# PORNOGRAPHY AT THE EDGE:
## *Depiction, Fiction, and Sexual Predilection*

*Christy Mag Uidhir & Henry John Pratt*

The primary purpose of depictive works of pornography, we take it, is sexual arousal through sexually explicit representations; what we call *prototypical pornography* satisfies those aims through the adoption of a *ceteris paribus* maximally realistic depictive style. Given that the purpose of sexual arousal seems best fulfilled by establishing the most robust connections between the viewer and the depictive subject, we find it curious that not all works of pornography aspire to prototypical status. Accordingly, we target for philosophical scrutiny several non-standard but putatively pornographic forms: Tijuana Bibles, *hentai manga*, and slash-fiction. We find that works of these genres possess certain depictively or fictively oriented properties that appear at least *prima facie* incompatible with prototypical pornography, and thereby to pose two pressing questions that any *prima facie* viable analysis of pornography must answer: *the depiction question* and *the fiction question*. By answering these questions, we can not only arrive at a deeper understanding of the aims of pornography and the reasons for which significant sub-genres of pornography might diverge from the prototypical ideal, but also perhaps better understand what lies at pornography's edge, and so better understand the ways in which pornography might relate to what lies beyond.

## §1. FRAMING PORNOGRAPHY

Any attempt to characterize the pornographic is likely to be contentious. We do not intend to defend any such account here, but we should make our starting points clear. For our purposes, we merely assume the following:

> MINIMAL CHARACTERIZATION OF PORNOGRAPHY: A work $w$ is a work of pornography only if (a) $w$ is a depictive work (b) of which the (primary) purpose is sexual arousal of its audience, (c) the primary subject of which is of an explicitly sexual nature, and (d) $w$ prescribes attention to (c) as the (primary) means of satisfying (b).[1]

---

[1] For our purposes here, we assume depiction to be representation in the *standard* sense. Although representations can be visual or verbal, we are primarily concerned with pornography as visually depictive. That said, we take visual depiction *standardly* to involve an object, a subject, and an agent, where the object admits at least some baseline degree of resemblance to that subject in virtue of that object being the product of some set of conventionally established activities successfully performed by that agent with the intention that the product of those actions possess at least some baseline degree of resemblance to that subject. This standard sense should be seen as broadly applicable, having no allegiance to any particular theory of depiction, and able to be formatted to fit specific views (Abell 2005; Hyman 2000; Lopes 2005). So, although there are many theories according to which neither resemblance nor intentions are necessary for depiction (e.g., Newall 2006; Walton 2002), we neither defend nor endorse the necessity of resemblance or intention for depiction *simpliciter*; we merely take depiction to *standardly* involve resemblance and intention.

Nothing in what follows should be taken to suggest allegiance to or dependence on any particular robust definition of pornography; we merely offer the above eminently plausible necessary condition as a means by which we can ground the substantive discussions to come.

Of course, one might think that even the above modest necessary condition could be made more precise. Take (b), for example. Matthew Kieran (2001) claims that pornography's goal is to "elicit sexual arousal or desire," (32) while Jerrold Levinson (2005) holds that pornography is supposed to do more: to "sexually arouse in the interests of sexual release" (230). Both are careful about the type of sexual arousal characteristic of pornography and erotica precisely because they want to determine whether such arousal is compatible with being an artwork. However, both nonetheless agree that sexual arousal of some sort is the crucial intended effect, and since the art status of pornography is not our topic here, we only require a more coarse-grained understanding: pornography succeeds in its primary purpose when it causes sexual arousal.[2] Again, although our minimal characterization of pornography could be further specified, for our purposes, we shall remain silent as what such further specifications there may be.

While we take pornography to be essentially depictive, we also take pornography to encompass a number of different depictive styles that depend on the technical possibilities afforded by the media in which they are created. However, even though not all pornography is stylistically realistic, this does seem to be an ideal to which much pornography aspires, for apparently straightforward reasons. Consider *when* pornography is typically consumed: in circumstances where one cannot engage in sexual activity of the desired type because the other participants in that activity are unavailable. As Levinson (2005) puts it, "pornography is essentially a kind of substitute or surrogate for sex, whether a poor one or not we can leave aside" (385). When coupled with the idea that effectiveness in producing sexual arousal correlates directly with sensory access to the objects of sexual attraction, this implies that pornography is most successful at achieving its purposes when it affords to the consumer the most direct sensory access to the (absent) objects of attraction. The best way to do this would seem to be to make pornography as *realistic* as possible,[3] hence Levinson's claim that "to fulfill that purpose its images should be as transparent as possible—they should present the object for sexual fantasy vividly, then, as it were, get out of the way" (385).

Presumably, then, we can assume that the contemporary paradigm (prototype, exemplar) of pornography involves the attempt to sexually arouse its audience via the depiction of actual

---

[2] For a more detailed analysis of pornography's purpose and the relation to its prescribed manner of satisfaction, see Mag Uidhir (2009).

[3] For a detailed analysis of the notion of depictive realism to which we broadly subscribe, see Abell (2006, 2007) and Lopes (1995, 2006).

people engaging in actual sexual activity. At least insofar as the purpose of sexual arousal is concerned, we ought to expect prototypical pornography to satisfy this purpose via employing or featuring sufficiently realistic depictions of a sexually explicit sort. Likewise, we ought to expect a target audience to be sexually aroused at least to the extent that the audience takes those depictions to be transparent (i.e., as a depictive record of actual persons engaged in actual sex acts) or realistic (i.e., as more or less conforming to relevant expectations about the actual world).[4]

We can now offer a more precise definition.

> PROTOTYPICAL PORNOGRAPHY: A work of pornography is a work of *prototypical pornography* only if that work (i) employs a maximally realistic depictive style (given the technological and representational possibilities afforded to the pornographer) or a depictive style sufficiently realistic to maximally satisfy the purpose of sexual arousal, and (ii) features an explicitly sexual (primary) subject that is maximally realistic (*ceteris paribus*) or sufficiently realistic to maximally satisfy (*ceteris paribus*) the purpose of sexual arousal.

According to this view, we ought to expect prototypical pornography prior to the invention of photography to feature more or less sufficiently realistic depictions. Likewise, the degree to which a work's depictions are realistic should *ceteris paribus* be the degree to which that work is successful in sexually arousing its audience. We take depictive realism here to be indexed to time and cultural standards with respect to both sexual preferences and depictive style,[5] thereby allowing for multiple depictions with the same subject to be more or less equally realistic despite each featuring depictive styles radically divergent from the rest (e.g., second-century BCE Buddhist cave frescos, murals of Pompeii, Edo-period Japanese woodcuts, illustrations from de Sade's *L'Histoire de Juliette*). Of course, after the advent of photography, transparency seems to have become the default form of depictive realism, and with it, prototypical pornography has shifted towards those media establishing direct causal connections to the world.

Nonetheless, we should be cautious to avoid the claim that unrealistic depictions cannot or do not sexually arouse or that prototypical works of pornography cannot also be works of fiction. For example, consider the to-date most expensive adult film ever made: *Pirates* (2005). This movie is patently not just a prototypical work of pornography (though one with an atypical production budget) but also a work of film-fiction.[6] Presumably, however, *Pirates*

---

[4] For a detailed analysis of realistic and unrealistic fictions, see Hazlett & Mag Uidhir (2011).
[5] For the defense of such an account, see Abell (2007).
[6] Pornography is not a medium but rather a work-description that putatively applies to works specific to a variety of media: movies such as *Hot Shots Volume 30: Hot Jocks*; photos such as those contained in

successfully sexually arouses its audience primarily via that audience engaging with the film as a maximally transparent depiction of actual persons engaging in actual sexual acts (e.g., between adult film actors Evan Stone and Jesse Jane) rather than as a cinematic representation of the fictional-world sexual escapades of the pirate-hunting libertine, Captain Edward Reynolds (played by Evan Stone) and his equally licentious first officer, Jules (played by Jesse Jane). *Qua* pornography, to satisfy the purpose of sexual arousal, the audience need not engage with *Pirates* as a work of fiction; they need only engage with *Pirates* as a sufficiently transparent photographic depiction of actual persons actually having sex.[7] Of course, the advent of the camera did not spell the end of non-photographic pictorial pornography anymore than it appears to have put the sketch artist permanently out of business.

It is noteworthy that even if a work is *pornographic*, it need not be a work of *pornography*. For instance, erotic birthday cakes, obscene phone messages, wet dreams, security footage of employee hanky-panky, naughty novelty key chains, and so forth are pornographic, but it would be strange indeed to call them pornography. Moreover, it appears that many works that are pornographic, far from aspiring to be prototypical pornography, have stylistic or referential properties that appear to be *antithetical* to prototypical pornography. Such works fall into at least three (overlapping) categories. First, though transparency is an obvious way to approach maximal realism, some pornographic works employ decidedly non-transparent depictive media. Second, though a range of stylistic choices is available within each depictive medium, some pornographic works are the result of deliberate decisions to depict their subjects less realistically than they could have been, even to the point of gross exaggeration. Third, while depictions of real-life people would seem to serve well the purposes of bringing the consumer closer to the objects of attraction, some pornographic works predominantly depict subjects that are known by the audience to be entirely fictional, for whom the audience is invited to feel sexually aroused.

This ought to strike one as puzzling. That is, everything pornographic, one might think, should aim towards the prototypical, which (if Levinson is to be believed) is the most successful type of pornography at achieving its primary goal. Given that, among depictive media available to us at present, photography and related technologies of film and video seem to yield maximally realistic depictions in the sense required for prototypical pornography, it might be thought that photographic technologies would have rendered all other pornographic media

---

*Hustler* magazine; comics such as *Boku No Sexual Harrassment*; novels such as *Tropic of Cancer*; video games such as *Bible Black*; and music such as 2 Live Crew's 1989 album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*.
[7] To this extent, contemporary prototypical pornography seems instructively similar to video surveillance: in order to satisfy their respective purposes, both rely on viewer assumptions about the objective purport of photographs.

obsolete.[8] Yet pornographic works survive and even thrive in media that are opaque, unrealistic, or predominantly and thoroughly fictional in content. Why is this?

To best answer the question, let us distinguish between two senses of "pornographic."[9]

For a work $w$ to be *work-pornographic* is for $w$ to have sufficiently salient properties in common with prototypical pornography.

For a work $w$ to be *genre-pornographic* is for $w$ to be in a medium genre (or subgenre) for which prototypical works of that genre are both pornography and work-pornographic.

By making this distinction, we allow for there to be works of the following sorts:

*Neither work-pornographic nor genre-pornographic.*

For example, *Bambi* (1942) has no salient properties in common with prototypical pornography, and is in a medium genre (*animated film/family film*), for which prototypical works are neither pornography nor work-pornographic.

*Both work-pornographic and genre-pornographic.*

For example, *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Camera Sutra* (2004) are both part of a medium subgenre (*adult film*) that is prototypically pornographic and have many salient properties in common with prototypical pornography (e.g., feature several explicit and extended depictions of sexual intercourse).

*Work-pornographic but not genre-pornographic.*

Although Gaspar Noe's *Irréversible* (2007) contains a nine-minute anal-rape scene, the film is decidedly not genre-pornographic, as it belongs to a medium subgenre (e.g., *French art film*) for which prototypical works are not pornography.[10]

*Genre-pornographic but not work-pornographic.*

Consider that *Bat Pussy* (1973), although intended to be a mainstream pornographic movie, is so incompetently made that it hardly, if at all, shares salient properties with works of prototypical pornography.[11]

The goal of all the foregoing distinctions is to provide an informative and productive framework within which we can better understand the nature of (and issues surrounding) those

---

[8] Levinson (2005) claims that photography is "the prime medium for pornography, that which has displaced all other such media in that connection. For photography is the transparent medium *par excellence*, that is, the medium that comes closest to simply presenting the requisite object . . . directly, as material for sexual fantasy and gratification" (385).

[9] For a similar view about "pornographic," see Mag Uidhir (2009).

[10] *Irréversible*, though in a decidedly subversive manner, may also belong to other genres such as crime thriller or revenge fantasy.

[11] Notice that this distinction can be used to informatively characterize cases of censorship or banning of, e.g., films such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Brown Bunny* (2004), *Salo* (1975), *Fat Girl* (2001), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). It allows for plausible explanations of the motivations behind such bans while nevertheless remaining consistent with the position that the works so banned are in fact not pornography at all, but instead are at best work-pornographic films. Presumably, the ethical motivations behind censorship ought to, in the main, track work-pornographic rather than genre-pornographic.

putative works of pornography that nevertheless appear to be of the sort antithetical to prototypical pornography. In the end, we take our framework to be of substantial philosophical import not only for understanding pornography itself but also for specifying the scope and limits of its ascriptions. So, although we refrain from making either exclusionary or inclusionary claims about art and pornography, we nevertheless take our proposals to provide productive tools for framing such issues precisely because the art-pornography debate looks to be located upon the very terrain we target for philosophical scrutiny—*at pornography's edge*.

Which works exist at that edge? While other examples could be chosen, we will be focusing on three sorts that, we will see, are far from the prototypical: Tijuana Bibles, *hentai manga*, and slash fiction.

> TIJUANA BIBLES:[12] cheaply made pocket-sized comic books popular in the Depression-era United States that depict sexually explicit scenarios (both heterosexual and homosexual) involving celebrities and cartoon characters who were well-known at the time (e.g., Popeye, Snow White, Nancy and Sluggo, Clark Gable, John Dillinger, Dorothy Lamour).
>
> HENTAI MANGA: a subgenre of *manga*—Japanese comics—primarily aimed at adult consumers due to its preponderance of sexually explicit themes and graphic depictions of a veritable host of sexual orientations, acts, and fetishes (e.g., breasts, transsexuality, incest, bestiality, *alien hentai* or "tentacle rape").
>
> SLASH FICTION: a foundational subgenre of fan fiction chiefly featuring sexually explicit depictions of non-canonical homosexual relationships between otherwise heterosexual male characters. The first slash fiction consisted in stories depicting a homosexual relationship between *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, and were referred to as Kirk/Spock (*K/S*) stories—hence the name *slash* fiction.

Since they fit into the minimal characterization with which we began, we assume that such works are at least *putatively* pornography, and this allows us to investigate the following questions:

> THE DEPICTIVE QUESTION: How might, issues in depictive realism (in style or in subject) for such works bear, if at all, upon such works being pornographic (in either sense)? Does the lack of realism in Tijuana Bibles or *hentai* affect their status as pornographic?
>
> THE FICTION QUESTION: How might the conditions for being a work of fiction (slash fiction or otherwise) fit, if at all, with the conditions for being a work of pornography? Are the primary aims of fiction and pornography compatible, and can a work be an excellent example of both?

---

[12] The origin of the term "Tijuana Bible" is obscure, but seems to have little to do with Mexico save their contraband status and corresponding need to be smuggled.

In answering these questions, we will gain an understanding of how and why works at the edge can be putatively pornography despite clearly failing to be prototypical pornography, and we will arrive, in turn, at a deeper understanding of the aims of pornography and the reasons for which significant subgenres of pornography might diverge from the prototypical ideal.

## §2. PORNOGRAPHY & THE DEPICTIVE QUESTION

While Tijuana Bibles and *hentai manga* alike are putatively pornography, given that they are geared primarily towards sexual arousal, the depictive styles employed therein have interesting implications for their status, given the framework established in §1. Neither seems to be prototypical pornography; nevertheless, such works are both genre-pornographic and work-pornographic.

Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* are both created by drawing, clearly situating them alongside most of the other works in the broader medium to which they belong: comics. Before the advent of photographic technologies and economically viable ways of disseminating them, drawing afforded among the most realistic depictive techniques known. While *hentai* certainly arose after photographically-based pornography was readily available, Tijuana Bibles did not. It is to be expected that the makers of Tijuana Bibles did not use photography; what is *not* expected is that they did not avail themselves of realistic drawing techniques, opting instead for gross exaggeration and caricature.[13] (In one Tijuana Bible, for instance, Popeye, already a bizarre caricature, is pictured with a penis roughly the size of his torso.) The makers of Tijuana Bibles *could* have drawn more realistically and produced more sexually realistic subjects, but did not. The case of *hentai* is even more clear-cut. *Hentai* also trades in exaggeration. In addition to the exaggerations of eye size and limb length characteristic of *manga* in general, works of *hentai* often grossly exaggerate penis and breast size. Moreover, since the makers of *hentai* are technologically able to use photography (but do not) their works could easily be more realistic, both in general style and in the specific characters depicted. Obviously, neither Tijuana Bibles nor *hentai* are prototypical pornography.

Both, however, are genre-pornographic. Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* are among the drawn media, as mentioned earlier, but more specifically, both are subgenres of comics. While precise definitions of comics are controversial (McCloud 1993; Hayman & Pratt 2005; Meskin 2007), there seems to be a rough consensus that comics, prototypically, are a kind of sequential, pictorial narrative—the form in which Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* are presented. While the medium of comics is not itself characteristically pornography, it admits of subgenres that are,

---

[13] For more on pictorial caricature, see Mag Uidhir (2011).

Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* among them—and *hentai*, in particular, is a very significant subgenre of comics.[14]

Most works in the Tijuana Bible and *hentai* genres are work-pornographic, save for those that are executed incompetently. While they do not exhibit the maximally realistic depictive styles characteristic of prototypical pornography, as noted above, they do share other salient properties: explicit representation of sexual intercourse and sexualized body parts, together with the intention to maximally satisfy the aim of sexual arousal.

We can now see why there is justification for thinking of Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* under the rubric of pornography even though they fail to be prototypical. Works that are both work-pornographic and genre-pornographic are still situated within the bounds of pornography, even if at the edge. But we still have a mystery before us: what is the point of creating pornographic works that are not prototypical when the prototypical depictive styles and technologies are readily available?

The solution lies in the idea that there are some things that can be done in Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* that cannot be done in prototypical pornography. To make such a claim is to endorse some degree of medium specificity. As Noël Carroll defines it (2008, p. 35-37), medium specificity is the view that the media associated with a given art form (both its material components and the processes by which those components are manipulated) entail specific possibilities for and constraints on representation and expression, which provides a normative framework for what artists working in that art form ought to attempt. Carroll rejects medium specificity, largely due to problems he finds with the second clause, but the first clause is more plausible. Comics like Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* allow for specific depictive possibilities that more realistic technologies cannot without great difficulty match.

Because Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* are drawn, they can represent pornographic scenes that are difficult or even impossible to photograph. The representational capacities of drawings are limited only by the skills and imagination of the artist. The representational capacities of photographic technologies, in contrast, have additional limits: a "pure" photograph (one with minimal digital or darkroom manipulation) can only depict the objects at which the camera is pointed.

Some people—audiences at the edge, if you will—become aroused by seeing or thinking about scenes and objects that, if not physically impossible, are at the least physically highly unlikely. These sorts of things are almost completely beyond the abilities of photography to capture. Examples include:

- Disproportionally-sized body parts (particularly breasts and genitalia).

---

[14] In Japan, just one *hentai* genre, *redezu komikku* (targeted at women in their twenties and thirties) accounts for an estimated 103 million copies sold monthly (see Shamoon (2004), p. 78).

- Sexual intercourse between celebrities, sometimes contrary to the presumptive sexual orientation of those celebrities.
- Human sexual congress with animals, cartoon characters, monsters, and aliens.
- Sexual acts that require anatomically impossible degrees of flexibility.
- Visual representations of the female orgasm.
- Acts of penetration not visible on film, achieved through depictive devices such as transparent skin and clothing.[15]

The people for whom such representations are arousing are not going to be satisfied by pornographic photographs.

Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* have an additional advantage over prototypical pornography: they can be made without the help of anybody else. Imagination is required, but not cooperation or consent. A medium-specific feature of comics is ease of production; a feature of genre-pornographic comics is ease in producing works depicting actions that contravene mainstream sexual mores. Photographed objects and actions can, obviously, contravene such mores as well. But the more radical the departure, the more difficult it is to find willing subjects and to arrange the conditions under which they are photographed. Not so with comics. Since Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* are situated at the edges of pornography, they can, much more easily than photographs, cater to individuals whose sexual preferences are also at the edges.[16]

Still, it seems that one could best satisfy these sexual preferences, if not through photography, by opting for a maximally realistic drawing style. Why do the makers of Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* make the opposite choice? In the case of Tijuana Bibles, the explanation could well be incompetence: it would be an act of great charity to describe the artistry in most of these as amateurish. But sometimes the choice is deliberate, particularly in *hentai* works where it is clear (sometimes from very realistically depicted background scenery) that the artist is capable of rendering his or her subjects in less cartoonish styles.

One reason why cartooning and caricature are common in comics in the first place also helps explain why there are non-prototypical pornographic comics. According to Scott McCloud, the simplicity and degree of abstraction involved in cartooning allows for the possibility of almost universal identification with the characters depicted.[17] The more realistically a person is depicted, the harder it is to relate to it as you relate to yourself. In contrast, any human being who is not horribly disfigured can picture his or her face as a simple circle with two dots for eyes and a line for a mouth. Comics use cartoons, in short, to facilitate

---

[15] See Shamoon (2004), p. 88.
[16] This prompts interesting questions about the ethical contrasts, if any, between pornographic drawings and pornographic photographs—an issue particularly salient in the case of pedophilia.
[17] McCloud (1993), pp. 30-37. McCloud's view, it should be noted, is controversial.

reader identification. If cartooning allows for greater reader identification than photographs, then it allows the reader more easily to project himself or herself into the depicted scene. So if Levinson is correct in his claim that pornography is a substitute or surrogate for sex, and that effective pornography enables one to envision more closely that one is actually engaged in or with what is depicted, then there is a way that non-prototypical works can be *better* at delivering sexual arousal than prototypical works. A work that uses less realistic drawing techniques facilitates closeness with the characters therein, rather than (as in photographic pornography) forcing one to perform the far more difficult task of imagining that one is somebody else in all their extreme particularity.

At the same time that Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* allow readers to achieve greater *identification* with the characters, they provide a sense of *distance* that photographs cannot match. This is not as paradoxical as it appears. When prototypical pornography depicts a fictional narrative through the use of photographically-based technologies, there are still very real people acting that fiction out—individuals with a subjectivity that includes personalities, hopes, desires, friends, family, and so on. The degree of transparency associated with photographs cannot help but to make this clear to the viewer. And though maximally realistic drawings need not have real persons as subjects, their realism prompts one to imagine strongly that those persons are real and individual.

The consumer of pornography, however, may not *want* his or her sexual fantasies or desires to be connected to real people in any way. In particular, a sense of distance may be sought when those fantasies or desires are taboo or believed to necessitate causing harm to oneself or another. Removal of concern for the particularities of the human beings in pornography, by thinking of them more abstractly, is a way to avoid feeling guilt.[18]

Pornographic narratives in photographic media often contain attempts to divert attention away from the actual personhood of the participants, both through the use of pseudonyms for the performers and the various devices aptly noted by Kieran:

> The characters are mere ciphers, stereotypical substitutes, precluding any need on our part to imagine in any depth their feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. Similarly, the plots, such as they are in narrative pornography, remain ludicrous caricatures of implausible situations, presented as if they were ordinary, everyday occurrences. (371)

Though *attempts* to distance can be made in maximally realistic styles, they cannot be *entirely* successful. Pornography at the edge has no such problem. Because the drawing is less than photorealistic, the persons depicted are more generic than real people—closer to a template or a blank object than a human being. While this means that the reader can identify with a character,

---

[18] Thinking of humans in the abstract, instead of as particular people, may be thought to be a variety of objectification—and hence ethically troubling. See Nussbaum (1995).

it also implies that Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* that do not represent a particular person cannot objectify any particular person, and so have the capacity to afford the sense that no particular person is being harmed.[19]

This allows for a felt moral superiority. Consumers of *hentai* and Tijuana Bibles (at least, those that do not depict celebrities) can claim that the indefinite persons represented by the drawings cannot be harmed. Since no real, particular person is harmed, the guilt that often accompanies consumption of pornography is alleviated. This moral superiority may be completely illusory—it is entirely possible that the moral status of Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* is exactly equal to that of prototypical pornography—but a felt superiority for its readership would go a long way towards explaining why pornography at the edge can have a certain appeal.

Selection of less than maximally realistic depictive styles may also be explained, finally, by the perception that those styles are, in some significant way, artistic. A common if controversial idea about art is that one's work must contain creative contributions that express distinctive visions of the world, rather than merely duplicating the world's appearance.[20] When a work's depictive style diverges from the realistic, it is easier to make the case that it is art. Even if art and pornography are incompatible, when pornography is thought of *as* art, it gains cultural currency (attaining, perhaps, the esteemed status of erotica rather than pornography). Because it is easier to think of Tijuana Bibles and works of *hentai* as art than it is to think of more realistic pornography as art, it is easier to defend possessing and appreciating them. One's significant other, for instance, is likely to have a very different reaction to an issue of a *hentai* series found around the house than he or she would to an issue of *Penthouse*, even if the comic and the magazine have identical sexual content.

Pornography, we agreed at the outset, has the primary purpose of sexual arousal of its audience. We have seen in this section that being prototypical is not the only way to be effective in this regard. Realism and transparency of pornographic media are not always desirable; rather, the lack of transparency afforded by pornography at the edge allows it to achieve a number of sexually arousing effects not available in prototypical pornography at all.

## §3. PORNOGRAPHY & THE FICTION QUESTION

Given the minimal account of pornography laid out in §1, we ought, at least *prima facie*, to expect works in the domain of *prototypical pornography* to be more or less unified with respect to

---

[19] This is not to say that Tijuana Bibles and *hentai* do not objectify, only that when they do, it is either in virtue of representing an actual person—in, say, a Tijuana Bible featuring a gay James Cagney—or derivatively, by objectifying a class of persons.

[20] This view is articulated prominently by Scruton (1981), who uses it to inveigh against photography and film as art forms.

subject, purpose, and manner—more or less to minimally satisfy the purpose of sexually arousing their audiences via prescribed audience attention to maximally realistic and transparent depictions of the same broad subject matter (i.e., human beings engaged in sexually explicit situations). Given that the more a work of putative pornography departs from depictive realism and transparency, *ceteris paribus*, the less capable that work is of sexually arousing its audience, one might reasonably conclude that a work of fiction ought to be less successful than its non-fiction counterpart in satisfying the primary purpose of pornography. Let us explore, then, the descriptive and evaluative tensions present in the overlap between pornography and fiction.

To that end, we will operate with the following:

> MINIMAL CHARACTERIZATION OF FICTION: For $F$ to be a work of fiction is (minimally) for $F$ (i) to depict some fictional world [$W_F$], and (ii) to invite its audience to imagine $W_F$ in accord with (as minimally specified in) that $F$.[21]

How might satisfying those conditions for being a work of fiction bear upon satisfying the minimal conditions for being a work of pornography?

One might reasonably expect few works in the domain of prototypical pornography to be works of fiction. There seems to be an intuitive sense in which fictions are depictive departures from reality, primarily inviting us to imagine fictional worlds rather than offering us testimony about the actual world. However, the briefest of reflection shows that works of fiction comprise quite a substantial subset of prototypical pornography, including the classic pornographic film-fictions of the 1970s such as *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973), *Naked Afternoon* (1976), *Debbie Does Dallas* (1978); the utterly forgettable pornographic film-fictions from the decidedly not-so-classic video era of the 80s and 90s such as *The Sperminator* (1985), *Saturday Night Beaver* (1986), and *Spankenstein* (1998); and even the big-budget pornographic film-fictions from the largely fiction-free DVD/Internet era of the last decade such as *Manhunters* (2006), *Pirates* (2005), and *Upload* (2007). As such, our principal focus must shift to how, if at all, satisfying the conditions for being a work of prototypical pornography is compatible with satisfying the conditions for being a work of fiction *likewise prototypically construed*.

Fiction standardly prescribes for its audience certain responses among which are aesthetic, narrative, emotional, didactic, or cognitive experiences. Prototypically, such responses are in service to the same broad aim: the entertainment of the fiction's audience.[22] Entertainment value

---

[21] For more on this, see Lewis (1983), Currie (1990), Walton (1990), Gendler (2000), and Hazlett & Mag Uidhir (2011).

[22] For example, I assume the film *Days of Heaven* (1978), the novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the play *King Lear*, and the television series *Mad Men* all to be fictions that successfully entertain their audiences by being, respectively, beautifully shot, narratively complex, emotionally powerful, and richly historically informative about its subject.

is a substantial part of the reason why we take engaging with fictions to be a *prima facie* worthwhile activity. If being entertained is a *prima facie* (if not *pro tanto*) good, and prototypical fictions, when engaged, provide a source of entertainment, then to that extent engaging with prototypical fictions is a worthwhile activity.

Prototypical pornography aims primarily at sexually arousing its audience via prescribed attention to maximally realistic and transparent depictions of its subject matter. Prototypical fiction aims primarily at imaginatively entertaining its audience via the prescribed imagining of the fictional world depicted. At first blush, the standard sorts of aims of prototypical pornography appear to run orthogonal or perhaps even directly counter to those for prototypical fiction. Given the primary aim of sexual arousal, depictive realism clearly constitutes a central if not essential concern for prototypical pornography, but given the primary aim of imaginative entertainment, depictive realism quickly becomes a peripheral matter for prototypical fiction—a central concern perhaps for certain genres of fiction (such as historical biopics, period romances) but never for fiction itself.

Although some works of prototypical fiction are sexually arousing (e.g., Adrian Lyne's film *9 ½ Weeks* (1986), Agnar Mykle's novel *The Song of Red Ruby* (1956), Alan Moore's comic *Lost Girls* (2006)), presumably their being sexually arousing is ultimately not an end itself but rather a means of satisfying fiction's entertainment aim. *Qua* fiction, works that depict sexually explicit situations do so either in direct service to the primary aim of audience entertainment, or in order to elicit certain emotional responses, signal certain narrative shifts, heighten or relieve dramatic tension, draw certain thematic contrasts or comparisons, or similarly serve some such other prescribed uptake. We should neither expect nor find to be anything but peculiar a work that, *qua* fiction, aims to sexually arouse its audience *and nothing more*, as the satisfaction or frustration of such an aim looks utterly incidental to the satisfaction or frustration of the primary aim of that work *qua* fiction.

Likewise, while many works of prototypical pornography are also entertaining works of fiction, such works *qua* pornography depict sexually explicit situations so as to sexually arouse their audiences *simpliciter*. That is, even though such works *qua* fictions aim at entertaining their audiences, the satisfaction of that primary aim *qua* work of fiction can at best contribute only incidentally to the satisfaction of the primary aim *qua* work of pornography. Moreover, such works of prototypical pornography often fail to satisfy their primary aim *qua* pornography to the extent they succeed in satisfying their primary aim *qua* fiction. For example, *Café Flesh* (1982), a pornographic film-fiction, depicts sexually explicit situations sufficiently bizarre to advance its aims *qua* fiction (e.g., the oddly cold and mechanical nature of the sex depicted contributes both narratively and atmospherically to the work as an entertaining film-fiction) but also sufficiently bizarre to interfere with its aims *qua* pornography (e.g., the oddly cold and

mechanical nature of the sex depicted detracts from the work as a sexually arousing pornographic film). The extent to which *Café Flesh* succeeds as an entertaining work of post-apocalyptic science-fiction is the extent to which *Café Flesh* fails as a sexually arousing work of pornography. This suggests that, at least for some works within the fiction-pornography extensional overlap, not only do the good/bad making features of works *qua* fiction and those *qua* pornography come apart, but more importantly, good/bad making features *qua* fiction may be bad/good making features *qua* pornography. Discovering the descriptive conditions under which fiction and pornography possess antipodal evaluative criteria not only help us better formulate boundary disputes between pornography and other genres (both fictive and depictive alike) but also reveal that the key to answering the pornography/art question lies squarely at pornography's edge.

In order to avoid conflating the fiction question with the depictive question, we think it best at this stage to abandon our focus on visual depiction, lest we end up defending a purely fictive-pornographic tension (descriptive or evaluative) that upon closer inspection turns out to be a visually depictive-pornographic tension in clever disguise. To this end, we consider *slash fiction*.

Slash fiction is a sub-genre of fan-fiction—non-canonical texts written by fans of a particular fictional series (e.g., *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*) that comprises a well-established, canonical fictional universe. What sets slash fiction apart from other fan-fiction is that it deliberately depicts a non-canonical homosexual relationship and/or sexually explicit homosexual activity between two canonically heterosexual male characters (some *Star Trek* slash has depicted Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock as being engaged in a homosexual relationship; some *Harry Potter* slash has similarly paired Harry Potter and Professor Snape).[23]

How does slash fiction fit into the accounts of fiction and pornography sketched in the foregoing? Consider a Kirk/Spock fiction [*K/S*]. *K/S* depicts a fictional world that is non-canonical, in that it invites its audience to imagine Kirk and Spock in a sexually explicit relationship. And the audience (composed, incidentally, primarily of other slash fiction writers) is to be entertained via imagining that relationship. *K/S* is also putatively pornography.[24] It aims at sexually arousing its audience precisely by prescribing audience attention to its graphic depictions of sexually explicit (and non-canonical) interactions between Kirk and Spock.

---

[23] This may also be an illusion to Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1970), in which he offers a structuralist analysis of Balzac's "Sarrasine" revealing hidden homoerotic aspects—the titular 'S' and 'Z' being Sarrasine and the castrato, La Zambinella. Thanks to Jerrold Levinson for pointing this out.

[24] Or at least putatively both work-pornographic and genre-pornographic. Note that slash-fiction is far more plausibly construed as a species of pornographic fiction—the standard pulp sort typically found in adult bookstores (e.g., *Midtown Queen* or *The Short Happy Sex Life of Stud Sorell*)—rather than of erotic literature—the standard literary minded sort of erotica found in academic libraries (e.g., *Lady Chatterly's Lover* or *The Story of O*).

*K/S* (and similar works of slash-fiction), then, reveal a potential tension. To be a good work *qua* fiction, *K/S* must successfully entertain its audience. To be a good work *qua* pornography, *K/S* must successfully arouse its audience sexually. How might these evaluative standards bear upon each other? The answer depends on how the audience engages with the work. Consider the following possibilities:

> • The audience for *K/S* skims the fiction, reading only the sexy bits. As a result, though the audience finds the sexy bits exceedingly sexually arousing, they nevertheless fail to be entertained by *K/S*.
>
> • The audience for *K/S* is sexually aroused, not by imagining the fictional characters Kirk and Spock to be engaged in all manner of sexual congress in the fictional world, but by imagining the actual world actors William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy to be engaged in all manner of sexual congress (as minimally depicted in *K/S*) in the actual world.
>
> • The audience for *K/S*, though wholly unfamiliar with the *Star Trek* canon and thereby clueless as to who this lusty fellow (called "Kirk") and his sexually generous lover (called "Spock") may be, nevertheless finds imagining their sexual union (as minimally depicted by *K/S*) to be exceedingly sexually arousing.

Clearly, each of the above constitutes a failure for *K/S qua* fiction. However, since slash fiction is putatively pornography, it appears that in each of the above, not only does *K/S* succeed as a work of pornography but also it does so despite its failure *qua* fiction. Therein lies the problem. If we assume, and we are no doubt correct to do so, that slash fiction is constitutively fiction, then upon pain of incoherence, it follows that slash fiction cannot also be constitutively pornography. So, the claim that slash fiction is putatively pornographic fiction is, more precisely, the decidedly tepid claim that works of slash fiction are constitutively fiction but non-constitutively pornography. For any work putatively in the extension of both fiction and pornography, *being constitutively fiction* entails *being incidentally pornography* (e.g., *K/S* as slash fiction can be work-pornographic only incidentally) and *being constitutively pornography* entails *being incidentally fiction* (e.g., *Pirates* as a work of prototypical pornography can be a work of fiction only incidentally).

Recall that quite a few works of prototypical pornography are also works of fiction (if not putatively prototypical fiction). *Pirates*, for example, quite clearly looks to be a work of fiction, specifically a big-budgeted, elaborately designed and costumed, more or less decently crafted (directed, edited, acted, written) work of narrative film-fiction. Nonetheless, it is prototypical pornography—and an audience may engage with it as such without engaging with it *qua* fiction. One could do this by watching the film with the sound off, or by fast-forwarding past the narrative elements straight to the sexy bits, thereby becoming unable to imagine most of

what *Pirates qua* fiction invites one to imagine. An audience adopting such viewing practices may quite easily become sexually aroused (as prescribed by *Pirates qua* pornography) by attending to the maximally realistic and transparent depiction of the actual world actors and actresses engaging in all manner of sexual congress in the actual world. However, this audience cannot be sexually aroused by *Pirates qua* fiction because such an audience fails to imaginatively engage with *Pirates* (*qua* fiction) in the manner *Pirates* (*qua* fiction) prescribes (i.e., to be sexually aroused by imagining the fictional Captain Skagnetti and his equally fictional, yet no less lusty, crew of salty sea dogs engaging in all manner of sexual congress with one another in the fictional world of *Pirates*).[25]

*Pirates* is, *ceteris paribus*, a far more entertaining work of fiction when its audience properly engages with it than when its audience does not. However, we should not presume *Pirates* to be, even *prima facie*, a more sexually arousing work of pornography when its audience properly attends to it *qua* fiction. This strongly suggests, not just for *Pirates*, but for all works in the extensional overlap between pornography and fiction, that *being fiction* has nothing constitutively to do with *being pornography*. For works in the extensional overlap being a successful work of fiction, *ceteris paribus*, neither entails nor suggests also being a successful work of pornography. And it also appears that possessing good-making properties for the one (e.g., satisfying the principal aim of fiction in the manner prescribed) suggests, if not entails, possessing bad-making properties for the other (e.g., failing to satisfy the principal aim of pornography in the manner prescribed, if not *simpliciter*).

Being a work of fiction looks incidental to being a work of pornography; however, the extent to which one construes such works in a manner explicitly or implicitly favoring one side over the other appears to be the extent to which satisfying the descriptive or evaluative conditions for one begins to interfere with satisfying the descriptive or evaluative conditions for the other. For instance, the greater the push to construe *Pirates* as constitutively fiction, the greater the evaluative tension for *Pirates* with respect to being both successful *qua* pornography and successful *qua* fiction. To avoid this predicament, there are but two options: (i) accept the fiction-pornography extension to be nothing more than an uninformative, purely contingent, and ultimately incidental overlap, or (ii) commit to the overlap being both informative and constitutive but claim that the philosophically relevant area of overlap lies at pornography's edge rather than inside the domain of prototypical pornography.

## FINAL REMARKS

---

[25] One could further imagine the absence of sound to be the fault of poor film production, such that, no audience, no matter how attentive, could reasonably imagine what *Pirates* attempts to invite its audience to imagine.

We take our analysis of the *depiction* and *fiction* questions for pornography also to apply *mutatis mutandis* to the *art* question for pornography. Accordingly, it follows that debates about the pornography-art extensional overlap cannot be about whether a work can be both a work of art and a work of pornography, but instead must be about the conditions under which a work comes to be located at pornography's edge and how a work of art might (if at all) come to satisfy such conditions so as to be similarly located. That is, should the extension of "pornographic art" be the extension of works that are both art and pornography, one commits a grave philosophical error in assuming that such works bear any substantively meaningful resemblance either to prototypical pornography or to prototypical art. Instead, as we have shown, if there are such works, then surely they must be akin to the sorts of works we have discussed here (e.g., Tijuana Bibles, *hentai*, slash-fiction)—works that by their very constitution must be located at pornography's edge.

## WORKS CITED

Abell, Catherine. 2005. "On Outlining the Shape of Depiction," *Ratio*, 18(1): 27-38.

Abell, Catherine. 2006. "Realism and the Riddle of Style," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4.

Abell, Catherine. 2007. "Pictorial Realism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85: 1-17.

Carroll, Noël. 2008. *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Blackwell Publishing).

Currie, Gregory. 1989. *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge University Press).

Gendler, Tamar. 2000. "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Journal of Philosophy* 97: 55-81.

Hazlett, Allan & Christy Mag Uidhir. 2011. "Unrealistic Fictions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 48: 36-43.

Hayman, George & Henry John Pratt. 2005. "What are comics?" in Goldblatt & Brown (eds.) *A Reader in the Philosophy of the Arts* (Pearson Education, Inc.).

Hyman, John. 2000. "Pictorial Art and Visual Experience," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 40: 21-45.

Kieran, Matthew. 2001. "Pornographic Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 25 (1): 31-45.

Levinson, Jerrold. 2005. "Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures," *Philosophy and Literature* 29: 228-240.

Lewis, David. 1983."Truth in Fiction," in *Philosophical Papers I* (Oxford University Press) 261-80.

Lopes, Dominic. 1995. "Pictorial Realism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55: 277-85.

Lopes, Dominic. 2005. *Sight and Sensibility: Evaluating Pictures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Lopes, Dominic. 2006. "The Special and General Theory of Realism: Reply to Abell, Armstrong, and McMahon," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4.

Mag Uidhir, Christy. 2009. "Why Pornography Can't Be Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 33: 193 203.

Mag Uidhir, Christy. 2011. "Drawn to Defection: The Epistemic Misuse & Abuse of Pictorial Caricature," manuscript.

McCloud, Scott. 1993. *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperCollins).

Meskin, Aaron. 2007. "Defining Comics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65: 369-79.

Newall, Michael. 2006. "Pictures, Colour, and Resemblance," *Philosophical Quarterly* 56: 587-595.

Nussbaum, Martha. 1995. "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24: 249-91.

Scruton, Roger. 1981. "Photography and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 7: 577-603.

Shamoon, Deborah. 2004. "Office Sluts and Rebel Flowers," in Linda Williams (ed.), *Porn Studies* (Duke University Press).

Walton, Kendall. 1990. *Mimesis as Make Believe* (Harvard University Press).

Walton, Kendall. 2002. "Depiction, Perception, and Imagination: Responses to Richard Wollheim," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60: 27-35.