

ART AND PORNOGRAPHY

Essay review of:

CONTEMPLATING ART by Jerrold Levinson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, 423 pp., £ 65 Hardback.

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After *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (1990) and *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (1996), this is Jerrold Levinson's third volume of essays, containing the bulk of his work in aesthetics over the past 10 years. Twenty-four essays are grouped into seven parts. The first part is simply entitled 'Art' and consists of essays on the concept and definition of art, emotion in response to art, and artistic creativity. The next three parts deal with philosophical issues specific to individual art forms. There are three essays on pictorial art, three essays on literary interpretation, and no fewer than eight essays concerning music, the art form that has always been Levinson's principal occupation as an aesthete. The final sections each contain only two essays. Part V deals with the nature of aesthetic properties, while Part VI contains essays on two major figures in the history of aesthetics, Hume and Schopenhauer. Part VII serves as a kind of bonus. Under the heading 'Other Matters' Levinson provides an analysis of two topics, humor and intrinsic value, that are not central but nevertheless relevant to contemporary aesthetics.

All essays have already appeared elsewhere. Most are reprinted unchanged with only a few exceptions. 'What is Erotic Art?' and 'Musical Frissons' are expanded versions of earlier papers, while 'Two Notions of Interpretation' is much shorter than the original essay, mainly because of a significant overlap with 'Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies.' Some of the other essays could perhaps have done with some trimming as well (the first two essays in the book, for instance, both contain a discussion, in almost the same wording, of Paul Bloom's intentional-historical theory of artefacts). On the whole, however, the author and editors at Oxford University Press have done a wonderful job in presenting a well-edited and beautifully produced book (with Gustav Klimt's stunning *Judith* on the cover). It is in every respect a worthy addition to OUP's prestigious series of contemporary works in aesthetics.

Most professionals in the field will already be acquainted with a considerable portion of the essays brought together here. This does not mean, however, that *Contemplating Art* has nothing to offer them. This new collection has at least two great advantages.

First of all, there are some unexpected treasures to be found. Levinson's work has generally received a lot of attention, but some essays have gone virtually unnoticed, mainly because they were published in lesser known journals or books. These essays contain many challenging ideas and deserve a wider audience than they have thus far enjoyed. To offer just a few examples: in 'Two Notions of Interpretation,' Levinson introduces and discusses a distinction between DM interpretations (that aim to answer the question 'What *does* such and such mean?') and CM interpretations (that aim to answer the question 'What *could* such and such mean?') – a distinction that should prove useful in the debate on intention and

interpretation.¹ In ‘Nonexistent Artforms and the Case of Visual Music’ he lays the foundations for an answer to the question why certain artforms which seem eminently possible in fact fail to exist.² ‘Musical Chills’ addresses a well-known phenomenon, musical chills or ‘frissons,’ that has been the focus of empirical studies, but has received little or no attention from aestheticians.³ ‘Sound, Gesture, Space, and the Expression of Emotion in Music,’ finally, investigates the role of spatial imagination in the grasp of musical gesture and the role of the latter in the grasp of musical expressiveness.⁴

Secondly, *Contemplating Art* gives readers the opportunity to examine the internal coherence of Levinson’s thinking. He has tackled many different topics from many different angles and it is easy to lose sight of the common strands in his work. Such a book makes it possible to gain a clearer view of these common strands and of the basic ideas, notions and affinities that inform the author’s thinking. For example, one can track the contours of Levinson’s nuanced but persistent intentionalism throughout the essays on the definition of art (‘something is art iff it is or was intended or projected for overall regard as some prior art is or was correctly regarded.’ 13) and his work on literary meaning (‘the core meaning of a literary work is given by the best hypothesis, from the position of an appropriately informed, sympathetic, and discriminating reader, of authorial intent to convey such and such to an audience through the text in question’ 302)

Or take the notion of ‘an appropriate audience.’ It is striking how often and in how many different contexts he appeals to this particular notion. His account of literary meaning (above) is just one example. Here is his definition of humor:

‘An item x is humorous or funny iff x has the disposition to elicit, through mere cognition of it, and not for ulterior reasons, a certain kind of pleasurable reaction in appropriate – that is, informationally, attitudinally, and emotionally prepared – subjects generally, where this pleasurable reaction, amusement, is identified by its own disposition to induce, at moderate or higher degrees, a further reaction, namely, laughter.’ (396)

The idea of an appropriate audience is also important in Levinson’s account of the value of music, which he thinks is at least in part determined by its capacity to provide pleasure to an appropriately informed listener (220), and expressiveness in music:

‘a passage of music P is expressive of an emotion E iff P, in full context, is readily heard, by a listener appropriately backgrounded in the musical genre in question, as the expression of E in a *sui generis*, purely musical manner, by an indefinite agent, what we can call the music’s persona.’ (85)

The crucial question, of course, is: how do you define ‘an appropriate audience’? When exactly is someone ‘appropriately backgrounded’? On this matter, directly related to issues of

¹ ‘Two Notions of Interpretation’ originally appeared in A. Haapala and O. Naukkarinen (eds.), *Interpretation and its Boundaries*, Helsinki, Helsinki University Press, 1998.

² ‘Nonexistent Artforms and the Case of Visual Music’ originally appeared in A. Haapala, J. Levinson, and V. Rantala (eds.), *The End of Art and Beyond: Essays after Danto*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997.

³ ‘Musical Chills’ originally appeared as ‘Musical Frissons’ in *Revue Française d’Etudes Américaines* 86 (2000).

⁴ ‘Sound, Gesture, Space, and the Expression of Emotion in Music’ originally appeared in *European Review of Philosophy* 5 (2002).

aesthetic education, Levinson remains rather vague. Sometimes he just says that the audience should be ‘stylistically and historically informed’ (220) or ‘informationally, attitudinally, and emotionally prepared’ (396). He is more specific in the essays on literary interpretation. There the appropriate reader is defined as one cognizant of the tradition out of which the work arises, acquainted with the rest of the author's oeuvre, and familiar with the author's public literary and intellectual identity. But this description still leaves an important question unanswered. *To what degree* should a reader be knowledgeable about these things? Is a good grasp sufficient or does he / she need to have perfect knowledge of the author's oeuvre or public identity to be able to determine the meaning of a given work? The fact that Levinson sometimes talks about ‘the ideal reader’ instead of ‘the appropriate reader’ suggests the latter, but he is not clear about this.

What Levinson *is* clear about, is that an appropriate or ideal audience should be familiar with an author's *public* identity, but should not take into account any evidence concerning the *private* attitudes of the author. This caveat is important because it points to the difference between Levinson's own hypothetical intentionalism and actual intentionalism (which holds that the actual intentions of an author revealed in interviews, diaries or personal statements *should* be taken into account when trying to determine a work's meaning).⁵ However, the distinction between essentially *public* and essentially *private* information regarding the author is not unproblematic, as Levinson readily admits (310). Where does one draw the line?

One option would be to distinguish between published and unpublished information. But this would have the implausible consequence that the meaning of a work would suddenly change upon the publication of certain facts regarding the work's creation that were not known outside the author's intimate circle. Levinson suggests another solution. In the original version of ‘Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies’ he formulates it thus: ‘one might begin to refine the concept of a work's appreciative relevant public context by focusing on the idea of what the author *wanted* readers to know about the circumstances of a work's creation, beyond what is implicit in the author's previous work and the author's public identity.’⁶ The obvious problem with this suggestion is that it refers to the *actual* intentions of the author – something hypothetical intentionalists try to avoid.

Levinson apparently came to recognize the difficulty because in *Contemplating Art* ‘what the author *wanted* readers to know’ is replaced by ‘what the author *appears to have wanted* readers to know’ (310) making the account more consistent with hypothetical intentionalism (which just goes to show how Levinson is never afraid to update and further improve his position). Still, not all worries are thereby resolved. On the contrary, we can ask the very same question with which we started out: How exactly do you determine what the author appears to have wanted readers to know? Do you make use of private information or is only public information allowed? And how do we distinguish between information that is essentially public and essentially private?

It is clear from all this that the notion of an appropriate audience, that plays an important role in several essays and is directly relevant to the topic of aesthetic education, needs to be further developed.

⁵ See, for instance, Noël Carroll's ‘Interpretation and Intention: The Debate Between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism,’ *Metaphilosophy* 31 (2000) or his ‘Andy Kaufman and the Philosophy of Interpretation,’ in: M. Krausz (ed.), *Is There A Single Right Interpretation?*, Penn State University Press, 2002.

⁶ J. Levinson, ‘Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies,’ in: M. Krausz (ed.), *Is There A Single Right Interpretation?*, Penn State University Press, 2002, p. 317.

If *Contemplating Art* allows one to look for common strands, it also allows one to check for inconsistencies between essays or subtle tensions. In the remainder of this essay, I want to draw attention to one such tension. I will argue more specifically that some of the claims in ‘Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures’ do not fit well with ideas expressed elsewhere in *Contemplating Art*.

According to Levinson there is no such thing as pornographic art because the aims of true pornography and the aims of art war against one another. One induces you, in the name of sexual arousal, to ignore the representation, the other induces you, in the name of aesthetic delight, to contemplate and dwell on the representation. The argument of ‘Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures’ can be spelled out in the following way (270-271):

(i) Art is centrally aimed at a certain sort of reception, R1, which essentially involves attention to form/vehicle/medium/manner, and so entails treating images as in part opaque.

(ii) Pornographic pictures are centrally aimed at a certain sort of reception, R2, which essentially excludes attention to form/vehicle/medium/manner, and so entails treating images as wholly transparent.

(iii) R1 and R2 are incompatible.

(iv) Hence, nothing can be both art and pornography; or at least, nothing can be *coherently projected* as both art and pornography.

I do not find this argument to be entirely convincing. But before I try to articulate where in my view the argument breaks down, I want to draw attention to a certain tension between the claims made here, in (i) and (ii), and claims made elsewhere in *Contemplating Art*. I will start with premise (i).

Levinson’s intentionalist and historicist definition of art says that an artwork ‘is something that has been intended by someone for regard or treatment in some overall way that some earlier or preexisting artwork or artworks are or were correctly regarded or treated’ (27). This definition is very broad for a reason. According to Levinson, a definition of art should be extensionally adequate: it should cover *all* art, art of the past, the present and the future. It should apply to works produced in different cultures and traditional societies as well as to the idiosyncratic, stripped-down activities of contemporary artists. That is why he does not specify what ‘the correct ways of regarding art’ at a given time are or were – to keep the definition as broad and adequate as possible.

If you compare this definition, developed in essays like ‘The Irreducible Historicity of the Concept of Art’ or ‘Artworks as Artifacts,’ to the theory of art that is implied in (i), you will notice a considerable difference. Not only has the ‘irreducible historicity of the concept of art’ been dropped, but more importantly, Levinson now *does* specify what the correct way of regarding art is (it ‘essentially involves attention to form/vehicle/medium/manner’), making this theory less liberal, but also, inevitably, less extensionally adequate and therefore less plausible than the theory formulated in the other above-mentioned essays.

Levinson, of course, has his reasons for adopting a narrower conception of art in 'Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures.' He wants to exclude pornography from the realm of art: 'nothing can be both [...] art and pornography.' (271) This is a very strong claim. Levinson does not just say that pornographers produce *bad* art. Rather, he claims that what pornographers produce has nothing to do with art, that it is impossible for them to create something that is pornography and art at the same time. Again, it is hard to see how this very strong claim fits with the much more liberal view defended elsewhere in *Contemplating Art*. Levinson has repeatedly acknowledged the idea that 'in the current cultural situation, art is anything that was intended as art'⁷ and has indicated that his intentional-historical definition of art is basically an attempt to transmute this idea into something less circular. That is why he insists that there can be no minimal success condition of a substantive sort when you try to define art. The problem I have highlighted, however, is that in 'Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures' he does formulate a substantial success condition – a success condition that pornography systematically fails to meet.

I turn now to the second premise which states that pornographic pictures are centrally aimed at a kind of reception which essentially excludes attention to vehicle or medium. One might wonder how Levinson can defend this claim and at the same time, elsewhere in *Contemplating Art*, defend a Wollheimian account of pictorial representation (see 'Wollheim on Pictorial Representation'). Wollheim famously argued that being a pictorial representation requires inviting and sustaining seeing-in, i.e. a twofold experience of the subject matter and picture surface (242). So, if Wollheim is right, pornographic pictures, being pictorial representations, must invite and sustain an experience of twofoldness which necessarily implicates awareness of and attention to pictorial surface. How does this fit with Levinson's view that pornographic images are made to be treated as wholly transparent, excluding any attention to vehicle or medium?

One way out of this difficulty would be to make a distinction between attention and awareness. Pornographic images, one might argue, are aimed at a kind of a reception that excludes *attention* to vehicle or medium, but not necessarily *awareness* of the vehicle or medium. In that case, pornographic images *can* invite and sustain an experience of twofoldness, if twofoldness is defined as the simultaneous visual awareness of the surface and the represented object. Levinson, however, cannot take this line because he does not acknowledge a clear distinction between awareness and attention. On the contrary, visual awareness of the medium, for Levinson, means 'attention in some degree to medium' (245). So, if attention to the medium is excluded in the enjoyment of pornography, awareness of the medium is also excluded leaving no room for a Wollheimian experience of twofoldness.

Another way out of this difficulty would be to simply accept, *contra* Wollheim, that not all pictures invite and sustain an experience of twofoldness and that pornographic pictures are of this kind. This would be in all likelihood Levinson's response. In 'Wollheim and Pictorial Representation' he actually makes a case, against Wollheim, for a special kind of seeing-in that does not involve twofoldness. When we look at postcards, passport photos, magazine illustrations, comic strips, television shows or movies, Levinson claims, we are usually not aware of pictorial properties or the medium in which they are embedded (243). These pictures invite what Levinson calls 'simple seeing-in', a seeing in that is not informed by awareness of these pictures as pictures. So, if pornographic pictures are considered to belong to this kind of

⁷ J. Levinson, 'Refining Art Historically,' in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 (1989), p. 23.

pictures there is no longer any conflict with the claim that they are aimed at a sort of reception that excludes awareness to medium.

The problem with this response, however, is that the distinction between ‘simple seeing-in’ and proper pictorial seeing is highly controversial. To claim, in the case of postcards, passport photos or pornographic pictures, that we are typically not aware of these pictures as pictures, seems just wrong. We *are* usually aware of these pictures as pictures and of their pictorial surface. Suppose you are asked to put your finger on the nose of a person shown on a postcard, passport photo or pornographic picture. You will not try to reach through the picture. You will simply touch the surface of the picture – which indicates that you are fully aware of the pictorial surface and of the picture as picture.⁸ So, it seems we are still lacking a satisfying way to resolve the tension between Levinson’s ideas on depiction and pornography.

I have argued that, within the context of *Contemplating Art* itself, premises (i) and (ii) are not unproblematic. But what about (iii)? Even if we assume that (i) and (ii) are correct, are R1 (treating images as in part opaque) and R2 (treating images as wholly transparent) really incompatible? Yes and no. It seems indisputable that *the same person cannot at the same time* treat images as opaque and transparent. But these two qualifications are important. It is perfectly possible that *different* persons react in radically different ways to a work, just like a person’s reception of a work *at one time* can be different from or even incompatible with his reception of that work at another time. So, (iii) needs some spelling out: R1 and R2 are incompatible in the sense that the same person cannot at the same time receive a work in R1 and R2 mode. But once it is put this way, it becomes clear that (iv) does *not* follow from (i) to (iii). An artist *can* successfully aim at two radically different reactions, even incompatible ones like R1 and R2, as long as one does not expect these reactions at the same time from the same audience. Let me illustrate this.

First, it can be the aim of the artist that one part of the audience treats the images as transparent while another part of the audience treats them as opaque. Take Quentin Tarantino’s most recent films, *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof*, which are best characterized as pastiches. They are firmly rooted within certain popular genres (action, kung fu, car chase movies), yet they also play with the conventions of those genres, exaggerating certain aspects and employing typical narrative or stylistic devices in an extremely self-conscious way. As such they appeal to the usual consumers of the genre, as well as to film buffs and cinephiles. The latter are drawn to Tarantino’s films for cinematic reasons, paying close attention to the many subtle references, original dialogues and virtuoso camerawork, usually absent from the typical instances of the genre. Ordinary film goers, on the other hand, unaware of or uninterested in these stylistic aspects, treat his pictures as more or less transparent. They are absorbed by the story and the action or violence depicted, quite oblivious to Tarantino’s sophisticated recuperation of film history. Thus, films like *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof* are aimed both at audiences that ignore matters of form/vehicle/medium/manner and audiences that precisely focus on those features.

But if this is possible for the horror and kung fu genre, then why not for pornography? In fact, Quentin Tarantino has said in the past that he would once like to direct a porn movie. If he ever decides to go through with this, and if the result is as ‘Tarantinesque’ as the rest of his oeuvre, we have every reason to suspect that the film will be received in radically different ways by different audiences, and will be regarded as film art and pornography at the same

⁸ See B. Nanay, ‘Is Twofoldness Necessary for Representational Seeing?’ in: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005), p. 254.

time. (It would be the kind of ‘artistic blue movie’ that Pauline Kael once dreamt of: ‘talented directors taking over from the Schlockmeisters and making sophisticated voyeuristic fantasies that would be gorgeous fun - a real turn-on.’⁹)

Secondly, it sometimes happens that people first treat images as transparent and only afterwards attend to matters of form/vehicle/medium/manner – a process that can be anticipated and planned by the artist. Again, films offer good examples. Take the famous opening scenes of Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* which show the landing of allied forces on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. Seeing the film for the first time really gives you the feeling of being an eye-witness to the events. This was Spielberg’s explicit aim. He wanted to throw the audience right into the action and recreate what it must have been like to be a soldier there and then. The film is so successful at this – it evokes the chaos and horrors of a battlefield better than any film before – that one may start to wonder how Spielberg achieved this effect. Seeing it for a second time or thinking about it afterwards, one’s attention may be drawn to the specific techniques and devices Spielberg employs: the POV shots, the shaky, hand held camera, the CGI to evoke bullets and shrapnel flying around, the impressive sound effects, ... – all these things to which one does not pay attention when one sees the film for the first time. So, here is a film that invites the audience to respond in radically different ways at different times (ignoring and then later attending to formal features). Why would the same not be possible for pornography?

Levinson writes of pornographic pictures that ‘they should present the object of sexual fantasy vividly, and then, as it were, get out of the way.’ (233) In a sense, Spielberg’s goal was similar: to present the events of D-Day as vividly as possible and then, as it were, get out of the way. He is not a show-off director who draws attention to his own virtuosity with every shot. He wants the audience to focus on the events and nothing else. But to make this degree of immersion possible requires great artistic skill – skill that will invite admiration when successfully applied. In much the same way, I think, one can imagine a porn movie that, through excellent acting, a truly gripping story, effective use of lighting and sound, succeeds in presenting the objects of sexual fantasy more vividly than ever, being sexually stimulating in the first place and inviting the viewer afterwards to contemplate the relationship between the stimulation achieved and the means employed to achieve it.

What Levinson seems to have overlooked, put more generally, is that transparency can be a bona fide artistic goal. C.S. Lewis once argued that good literature should be like a good lens, it should make things clearer. He gave this example: ‘Reading in Milton “chequered shade” we find ourselves imagining a certain distribution of lights and shadows with unusual vividness, ease, and pleasure. The clarity of the object proves that the lens we saw it through is good.’¹⁰ So, transparency, and the vividness that goes with it, can and often does constitute an authentic artistic achievement. It is also interesting to note in this respect that the problem of bad novels or bad films is often not that they are wholly transparent, inducing the reader or viewer to ignore the form/vehicle/medium/manner, but rather that they are *not transparent enough*. The viewer or reader is prevented from losing himself in the story because the lighting and acting are irritatingly bad or the plot and metaphors are just laughable.

I want to conclude this argument by again pointing to a subtle tension between the claims Levinson makes in his essay on pornography and an observation that he makes elsewhere in

⁹ P. Kael, ‘Last Tango in Paris,’ in: R. Ebert (ed.), *Roger Ebert's Book of Film*, New York, Norton, 1997, p. 308.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 31.

Contemplating Art. In 'Musical Chills' Levinson describes how there are two contrasting modes of listening to music:

'On the one hand one may, without losing contact with the music in its full particularity, let a piece of music enfold one, envelop one, wash over one, so that one gives oneself over to it in a personal way, as to a lover ... On the other hand one may undertake to keep music at a distance, so to speak, observing its lapidary details, its emotional manoeuvrings, its dramatic gestures as something external to and apart from the self that listens.' (221)

Both modes of listening are legitimate and carry with them distinct sorts of pleasure. If a composer can anticipate and aim for these two different kinds of reception, then why not a filmmaker or photographer? It seems that in 'Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures' only the second way of engaging with a work is considered truly artistic or aesthetic.

In spite of the few concerns and objections I have formulated, I believe *Contemplating Art* is too rich and insightful for anyone interested in aesthetics *not* to contemplate further. Levinson is one of those rare philosophers who is equally capable of discussing very fundamental questions and highly specific issues related to particular artforms. He is extremely knowledgeable of recent developments as well as the history of aesthetics and his writing is rigorous but accessible and occasionally even playful (in 'Musical Thinking' Levinson emulates Wittgenstein's elliptical, oracular style and 'Who's Afraid of Paraphrase', an essay about metaphors, contains a greater than usual number of metaphors). He participates in existing debates, some of which he helped to shape, but is also not afraid to enter uncharted territory and put new research questions on the table. One finishes the book with gratitude – for it is at once thoughtful and thought provoking – and with renewed respect for its author who is generally and rightly considered one of the leading lights in contemporary aesthetics.