The Fictional Character of Pornography[*]

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Abstract

We refine a line of feminist criticism of pornography that focuses on pornographic works' pernicious effects. We first analyze imagination's role in sexual desire. It is in virtue of this role that pornographic works can be thought of as *fictions*—representations that prompt imaginings. On this basis, philosophers such as A.W. Eaton (2007, 2008) employ models of moral persuasion developed in aesthetics to draw out the effects of inegalitarian depictions of sex in pornography. Essentially, Eaton's criticism is that inegalitarian pornography is responsible for its consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex in the same way that other fictions are responsible for changes in their consumers' attitudes. We argue that this criticism can be improved with a refined understanding of *fictions' capacity for persuasion*, on which works in different genres may affect consumers' attitudes in different ways. This is true of film and television: a satirical movie such as *Dr. Strangelove* does not morally educate in the same way as a realistic series such as *The Wire*. We argue that this is also true of pornography: inegalitarian depictions of sex are not invariably responsible for consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex in reality. We argue that Eaton's argument is best restricted to mainstream pornographic works, which are typically *response-realistic*—demanding consumers to respond to fictional characters and scenarios in the same way that they respond to analogous persons and situations in reality. Her argument applies less well to pornographic works in many fetish genres, which are typically not response-realistic. Unlike mainstream pornographic works, fetish pornographic works typically place no normative claims on reality—they neither ask consumers to *import* their actual attitudes into imaginative engagement, nor do they ask consumers to *export* their imaginative attitudes back out to reality. We end with two suggestions for advancing the debate over pornography's ethical status and permissibility.

Philosophers have made important contributions to the debate over pornography's ethical status and permissibility from various perspectives, ranging from legal theory to philosophy of language.[1] In this debate, the aesthetician's perspective is noticeably absent.[2] At the same time, although aestheticians have debated about pornography a great deal, they have primarily focused on the artistic status and the aesthetic value of pornography.[3] In this paper, we bring the aesthetician's perspective to the most recent round of the debate over pornography's ethical status and permissibility.

1. Overview

Our paper highlights *the fictional character of pornography* and draws out its implications for the debate over pornography's ethical status and permissibility. In this paper, we employ the term "fiction" in a technical sense that originates from Kendall Walton (1990) to refer to any *representation* that prompts *imaginings*. As Stacie Friend (2008, 2011, 2012) clarifies, the class of these representations includes *fictive* works, such as mockumentaries, as well as *non-fictive* works, such as documentaries.[4] Saying that pornography has a fictional character, then, is neither claiming that all or most pornographic works are fictive nor implying that pornographic works are causally disconnected from reality.[5] Instead, saying that pornography has a fictional character is a way of emphasizing that consumption of pornography paradigmatically involves imaginings—a point that is frequently overlooked by participants on both sides of this debate.

We start with a novel argument for the fictional character of pornography. Consumption of pornography paradigmatically involves imaginings because sexual desires are not mere appetites, but cognitive wants that interact with other intentional states. Next, we present A.W. Eaton's (2007, 2008) argument against inegalitarian pornography, which is premised on pornography's fictional character. Essentially, Eaton's criticism is that inegalitarian pornography is responsible for its consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex in the same way that other fictions are responsible for changes in their consumers' attitudes. The problem with Eaton's argument, we then argue, is that fictions of different genres are responsible for changes in their consumers' attitudes in different ways. So, not all inegalitarian depictions of sex are responsible for consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex.

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[1] Among the classic works in this debate are Langton (1990, 1993), MacKinnon (1987), Nussbaum (1995), and Vadas (1987). For an overview, see Watson (2010) and West (2008).

[2] Maes (2011: 386) notes a few exceptions. For example, Leibowitz (1990) examines the aesthetic presuppositions of MacKinnon's (1987) and Vadas's (1987) criticisms of pornography. Despite important differences in target and execution, this paper shares the same broad motivation with the works that Maes highlights.

[3] Among the classic works in this debate are Kieran (2001) and Levinson (2005). For an overview, see Maes (2011).

[4] Friend advocates treating "fiction" and "non-fiction" as terms for genres (or, perhaps, super-genres). We use the terms "fictive" and "non-fictive" to designate the genres in order to avoid unnecessary confusions (and inappropriate conflations) between Walton's technical notion and the commonsense notion.

[5] Our use of the term "fiction" and its cognates thus fundamentally differs from the use of the same terms in both Langton and West (1999), which criticizes pornography, and Cooke (2012), which argues against numerous criticisms of pornography. Unlike these philosophers, we do not assume that much of pornography is *fictive*—fiction in the genre sense—because our discussions do not rest on this assumption.

We believe that Eaton's argument is best restricted to mainstream pornographic works, which are typically *response-realistic*—demanding consumers to respond to fictional characters and scenarios in the same way that they respond to analogous persons and situations in reality. Mainstream pornographic works ask consumers to *import* their actual attitudes toward sex into imaginative engagement, exaggerate consumers' sexual fantasies in the pornographic representations, and then ask consumers to *export* their imaginative attitudes back out to reality.[6] Thus, we conclude—in agreement with Eaton—that these works are responsible for persuading consumers that the way they respond to the exaggerated pornographic representations is the way that they *ought to* respond to analogous persons and situations in reality.[7] However, we also argue that her argument applies less well to pornographic works in many fetish genres, such as BDSM (bondage/discipline/ sadism/masochism). Unlike mainstream pornographic works, fetish pornographic works typically place no normative claims on reality—they neither ask consumers to import their actual attitudes into imaginative engagement, nor do they ask consumers to export their imaginative attitudes back out to reality. Thus, we conclude—in contrast with Eaton—that these works are not responsible for persuading consumers that the way they respond to the unrealistic pornographic representations is the way that they ought to respond to analogous persons and situations in reality.

We end with two suggestions for advancing the debate over pornography's ethical status and permissibility. First, building on the problem we raise for Eaton's argument, we suggest that critics of pornography would do well to recognize that pornographic works in different genres involve different kinds of harm. For example, even if necrophilia pornographic works are not responsible for persuading consumers to adopt inegalitarian attitudes toward sex, they may be harmful in themselves as hate speech against women. Second, we think that the recognition of pornography's fictional character calls for broader engagement with the psychological literature on the real-world impact of fictions. Although participants on both sides of this debate are typically attentive to empirical evidence concerning the effects of consuming pornography, they should also attend to empirical evidence concerning the effects of consuming other fictions.

2. Sexual Desire and Imagination

Human beings are not just rational and emotional, but also imaginative beings. They can dream, fantasize, pretend, conceive of impossibility, enact complicated fictions, and entertain potential courses of actions. Imagination plays a particularly crucial role in sexual desires. Even though it is not possible in this context to provide a complete and fully satisfying analysis of sexual desire, we believe that the (fairly

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6 We borrow the import/export terminology from Gendler (2000), but broaden the scope to include non-cognitive and non-intentional attitudes.

7 Compare our claim about mainstream pornographic works with Jacobson's (1996: 335, our emphasis) claim about (response-realistic) fictions generally: "That we find ourselves feeling a certain way [in response to a fiction] puts a powerful, although defeasible, pressure on us to grant that this is how it *makes sense* to feel".

limited) philosophical literature on sexual desire overlooks the role of imagination.[8] The recognition of imagination's importance to sexual desire allows us to appreciate the fictional character of pornography: pornographic works are representations that prompt imaginings in addition to sensory responses.

Imagination plays a fundamental role in the enactment of fantasies in reciprocal fulfillments of sexual desires. Take the following example. In an attempt to revive their sexuality, long-married couple Mary and George enacts their favorite Shakespearean drama. She pretends to be Juliet and he pretends to be Romeo. Moreover, she pretends to *want* Romeo, and he pretends to *want* Juliet. What fuels Mary and George's sexual fantasy and satisfies their sexual desires are their imaginings and the fiction constructed: that this is their first sexual encounter, indeed the first time they kiss and touch; that Mary is a trembling virgin and George an inexperienced young boy; that they have longed for this moment for many days; that their passion is illicit and secret; and so forth.

Most of us are familiar with sexual fantasies and role-playing, whether they involve just ourselves or are shared with one or more partners. The very term "sexual *fantasy*" underscores the importance of the imagination. Similarly, role-playing involves pretense, an activity in which imagination plays a central role.[9] In the case of George and Mary, imagination not only plays a role in the conception and enactment of their pretense, it also directly affects the development and expression of sexual desire within the pretense: Mary's pretended virginal candor will affect her own and George's desire, the way it is felt, manifested and satisfied.

But imagination plays a role in sexual desire even when there is no *explicit* engagement in pretense, and this aspect is especially relevant to the present discussion. A man who masturbates while watching a pornographic movie is not explicitly engaging in pretense. However, imagination is likely to play an important role in the satisfaction of his sexual desire. For example, he might imagine being with someone else, or imagine that other people are having sex.[10] In Waltonian terms (Walton 1990), the pornographic movie functions as a prop in the man's make-believe game.

Sexual desire is often compared to appetites such as hunger and thirst, but it is importantly different in that it can be satisfied through interacting with a representation. No other conative state that is traditionally labeled as "appetite" functions like that: we can lick the image of a delicious cake or look at a documentary on Taiwanese street food for as long as we want, but we will still be hungry; hearing the sound of water falling out of a fountain will make us more, not less, thirsty; and only actual sleep will satisfy our desire for sleeping. Another feature that makes sexual desire different is that other appetites are not essentially relational, in the sense that they do not presuppose interaction with other agents. Sexual desire, in the

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[8] For a representative sample, see Goldman (1977), Morgan (2003), Nagel (1969), Shaffer (1978), and Solomon (1974).

[9] For an overview of the connections between imagination and pretense, see Liao and Gendler (2011).

[10] Although we think *de se* imaginings are more common in consuming pornography, Stock (2012) rightfully argues that pornographic imaginings can be *de dicto* as well. We thank Hans Maes for bringing this point to our attention.

typical cases, seems to necessarily presuppose interaction with other people—first of all as object of desire, and secondly as means of satisfaction. But when "real" people are not available, pornography can supply the object of desire and aid the agent in the business of autarchic satisfaction.

The imaginative component of sexual desire is crucial in solipsistic sexual practices, since it is what allows for satisfaction together with manual stimulation.[11] Even in the most absent-minded masturbation, there is not just a body with its secretions, but also a mind with volitions, attitudes, thoughts, emotions and imaginings. It is of course possible to perform sexual activities in a completely non-cognitive way. Indeed, this is probably what most porn actors do. But sexual desire is not the same as desire to have sex, and consequently satisfaction of sexual desire is not the same as having sex (even though having sex is often a crucial component).[12]

The imaginative component of sexual desire is also what makes pornography a powerful tool for sexual arousal: when the subject is simply "horny"—that is, is in a state of objectless arousal—the representation provides an object. When the subject does have an object of desire, the representation provides material that enriches one's imagination. Even though any representation—the photo of your favorite celebrity, or the images in your fine Kama Sutra edition—might do, pornographic representations are aimed at doing the job more efficiently than any other.

The variety of pornographic works on the market provides even more evidence that pornography must engage the mind as well as the body. Different kinds of representations satisfy different desires by prescribing different imaginings. Since sexual desire is imaginative as well as sensory, pornography can only satisfy the demands of sexual desire through fictional representations in addition to sensory stimulations.

3. Eaton's Argument Against Inegalitarian Pornography

The fictional character of pornography is mostly overlooked in the debate over pornography's ethical status and permissibility. However, recently Eaton (2007, 2008) has advanced a new argument against inegalitarian pornography that is crucially premised on pornography's fictional character. In short, Eaton argues that inegalitarian pornography is responsible for its consumers' adoption of inegalitarian

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[11] One might object that the satisfaction of sexual desire is *only* the result of manual stimulation, and that representations *only* cause genital arousal, in the same way as an appetizing image of a cake might make us salivate. But even granting that some sort of automatic and mindless reaction to stimuli is an important part of the story, that cannot be the whole story, or else we could not account for the complexity of much of our sexual experiences: our sexual tastes are vastly idiosyncratic, evolve through life, and are weary of repetition and predictability. Automatic physiological arousal is also not sufficient for sexual desire. Mere genital stimulation does not count as sexual activity: very young children can masturbate to the point of achieving orgasm, but we would hesitate to say that they feel and satisfy sexual desire.

[12] Shaffer (1978) convincingly defends the distinction between the desire of having sex and sexual desire by appealing to the following reasons to have sex that appear to be completely unrelated to having sexual desire: to reproduce, to fulfill an obligation, to please someone, and to make money. We propose three more reasons: to lose one's virginity, to make a political statement, and even to prove a philosophical point about the nature of sexual desire. Blackburn (2004: 19) makes a similar observation about lust: "the enthusiastic desire, the desire that infuses the body, for sexual activity and its pleasures *for their own sake*" (our emphasis).

attitudes toward sex in the same way that other fictions are responsible for changes in their consumers' attitudes. We will examine her argument in three ways: contrasting it with other feminist criticisms of pornography, clarifying its target, and drawing out the role that the fictional character of pornography plays in it.

Criticisms of pornography can be categorized by the kind of harm that they focus on. First, some pornographic works are said to *result from harm* to women. The brutal treatment of Linda Lovelace in the production of *Deep Throat* provides an unfortunately vivid example. In response to this criticism, one might note that while there exist some pornographic works that result from harm, not all do. So, being originated from harm cannot be an essential feature of pornography.

Second, pornography is said to *constitute harm* toward women, in a way comparable to hate speech toward their targets. This line of criticism has been advanced by, amongst others, Rae Langton (1990, 1993), Catherine MacKinnon (1987), and Melinda Vadas (1987, 2005). As Langton (2008: 1) notes, the details of the specific criticisms vary (in-text references are omitted for clarity in presentation):

> Considerable work has been done to unpack the idea that pornography might harm women in a constitutive manner: for example, the idea that it discriminates against women; it subordinates women; it enacts facts about what is permissible and not permissible; it alters conventions governing women's speech acts; it is comparable to hate speech and group libel. Agreement might well be reached that certain forms of pornography—for example, an infamous *Hustler* image of a headless naked woman being fed into a meat grinder—harm women in the way that hate speech and racial insults are understood to be constitutively harming their targets.

Despite the variations in details, there is a point of agreement that we can rephrase in familiar aesthetic terminology: pornography's inegalitarian *depiction* of sex is itself harmful. The pornographic images or texts themselves are morally problematic, regardless of their origins or effects.

Third, pornography is said to *cause harm* to women in the real world through its consumers (who are typically men).[13] Eaton's argument, we think, is an exemplar of this line of criticism because it is highly nuanced and attentive to both the available empirical evidence and the philosophical literature on fictions' capacity for persuasion. Eaton locates pornography's harm in its effects: pornography harms women because it habituates its consumers' attitudes "in ways that are injurious to women" (2007: 677). The source of pornography's harm, according to Eaton, is in its capacity to *persuade* consumers to adopt inegalitarian attitudes.

One nuance in Eaton's criticism of pornography is with respect to the target. Instead of criticizing all pornography, she focuses on *inegalitarian pornography*:

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[13] Our taxonomy is somewhat imprecise in one respect. Critics who claim that pornography constitutes harm, in a way comparable to hate speech, often also claim that pornography causes harm. After all, hate speech does cause genuine harm to its targets. In fact, according to these critics, pornography causes harm *because* it constitutes harm. So, when we discuss criticisms of pornography on the ground that it causes harm, we are focusing on the other ways that pornography is said to cause harm. In other words, we are focusing on a line of criticism that stands independently of the constituting-harm line. We thank Rae Langton for alerting us to this imprecision in our taxonomy.

"sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender inequity" (2007: 676). On Eaton's definition, the inequality that characterizes inegalitarian pornography is to be found in the representation itself, and not in the effect the representation has. Defining inegalitarian pornography in consequential terms—for example, as pornography that persuades consumers to adopt injurious attitudes of gender inequality—would make her argument rather trivial; on this definition, it is almost definitional that inegalitarian pornography causes harm. Hence, Eaton's criticism must only be directed toward pornography that, *in its depiction*, eroticizes relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender inequality.

The fictional character of pornography plays an important role in Eaton's argument against inegalitarian pornography. In explicating the mechanism by which pornography persuades consumers to adopt inegalitarian attitudes, Eaton (2008: 1-5) explicitly draws on the philosophical literature on fictions' capacity for persuasion. Philosophers have long argued that fictions can play an important role in moral education. Recent defenders of this thesis include Daniel Jacobson (1996) and Martha Nussbaum (1990). On the model that Jacobson and Nussbaum advance, fictions prescribe consumers to respond to fictional characters and scenarios in particular ways, and in doing so, also cultivate consumers' dispositions to respond similarly to real persons and situations. The same mechanism underwrites pornography's real-world impact.

The crucial move in Eaton's argument against inegalitarian pornography can be seen in the following two passages. To start, Eaton (2008: 3) gives a rather abstract example to illustrate how a fiction can be responsible for changes in consumers' attitudes:

> For instance, when a character in a movie makes me feel disgust I don't simply have a somatic response (like a tickle) but, rather, I see the character as *worthy* of my disgust; that is, as *disgusting*. In this way the emotional responses that representations solicit, color our perceptions. … If the movie just mentioned were sufficiently compelling, then my engagement with it would likely bring me to see other persons of that type as disgusting (or, to take the first-person perspective, I would come to see what is disgusting about other persons of that type).

In Eaton's example, the movie prescribes consumers to imaginatively find a character disgusting—that is, worthy of disgust *in the fictional world*; and in doing so, the movie also cultivates consumers to genuinely find similar people disgusting—that is, worthy of disgust *in the real world*. According to Eaton (2008: 4), pornography functions similarly in molding consumers' sexual desires:

> In so far as inegalitarian pornography succeeds in rendering inegalitarian sex – in all of its forms – sexy, it convinces its users that inegalitarian sex is in fact *desirable*; i.e., *worthy* of desire. The emphasis here is not on the *ideas* that result from using inegalitarian pornography but, rather, on the more primary effect, namely the deformation of our emotional capacities and the resulting taste for inegalitarian sex of differing varieties and strengths.

In other words, according to Eaton, pornography prescribes consumers to imaginatively find inegalitarian sex desirable—that is, worthy of desire *in the fictional world*; and in doing so, pornography also cultivates consumers to genuinely find similarly inegalitarian sex desirable—that is, worthy of desire *in the real world*.

To foreshadow our problem with Eaton's argument, note the abstractness of the movie example; for instance, she does not mention the genre of the movie in the example. The abstractness suggests that, in making her argument against inegalitarian pornography, Eaton is implicitly assuming that prescribing consumers to imaginatively respond in a particular way *invariably* cultivates consumers to genuinely respond in the same way. Indeed, this assumption is also reflected in the generality of her claim about inegalitarian pornography. In short, our problem with Eaton's argument is that it unduly minimizes a substantial gap between depiction and persuasion, between prescription and cultivation, and between fictionality and reality.[14] In the next section, we argue that prescribing consumers to imaginatively respond in a particular way *need not* cultivate consumers to genuinely respond in the same way.

4. Imaginative Response, Genuine Response, and Genre Variations

The recognition of pornography's fictional character encourages us to grapple with the complexity of fictions. Specifically, different fictions have different *modes of persuasion*.[15] Some fictions, such as realistic dramas, are responsible for cultivating genuine responses similar to the imaginative responses that it prescribes. Other fictions, such as satirical comedies, are responsible for cultivating genuine responses that differ from the imaginative responses that it prescribes. In this section, we discuss such genre variations in the relationship between imaginative responses and genuine responses. We will late argue that such genre variations can be found in the realm of pornography, too. But let us begin by explicating two central theoretical terms.

First, what do we mean by "responsible for"? The relationship between fictions and consumers that we are interested in is neither straightforwardly causal nor straightforwardly normative. We can get a grasp on the notion with a brief thought experiment. Suppose there exists a film that is qualitatively identical to Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, which satirizes the dysfunctions of modern bureaucracy. However, this fiction has only one consumer. As a matter of fact, the film *causes* this consumer to come to adopt a positive attitude toward modern bureaucracy. Intuitively, even though this fiction is—by stipulation—the *cause*, it is not *responsible for* this undesirable consequence. We absolve the fiction of the moral blame because we think that a *normal* consumer, one who understands the film to be a dystopian satire,

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[14] This gap, in its various guises, has been highlighted by Giovannelli (2007), Hanson (1998), Jacobson (1997), and Mullin (2004) in a different context—the debate over the appropriateness of ethical criticisms of art.

[15] In the same spirit, Harold (2007) uses a detailed examination of *Catch-22* to note the various ways that literature can morally educate readers; and Livingston (2009) argues that the diversity of narratives should make us wary of general claims about narratives' capacity to educate and corrupt. Liao (2013) develops an account of moral persuasion that is sensitive to the diversity of fictions.

would not come to adopt such an attitude; or because we think that coming to adopt such an attitude is not a *fitting response* to the film, given the content the film has and the conventions that govern it.[16]

With this brief thought experiment as our guide, we understand the attitudinal changes that a fiction is *responsible for* to be the attitudinal changes that it would cause a normal consumer to have, or the attitudinal changes that are fitting. In most ordinary cases, there is a convergence between the attitudinal changes that a fiction is responsible for and the attitudinal changes that a fiction in fact causes. However, the brief thought experiment shows that the two are also conceptually distinct. We adopt the "responsible for" locution to emphasize that we are concerned with both normative and descriptive aspects of the relationship between pornographic works and consumers.

Second, what do we mean by "genre"? There are few systematic treatments of genre in contemporary analytic aesthetics.[17] To keep our theoretical commitments minimal, we take a genre to simply be a special grouping of fictions that is recognized by a community as such. Walton's (1970) account of perceptually-distinguishable categories suggests one, but by no means the only, way of filling out our minimalist conception of genre. On Walton's account, a fiction's appropriate classification in a genre depends on factors such as its relevant resemblance to other fictions in that genre, the artist's intentions, critical judgments, and that genre's propensity for aesthetic pleasure. A genre can be relatively broad, such as comedy, or relatively narrow, such as Shakespearean tragedy. Typically, a genre will overlap with and stand in hierarchical relationships to many other genres. Typically, a fiction is appropriately classified in multiple genres, some of which may be particularly salient for a given aim or context.

But genre is philosophically significant because it is more than just a classification device. Genre influences the normative conditions of our imaginative engagements with fictions and our actual responses. While it is *appropriate* to laugh at a decapitation scene in a horror comedy, it is not appropriate to laugh at an identical scene in a film noir. While we *in fact* tend to laugh at a decapitation scene in a horror comedy, we in fact tend to not laugh at a decapitation scene in a film noir. Genre conventions and expectations partly determine how we are to bring our genuine attitudes to bear on imaginative engagement (*import*) and how we are to bring our imaginative attitudes to bear on reality (*export*).[18] On the descriptive front, Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) provide an overview of extant psychological research on genre's influence on imaginative engagement.

We can now state our position, which has a negative and a positive component, more carefully. The negative component: a fiction—pornographic or

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[16] The notion of normality adopted here is essentially evaluative rather than statistical. Lance and Little (2004, 2005, 2006) explains this notion in greater detail and provides numerous examples where what is normal diverges form what is statistically typical. Similarly, the notion of fittingness adopted here is normative rather than descriptive. D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) explain this notion in greater detail and contrast it with nearby notions, such as moral propriety.

[17] There are exceptions—notably Currie (2004), Laetz and Lopes (2008), and Walton (1970).

[18] Liao (2011), ch. 2, develops a detailed account of genre convention and expectation en route to resolving the puzzle of imaginative resistance.

not—that prescribes consumers to imaginatively respond to fictional characters and scenarios in a particular way is *not* invariably responsible for the consumers coming to genuinely respond to analogous real persons and situations in the same way. The positive component: genre is a factor that determines whether prescribing consumers to imaginatively respond to fictional characters and scenarios in a particular way is responsible for the consumers coming to genuinely respond to analogous real persons and situations in the same way.

Let us start by looking at genre variations in non-pornographic fictions' modes of persuasion. The HBO television series *The Wire* and the Stanley Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove* are both fictions that are widely thought to be morally educative. Both fictions serve up powerful social commentaries on arguably futile wars and associated dysfunctional institutions. However, they make their social commentaries in radically different ways. *The Wire* is a realistic drama that gives the audience a candid look at the war on drugs. In contrast, *Dr. Strangelove* is a satirical comedy that gives the audience an ironic look at the cold war. In virtue of their different genres, the two fictions call for different modes of imaginative engagement.

Specifically, while *The Wire* is *response-realistic*, *Dr. Strangelove* is not.[19] When we watch *The Wire*, we are to respond to fictional characters and scenarios in the same way that we respond to analogous persons and situations in reality. In turn, when we imaginatively find a character sympathetic—that is, worthy of sympathy in the fictional world—we are to genuinely find similar people sympathetic—that is, worthy of sympathy in the real world. So, when we come to see that even the toughest stick-up man, Omar Little, and the smartest businessman, Stringer Bell, cannot escape the drug trade institutions that virtually guarantee their doom, we come to not only sympathize with these fictional characters, but also their real-world counterparts. By depicting people in the drug trade sympathetically, *The Wire* is also responsible for persuading us to sympathize with real-world individuals who are similarly trapped in dysfunctional institutions.

In contrast, when we watch *Dr. Strangelove*, we are to *not* respond to fictional characters and scenarios in the same way that we respond to analogous persons and situations in reality. Since the film is a satire, its fictional world differs from ours in important respects; it is a world where the absurd is normal. In turn, when we imaginatively find a war-related idea reasonable—that is, rationally warranted in the fictional world—we are to *not* genuinely find similar ideas reasonable—that is, rationally warranted in the real world. So, when we imagine that it makes perfect sense to construct a doomsday machine to ensure mutually assured destruction (well, as long as the enemy is aware of the threat), we are to believe the opposite— that this idea in fact makes no sense at all.[20] By depicting the idea of a doomsday

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[19] We want to separate response realism from *depiction realism*. A fiction is depiction-realistic if its depictions closely resemble what they depict. This distinction is relevant because *The Wire* is both response-realistic and depiction-realistic. However, the two kinds of realism need not go together. For example, a cartoon video that demonstrates fire emergency procedures is response-realistic but not depiction-realistic.

[20] We acknowledge that there can be other interpretations of the way that *Dr. Strangelove* – and indeed, satires generally – morally persuade. However, we think our interpretation explains the ironic distance that this satire, and satires generally, force on the audience. On our interpretation, the ironic distance is created by the gap between the appropriate response to fictional characters and scenarios and the appropriate response to

machine as reasonable in the fictional world, *Dr. Strangelove* is in fact responsible for persuading us to find similar ideas in the real world to be unreasonable.

There is clearly much more that can be said about the moral dimensions of *The Wire* and *Dr. Strangelove* than we have space for. However, the necessary simplifications we make bring out two crucial points. First, a fiction can cultivate genuine responses that differ from—and in the case of *Dr. Strangelove*, are the opposite of—the imaginative responses that it prescribes. Second, genre is one factor that explains the variations in the relationship between the genuine responses that a fiction cultivates and the imaginative responses that it prescribes. In fact, genre gives us the necessary finer distinctions; the dichotomous taxonomy of response-realism versus response-unrealism is too coarse because a fiction can be response-realistic in one respect but not response-realistic in another respect.[21] For example, science fictions are plausibly response-realistic with respect to morality but not response-realistic with respect to physics.

5. Modes of Persuasion and Genre Variations in Pornography

With these two points in mind, we now return to pornography. In the marketplace, there is a wide variety of pornographic works. These works, like non-pornographic fictions, come in different genres. Some pornography genres are response-realistic *with respect to attitudes toward sexual relationships and practices*, and others are not. Consequently, not all inegalitarian depictions of sex are responsible for consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex. Only response-realistic pornographic works that prescribe consumers to imaginatively find inegalitarian sex desirable are responsible for cultivating consumers' genuine desire for inegalitarian sex.

Examples of pornographic works that are not response-realistic (with respect to sexual matters) can be found in many fetish pornography genres, such as BDSM.[22] Consider a BDSM pornography video that depicts a sexual scenario that involves a woman being treated violently. Consumers are prescribed to imaginatively find violent treatments of women to be sexually desirable. However, conventionally, BDSM fictional worlds differ from ours in important respects. For example, plausibly in BDSM fictional worlds women universally find pain to be sexually pleasurable. So, consumers are prescribed to *not* import their belief that, in reality, women have different preferences and tolerances with pain. A normal consumer of BDSM pornography is able to (often unconsciously) recognize import rules like these and that they have corresponding export rules. Thus, he is able to (again, often

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analogous persons and situations in reality.

[21] We are assuming that, in general, the various respects in which a fiction is response-realistic or not can be discerned from one another, even if no sharp boundaries exists between them. However, we acknowledge that there are difficult cases located on the vague boundaries. We thank Hans Maes for pressing us to clarify and articulate our assumption here.

[22] Eaton (2007: 676) implicitly suggests that BDSM pornography falls outside the scope of her target, inegalitarian pornography. Indeed, she calls the power dynamics in BDSM pornography "often liberatory". However, it is unclear to us why BDSM pornography should fall outside the scope of her target, if—as we have argued in section 3—inegalitarian pornography is to be characterized by its depictions rather than its consequences.

unconsciously) recognize that the imaginative attitudes are to be quarantined from export. So, despite imaginatively finding violent treatments of women to be sexually desirable, the normal consumer would not come to genuinely find violent treatments of women to be sexually desirable. This example generalizes: pornographic works that are not response-realistic are not responsible for persuading consumers to come to genuinely adopt injurious attitudes of gender inequality even when their depictions of sexual relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) are characterized by gender inequality.

Eaton's argument against inegalitarian pornography is best restricted to mainstream pornography, where response realism (with respect to sexual matters) is essential to its success. Mainstream pornography does not involve overtly inegalitarian sex, but instead aggrandizes sexual fantasies rooted in reality that subtly objectify women. For example, mainstream pornography picks up on and showcases men's fantasies involving their semen. Sexual acts depicted typically conclude with the man ejaculating on the woman's face—the more the better, of course—and the woman enjoying this. In doing so, mainstream pornography ignores reality in the imaginative attitudes it prescribes: the quantity of semen is hardly relevant to sexual pleasure and women's attitudes toward semen vary, but rarely are they blindly worshipful. What makes this ignorance of reality problematic is that, conventionally, mainstream pornographic worlds are supposed to be more or less like ours with respect to sexual matters. Consumers are to import their genuine attitudes toward sex in imaginatively engaging with mainstream pornography; so, the corresponding export rule dictates that they are to export their imaginative attitudes toward sex back out into the real world.

In contrast with the import and export rules of many fetish pornography genres, the import and export rules of mainstream pornography make claims on how reality *should* be. For example, it is responsible for persuading consumers to come to think that men *and women* derive pleasure when semen is abundant and women receptive. Insofar as mainstream pornography succeeds in developing consumers' imaginative taste for inegalitarian sexual relations, such as sex that must end with facial ejaculation, it also succeeds in developing consumers' genuine taste for inegalitarian sexual relations. Response-realistic pornographic works are therefore indeed responsible for persuading consumers to come to genuinely adopt injurious attitudes of gender inequality when their depictions of sexual relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) are characterized by gender inequality.

With pornography, our position is that *some* inegalitarian depictions of sex are responsible for consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex and *some* inegalitarian depictions of sex are *not* responsible for consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex; and that genre is one factor that helps to explain whether an inegalitarian depiction of sex is responsible for consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex. To put our position into context, note that it differs from both Eaton's position, which claims that *all* inegalitarian depictions of sex are responsible for consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes toward sex, as well as Brandon Cooke's (2012) position, which claims that *no* inegalitarian depiction of sex is responsible for consumers' adoption of inegalitarian attitudes

toward sex. A final clarification: we are not committed to, say, the claim that BDSM pornographic works are *never* responsible for persuading consumers to come to genuinely adopt injurious attitudes of gender inequality; genre may compete with and lose out to other factors that matter for a fiction's mode of persuasion. However, we focus on genre because it is an important factor that is also unfortunately overlooked in this debate.

6. Two Suggestions for Advancing the Debate

We end with two suggestions for advancing the debate over pornography's ethical status and permissibility. First, we call for critics of pornography to recognize that different genres of pornography may involve different kinds of harm. Second, we call for all participants of the debate to attend to the psychological literature on the real-world impact of fictions.

The recognition of pornography's fictional character opens up the possibility of a more nuanced perspective in criticizing pornography. Our claim that some inegalitarian pornography does not cause harm should not be mistaken for the claim that some inegalitarian pornography must involve no harm whatsoever. Even if some fetish pornographic works do not *cause* harm, they might nevertheless *result* from harm or *constitute* harm in themselves. What we suggest is that different kinds of criticisms may be more appropriate for different kinds of pornography. While mainstream pornography may be criticized for persuading consumers to adopt injurious attitudes of gender inequality, necrophilia pornography may be criticized for functioning as hate speech against women.[23] The different feminist criticisms of pornography are not only compatible, but also complementary.

The recognition of pornography's fictional character also opens up the possibility of broadening the empirical evidential base for the debate over pornography's ethical status and permissibility. Participants in this debate are rightly attentive to the empirical evidence of pornography's harms. Folk psychological observations are supplemented with findings from different kinds of studies. Ecological studies track long-term effects of pornography consumption through the variation between the availability of pornography and sex crimes, especially rape. Clinical studies assess short-term influences that viewing pornography has on consumers' attitudes in a laboratory setting. However, to date, there has been little convergence in the findings. Some studies suggest significant correlations between the consumption of pornography and inegalitarian attitudes, behaviors, or norms. Other studies find no such correlations. Moreover, as Eaton (2007: 697-710) notes, many studies suffer from serious methodological flaws. Despite decades of empirical scrutiny, a confident consensus remains elusive in the domain of pornography research.

Our suggestion is to take a broader view to empirical research on other works

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[23] As we have noted in section 3, there is a prominent line of criticism that construes pornography as hate speech against women. These critics have focused on violent pornography, including rape and strangulation pornography. We believe that necrophilia pornography falls under this category too, given its implied violence.

that share pornography's fictional character, such as violent games.[24] Once we recognize the similarities in the mechanisms that underwrite various fictions' capacity of persuasion, it becomes apparent that the work that psychologists and communication theorists have done on non-pornographic fictions are directly relevant to the pornography debate.[25] However, we also want to urge empirical researchers to take genre variations into account. Perhaps one reason a confident consensus remains elusive in the domain of pornography research is that, as we argued earlier, different kinds of pornography have different modes of persuasion. Therefore, attending to genre variations could help us reach more-circumscribed, but also better-supported, conclusions about the effects of pornography consumption.

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[24] Cooke (2012) implicitly makes this suggestion too. However, we do not share Cooke's view that the violent games literature tells strongly against fictions' capacity for persuasion. We think the literature has not reached a confident consensus, and far more research—especially ones that are sensitive to genre variations—needs to be done.

[25] Liao and Gendler (2011) provide a brief overview of this research.

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