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Eroticism, Pornography, Love: The Discursive Politics of Reactionary French Scholarship on Sexual Imagery

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Abstract

In this article, I focus on a selection of recent French scholars who insist on a fundamental distinction between *pornography* (*pornographie*) and *eroticism* (*érotisme*). I delve into these scholars' descriptions of and justifications for the *pornography-eroticism* distinction, and explore what is at stake in affirming such a difference. I contend that, far from being a question of genre—or even quality—this is a political distinction, which intertwines with important debates about values and social relations that are present in current French politics and academia. This article examines the justifications used and definitions proposed by scholars in France to (re)assert this distinction, and considers the extent to which the new French claims reproduce some of the political assumptions of US anti-porn feminists, as well as an elitist hierarchy based on ideas of artistic quality. Ultimately this article argues that the key concept that distinguishes *pornography* from *eroticism* for these scholars is love, and that they conceptualise love in a highly normative and reactionary fashion in order to elevate eroticism and denigrate pornography. In pursuing their analysis in this way, conservative values are permitted to masquerade as apolitical explorations of genre and aesthetics, without open acknowledgement of the political and moral perspectives they reinforce.

Keywords: Pornography; Eroticism; New philosophers; Body; Discourse; Love

First published in *Ms.* magazine, and later collected in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (1983), Gloria Steinem's 'Erotica vs. Pornography' offers a withering critique of pornography.¹ Pornography, against which Steinem sought legal restrictions, is contrasted to a different type of sexual imagery, erotica, which she sees as catering to the pursuit of women's pleasure. Steinem, at the forefront of campaigns to ban pornography, separated its violent tyranny from erotica's more loving reciprocity:

¹ I would like to thank Jason Hartford for excellent and constructive feedback on several earlier versions of this article.

Erotica is a word that can help us to differentiate sex from violence, and therefore rescue sexual pleasure. It [...] contains the idea of love and mutuality, positive choice and the yearning for a particular person. [...] Pornography is about dominance and often pain. Erotica is about mutuality and always pleasure.²

Today, such claims seem part of a bygone era, a product of previous US culture wars. Nonetheless, statements from Steinem and other anti-porn feminists from this period are still frequently cited as examples of thinking which links pornography and phallogocentric violence. Linda Williams, a key reference for writing on pornography from the 1990s onwards, points out that the increasing variety of sexual imagery, especially by female directors, was already breaking down simplistic differences between ‘soft, tender, nonexplicit women’s erotica and a hard, cruel, graphic phallic pornography’.³ Williams refers to the aphorism ‘pornography, it’s another person’s erotica’,⁴ arguing that attempts to separate erotica from pornography tend towards moralistic denunciations, often couched in terms of authenticity: ‘the bracketing of hard core,’ she writes, ‘only ends up setting the seemingly inauthentic and unacceptable (erotic or soft-core) sex of the self against the inauthentic and unacceptable (pornographic, violent, or obscene) sex of the “other”’.⁵ As this distinction came to be seen as untenable, and scholars began to take the complexities of pornography studies more seriously, moving away from extreme pro- or anti-porn positions, interest in this binary distinction waned. With it, interest in defining *erotica* declined, suggesting that claims to distinguish it from *pornography* were also tied up with the politics of their advocates.

In recent years, renewed debates about the possibility of distinguishing *pornography* from *eroticism* or *erotica* have re-emerged as a central interest for a number of scholars working on sexual imagery in France. What is at stake in resurrecting this old debate about eroticism? Like Steinem, these French scholars propose that images and texts of a sexual nature can be clearly and easily separated into the pornographic and the erotic—although their reference points tend to be 1960s obscenity trials in the UK and US, rather than US anti-pornography feminists. Moreover, they evoke ideas of love, mutuality, dominance and violence in terms not far removed from those cited above. This article examines the justifications used and definitions proposed by scholars in France to (re)assert this distinction, and considers the extent to which these new French claims reproduce some of the political assumptions of US anti-porn feminists, as well as an elitist hierarchy based on ideas of artistic quality. Rather than participating in the debate, I unpack the motivations of those who consider it worthwhile, suggesting, like Marie-Anne Paveau, that the distinction between *pornographic* and *erotic* is ‘essentially rhetorical’: I show this to be a device that allows commentators ‘to condemn pornography whilst saving sexuality, and help[ing] to preserve romantic myths and the art of seduction’.⁶ This point is supported by substantial recent scholarship in France.⁷ Against this landscape, my findings

² Gloria Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), 238-53.

³ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 6.

⁴ ‘La pornographie, c’est l’erotisme des autres’, variously attributed to Alain Robbe-Grillet and André Breton.

⁵ Williams, *Hard Core*, 6.

⁶ Marie-Anne Paveau, *Le discours pornographique* (Paris: La Musardine, 2014), 39.

⁷ See, for instance, Dominique Maingueneau, *La littérature pornographique* (Paris: Colin, 2007), 26; Ruwen Ogien, *Penser la pornographie* (Paris: PUF, 2008), 30; Olivier Bessard-Banquy, *Sexe et littérature aujourd’hui* (Paris: Musardine, 2010), 15-16; François-Ronan Dubois, *Introduction aux porn studies* (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2014), 19. For a detailed summary of cultural studies- and porn studies-inspired work on pornography undertaken in France, see Émilie Landais, ‘Porn studies et études de la pornographie en sciences humaines et sociales’, *Questions de communication* 26 (December 2014): 17-37.

present the particularities that arise in the French intellectual context, which in turn reveal the underlying political convictions that this rhetorical distinction is used to support and defend.

In this article, I focus on a selection of French scholars who insist on a fundamental distinction between *pornography* (*pornographie*) and *eroticism* (*érotisme*). While almost entirely unknown in the English-speaking world, these scholars are in some cases quite prolific and well-known in France.⁸ I delve into the descriptions of and justifications for the *pornography-eroticism* distinction, and explore what is at stake in affirming such a difference. I contend that, far from being a question of genre—or even quality—this is a political distinction, which intertwines with important debates about values, the subject and social relations that are present in current French politics and academia. I begin by pointing to a number of fundamental issues with the methodology of these scholars, which undermine the conclusions they draw. I then examine the assumptions about sex and the body that underpin their most basic claims. Finally, I show that their arguments can be distilled down to a claim about the role of ‘love’ in sex, and that their understanding of this love is traditional and conservative. My main aim is to demonstrate the ethical and political assumptions that underpin what is presented as a question of aesthetics and genre.

*

In French writing that draws clear distinctions between *pornography* and *eroticism*, we see repeated examples of generalisation, frequently arising in essentialist terms. These authors make claims about what pornography as a whole ‘is’, as well as what it does: the effects of all pornographies are assumed to be equal and consistent, regardless of the identity of the spectator or the viewing context. Considering what pornography ‘is’, Estelle Bayon, for instance, describes pornography as ‘a tension in the face of the uncovering of an original truth’;⁹ Pascale Molinier describes it as ‘a public demonstration of gender-based hatred, an injunction to dislike women’;¹⁰ Gilles Mayné calls it ‘the domain of an ultimately rather banal certitude’;¹¹ and for Dominique Baqué pornography is ‘by its very nature, utilitarian and commercial’.¹² Considering what it ‘does’, Baqué argues that pornography ‘makes flesh visible in all its crudeness’,¹³ while for Michela Marzano, it shows just ““chunks of meat” which trade and copulate according to rules aiming to represent the “perfect orgasm””.¹⁴ For Patrick Baudry, the female porn performer is key, because ‘in pornography, the woman knows very well how to deal with [a penis] and demonstrates this with professionalism’.¹⁵ According to Alain Brassart, ‘in pornography, eroticism resists’.¹⁶

⁸ One notable English-language text on French erotica is John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1999). This study, predating most of the analyses examined here, focuses on literary texts and the political discourses around their publication, not cultural studies or philosophical discussions of pornography by French academics. Some discussed texts are briefly mentioned, without concerted analysis, in Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 8-9.

⁹ Estelle Bayon, *Le cinéma obscène* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007), 62.

¹⁰ Pascale Molinier, ‘La pornographie « en situation »’, *Cités* 15, no. 3 (2003), 62.

¹¹ Gilles Mayné, *Pornographie, violence obscène, érotisme* (Paris: Descartes, 2001), 13.

¹² Dominique Baqué, *Mauvais genres: érotisme, pornographie, art contemporain* (Paris: Regard, 2002), 44.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Michela Marzano, *La pornographie, ou, L’épuisement du désir* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2007), 27-28.

¹⁵ Patrick Baudry, *L’addiction à l’image pornographique* (Paris: Éditions le Manuscrit, 2016), 42.

¹⁶ Alain Brassart, *L’intimité à l’écran: l’amour et la sexualité au cinéma* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2017), 401.

For these writers, pornography appears to be homogenous, resolutely singular, or, at the very least, uninteresting in its heterogeneity. The repetition of terms such as *simple*, *obvious*, *banal*, *easy* and *crude* suggests that pornography is easily understood. It is implied that the genre always aims at one clear goal: as Baqué claims, ‘it [pornography] only delivers one message – an extremely simple one at that’,¹⁷ or as Patrick Métral declares, ‘there is almost nothing to see in a porn film. The proof: once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all’.¹⁸ Baudry claims that ‘essentially, an X-rated film doesn’t say anything’.¹⁹ We can also notice the moralising tone of these lexical choices: this is not the positive simplicity of something which is accessible, open and available, but a negative simplicity viewed from a supercilious position as something unworthy precisely because of that simplicity. Such framing introduces judgement and value into the basic definitions and descriptions of pornography and eroticism; ‘to differentiate between them in terms of value also implicitly condones the denigration, if not censorship, of the pornographic’.²⁰ These scholars, therefore, reveal the political contentions of their claims. By framing *pornography* as banal, misogynistic, utilitarian or crude, rather than assessing it in more neutral terms as sexual spectacle aimed primarily at the arousal of a spectator, they open the door to a definition of *eroticism* as forms of sexual imagery that meet with their approval. Indeed, the remarkable absence of sex from all of these descriptions of pornography and eroticism further demonstrates the moralistic charge of the claims.

A number of these scholars are remarkably imprecise in their use of key terms. A startling example may be found in Mayné’s book on pornography, obscenity and eroticism.²¹ Although the book deals almost exclusively with sexual images and with Bataille’s reading of the erotic, real-life violence is suddenly called upon to substantiate Mayné’s arguments about pornography:

Let me cite here some examples not directly linked to the sexual drive, but which seem nonetheless *revelatory* of this lesser, cynical obscenity which produces a *general atmosphere of pornography*: [...] first example: war [...] second example, more recent: the execution by gas a few years ago of Robert Harris [...] third example: Princess Diana’s fatal car accident.²²

While the word *pornography* has come to mean much more than just arousing sexual imagery,²³ the use of Princess Diana’s car crash as an explanation for how *sexual* pornography is obscene involves a distinct slippage in both terminology and perspective.

Direct links between sexual pornography and violence are characteristic of US anti-pornography scholars, most notably Andrea Dworkin, who wrote that ‘pornography is violence against women’²⁴ and that ‘pornography reveals that male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting’.²⁵ However, while Dworkin explicitly links sex, pornography and male violence through the violence of male pleasure, Mayné’s link between *actual*

¹⁷ Baqué, *Mauvaise genres*, 45.

¹⁸ Patrick Métral, ‘Pulsion scopique et répétition. Qu’est-ce qu’un phénomène pornographique?’ in *La sexualité en images: regards croisés sur l’érotisation des corps* ed. Bertrand Cocharde and Grégori Jean (Paris: Hermann, 2018), 65.

¹⁹ Patrick Baudry, *La pornographie et ses images* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1997), 161.

²⁰ John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions: Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 6.

²¹ Gilles Mayné, *Pornographie, violence obscène, érotisme* (Paris: Descartes, 2001).

²² Mayné, *Pornographie, violence obscène*, 18-20. Emphasis added.

²³ See Helen Hester, *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the Displacement of Sex* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014).

²⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Letters from a War Zone* (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993), 207.

²⁵ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. (New York, NY: Plume, 1989), 69.

instances of war and execution, and *watching* filmed images of sex, is not explicitly theorised in any such way. Not only does his implicit definition of pornography become very general and moralistic ('cynical obscenity'), it clearly conflates the act of doing something with the representation of that act. This problematically conflates questions of reality and fiction, witness and spectator, perpetrator and consumer. While Helen Hester has indeed examined drawings of slave ships and images of torture in Abu Ghraib as forms of pornography,²⁶ it is important to note that she discusses *representations* of sexualised violence, not the violence itself.

Another common slippage in terminology occurs between sex and sexuality in the texts discussed here. For instance, with respect to pornographic images, Molinier contends that '*pornography* is bodily mechanics, minus the sexual unconscious. A *sexuality* without subjectivity',²⁷ while Brassart writes,

Filmed in close-up, the genitals distance themselves from our perceptual experience and become abstract objects, depriving the spectator of their aesthetic points of reference. Despite the attempts to idealise and neutralise ugliness, *sexuality* is often represented in a brutal, mechanical way, thus confronting the spectator with its animalistic elements.²⁸

Brassart's quotation, in its evocation of genitals, aesthetics, ugliness, animality and mechanics, is surely referring to *sex* rather than *sexuality*; even if we deduce something about sexuality from these images of sex, this does not mean that sexuality is directly represented in an image. Molinier's quotation describes pornography as a sexuality (without subjectivity). If we consider the simplest biological meaning of *sexuality* as 'the quality of being sexual', or in its more specifically human context as 'a person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which he or she is typically attracted'²⁹ or more broadly as the nexus of a person's sensual and sexual desires, drives, fantasies and arousals, *sexuality* must be applied to a person and not to a concept. The same is the case in French: Larousse's encyclopaedia entry on *sexualité* provides a similar distinction in French between the two terms, with *sexualité* being described as covering 'the collection of biological, physiological and behavioural phenomena linked to sexual reproduction' while *l'acte sexuel* is limited to 'the parts played by all the sensual organs and the psyche'.³⁰

Pornography is clearly bound up with sexuality, and we can examine the sexuality of the performers and viewers, and how pornography influences people's lived experience of their sexuality. But pornography itself cannot *be* a sexuality. Molinier, like Brassart, describes pornography and sexuality as bodily mechanics, conflating *sex* and *sexuality* despite the fact that these terms are not equivalents. This point has been well-known in France and elsewhere at least since Foucault (1978).

In a different way, Marzano engages in an unusual comparison of *sexuality* and *pornography*, in which *sexuality* comes to mean 'sex outside a film' and *pornography* comes to mean 'sex within a porn film'. I quote one passage amongst many which compares sexuality and pornography:

²⁶ Hester, *Beyond Explicit*, passim.

²⁷ Molinier, 'La pornographie « en situation »', 61. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Brassart, *L'intimité à l'écran*, 405. Emphasis added.

²⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Sexuality, n." sec. §1a, §3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), accessed 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/177087?redirectedFrom=sexuality>.

³⁰ *Larousse : encyclopédie*, s.v. "sexualité." Paris: Editions Larousse. Accessed 2020, <https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/sexualit%c3%a9/91643>.

That is why *sexuality* has always been almost impossible to represent. Nothing is less obvious than expressing the meaning, for a man, of touching a woman's breasts or vulva, or, for a woman, of seeing a man's penis or caressing his shoulder. [...] *Pornography* arises when *sexuality*, as I have just defined it, ceases to exist and can no longer exist. Although seemingly nothing more than an explicit representation of the sexual act, in reality it is possible only by erasing the subject and its desire, which is to say by cancelling and destroying sexuality. [...] Where *sexuality* is made of temporality, of doubts, of difficulties, sometimes of failures, *pornography* presents itself as the reign of instantaneousness, of the absence of obstacles, of certitude, of omnipotence. Where *sexuality* excludes questions of efficiency and the possibility of considering another person as a tool, *pornography* turns the individual into a thing or an instrument.³¹

Marzano appears to conflate *sex* and *sexuality*: her examples of *sexuality* involve touching a woman's breast and vulva or caressing a man's shoulder,³² as well as the challenge of representing (visually?) these caresses. The drives and desires that lead to the touching of a breast, and the pleasure or arousal arising therefrom, constitute parts of sexuality, but the act of touching is sex. *Sex* (what she calls *sexuality* here) and *pornography* are then placed upon a spectrum, according to which pornography effaces sex through the destruction of the subject and their desire. Nevertheless, like Mayné, Marzano fails to point out that pornography is necessarily separate from sex for the viewer. In sex, a person is physically involved in the action, whereas in pornography, it is the porn performers who engage in the action. In this sense, the difference between *pornography* and *sex* has been unhelpfully sidestepped in Marzano's account. Her poetic description of the temporal differences between *sex* (her *sexuality*) and *pornography* reduces the distinctions to ones of speed, ease, efficiency and instrumentalization, without taking the virtual and actual realms of pornography (virtual) and sex (actual) into account. Moreover, sex can be highly instrumental and efficient, while porn videos can be long, full of obstacles and far from instantaneous.

Marzano mixes together *sex*, *sexuality* and *pornography* in a manner which, as well as being misleading, is disconcertingly normative: by describing *sexuality* in a particular way, she normalises very specific forms of sex and sexuality *in contrast to* pornographic sex, not only demonising pornography per se but also elevating a form of idealised romantic sex above all others. Positive, non-pornographic sex is said to involve doubt, difficulty, obstacles and uncertainty, and to reject using another as a tool. As such, easy unproblematic sex, any sex undertaken purely for the sake of sex, and many BDSM practices (to suggest only a few types of sex) would fall outside Marzano's definition of acceptable sex, and into the realm of pornography, regardless of whether it is filmed or not. Other reactionary scholars draw similar normative conclusions about the forms of sex appropriate to eroticism, regardless of how they are presented visually or textually: for Bertrand Cochard, pornography fails in its inability to show the 'precarity, difficulty, fragility of this relationship'³³ while Baudry compares

³¹ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l'épuisement*, 47–48. Emphasis added.

³² Although not directly relevant to her use of the term *sexuality*, the assumed passivity of a woman who only sees the penis and coyly touches the man's shoulder while he touches her breasts and genitals suggests an adherence to traditional gender roles within Marzano's broader work. Such reductive binarism can also be seen in other writing, for instance by Efstria Oktapoda who argues that 'Eroticism based on fragmentation (male) and eroticism based on continuity (female) remain contemporary issues and continue to feed the debate. The sexual desire experienced by a man is inexhaustible, infinite. For a man, sexual pleasure is an end in itself. By contrast, female seduction demonstrates a creativity renewed by charm and novelty in order to maintain erotic interest' ('Introduction' in *Mythes et érotismes dans les littératures et les cultures francophones de l'extrême contemporain* ed. Efstria Oktapoda [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013], 41–42.)

³³ Bertrand Cochard, 'Érotisme, pornographie et imagification' in *La sexualité en images: regards croisés sur l'érotisation des corps*, ed. Bertrand Cochard and Grégori Jean (Paris: Hermann, 2018), 37.

pornography to prostitution and eroticism to a girlfriend: ‘although perhaps arbitrary, there is a difference and it supposes modes of use, “practices”, which are not identical in eroticism and in pornography. Must I insist? The road which takes you to a prostitute is not the same as the one which takes you to a girlfriend’.³⁴ Not only are value judgements introduced at the earliest stages of their argument, but these values have a highly normative and pre-emptively discriminatory character.

It is important to highlight these terminological slippages and apparent confusions, firstly to underline the alarming lack of rigour in many of these analyses. Regardless of one’s political convictions, a consistent logical use of terms and definitions must form the backbone of any scholarly analysis, and these accounts are problematically flexible when it comes to the very terms they examine. Moreover, this imprecision attests to the broader methodological problems of these accounts. Another concerning aspect in much of this critical work is the near-complete absence of close analysis of any pornographic text, image or artefact, despite the huge claims made about them. For instance, Marzano’s 289-page book, *Pornography*, contains no close analysis of any single pornographic text. Apart from a short list of titles buried in a footnote on page 194, and a section on the art-pornography of Catherine Breillat and Virginie Despentes, it contains just a few mentions of pornographic titles. Elsewhere, Bayon’s filmography contains no pornographic films made after *Deep Throat* (1975) except for several films directed by Ovidie, which Bayon classifies as erotic. Molinier and Mayné debate the merits of numerous erotic films, but not a single pornographic film is considered closely. Grégori Jean similarly considers Henry Miller at length without touching on any pornographic text,³⁵ and Métral, in the same collection, considers no texts closely at all.³⁶ Baqué’s book, which has the words *pornography* and *eroticism* in the title, contains over 120 images and screenshots of ‘erotic’ artworks, yet only a single image of mainstream pornography,³⁷ the source of which—unlike all the erotic works—is not given. The image’s caption reads simply, ‘pornographic image circulating on the internet’, and it is not considered in any detail. By contrast, even the advertisements included in the book are all referenced with the name of the photographer, company and date.³⁸ These authors lavish much ink on ‘erotic’ works, which are examined in great detail, while such attention which is entirely absent from the comments on pornography. We read about Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom and Gomorrah*,³⁹ D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*,⁴⁰ Manet’s *Olympia*,⁴¹ Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*,⁴² Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*,⁴³ Pasolini’s *Salò*⁴⁴ and Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris*,⁴⁵ amongst others.

This treatment of primary sources raises at least two methodological issues: when comparing pornography and erotica, devoting wildly disproportionate space to detailed examination of one term rather than the other inevitably skews the results in a pre-ordained

³⁴ Baudry, *La pornographie et ses images*, 47.

³⁵ Grégori Jean, ‘Le Porno et la grâce’ in *La sexualité en images: regards croisés sur l’érotisation des corps* ed. Bertrand Cochard and Grégori Jean (Paris: Hermann, 2018), 11-32.

³⁶ Patrick Métral, ‘Pulsion scopique et répétition’, 53-75.

³⁷ Baqué, *Mauvaise genres*, 36.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 89

³⁹ Efstratia Oktapoda, ‘Introduction’, 36.

⁴⁰ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l’épuisement*, 111ff.

⁴¹ Molinier, ‘La pornographie « en situation »’, 60.

⁴² Baqué, *Mauvaise genres*, 44–45.

⁴³ Jean, ‘Le Porno et la grâce’, *passim*.

⁴⁴ Estelle Bayon, *Le cinéma obscène* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007), 91; Marzano, *La pornographie ou l’épuisement*, 207.

⁴⁵ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l’épuisement*, 29–30; Brassart, *L’intimité à l’écran*, 398–99.

direction, based on pre-existing views rather than a scientific consideration of the evidence. Linda Williams notes precisely the problems with this approach in her paradigm-shifting study from 1989, which began life as a chapter in a book on ‘film bodies’, a chapter she thought ‘would require no new thought or research’:⁴⁶ ‘as soon as I began really to look at a large number of films across the genre’s history rather than to generalize from a viewing of one or two films, I found that film pornography did not so neatly illustrate such [assumed] objectification’.⁴⁷ By choosing not to explore the (admittedly ethically fraught) complexities of pornography, these scholars refuse to see the points at which pornography does not illustrate their claims, and to take the wide variety of different pornographies into account in their critiques.

Secondly, there is a distinct and unacknowledged imbalance in terms of the medium of the works considered. Whilst references to pornography are almost invariably references to films,⁴⁸ references to erotica are predominantly written texts or paintings.⁴⁹ These scholars may wish to generalise, but the terms of their definitions suggest that a long-standing condescension towards the seventh art and moving-image media is at play, rather than anything linked to the actual images or words used in a given work. We must therefore be wary of any claims these scholars make based on such dubious methodologies: poorly-defined terms, gross generalisations, little close analysis of the subject matter and a clear imbalance in the analysed texts should combine to massively undermine the conclusions that are subsequently drawn.

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Despite such major concerns, these scholars make many broad claims about the distinctions between pornography and eroticism. Baudry contends that ‘eroticism and pornography are not of the same order’;⁵⁰ for Mayné, ‘unlike pornography, generally defined as the *calculated* awakening of sexual desire, the movement of eroticism defies all calculation’;⁵¹ for Steven Bernas, ‘eroticism plays with the limit of the self in *eros* and *ethos*. Pornography is of the order of the shown, the exhibited’;⁵² for Bayon, ‘it is generally agreed that if pornography is defined by its obscenity, eroticism is saved from obscenity by its more aesthetic and suggestive character’;⁵³ for Efstratia Oktapoda, ‘while pornography—which has no other end than itself—is direct, and presents itself unashamedly with the sole intention of awakening sexual desire, erotic literature is more veiled, more suggestive. Beneath its aesthetic aspirations, it aims to sublimate sexuality’.⁵⁴ For Marzano, ‘where eroticism is a narrative—in images or in words—of a desire which pushes a person to an encounter with the other, pornography, as we shall see,

⁴⁶ Williams, *Hard Core*, xv.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, xvi.

⁴⁸ Marzano examines *Baise-moi* (Despentes, 1994) and *Pornocratie* (Breillat, 2004), both of which she considers to be pornography. However, both have also been turned into films, which she also discusses.

⁴⁹ With her focus on cinema, Bayon is a notable exception, but her bibliography still features a page and a half on literary fiction. None of the works listed are conventionally considered to be pornography (Bayon, *Le cinéma obscène*, 261–62).

⁵⁰ Patrick Baudry, *La pornographie et ses images* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1997), 46.

⁵¹ Mayné, *Pornographie, violence obscène*, 12.

⁵² Steven Bernas, *La photographie et le sensible: les enjeux du sensible dans la représentation* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009), 13.

⁵³ Bayon, *Le cinéma obscène*, 49.

⁵⁴ Efstratia Oktapoda, ‘Michel Houellebecq. Entre représentation obsessionnelle de scènes de sexe et déni de l’amour’ in Oktapoda (ed.) *Mythes et érotismes dans les littératures et les cultures francophones de l’extrême contemporain* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 133.

never aims to tell a story and represents individuals who do not recognise each other as the subjects of their desires'.⁵⁵

In general, pornography is seen as the lowest category of sexual representation—‘the sexual act is shown in its raw state’⁵⁶—it is reduced to the simplest, basest of representations⁵⁷—or there is nothing beneath pornography in terms of sexual imagery.⁵⁸ In contrast, eroticism ‘can be surreptitious, suddenly arising where you weren’t expecting it’,⁵⁹ it is suggestive and sublime,⁶⁰ and defies calculation;⁶¹ ‘pornography is distinguished from eroticism because it erases its supposed secret’.⁶² Erotic then, is surprising, veiled and suggestive; it offers access to the sublime, defies all calculation, is secretive, intellectual and transcendent. Broadly speaking, pornography, for these scholars, is obvious; like US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, in his infamous 1964 description of obscenity,⁶³ we know what pornography is and that is the end of the story. Erotic then, on the other hand, for these scholars goes far beyond such simplicities: it reveals the mysteries of sexuality, the limits of the self, and transcendence; it is indefinable and eludes all categorisation; it is intellectual, artistic and spiritual. Thus while most scholars, including these, acknowledge the impossibility of ever clearly distinguishing between pornographic and erotic images, the stakes here are very high indeed: it is the difference between sublime art and the basest of representations. Erotic is a transcendent exercise for the mind, while pornography involves only the body, which is considered deeply suspect.

For these scholars, pornography is unable to gesture beyond the limits of the bodily reflex. This leads to descriptions of pornography as a sexual medium, which reduces the body to its bodiliness, while eroticism elevates it by stimulating the mind. Moreover, bodily contact and the body as material entity are mostly described in negative terms, such that pornography’s reductive focus on the body is necessarily a negative, unsavoury focus. Marzano, for instance, suggests that pornography is highly reductive of desire, of performers and of the body: ‘the economy of desire is reduced to the instinctive functioning of organs, [...] to an assemblage of genital organs and erogenous zones’.⁶⁴ Marzano further suggests that female porn performers are reduced to ‘a body to “open”, a “body-as-orifice”, a “body-as-hole” [*un corps « à ouvrir », un corps « orificiel », un corps « trou »*],⁶⁵ and that the pornographic body is ‘reduced to a simple thing, it is nothing more than an object that one can feast on, before it disappears’.⁶⁶ This focus on the materiality of the body is seen as destructive towards a person’s non-material

⁵⁵ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l'épuisement*, 27-28. See also Molinier, ‘La pornographie « en situation »’, 61-62.

⁵⁶ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l'épuisement*, 28.

⁵⁷ Bernas, op cit.

⁵⁸ Oktapoda, op cit.

⁵⁹ Baqué, *Mauvaise genres*, 44.

⁶⁰ Oktapoda, op cit.

⁶¹ Mayné, op cit.

⁶² Patrick Baudry, ‘Rhétorique X’ in *Sous-titrée X, la pornographie entre image et propos* ed. Patrick Baudry, Martine Boyer, and Larys Frogier (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2001), 17-22. 17-18.

⁶³ ‘I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that’ (Stewart, Concurring Opinion to *Nico Jacobellis, Appellant*, in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 [1964], para. 14).

⁶⁴ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l'épuisement*, 44.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 70.

existence: pornography is ‘the very negation of eroticism and sexuality’,⁶⁷ it erases ‘the possibility of “revealing” oneself to a chosen other’,⁶⁸ it destroys a person and their value, ‘making a person destitute in their body [...] to the point of dismantling the physical integrity of the self’⁶⁹ and it is ‘a gaze which reduces the subject to a thing’.⁷⁰ For Jean, the subject in pornography ‘is led, indeed to abandon the battle for their very erotic existence’.⁷¹ For Baqué,

[pornography] reveals flesh in all its crudeness, the incarnation of mouths and genitals, and partakes thus in a form of writing that is deliberately flat and highly economic [*économique*]: gaining the maximum visual information in a minimum of visual space, a space which itself is saturated by the profusion of bodies attached to one another.⁷²

For Baudry, ‘the defining rupture of the typical X-rated image is its contribution to the dissolution of our relationship to the other’.⁷³ For Bernas, ‘a woman’s body is considered as an orifice’.⁷⁴ And beyond the destruction of our relationship with the other, Marzano suggests that pornography negates even the idea of the human: ‘it sounds the death knell of desire by giving value to an instrumental vision of man and, finally, the dissolution of the very idea of what it is to be human’.⁷⁵ While we could try to read these comments in terms of biopolitics⁷⁶ or machines⁷⁷ and the intimate role our physical bodies play in contemporary political discourse, subsequent comments show these comments to be evaluative judgements rather than deconstructions of the human as a concept.

The evaluative aspect of these claims can clearly be seen by examining the comparisons which these scholars make in order to clarify their assertions. Employing reductively binary terms, these scholars emphasise pornography’s focus on the body to the exclusion of the mind, claiming that it reduces the human to the animal. Bayon, for instance, contends that ‘pornography’s function is to increase its public’s libido [...] conceived of not to reflect on sexuality, not to think about it. [...] it is therefore focussed only on the animality of sexuality’.⁷⁸ Like Marzano, this is not simply a focus on the animalistic elements of sexual desire but rather because pornography ‘does not involve language or consciousness of the depicted acts [...] the desiring subject is reduced to an orgasmic object [*objet de jouissance*] which does not think about its actions’.⁷⁹ Bayon’s reference to pornography’s supposed lack of language, which is often seen as the distinguishing character of humans against animals, emphasizes that for her, like Marzano and Baudry, pornography takes away precisely what it means to be human and interact with other humans. Baudry undertakes a similar manoeuvre when arguing that in porn, sex is reduced not just to bodies [*corps*] but to ass [*cul*]: ‘That is what porn reveals or demonstrates, it’s that. Not photographed bodies [*corps photographiés*], but photographic ass

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 69.

⁷¹ Jean, ‘Le porno et la grâce’, 31.

⁷² Baqué, *Mauvaise genres*, 44–45.

⁷³ Baudry, *La pornographie et ses images*, 68.

⁷⁴ Bernas, *La photographie et le sensible*, 153.

⁷⁵ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l’épuisement*, 267.

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1978), 133ff; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁷⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (London: Viking Penguin), 1977.

⁷⁸ Bayon, *Le cinéma obscène*, 118.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 119.

[*cul photographique*]. Ad nauseam'.⁸⁰ This complaint about the reductive nature of pornographic sex in comparison to erotic sex intriguingly also mirrors the construction of homosexuality that Guy Hocquenghem critiques in Freudian psychoanalysis, whereby certain kinds of sex are reduced to their anatomical connections: 'to centre the homosexual drive on the wish to appropriate the penis of others is the same as deriving it from castration anxiety. Sex is reduced to the penis, this being the homosexual's only possible sexual "object"'.⁸¹ In other words, reactionary scholars' attempts to discredit pornography as reductive mirror older attempts to discredit non-normative sexualities. Far from being a question of genre, the claims made by these scholars to distinguish eroticism from pornography are highly political.

The scholars discussed in this article appear to support not only a prejudice against the body as a means of engaging with the world, but a fundamental ambivalence about, if not fear of, the body as a corporeal, fleshy, material, thing—especially when that body is highlighted and emphasised by the realism of photography and film. This explains, to some extent, why these scholars tend to introduce written texts and paintings as touchstones for the erotic: the act of writing or painting provides a translation of, or barrier against, the original fleshy encounter: 'in contrast to the artistic nude, which always maintains the possibility of an interstitial space between the body and the spectator [...], an obscene representation of nudity transforms the body into corporeal material'.⁸² The nude, materialised only in paint, is held up as far superior to the representation of a flesh-and-blood, feeling and reacting human body. Indeed, Baqué criticizes pornography's 'profusion of bodies'⁸³ and the fact that its content is little more than 'sexualised flesh'.⁸⁴ Mayné contends that, rather than people, 'bodies make love',⁸⁵ while Brassart states that pornography is 'this confrontation between artistic beauty and the ugliness of the flesh'.⁸⁶ We must then wonder whether pornography's supposed reduction of sex to the body is really what concerns these scholars, or rather the evocation of the corporeality of that body—a bodiliness most obviously visible in the sexual act. By contrast, when Marzano presents the erotic sex she approves of, sex is described as symptomatic, sex is not sex, but something else: in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, for instance, 'all the sex scenes, be they more or less explicit, are at the service of the argument that Lawrence wishes to put forward'.⁸⁷ This is in fact a formula misappropriated from Georges Bataille, who argues, not in relation to pornography but in terms of the act of sex, that 'what distinguishes eroticism from the simple act of sex [is] a psychological exploration independent of the natural ends assumed by reproduction'.⁸⁸ For these reactionary scholars, a key problem of pornography appears to be the focus on bodies, flesh, viscous material connections, and direct corporeal encounters. What they value in eroticism is suggestion, indirectness and symptomatic overlayering; eroticism creates a cover behind which something mysterious can still be found. In the context of pornography, sex is sex; in eroticism, sex is always 'at the service' of something else.

⁸⁰ Baudry, *La pornographie et ses images*, 57. Any substantive difference between the terms *photographié* and *photographique* is not made clear.

⁸¹ Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 120.

⁸² Marzano, *La pornographie ou l'épuisement*, 108.

⁸³ Baqué, *Mauvaise genres*, 45.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 43.

⁸⁵ Mayné, *Pornographie, violence obscène*, 13.

⁸⁶ Brassart, *L'intimité à l'écran*, 405.

⁸⁷ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l'épuisement*, 119.

⁸⁸ Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957), 17.

One way that eroticism avoids the directness of sex as fleshy materiality, according to these scholars, is mystery. Concern over pornography's lack of mystery is common: Bayon, decrying its obviousness and directness, writes that 'porn as it is presented today is trapped by evidence: evidence of coitus, evidence of sex and bodies, where orgasm goes without saying, and even becomes an obligation, a prescribed norm'.⁸⁹ For Marzano, mystery is inherent to eroticism; the fact that pornography purports to reveal the mysteries of sexuality, or show them 'all', is part of what disqualifies pornography from the serious consideration accorded to eroticism: 'it is intrinsic to the erotic work that it attaches itself to the representation of sexuality. It aims to narrate the mystery of the sexual encounter, the enigma of the body and the secret of desire: the unknown of a man and of a woman remains whole'.⁹⁰ In pornography, contrastingly, Marzano writes that 'we find no real ambivalence, no desire, no anxiety, no guilt. Nothing is mysterious. Nothing is even concerning'.⁹¹ Even Olivier Bessard-Banquy, who is much more sympathetic to pornography, laments the fact that 'sex is no longer this great "radically unthought element", this secret territory that each person discovers in the silence of the night, struggling against the powerful effects of shame and the terrifying weight of neurosis' as a result of 'commands to "orgasm without restraint"',⁹² as if the shame linked to mystery in eroticism were a good thing. Here the softcore/hardcore distinction is pushed to an extreme: the insinuations of (softcore) eroticism evoke the mysterious depths of sexuality and intimacy, which are destroyed by the directness of (hardcore) pornography.

One might suggest that this is not particularly surprising, because many Foucauldian readings of heterosexual pornography see it as the 'will-to-know the "truth" of the female body, and the incessant frustration of that will'.⁹³ If it was accepted that eroticism contains no 'truth' of sex, sexuality or bodies, and that it allows one to wallow in the many unknowns of human sexuality, we could then see eroticism's engagement with sexuality and knowledge to be different from pornography, as we understand it from a Foucauldian perspective. But Marzano specifically states that eroticism is about *narrating* the mysteries, enigmas and secrets of sex, bodies and desire: in her reading, eroticism also consists of a will to knowledge of the body's 'truths'. What we must see, therefore, in these evocations of the importance of erotic mystery by Marzano and others, is not an escape from a 'will to knowledge'⁹⁴ but rather a distinction between depictions of sex, sexuality and bodies as complex, mysterious entities (eroticism) and depictions that treat them as simple, uncomplicated and easy (pornography). Indeed this seems to come back to a preference for the softcore over the hardcore, based upon a scepticism of the moral value of visibility and revelation.⁹⁵ The link between visibility, mystery and the powers of the erotic is made clear in a question that arises early in the text by Jean: 'How can we see the body of the other in all its mystery if seeing it suffices for the mystery to disappear?'.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Bayon, *Le cinéma obscène*, 56.

⁹⁰ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l'épuisement*, 267.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² Olivier Bessard-Banquy, *Sexe et littérature aujourd'hui* (Paris: Musardine, 2010), 13.

⁹³ Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 19.

⁹⁴ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, *passim*.

⁹⁵ This is perhaps linked to a long-standing scepticism towards sight and vision in 20th-century French philosophy (see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press], 1994).

⁹⁶ Jean, 'Le Porno et la grâce', 24. Jean does nuance these comments later in his chapter when he argues that 'all sexual activity lives under the threat that its constitutive mystery, that its *magic*, as one says, might dissipate, and only remains *erotic* by placing itself in a realm of ambiguity which is never fully decided on' (*ibid.*, 28);

These different means of casting suspicion upon and devaluing the material body are tied to a frequent link between consumerism and pornography, as though the act of purchasing something inherently devalues it.⁹⁷ Marzano repeatedly harangues pornography for its associations with materialist consumption: porn is criticized for ‘flaunting the mystery of the body on the canvas of consumption’,⁹⁸ for being ‘a product which installs a discourse around sex capable of making the intimate act into an object of knowledge and consumption’,⁹⁹ and, ultimately, for ‘reducing sexuality to a quasi-commercial exchange of gestures and practices’.¹⁰⁰ Mayné also emphasizes the supposed commercial nature of pornography as a point of contrast with eroticism, writing that ‘it seems easy to integrate sexual commerce into the larger framework of a pornographic essence’.¹⁰¹ Bayon claims a similar, intrinsic monetary problem with pornography, drawing on the etymology of the Ancient Greek word for ‘prostitute’ in order to claim that pornography is inseparable from market forces: ‘this abjection of the reduction of the act of lovemaking to a simple commercial exchange is an inherent part of it. Turning a body into a mercantile object is the basis of porn. Even more so given that the word is derived from the Greek *pernemi* meaning *sell*’.¹⁰² For Baqué, ‘considering a market definition, the pornographic image is, by its very nature, utilitarian and commercial. Inscribed within a commercial system, it has only one aim: to give orgasms and to make people buy it.’¹⁰³ For Bernas, who repeatedly quotes Baqué in his work, ‘in our era which has proclaimed pornographic representation as a *must*, the stage is set for the meeting of carnal prey and its consumers’,¹⁰⁴ while for Métral, pornography is ‘a grotesque auction, an agricultural show, a car-boot sale where everything passes through everyone’s hands, being sold at the highest but also the cheapest price [...] it is the heart of a soulless world’.¹⁰⁵

A long-standing French scepticism towards consumerism¹⁰⁶ may be reflected in the deeply negative depiction of consumption presented by each of these scholars, who link it to

however, this still lauds the magic, mysterious ambiguities of eroticism, even without the explicit concern with questions of visibility.

⁹⁷ Although large amounts of pornography are consumed via free-to-view tube sites rather than purchased directly by the viewer, while one must pay for cinema tickets or DVDs in order to see the films they describe as erotic, thus hardly exempting eroticism from market forces and exchange value.

⁹⁸ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l'épuisement*, 43.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 267.

¹⁰¹ Mayné, *Pornographie, violence obscène*, 24. In a later work, Mayné also refers to the difference in these terms: ‘taboo and transgression “are not formulated” and can never be formulated. To formulate them, is always-already to cross from eroticism to pornography: from an erotic *writing*, which is both tortured and tortuous, to “porno-graphy” (the graphic display of sex in order to facilitate its sale)’ (Gilles Mayné, *Georges Bataille, l'érotisme et l'écriture: applications pratiques à l'étude de textes littéraires* [Paris: Descartes, 2003], 44). This itself reproduces a cultural-generic hierarchy, whereby the *written* would be superior to the *drawn*.

¹⁰² Bayon, *Le cinéma obscène*, 55.

¹⁰³ Baqué, *Mauvaise genres*, 43.

¹⁰⁴ Bernas, *La photographie et le sensible*, 167.

¹⁰⁵ Métral, ‘Pulsion scopique et répétition’, 75.

¹⁰⁶ See Samy Sanches, ‘Sustainable Consumption à La Française? Conventional, Innovative, and Alternative Approaches to Sustainability and Consumption in France’, *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 1, no. 1 (2005): 43–57; David H. Walker, *Consumer Chronicles: Cultures of Consumption in Modern French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2012; Valentin Filip, ‘The Roots of French and German Anti-Americanism’, *EIRP Proceedings* 13, no. 1 (2018) 264–74. This anti-consumerism is often couched in anti-American terms, most notably with the emergence of the concept of the ‘cultural exception’ [*l'exception culturelle*] to protect French cultural products from American market dominance during the 1993 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) talks. A rather outrageous example of the conflation of anti-consumerism, anti-Americanism and anti-pornography rhetoric is provided by Pascal Bruckner, whose work bears similarities to the reactionary pornography accounts discussed here: ‘Whereas the Frenchman says:

the destruction of desire and the erasure of subjectivity: pornography ‘erases any sort of subjectivity and reduces these fantasies to simple consumer products’¹⁰⁷ while ‘sexual desire exists from the moment when one refrains from turning the object of one’s desire into a “consumer object”’.¹⁰⁸ Baudry reframes the same idea without anti-market bias. The relation of eroticism to consumerism is accepted, while pornography must be critiqued for being unreasonably intertwined with consumerism:

It is the relationship to the sexual image which counts, the relationship introduced by the pornographic logic. In other words, it’s not only the content of the image which counts, but the construction of this content. And it’s not only the ‘consumption’ of this image which is important, but the relationship with this consumption.¹⁰⁹

Even if market forces are accepted as part and parcel of the modern exchange of sexual images, pornography’s relation to those modes of exchange is considered problematic. The erotic elements of arthouse films have long been used to increase sales¹¹⁰ while the typically poor quality and ethically dubious character of porn films may be seen as effects of their cultural, social, economic and legal ghettoization: low quality is not inherent to moving images designed to arouse.¹¹¹ Given these facts, these French scholars’ choice to focus on pornography as consumerist once again appears to be a political gesture.

This connection, too, has its antecedents in anti-pornography feminism, which in the US compellingly compared pornography to prostitution, and therefore to the direct commodification of women’s bodies. The scholars who originated these ideas, such as Dworkin, speak radically about all images of sex and even the act of sex itself, making claims about the underlying patriarchal nature of all sexual interactions between men and women by citing the clear depiction of patriarchal relationships in pornography.¹¹² These French scholars, on the other hand, compare pornography and eroticism, a distinction which Dworkin explicitly rejected.¹¹³ In this later French scholarship, erotic images are said to entail none of the aforementioned negative connotations associated with consumption. Must we therefore assume that eroticism exists in a realm outside economic exchange value and monetary equivalence? Not quite. Erotic texts are presented as works of art. In contrast to pornography’s links with ‘consumerism’, the erotic ‘respects both the imagination and the intellectual maturity of the reader or spectator, and the inner life and plenitude of those who are represented’¹¹⁴ while it

“Faisons l’amour,” the American in television series and films says: “Let’s have sex.” The difference is not merely semantic, it reflects two worldviews: in the latter case it is a matter of a pressing, animal need, like hunger or thirst, and in the former of a complex act that gives rise to a whole erotics, love that makes us as much as we make it, a subtle construction rather than a physical evacuation. Ceremony on the one hand, bestiality on the other.’ Pascal Bruckner tr. Steven Rendall, *The Paradox of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 47.

¹⁰⁷ Marzano, *La pornographie, ou, l’épuisement*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Baudry, *L’addiction à l’image pornographique*, 41

¹¹⁰ Mattias Frey, *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today’s Art Film Culture* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2016) 4-6.

¹¹¹ Petra van Brabant and Jesse Prinz, ‘Why Do Porn Films Suck?’ in *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays* ed. Hans Maes and Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 161-90 *passim*; Mathieu Trachman, *Le travail pornographique: enquête sur la production de fantasmes* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013) 20-21, 53.

¹¹² Dworkin, *Letters from a War Zone*; Dworkin, *Pornography*; Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

¹¹³ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 10-11.

¹¹⁴ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l’épuisement*, 32.

‘deal[s] with the problem of sexuality and all its obscure dimensions’.¹¹⁵ Consumerism, in this context, is actually a by-word for ‘low’ art.

In one sense then, these reactionary scholars are following in a long history of separating artistic sex from non-artistic sex, and adding a moral charge to that distinction. While they claim to present an argument about genre, they in fact present a clear and predetermined hierarchy that elevates eroticism and denigrates pornography, and is seemingly rooted in an outdated concern for the effects of sexual imagery on the masses. While the refined images of high art do not cause problems, and open up the world for those able to understand them, consumerist products sound the death knell for the very idea of the human and for human interactions with others. In this sense, the fear of pornography in recent French scholarship might be understood as a fear of consumerism, fear of the masses and fear of what happens when lower-class audiences are exposed to sexual imagery. While they may couch their arguments in terms of what is intrinsic to pornography, these scholars’ repeated comments about consumerism suggest that they are more concerned about *who* is watching sex than *what kind* of sex is being watched. In this sense, it appears that little has changed since Nancy Huston critiqued this in her analysis of expert defences of mainly male-authored ‘erotic’ texts in the mid-twentieth century: ‘while what we habitually call *eroticism* is consumed above all by an intellectual and professional elite (male and female alike), the pornographic novel “without literary merit” and sentimental novels are targeted at working-class men and women, respectively’.¹¹⁶ Once again, what is presented as a discussion about genre and aesthetics is actually a question of politics.

Traditional aversions to emotion in artistic judgement, privileging detached reflection over somatic engagement with an artwork, may provide a partial explanation for this state of affairs, as scholars resist attempts to integrate bodily reactions into their definitions of art. These scholars, however, go far beyond this long-standing prejudice—which has been central to discussions of art—to direct their concerns onto sex itself. The focal point of discourse is displaced from artistic representation onto our understanding of the material body, human subjectivity and our understanding of what it means to be human. As such, pornography becomes a cypher for a host of contemporary societal attitudes with which these scholars are explicitly or implicitly concerned, rather than a the subject of debate about pornography itself. It becomes, instead, a flashpoint used for an implicit discussion of sexual, familial, bodily and political relations in contemporary France.

In this scholarship, these political concerns are crystallised in their descriptions of love: their definitions of this term bring together all the points that have been discussed so far, and demonstrate the political import of their claims—even as they are presented as questions of aesthetics. In their discussions of love, we see the contemporary particularities of their arguments, which diverge from historical dismissals of pornography.

References to ‘love’ abound in the corpus I present here: Molinier suggests that ‘a woman’s love is the worst enemy of [pornography’s] virile denial of vulnerability’;¹¹⁷ Oktapoda argues that in pornography, ‘*eros* has lost its initial meaning and been reduced to a simple instinctive force responsible for genital pleasure and orgasmic climax. It no longer has much to do with love’.¹¹⁸ Mayné’s analysis, meanwhile, is heavily based on Bataille’s work, which

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Nancy Huston, *Mosaïque de la pornographie: Marie-Thérèse et les autres* (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1982), 29.

¹¹⁷ Molinier, ‘La pornographie « en situation »’, 62.

¹¹⁸ Oktapoda, ‘Introduction’, 43.

emphasises ‘this discrepancy between the *low* parts (the sexual organs) and the *high* representations linked to love’.¹¹⁹ Brassart argues that pornography uses lighting and editing to compensate for the deficiency of love shown to the body: ‘if the body of another is not dignified by amorous feelings as it can be in society, it is often magnified by make-up, lighting and montage’.¹²⁰ Marzano explains that the explicit descriptions of sex in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* are not obscene or pornographic because they are ‘at the service of the love story between Constance and Mellors’.¹²¹ Sexual imagery is supposedly saved from being pornography by love: in his argument about the difference between pornography and eroticism, Baudry cites Jeff Koons’s claim that the explicit images of penetration which form part of his collection *Made in Heaven* are not pornographic because ‘love was there’.¹²² Jean claims that Henry Miller’s eroticism also evades obscenity through love.¹²³ In each case ‘love’ is mentioned as integral to what distinguishes these images from pornographic images, which may never be described as ‘a love story’ or ‘a romantic encounter’. Many of these scholars, furthermore, contrast the etymology of ‘eroticism’ from *eros* (love) against ‘pornography’ from *pornè* (prostitute) in an attempt to further elevate eroticism and denigrate pornography.

The use of love to distinguish ‘good’ from ‘bad’ images of sex has been remarked upon by a number of commentators.¹²⁴ Indeed, in connection with my previous points about consumerism, Huston pointed out how love and money are separated in descriptions of erotic and pornographic works, forming an additional critique of pornography as only interested in money and consumption: ‘normally, the more you climb the social ladder [from pornography to eroticism], the more you are forced to sidestep the link between love and money’.¹²⁵ The question then is: what *form* of love do these scholars consider as redemptive of pornography’s loveless depictions of sex, and what does this tell us about their broader political project? Ultimately, what is meant when reactionary scholars evoke ‘love’ remains rather vague, much like their descriptions of eroticism and pornography: there is no clear definition given, as though this were obvious.

If love is what distinguishes eroticism from pornography, it follows that a definition of love can be pieced together from the analysis of the distinctions I have undertaken in this article. As such, we can surmise a number of elements characteristic of love: most standardly, it is a positive, transformative, even transcendent force, attached primarily to the intellectual and emotional cores of our interpersonal relations. Love is what saves the material, ‘animalistic’ elements of sex and elevates it to *lovemaking*; sexual passion is all well and good, but it is an immature form of love that needs to evolve into something that transcends the lover’s body, a perspective on love and sex embedded in Christian thought and inherited from the Ancient Greeks. As Hocquenghem pointed out, speaking of conservatives in the 1970s, ‘the most common criticism made of it [the gay movement] is that it speaks only about sex, and not about love’.¹²⁶ Claims that pornography focuses on sex to the detriment of love seem to fall into a

¹¹⁹ Mayné, *Pornographie, violence obscène*, 27.

¹²⁰ Brassart, *L’intimité à l’écran*, 405.

¹²¹ Marzano, *La pornographie ou l’épuisement*, 124.

¹²² Baudry, *La pornographie et ses images*, 49–50.

¹²³ Jean, ‘Le Porno et la grâce’, 32n17.

¹²⁴ See Bernard Arcand, *Le jaguar et le tamanoir: vers le degré zéro de la pornographie* (Montréal: Boréal, 1991), 37; Marie-Hélène Bourcier, ‘Pipe d’auteur: la « nouvelle vague pornographique française » et ses intellectuels (avec Jean-Pierre Léaud et Ovidie, Catherine Millet et son mari et toute la presse)’, *L’Esprit Créateur* 44 no. 3 (2004): 13–27, 21.

¹²⁵ Huston, *Mosaïque de la pornographie*, 162–63.

¹²⁶ Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 144.

similar reactionary vein. Love is mobilised as a concept to denigrate forms of sex and sexual expression, that these authors implicitly disapprove of. Continuing the immaterial theme, this love is mysterious, enigmatic and intangible. It takes on an almost religious tenor, as that which can never be properly understood but must be respected and worshipped nonetheless. At the same time, the love attached to eroticism raises it to the status of art. Love is thus associated with art, and, in these French scholars' accounts, unsullied by consumerism. There is, therefore, a distinctly elitist quality to this love: it is accompanied by the suggestion that an educated elite is required to identify when love is present in an image of sex, just as it is necessary for the identification of good art.¹²⁷ Taken together, this suggests a highly normative view of sex and sexuality, which privileges long-term romantic connections between sex partners, and denigrates sex as a purely physical activity (especially the pursuit of orgasm), any aspects of sex involving money (sex work, pornography) and dominating or sadomasochistic sexual practices and fantasies (common to BDSM).¹²⁸

As this section has shown, the key concept underpinning their analysis of such figures is 'love'. This summary of their understanding of love functions as a presentation of the key political concerns that implicitly drive them to differentiate pornography from eroticism.

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As a contribution to thinking about the question of eroticism, and to scholarly considerations of this issue in contemporary France, this article proposes two main conclusions. Firstly, reactionary French scholars entertain a methodology so fundamentally flawed that we should be very suspicious of any analyses of sexual imagery they present.¹²⁹ Secondly, those French scholars who consider it necessary and desirable to separate eroticism from pornography, on a conceptual level, implicitly push a reactionary political agenda that is guided in the main by a traditional and normative conception of transcendent love.

By demonstrating that a concept of love is at the heart of these scholars' distinction between pornography and eroticism, we can fully appreciate the weight of the term *reactionary* when applied to them. The term *reactionary* does not merely refer to individual ideas or sentiments, evoked here and there within these scholars' work, but to their broader world view, of which claims about eroticism form only a part—albeit a telling and exemplary one. While reactionary pornography scholars try to position themselves as anti-censorship, elevating

¹²⁷ Cf. the earlier point about Jeff Koons, and 'love' attributed to otherwise pornographic images (Baudry, *La pornographie et ses images*, 49–50).

¹²⁸ This understanding of love, with attendant criticism of non-normative sexual practices, shares similarities with writing by reactionary French philosophers such as Luc Ferry, Alain Renaut, Alain Finkielkraut and Pascal Bruckner. (Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, tr. Mary Cattani [Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990]; Luc Ferry, *De l'amour: Une philosophie pour le XXI^e siècle* [Paris: Odile Jacob, 2012]; Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut, *Le nouveau désordre amoureux: essai* [Paris: Seuil, 1977]; Pascal Bruckner tr. Steven Rendall, *The Paradox of Love*. [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.]) The relevance of this connection to broader French politics lies in the public political role played by these French intellectuals whose conservative tendencies are directly implicated in government policies and public opinion: Ferry was Minister for Education from 2002 to 2004, during which time he introduced laws forbidding religious symbols to be worn in schools. Finkielkraut was instrumental in restrictive changes to French laws on nationality in the late 1980s and early 1990s. (see Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: Nation, State and Citizenship in Contemporary France* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015].)

¹²⁹ See Maes and Levinson, eds. *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) for a more philosophically rigorous analysis of the issue. Some essays in this collection should however also be considered problematic in their assumptions and conclusions.

eroticism and emphasising their affinity with the legal campaigns to allow for the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer*, their simultaneous denigration of pornography reveals the highly moralistic tenor that characterises their thought, reacting against developments in thinking about the material body, visual media, non-normative sexualities and relationship structures. The scholars discussed choose not to engage with the difficult analyses surrounding our complex contemporary relationship to images of sex, but rather to decry the false subversions of modern pornography, nostalgically extolling the virtue of now-canonical texts from before the sexual revolution.

The findings of this article suggest that greater attention ought to be paid to the political ramifications of French research into pornographic imagery. Not only do these works represent an influential strain of French thinking about sexual material, but several of the authors in question have published prolifically on other subjects.¹³⁰ The crossover suggests that analysis of the underlying political convictions that define these authors' positions on pornography may also be relevant to other domains. Particularly concerning is the fact that conservative values are permitted to masquerade as apolitical explorations of genre and aesthetics, without open acknowledgement of the political and moral perspectives they reinforce. My analysis, therefore, participates in broader critiques of contemporary iterations of French universalism.¹³¹ Far from a politically disinterested attempt to understand the complexities of sexual imagery, contemporary claims to distinguish *érotisme* from *pornographie* in France should be understood as overtly political.

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¹³⁰ Michela Marzano has published on violence, the body, gender, ethics, death, and consent. She is also a novelist, and was at one time an elected politician in Italy (see <http://www.michelamarzano.it>, accessed 10 June 2020). Patrick Baudry has published on extremity, media theory, violence, grief, euthanasia, urban sociology and adolescent identity (see <https://mica.u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr/ baudry-patrick/>, accessed 10 June 2020).

¹³¹ For an example of contemporary universalism, see an interview with Nathalie Heinich, an influential sociologist, in which she argues for a specifically French form of Republican universalism against an American feminism grounded in communities, describes queer theory as ‘an infantile fantasy’, criticises Muslim women who wear veils, and denounces postcolonial studies as a form of guilt-tripping. (Nathalie Heinich, “Le féminisme universaliste incite à suspendre les différences,” *Cités* 73, no. 1 [2018]: 103–14.)

¹³² All quotations from works cited in French are my own translations.

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