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Defining Pornography

Sarah Robinson

The concept of sexual art is not a new one, and art that displays bodies in various forms of coitus has existed for perhaps as long as humans have been able to wield the tools to depict them. Their meaning has changed so drastically over time that it is hard to interpret at the erotic art of the past without having one's opinions colored by the way sex is perceived today. Some representations are considered art, while some are closer to what we call "pornography." "If the human sexual interest were limited to the procreation or the simple physical release that marks the animals naturalistic sexual world, pornography and the pornographic world would not exist at all" (Randall 2). Humans have long been fascinated by sexual art partially because we do not have sex purely for procreation and gain intense enjoyment from sexual acts. In this essay I will explore the different reasons for erotic art in Pompeii, what has changed with modernity, and what the word "pornography" really means.

The idea of pornography has not always existed, which may seem counterintuitive to what was said above about the long history of erotic representations in art. "Pornography" is a term created by Victorian science following the unearthing of Pompeii (Rodley). The first entries of pornography recorded in dictionaries related to the hygiene of prostitutes. Around the same time that scientists were discovering Pompeii and its delightful art, the definition of pornography changed, expanding to concern "obscene" art. Prior to this, there was no word for pornography because one had not been necessary to describe things based upon their sexual context (Rodley). In the ancient world, control was a personal responsibility; while in the modern world regulation from authority constantly seeks to keep control rather than placing responsibility on the individual (Rodley). The Victorians believed that sex caused disturbance in those who looked upon it, so they removed all sexual items from public view and created a slew of laws concerning the nature of obscenity.

"Obscenity" is a modern term that is difficult to define because it depends upon the opinions of the person defining it. The word is generally used to describe basically anything that violates the accepted social norms of decency: that which is considered sexually disturbing, taboo, disgusting, abhorrent, or indecent. Many aspects of obscenity are difficult to define, because every individual finds different things obscene, and defining obscenity depends on the sexual morality of the time.

The Victorians found erotic art in Pompeii that was, almost without exception, "obscene" by their standards. There were depictions of sexual acts in almost every home and bathhouse, as well as many public spaces. Some scenes portrayed mythological figures engaged in sexual acts, such as the many depictions of Pan were of intermingled with mythology and showed deities in the act, as with the many depictions of Pan, while a large number of other depictions concentrated on bestiality (Cutler). There were other scenes on display in Pompeii depicting homosexuality, oral sex, and an incredible variety of sexual positions. According to the documentary *Pornography: The Secret History of Civilization*, the sexually explicit pictures found all over Pompeii were, "Proper pictures to have around your house. If you have a proper picture collection, you must have some really good pictures of people doing it, and if you don't well you just don't have any taste and don't understand the proper values of your society" (Rodley). There may have been a wide variety of sexual images on display in Pompeii, but it was incredibly unlikely that they were used to sexually excite spectators. Sexually explicit art was found among landscapes and other mythological art in rooms off kitchens, slave quarters, and other common areas. From the Roman point of view, the sex may have been noticeable, but it was not noteworthy and it did not set these pictures apart from landscapes and ordinary mythological depictions.

It must have been hard for the Victorians to look at these paintings and understand the motivations behind them, especially since the Roman world was interpreted as a rational and philosophical sphere that could not also include raunchy sex images. The Victorians assumed that these images were in private rooms to be masturbated over, but masturbation was not on Roman minds when they saw these images and would have in fact been considered a waste of a good thing because it was more fun to engage in sexual acts with another human being. Roman houses were open spaces and there was not a word for privacy during that time (Rodley). When discussing the Roman sense of self, Rodley states that, "A Roman's sexuality was talked about in the public light of day," which differs greatly from the modern view of sexuality, where it is hidden behind closed doors. The Romans seemed proud of their paintings, displaying them in full view of the public because of this pride. Sometimes the pictures were meant to give a sense of life's pleasures, as Loth notes that, "Among the ancients, sex was unashamedly joyous, in reading as in practice. The subjects carried no more taboos than food or sports, family quarrels or international wars" (Loth 46). One could just as easily discuss the viability of a sexual position in a nearby painting as one might discuss visiting the country portrayed in a particularly beautiful landscape.

An example of this would be one of the early statues unearthed from Pompeii that I have found no title for, so I refer to it as “Pan and the She-Goat.” This statue depicts Pan having intercourse with a she-goat in full anatomical detail. The Victorians found this statue shocking because of the bestiality aspect, “But for the Romans this could be nothing but a source of amusement and admiration at its wit and its skill, every detail is worked out lovingly . . . and this was, in its original context, displayed absolutely full public view” (Rodley). For the Romans it was an object of allegory that rendered both very artistically. The piece paid careful attention to the details of the expressions and the bodies of the participants.

One was not meant to interpret many of the sexual images at Pompeii as feasible sexual encounters; many of the depictions are humorous purely because they were not likely to occur. Homosexual scenes were often displayed, but no self-respecting Roman male would allow himself to be penetrated. Fellatio was the province of Roman prostitutes, and thus any image depicting a woman putting her mouth on a man’s sex was something no respectable woman would do. Similarly, cunnilingus was a completely ridiculous idea. The Roman view held that during oral sex the genitals being pleased penetrated the oral cavity, whether male or female. The mouth was a place of purity because one spoke from it, so for a man to let a woman penetrate his mouth would be unthinkable, whereas a powerful man penetrating the mouth of a prostitute would not be. Paintings of taboo activities, such as cunnilingus and males being penetrated, caused outrageous laughter in Pompeian society (Rodley).

The popular aesthetic of the penis in Ancient Rome was different than what is glorified in modern times; anything that was outside of that aesthetic could be another form of comedy. A smaller penis was considered more attractive, thus a larger penis with characteristics such as dark skin, blonde hair, and other details unusual to the Roman ideal was amusing and worthy of a good laugh (Clarke 131). Laughter was one way to dispel the anguish of the evil eye. Humorous, erotic art displayed around town and in your household was one way to employ the protection of laughter, and was probably the reason behind its prevalence in Pompeii. Protection against the evil eye could also be found in the many images of the phallus commonly depicted in Roman art. These phallic images range from unobtrusive stone reliefs carved into paved walkways to winged and belled hanging phalluses.

Power, status, and good fortune were expressed in terms of the phallus. Hence the presence of phallic imagery in almost unimaginable varieties all around the town. . . . There are phalluses greeting you in doorways, phalluses above bread ovens, phalluses carved into the surface of the street and plenty more phalluses with bells on-and wings. (Beard 233)

Though that seems like far too many phalluses for the modern person to deal with, many sculptural representations of phalluses also had functional aspects; a faucet handle being one example (Cutler). Many depictions of Priapus portray him with an oversize penis. One of the more famous examples was found in the entranceway of the House of Vetti, depicting Priapus weighing his huge phallus against a bag of money. This is a mix of a good luck charm and a protection against harm, but as with most of the phalluses, we cannot be sure, as these representations are so far outside the norms of modern culture. As with any phallic culture, anxieties were probably created as men tried to keep up with the strength society expected of them. Mary Beard explores how these sexual anxieties manifested themselves in homophobia, “In fact, many of the insults that scholars have sometimes taken as signs of Roman disapproval of homosexuality as such are directed only at those who played the passive part” (235). One could still be a strong Roman male by penetrating another male, but not by accepting penetration.

The first and most important difference in thinking about sexual images when comparing Ancient Rome to Modern American society is that the Ancient Romans did not consider sex to be shameful. They glorified voyeurism, as can be seen in many cultures’ (even modern ones) love of theater and spectator sports; whereas Modern Americans are still strongly influenced by Victorian views of sexuality as shameful (Christensen 2). Modern American culture socializes us so we believe sexuality and all sexual feelings are wrong. Sex is barely discussed in schools and usually only in a biological context, nudity is still taboo, and images of sexual relations are even more so. Lastly, the phallus is completely taboo in our culture. The erect or semi-erect penis continues to be considered utterly unacceptable in any form of media other than pornography while female nudity in various forms is rapidly becoming acceptable even in media that can be accessed by children. The subject of children and nudity is completely taboo in Modern American society, and showing a child a naked body is considered a terrible offense. Modern American culture does not like to admit to the impact of sexual imagery, but every time a conversation is started about pornography or nudity, it sparks a vehement reaction, which continues to prove the power of sexuality.

Anything related to pornography in the modern world comes with some assumptions, as it is an element of the private world, and when it comes into the public arena it is considered lewd. Pornography is private because it is personal entertain-

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Anything related to pornography in the modern world comes with some assumptions, as it is an element of the private world, and when it comes into the public arena it is considered lewd. Pornography is private because it is personal entertain-

ment. Rarely, if ever, does one hear of sharing or discussing pornography with another person. If one tried to start such a discussion, even with a close friend, it would likely be met with expressions of horror at deviating from this fundamental social norm. One argument against pornography is that it creates sexual deviance, and this is considered so terrible that it is used as a scare tactic. There is no actual evidence to show that this is true and, “Such charges have about as much evidence behind them as the claim that reading the Bible is what produces the psychoses of the Reverend Jim Jones of the world” (Christensen 105). The reaction might even include accusations of being perverted or having personality flaws, such as calling someone “sick” or “immature.” An insult that implies deficiency is usually a far more effective deterrent in our society, especially when it concerns to pornography, such as accusing someone of perversion and implying they are evil (Christensen 102). These types of attacks are made without actually knowing if being perverted makes one sick or immature, but are used because our culture implies these things about people that look at pornography, which is viewed as inherently evil because of its sexual nature.

The assumption that sex and sexual pleasure itself is sinful is hardly a sound argument to begin with. It is difficult to see the difference between enjoying a truly decadent meal and the enjoyment of the pleasures of the body. There are still religions that condemn any type of pleasure from any source, but Modern American culture glorifies the pleasures of the consumer world. There are numerous advertisements about “tantalizing the senses” and “sensual” pleasures to be found in food, which is a nonsexual pleasure (and thus innocent), an example can be found in many chocolate advertisements which play to the idea of “indulging” or “diving into” “creamy” chocolate. However, people are not allowed to indulge in similar gratification from sex. Sex-negativity often arises from being raised in a culture of sexual anxiety, which produces fear that something terrible will happen if one should ever “let go” of one’s inhibitions (Christensen 88). Modern American culture is concerned with staying in control and acting “civilized,” and sex is considered to be outside of the realm of the civilized. The attitude that sex is an entirely private affair that is neither shown in public nor ever discussed in public is the complete opposite of the Romans. Most people today are uncomfortable with the open discussion or mention of their bodily functions, and failure to conform to that expectation is one of the dominant reasons a person may be judged as “barbaric” or “uncivilized” (Elias 58-9). The body itself is an uncomfortable topic, and many signs indicate that Modern society assumes the body itself is barbaric, while the human mind, conceived as separate, is somehow divine. Often, one will hear a separation of physical needs from a purer emotional state, which is clearly untrue. Not only is there no separation between the two, but emotions are not in any way “purer,” as can be seen in examples like envy and hatred. In the book *Pornography: the Other Side*, F.M. Christensen writes, “Along with the sharp dichotomy between humans and animals, the old myth of a noble soul trying to control a rebellious body is obsolete” (30).

As was pointed out in the very beginning, if we limited our sexual interest to procreation we would not have pornography, so pornography is distinctly a human aspect and thus it seems ironic that pornography is often referred to as “animalistic” and “dehumanizing.” One of the assumptions behind the need to separate animals and humans is that animals are seen as being moved by blind instinct while humans use emotion and reason (Christensen 27). Perhaps one of the reasons sexuality is commonly related to animals is that animals are unconcerned about their display of procreation, whereas humans procreate in private. Sexuality is very human though, as are the many “representations and vicarious enjoyment in various media of expression. If anyone is trying to dehumanize us in this regard, it is those who would denigrate our sexuality and its celebration” (Christensen 26). Attempting to separate humans from sexuality is more dehumanizing than indulging in a very human pastime. Pornography is often accused of treating human beings like sexual objects, but objects (just like animals) do not have sexuality. Being a sexual object is a contradiction in terms, because regarding someone as having no sexuality is closer to viewing them as an object (Christensen 28).

In addition to objectifying people; pornography is also accused of depersonalizing people because one is able to witness a stranger in an intimate moment. In this way of thinking, if a person is not treated as a uniquely special human being they are not a person at all (Christensen 28). How is the pornography industry supposed to portray each person as a unique individual? A movie about a day in a person’s life is not condemned for showing only one event in that fictional character’s life; what is the difference in depicting characters engaged in an evening of sexual acts? Images of people in clothing are still images of bodies, whether they are clothed or nude. Aspects of people are often shown with far less personality in art, advertising, and films than in the pornography industry, all without any protest (Christensen 32). “Human wholeness in no way precludes focusing on one aspect of ourselves at a time. If there is some *special* reason why sex should only be portrayed in combination with other things, moreover, this argument fails to give it” (Christensen 32).

Sex-negativity often carries dire warnings of the “addictive nature” of pornography and implies that an interest in pornog-

raphy will cause one to lose sight of everything else in life and become an uncontrolled individual. Part of this is confusion lies in failing to distinguish between someone that has a strong interest in sex, and someone who that fails to care about other sources of happiness or is only concerned with their own happiness (Christensen 88). Someone who enjoys a good meal does not have their motives questioned merely because they value their sense of taste. There are a number of people who are addicted to pornography as well as sex, and like all addicts they need help rather than recriminations.

By demonizing the pornography industry, modern society also excuses itself for being prejudiced against pornography, but it is rare that the many negative assumptions about the pornography industry are ever questioned or explored. Despite rumors of mistreatment and coercion in pornography, “Numerous erotic models and actresses have come forward to insist that cases of genuine mistreatment are rare” (Christensen 90). Many American corporations destroy the local economies and environments in which they produce goods, while also underpaying American employees, and the modern consumer continues to buy their products, yet the supposed abuse of sex workers is cited as a strong reason to avoid sexual entertainment. It is claimed that the pornography industry has a tendency to attract unsavory, lawless people, with part of this claim evidenced from the high involvement of organized crime dating back to the earliest forms of pornography in America. If pornography had more legitimate mainstream accessibility, then it would not be relegated to the fringes of society where individuals that are less concerned with the laws about pornography, obscenity, and most social norms pick it up. “Ironically, then, it is not sexual explicitness at all, but social unacceptability that has put some pornography . . . into the hands of criminal types” (Christensen 91). Because pornography ends up in the hands of criminal types, it is assumed to have an element of inciting exploitive behavior, but it is more likely that since it is not closely regulated by mainstream society because it is already assumed to be wicked that those involved can end up getting exploited.

One often hears about the “fall of the Roman Empire” and the many different theories about what caused it to happen. The idea that sexual excess brought about Rome’s destruction has been passed down for a long time along with warnings about bodily pleasure. These ideas completely disregard the brutal imperialism, gladiators, and other atrocious aspects of Rome in order to make a point about sexual enjoyment (Christensen 88). When it was more socially acceptable to be racist, it was often stated that, “Mixing of the races . . . brought about the decline of Rome” (Christensen 89). When compared with Modern ideas about sexuality, it is easy to see the destruction of Rome depends upon the moral scapegoat of the time. Blaming the fall of Rome on sexual excess is ironic as the “Roman Empire actually became less sexually permissive with time, not more” (Christensen 89).

One’s perception of sexual imagery is dependent on how that individual was socialized to perceive sexuality. In modern culture, sexuality is perceived as another bodily function that belongs to the realm of the private. Seventeen centuries ago, during the time of Pompeii, sex was on display in the public realm and domestic spaces well as a prominent part of Roman art, folk culture, superstitions, and humor. Perhaps we are not the new Rome after all, but Victorian England.

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