovers. The viewer's first reaction is moral disgust, elicited by Sada's subaltern role in this unequal relationship. Later on the roles are reversed and she takes the lead in their lovemaking. Unless the viewer is impervious to all material disgust elicitors, at least one scene will motivate disgust. For some it will be where Sada engages in oral sex with Kichizo, ending with Sada vomiting seminal fluid. For others, it will be where upon Sada's urging Kichizo commits rape upon a corpulent servant girl and an old geisha. The strongest material disgust is elicited by the last scene. With Kichizo's consent, Sada applies pressure to Kichizo's carotid artery in order to revive his flagging sexuality, thereby accidentally strangling him. Fleeing the police, she cuts off and takes with her the virile member that had connected them.

Concentrating on the sequences that elicit moral and material disgust in this movie, it may be possible to create short videos separated from the narrative that could be considered pornographic. Yet within their original context these sequences are not pornographic. The aim of a pornographic video or film is to show sexual detail. The close-ups and low-level shots focus on body parts in the process of genital, oral, or anal sexual activity. Pornography stars perform for the camera and the fascinated viewer. What is the object of this fascination?

On offer for the completely inexperienced is satisfaction of curiosity; for the more experienced it is a reminder of what has been called the primal scene. For our purposes it is irrelevant whether the experienced viewer witnessed or only heard about that scene in his early childhood. Shock, aversion and disgust are natural responses of the young child who cannot deal with adult sexual activities. The adult viewer of pornography understands what in his early years was unintelligible. Yet the effect of the displayed biological, animal

activity accompanied by grunts and groans is similar to what the young child may have experienced or heard about. Temporarily or permanently shut out from more satisfactory forms of sexual activity, the adult viewer is both attracted to and repelled by the display of copulating humans. He is attracted by the pornographer's focus on the animal nature of human beings, by what is common to both man and beast. What differentiates man from beast is excluded. Traditionally it was called *soul*, today we are used to speaking about the *self*. In the absence of a self, a biological being or its part is merely flesh that is subject to decay and death. Bereft of a soul, "man is a worm and food for worms."<sup>[20]</sup> What attracts the viewer is exactly the same as what he finds disgusting. Were it not for the constant movement of the actors in pornographic videos, the viewer would identify the object of his fascination and disgust: death. In Susan Sontag's words: "What pornography is really about, ultimately, isn't sex but death."<sup>[21]</sup>

The connection between disgust and death has been noted in recent philosophical literature.<sup>[22]</sup> Without that connection, material disgust could not be a secure guide to pornography. Why? Because we become aware of idiosyncratic disgust elicitors only in the process of rational critique. Accordingly, reports of disgust that have not been submitted to rational critique cannot serve as guides to pornography. And since disgust does not do any work independently of its rational critique, we could rely exclusively on the latter to designate an object as pornographic. Yet even if we could do so, it would be unwise to follow this strategy. For as long as material disgust is not overcome and absorbed by a more complex reaction, we gain a distinguishing mark of pornography. By relying on material disgust, we come to understand "pornography" as a classificatory term, and thereby establish a demarcation line that separates pornography from erotic art or literature.

In realist art, erotic artworks can be *anything but* pornography, yet they have been used *as* pornography. That is why they are condemned by viewers who hold extremist religious or moral views: finding reasons there for censoring such artworks. Except to remind us that anything can be used *as* pornography, their judgment must be set aside. A debate on pornography requires all participants to agree that the object examined satisfies at least the necessary condition of pornography, that it is at least shocking. As we noted in the context of *Les Amants*, even a moral disgust elicitor can provide the required shock for debate. Yet, if material disgust elicitors cannot be discovered within a sexually explicit artwork, we must conclude that we are confronting erotic art, which is within the domain of Eros. Pornography is in the realm of Thanatos.

Just as I did not provide examples of pornographic works, I will not suggest examples of erotic art. Examples offered from either of the two domains may turn out to be guided by the presence—or absence—of idiosyncratic material disgust elicitors that could not be overcome by rational critique. Examples of erotic art can be found in books, movies, or videos containing sexually explicit works that do not aim to be pornography. We can expect a strong correlation between

works labeled "erotic art" and the reader's critical judgment that it is non-pornographic within the terms of the distinguishing marks introduced here. The idiosyncrasy of material disgust elicitors excludes a perfect correlation.

It will be objected that by separating pornographic works from erotic artworks I am merely legislating the use of words. However, the suggested vocabulary does have explanatory value. The following three examples provide only a weak defense of the understanding of pornography I have offered. They prepare the way for a stronger and more controversial defense, and they call attention to the continuity between the older word "obscene" and the relatively recent "pornographic."

First, we can only speculate why Michelangelo's tempera painting *Leda and the Swan* was destroyed in the early seventeenth century on the orders of an expert<sup>[23]</sup> who declared it obscene. From a distance of four centuries, judgment on the many existing copies of this painting will range over a wide field.<sup>[24]</sup> Some will claim that it is an allegorical painting that is not even shocking. Others will claim that it satisfies the necessary condition of pornography, that it is pornography, that it is erotic art, that it is not erotic art. We can only speculate whether moral or material disgust elicitors motivated the original painting's destruction. Both interpretations require considerable expertise for seeing explicit sexual content in this allegorical painting. Viewers must imagine the swan as Jupiter, and Jupiter as a man before they can imagine that this painting displayed a man and a woman in the act of lovemaking. On an alternative interpretation, viewers must imagine seeing a beast and a human making love. With either interpretation, distinguishing moral from material disgust elicitors and the need for rational critique will prove to be useful.

Second, judgments of what is (or is not) pornography are subject to change. At the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* in 2007 a selection of the library's vast holdings of erotic/pornographic interest—the *enfer*—was shown. Surprisingly, by today's standards only a few of these works could be judged pornographic. Unexamined moral disgust prompted antecedent library administrators to relegate most of these works to the *enfer* section. Continued secretiveness about such holdings or about the erotic drawings of major painters—such as the drawings that are closed to the public in the *Musée Ingres* of Montauban—creates mysteries of artworks that deserve to be shown and in many cases celebrated. In debates about these matters both sides will find our distinctions useful.

Third, material disgust that is (or is not) overcome and absorbed by a more complex reaction guides us in sorting a given sexually explicit work into one of the two domains. Therefore it is conceivable that the same disgust elicitor provokes in one critic material and in the other only moral disgust. Is the famous "butter scene" in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) simulated or real sex, or is the spectator witnessing rape? Except for moral or religious conservatives, critics celebrating this movie forty years ago, judged it an erotic movie. Since then, its spectators allegedly witnessed both anal sex and rape. Given such claims, would

the critics who once celebrated it still judge it an erotic movie?

If these claims turn out to be true, would material disgust at having been unwitting witnesses of such acts convince them that they were watching pornography? Would rational critique convince them that even if they knew what they were witnessing, their material disgust could be overcome and absorbed by a more complex reaction? For our purposes it is irrelevant how we answer these questions. We must note only that what we know about the way in which a sexually explicit work was produced has a decisive influence on whether we designate it as erotic art or pornography.

A stronger defense of separating pornographic works from erotic art relies on the connection between material disgust elicitors and death. Certainly such a defense will be judged controversial by the more radically skeptical viewers, or by readers of pornographic works who deny that death is a material disgust elicitor. From their viewpoint such a judgment can be derived only from an idiosyncratic choice of material disgust elicitors. Analogously to my objection against the traditionalist in matters of morals, the more radically skeptical critics could argue that I have been misled by an idiosyncratic disgust elicitor. Admittedly, the object *x* that I claim to be pornographic can be used *as* pornography, but this does not say anything about that object. In insisting that it is pornographic, I am merely legislating the use of "pornography." Responding in a conciliatory mood, I would admit that there is a normative element in my designating a given object pornographic. By this designation I imply that it failed the test of rational critique. Had it passed that test, I would have suggested that it did not satisfy the sufficient condition of pornography, i.e., it is merely shocking and not pornographic.

We need not argue that in works of pornography the viewer sees death, but only that he sees-in death. In works that display explicit sexuality and that we judge to be pornographic, death is the source of what both attracts and repulses the viewer. Compared to writings about the fear of death and the heroism recommended for overcoming that fear, the literature on disgust about death is quite limited. Yet it does have a venerable ancestry that can be traced to Plato.<sup>[25]</sup> The point of transition from life to death is at the center of such disgust: we no longer confront a person; we face only its decaying remains. This sight is both attractive and repulsive. In works we judge pornographic, we face *la petite mort*, the small death (faked, or real) of pornography-actors after the satisfaction of all desires and before they return to their ordinary lives. Photographic images of actors in the moment of their small death are strikingly similar to what can be seen in the moment of transition from life to death.<sup>[26]</sup>

A new dimension of curiosity and fascination reveals itself from the viewpoint of material disgust. Innocent curiosity about the lives of adults provoked moral disgust. When curiosity is no longer innocent, moral disgust becomes pointless. Yet, the curiosity driving pornography remains after the loss of innocence. What is the object of the remaining curiosity? What is the focus of the leftover fascination? The habitual consumer of pornographic videos may choose to speed up or

slow down the action on the screen, until all desires are satisfied. What is it like to be in that momentary death-like state? If the video's viewers are curious about a first-person answer to this question, they could just as well ask, "What is it like for me to be dead?" Such questions reveal a contradiction: they suppose that there is a self that can experience being dead. For lack of empirical studies, we can only conjecture that the remaining curiosity and the residual fascination converge. The curiosity driving pornography is based on an unanswerable question about the momentary death-like state. The same state, in which all desires are satisfied, is the residual focus of pornography's habitual viewers.

Certainly there are viewers for whom images of *la petite mort* or the transition to death are not disgust elicitors. As a result of training in a given profession, some have learned to be insensitive, while a very small minority may be naturally insensitive to these disgust elicitors. Can the latter differentiate works of pornography from erotic artworks? A negative answer would provide support for establishing death as the focus of what attracts and repulses the viewer of pornographic works; moreover, it would provide confirmation of our differentiation of pornographic works from erotic artworks.

## 8. Envoy

Material disgust that is not overcome by a more complex reaction provided the key for understanding pornography. Judgments based on material or moral disgust that have not been subject to rational critique cannot provide guidance about pornography, for such judgments could not even differentiate between disgusts that deserve to be ignored from others that must be acknowledged. Finally, among acknowledged disgusts, we could differentiate works that are assigned aesthetic value *despite* the fact that they contain disgust elicitors from works that are assigned aesthetic value *because* they contain disgust elicitors. Both belong to erotic art and both often are targets of judgments based on moral disgust that has not been submitted to rational critique.

An understanding of pornography gained from the perspective of the literature on disgust could be developed in contrary directions. Further work could provide a real definition of pornography, specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions that an object must satisfy to be designated pornographic.<sup>[27]</sup> Alternatively, work in the opposite direction could result in proof that such a non-relational definition is not attainable. Between these two extremes, the field is open for proving the cross-cultural relevance of disgust with death; alternatively, for showing that our marker of pornography cannot be detached from individual disgust elicitors considered idiosyncratic. Regardless of the direction of further work, we must emphasize that understanding pornography and its relation to erotic art and literature must not be relegated to marginal concerns within aesthetics. While there are no experts on pornography, there are no reasons for believing that judges, politicians, or self-appointed experts on community standards will find better markers for differentiating pornography from erotic artworks than

professionals in art and literary criticism or aesthetics.

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### Endnotes

[1] Jonathan Haidt, Paul Rozin, Clark McCauley, Sumio Imada, "Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship between Disgust and Morality," *Psychology and Developing Societies* 9, 1 (1997).

[2] The "as pornography" expression indicates that the object is not pornographic.

[3] For an excellent guide on this topic, see Colin Manchester, "Obscenity, Pornography & Art," *Media & Arts Law Review*, vol. 4 (1997), 65-87. See also, Hans Maes and Jerrold Levinson (eds.), *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[4] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 113.

[5] All single quotes in this paper are scare-quotes.

[6] *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Phänomenologische Forschung*, vol. 10. English translation: *On Disgust*, Edited and with an Introduction by Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).

[7] *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol.36 (1941), 393-412.

[8] For Kolnai, a soldier responding "to a command of his superior with an investigation of its correctness" is a disgust elicitor, 67. For Angyal, "(T)he disgusting quality of the animal body is due to its waste products," 409. See also, William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 268.

[9] See, Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: the Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, transl. by Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p.26. "Perhaps it is not by accident that both Kolnai's and Miller's study occasionally turn the intellectual stomach of the reader—and less through their disgusting subject matter than through many of their own perspectives on it, especially those that are, or claim to be original."

[10] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust*,



*Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[11] In the censored version of this movie that appeared in Germany, all references to the young girl were removed. After this deletion, the movie loses its shocking quality.

[12] "Horror and Hedonic Ambivalence," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 70 (2012), 209.

[13] On three kinds of criticism, see my "Voices of Critical Discourse," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60 (2002), 313-323.

[14] Richard Wollheim introduced in contemporary aesthetics the notion of seeing-in. See for example his *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 46.

[15] Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-life" (1968) in *Selected Papers: Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), pp. 1-38.

[16] For an interpretation of these paintings I am grateful to Agnes Berez.

[17] The markers are quoted in Colin Manchester, 68.

[18] Catharine MacKinnon, "Francis Biddle's Sister," in *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 163-197.

[19] For the best critique of this movie, see Donald Richie, "*In the Realm of the Senses: Some Notes on Oshima and Pornography*," posted on the Internet on April 30, 2009.

[20] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 26.

[21] See, "The Pornographic Imagination," *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), p. 60. According to Sontag, "it's toward the gratifications of death, succeeding and surpassing those of eros, that every truly obscene quest tends." Her view of the obscene is close to my understanding of the pornographic. Yet, I disagree with her application of these views in judging many works of literature.

[22] This connection is mentioned by every writer on disgust. As "the Death in Life Theory," it is at the center of Colin McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 88-96.

[23] François Sublet des Noyers, high-ranking member of the clergy and superintendent of the King's buildings under Louis XIII.

[24] Several copies are reproduced in Louis Dunand and Philippe Lemarchand, *Compositions de Jules Romains intitulées LES AMOURS DES DIEUX gravées par Marc-Antoine Raimondi* (Lausanne: Institut d'iconographie, 1977), p. 340, illustration 698.

[25] For the best guide to the literature on this topic, see

Menninghaus, *Disgust: the Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*.

[26] Jean-Luc Godard drew attention to the similarity between the ways pornographic scenes and the dead are photographed. I am grateful for this information to Yvette Biro.

[27] For an attempt at a real definition derived from the use of pornography see, Michael C. Rea, "What Is Pornography?" in *Noûs* 35:1 (2001), 118-145.

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