Imagination, Fantasy, and Sexual Desire

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, I argue against the view that visual pornography *qua* pornography – that is, regarded as such – cannot be simultaneously viewed with aesthetic interest. Second, I argue that where it is so regarded it engages states of imagining that are desire-like, rather than real desires. Moreover, insofar as this activity essentially involves the self in *de se* imaginative projects, it can possess certain cognitive values.

The argument for both claims draws on the idea that the appreciation of pornographic representations is heterogeneous; in particular, I make a distinction between two different appreciative attitudes or states: regarding pornography as fiction, and regarding it as non-fiction. The latter, I hold, does not involve the imagination, but involves instead the voyeuristic-like 'transparency' that, as some philosophers have argued, precludes aesthetic interest, and in virtue of doing so I hold that it involves real sexual desire. Indeed, this is what partially explains the phenomenon and phenomenology of transparency. In contrast, the appreciation of pornography as fictional, I contend, essentially involves the imagination and the 'opaque' aesthetic attention to and appreciation of the 'formal features' of the work. This constitutes an awareness of fictionality and ensures that our imaginative engagement is one involving merely imagined 'desire-like' states involving some aspects of the self as a character in the fictional world. Significantly, this imaginative engagement is sufficient to cause certain physiological and emotional sexual responses, but ones that we are sufficiently detached from such that they can serve as objects of reflection, of meta-responses of approval and disapproval.

I. Transparent Appreciation

The main issue I am concerned with in this paper is the nature of our appreciation of pornography; specifically with the question of whether such appreciation can be aesthetic, and hence whether pornography can have aesthetic value.[1] This issue, which I shall dub the 'appreciation problem', has generally been addressed in the context of the definitional debate about whether pornography can be art, and how to differentiate art, erotic art, and pornography. I will not be concerned to address the definitional issue here, at least not directly, but what I have to say about the nature of appreciation will have certain implications for it. In order to address these issues, I shall focus on visual pornographic representations, and will explore the nature of sexual desire and its relationship to the imagination. In particular, it will be important to dwell on three important distinctions: (i) between 'real' desire and imaginary desire; (ii) between fantasy and imagination; (iii) and between what I shall term 'fictional pornography' and 'non-fictional pornography'.

A particularly cogent and provocative way of articulating the kind of position I shall be concerned to reject consists in the following claim, which for reasons that will quickly become apparent I will refer to as the 'transparency thesis': even if a pornographic work may aim at and achieve certain artistic/aesthetic interest and value(s), this is at best incidental to its pornographic interest and value, and it cannot be appreciated as both art and pornography at one and the same time. Why? Because attention to and appreciation of its aesthetic features, *qua* aesthetic, necessarily precludes attention to and appreciation of its pornographic content, *qua* pornographic – and vice versa. This view can be drawn from Jerrold Levinson's (2005) paper 'Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures' :

'an image that has an artistic interest, dimension, or intent is one that is not simply *seen through*, or *seen past*, leaving one, at least in imagination, face to face with its subject. Images with an artistic dimension are thus to some extent *opaque*, rather than *transparent*. In other words, with artistic images we are invited to dwell on features of the image itself, and not merely on what the image represents. Both erotica and pornography predominantly aim at sexually affecting the viewer, one with an eye toward stimulation, the other with an eye toward arousal. They accordingly do not seek to have attention rest on the vehicle of such stimulation or arousal, the medium through which the sexual content is communicated or presented.' (232)[2]

Essentially a surrogate for sex, the aims of pornography, Levinson holds, are best fulfilled by media that exhibit the most transparency, namely film and photography. For in appreciating pornography we are interested in focusing on the object (or rather subjects) represented, not in appreciating the various imagistic and stylistic features employed to convey this content. In fact, the claim is stronger than this might suggest. It is not just that we are not interested in, or that the aim is not to focus attention on the form/vehicle/medium conveying the pornographic content; it is that attending to the medium itself necessarily *hinders* or *undermines* attention to what the image represents. This is clear in his objection to Matthew Kieran's (2001) attempt to argue

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[1] Although in other contexts one might want to distinguish them, I will use the terms 'aesthetic' and 'artistic' interchangeably throughout.

[2] 'Erotic art, though aimed in part at sexually affecting the viewer, at stimulating sexual thoughts and feelings…also aims in some measure to draw the viewer's attention to the vehicle, inviting the viewer to contemplate the relationship between the stimulation achieved and the means employed to achieve it…' (232)

that certain works of art, such as Klimt's erotic drawings, are pornographic but not thereby bereft of artistic value and interest:

'It is one thing to say that certain artistic *devices*, masterfully deployed, can enhance the erotic charge of a representation. It is quite another to say that a viewer's *focusing on* those devices will enhance the representation's erotic charge for the viewer, that is, render it more stimulating or arousing. There is every reason to think it would not, that it will rather temper the stimulation or arousal involved, replacing what is thus lost, however, with a portion of aesthetic pleasure.' (Ibid. 234)

Pornography and art are, Levinson claims, to be differentiated in virtue of their aims as these relate to the role of the features of the medium in inviting our attention and interest. Pornography 'enjoins treatment of the image as transparent, as simply presenting its subject for sexual fantasizing, thus *entailing inattention* to the form or fashioning of the image…'. (Ibid. 236-7)[3]

It is important to note that aesthetic interest is here being identified with interest in the properties and features of the medium itself, an identification that in turn rests on a presupposed distinction between what for the moment we may loosely call 'form' and 'content'. In order to assess these claims and to gain a clearer grasp of just what this distinction consists in, we need to look more closely at what the relevant 'medium awareness' consists in. What are the relevant features of the representational medium to which we attend when aesthetically engaging with an artwork; that, in the case of visual works such as films, render their images opaque rather than transparent?

I shall indiscriminately refer to such features as 'formal features', 'aesthetic features', 'features of the medium' or 'representational features'. Roughly, they constitute any of those elements that serve as the vehicles whereby the content is (re)presented, and which determine the way in which the content is conveyed and perceived. We can divide such features into two broad classes: (a) perceptual features, and (b) non-perceptual features. In the case of film, in Class (a), for example, we find sound, lighting, camera angles and perspectives, the screen itself – roughly all those elements which combine to give the film the 'look' that it has, that constitute our perceptual experience of the film. In Class (b) are located elements that seem to be strictly non-perceptual but that nonetheless play some sort of role in our overall film experience, as background knowledge that in some yet to be specified way imbues and organises this experience. For example, narrative structure, genre, authorial intentions, directorial decisions, and so on.

The precise relationship between these two classes, and the connection between them and our attention to and appreciation of the 'content' that is represented via them is a complex and controversial issue, particularly in philosophical discussions of film experience. (See Davies 203) At least one influential account, however, suggests that the transparency of which Levinson talks simply does not occur in our experience of film, pornographic or otherwise.

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[3] '[Pornography] induces you, in the name of arousal and release, to ignore the representation so as to get at the represented, [erotic art] induces you, in the name of aesthetic delight, to dwell on the representation and to contemplate it in relation to the stimulating or arousing qualities of what is represented.' (234)

Greg Currie (1995) holds that when watching a film the content of my experience is never simply 'as of seeing' X, but always of seeing X-as-representation. That is, I am always experiencing what is represented in a film *as* representations, not directly *as* what is represented, which would be the case were I, for instance, to have the perceptual illusion that I am really seeing Xs. In other words, we are always aware of the representational, fictional nature of what we are watching. However 'realistic', our film experience, we never suffer from perceptual illusion. We are always medium aware in the sense that we experience or see the film as an X-representation, rather than *seeing it* as an x.

Put like this, however, it does little to undermine the transparency thesis, for our awareness of pornography as a representation is not obviously incompatible with us not dwelling on the features of the representational images when appreciating the pornographic content of those images. We do not suffer from the perceptual illusion that we are actually watching, say, some people indulging their sexual appetites, but we are nonetheless appreciating what is depicted *solely for* its sexually arousing content when appreciating it qua pornography.[4]

It seems, however, that our film experience is also necessarily penetrated by an awareness of extra-narrative or extra-fictional features such as the inferences we make about the fictional truths in a story which require some attention to elements in Class (b): authorial intentions, hypothetical narrators, genre knowledge, and so on. It is, after all, central to the appreciation and understanding of a fictional narrative that we recognise that things are told *for a reason*. In other words, the content of our perceptual experience is somehow influenced or penetrated or imbued by those extra-perceptual elements I listed in Class (b).

There is some debate about whether this strongly cognitivist account can adequately explain the perceptual content of film experience. I will not enter this debate here, but it is sufficient for our purposes to note that in film experience we cannot only switch between attention to formal features, such as the style and camera angles, and the content which these convey; we also experience the kind of 'twofoldness' that Richard Wollheim thought characterised our experience of painted depictions. Indeed, it is arguably a *sine qua non* of normal film experience that we simultaneously attend to something both as a representation and as what is represented. Appealing to *trompe l'oeil* depictions, David Davies (2003) (in the process of attacking Currie's account) argues that we must be able to differentiate between the following two situations: (a) I look at the trompe l'oeil, realizing it is a trompe l'oeil, but I still see it as what it represents; (b) I look at the same trompe l'oeil, still realizing that it is a trompe l'oeil, but now I see it *as* a representation. (Davies 2003: pp. 240-1) The difference here, he rightly holds, lies in the perception, not (*contra* Currie) in the thought. Rather the thought, as it were, imbues the perception.

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[4] One could compare this to a similar position that might be adopted with respect to the paradox of fiction – the problem of how one can respond emotionally to what one knows is merely fictional. That is, it could be argued that our normal emotional responses require that one is not *fully*, occurrently, actively attending to the fictionality *as such* of the object (and hence one's epistemic relation to this object) towards which one's emotions are directed. This is compatible with our being *passively* aware of p-as-fiction, however, since all that this requires is not *actively* attending *fully* to this fact whilst involved in the relevant propositional imagining.

The important point here is that our (perceptual) experience of what is represented in a film is necessarily 'imbued' by the features in Class (a) that govern the way in which is it represented, and also by the non-perceptual elements listed in Class (b). In short, it looks like any plausible account of film experience must require that form and content cannot be separated in the way that Levinson's transparency thesis apparently requires, and presupposes, in order to differentiate between pornographic and artistic appreciation. There simply is no such thing as complete transparency.

Yet this too fails to get to the heart of the transparency thesis. To see why, we must note that the nature of our awareness of 'formal features' may refer to a number of different types (and degrees) of attention, interest, and perceptual content. There seem to me to be at least three ways of understanding this awareness that require careful differentiating: (i) the features play some more or less peripheral role in determining how the content is perceived; (ii) we can pay more or less disinterested attention to the features, perhaps oscillating between attending to them, and attending to the content they are used to represent; (iii) we focus fully and attentively on the formal features with the intention of appreciating them, as it were, for their own sake.

It seems that the transparency claim is properly construed as concerning the last category just listed; that is, with the role of occurrent attention to and appreciation of formal features i.e. features of aesthetic interest. Interpreted this way, the claim is not that, *generally*, opaqueness of and attention to the medium, to the representation *as* representation undermines or hinders attention to what is represented. For this is clearly not the case in our usual appreciation of art works (including films), where it seems that our attention just is devoted equally to both form and content and the relation between them. The issue concerns the possibility of *simultaneous* appreciation of something *as* art and *as* pornography.

The problem thus appears to be specific to the appreciation of pornography qua pornography. To the extent that we attend to the formal features of the medium, appreciating them for their own sake, we necessarily cease to take a pornographic interest in the representation – its pornographic content is necessarily occluded from our attention and interest. This is brought out in Levinson's reply to the objection that 'some pornography works *precisely by engaging* the artistic interest of the viewer…[inviting]invite attention to their artistic aspects *precisely so as to* enhance sexual arousal or fantasy involvement on the viewer's part' (Levinson 2005: p. 236) Suggesting that this represents a complex mode of pornography aimed at a cognitively atypical viewer, he responds thus:

'even in such cases, so long as the image is being regarded as pornography, aspects of the image are not being appreciated for their own sakes, but only as instruments to more effective arousal, fantasy, and release… if such drawing of attention [to artistic aspects of the image] is entirely in the service of arousal aimed at, then the image remains pornography, however artful, and not art' (pp. 236-7).

Thus the transparency thesis seems to be twofold: (1) Generally, (invited) attention to the medium [i.e. opacity] necessarily hinders or undermines (invited) pornographic interest (which requires transparency); (2) However, in unusual, cognitively odd cases where opacity actually accentuates the sexually arousing nature of the pornographic content, (i) the images' features are not being appreciated *for their own sakes*, and [hence] (ii) the image remains pornography.

Pornography can thus be distinguished from art and erotic art in virtue of the kind of attention it invites and sustains. Levinson's own position seems to be aimed directly at this question, and he concentrates on defending the idea that one cannot coherently and successfully aim at two incompatible audience responses. But as we are more interested in the nature of this attention and the appreciative states involved, we can avoid the definitional question and can formulate it instead as a claim about the psychological possibility of particular types of appreciative attitudes. Aesthetic interest requires (and pornographic interest requires the absence of) either opaqueness and/or appreciation of the relevant formal features *for their own sake*. To the extent that one pays attention to and appreciates formal features for their own sake, to that extent our interest necessarily ceases to be in the pornographic content qua pornographic. Hence:

Transparency Thesis: Simultaneous and full occurrent attention to and appreciation of pornographic content (qua pornographic) and the formal aesthetic features in virtue of which it is represented (qua aesthetic) is (psychologically) impossible.

So the question we must obviously address is whether this is true, and if so what makes it true.[5] It appears that its truth must depend essentially on the specifically *sexually* arousing aim of the pornographic content, and that this is undermined by (and in turn undermines) aesthetic attention to and appreciation of the medium features for their own sake. But what is it about the nature of the sexual arousal and desire involved in an interest in pornographic images that is necessarily precluded or hindered (or at least weakened) by our attention to those features of the image 'for their own sake' that constitute the vehicle for such content?

II. Fantasy Desire

Some light is shed on this question in Roger Scruton's (1983) account of the nature of fantasy and desire (including sexual desire), an account that appears to lend independent support to the transparency thesis. Scruton argues that fantasy is a property of a desire, and a desire exhibits fantasy when: (i) its object in thought is not the object towards which it is expressed, or which it pursues; (ii) the object pursued acts as substitute for the object in thought; and (iii) the pursuit of the substitute is to be explained in terms of a personal prohibition. (p. 129) Thus, in short, fantasy is a 'real desire which, through prohibition, seeks an unreal, but realized, object'. (p. 130)

The idea is that fantasy desires seek satisfaction in objects that serve as surrogates for the real thing which is prohibited from being, so to speak, 'really' pursued. Scruton gives the example of a fascination with death and suffering where the desire to see real cases is prohibited from being fulfilled and hence turns instead to realistic portrayals that substitute for – serve as surrogate objects for – its satisfaction. Importantly for our discussion thus far, Scruton makes two central claims. The first concerns the nature of the fantasy object and offers an insightful way of understanding the transparency claim with respect to cinematic representations:

'a fantasy will seek to gratify itself, not in the delicately suggestive, but in the grossly obvious, or explicit. Thus a fantasy desire will characteristically seek, not a highly mannered or literary

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[5] Although he attacks Levinson's argument understood as a claim about simultaneous intentions, Maes (forthcoming) nonetheless upholds the transparency thesis as I formulate it here.

description, nor a painterly portrayal, of its chosen subject, but a perfect simulacrum – such as a waxwork, or a photograph. It eschews style and convention, since these constitute impediments to the construction of the surrogate object…The ideal fantasy object is perfectly 'realized', while remaining wholly unreal. It 'leaves nothing to the imagination': at the same time it is to be understood only as a simulacrum and not as the thing itself.' (p. 129)

Scruton thus argues that much interest in the cinema is fantasy interest, in which the camera is subject to a 'realization principle'. The second relevant claim concerns the nature of the fantasy desire, which Scruton stresses is a real desire:

'The subject of a fantasy really does want something. This is brought out by the fact that, in the case of sexual fantasy, the sexual experience may be pursued *through* the fantasy object, and attached to it by a definite onanistic activity. The subject wants something, but he wants it *in the form of a substitute*. This desire has its origin in, and is nurtured by, impulses which govern his general behaviour. Objects can be found to gratify his fantasy; but the fantasy is grounded in something that he really feels'. (p. 130)

Scruton's account thus appears to shed some light on what it is about the sexual interest involved in appreciating visual pornography that precludes simultaneous aesthetic appreciation. The desire born of sexual fantasy necessarily seeks satisfaction in the kinds of surrogate objects that pornographic images readily provide. Moreover, by its very nature, this fantasy desire requires the utmost transparency for its satisfaction and accordingly will shun the frustrating diversion that attention to artifice creates. Hence, in cases where we are caught up in attending to features of the medium that thereby serve to enhance our arousal, our *aim* is nonetheless governed *solely* by a real desire to satisfy our fantasy. The appreciation of the features of the image is therefore entirely subservient to this aim, which by its very nature undermines the capacity simultaneously to appreciate them for their own sake.

This idea is explicated more fully by the central distinction Scruton draws between fantasy and imagination. The imagination, he holds, unlike fantasy, is constrained by a 'reality principle' consisting in the aim of understanding the true nature of its objects. As such, genuine artistic appreciation, governed by the imagination, is concerned with plausibility and objective truth; the responses to art dependent upon the imagination are 'disciplined by the world, whereas the nature of the fantasy object is, in contrast, *dictated* by the passion which seeks to realize it'. (p. 131) The desires concomitant with our imaginative engagement with art are not real desires, whereas in fantasy 'there is a real feeling which, in being prohibited, compels an unreal object for its gratification'. (p. 132) It is thus this distinction that underpins the different between pornography and erotic art. (See also Scruton 2006.)

Thus, we have a distinction drawn here between, on the one hand, those sexual desires that exhibit fantasy, and which aim at their satisfaction through a transparent engagement with the kinds of substitutes readily provided by visual pornographic representations; and on the other hand, 'non-fantasy' sexual desires which aim at the 'imaginative identification with the sexual activity of another' (Scruton 2006: p. 346). Fantasy and imagination, one might say, have different directions of fit: the former, like desire, involves a world-to-mind fit, whereas imagination resembles belief in possessing a mind-to-world direction of fit.

It seems to follow from this that all sexual desires that exhibit fantasy will necessarily find their satisfaction in pornographic representations (and similar media that provide the required transparency and surrogate objects), but it does not seem to follow that

all types of appreciation of pornography qua pornography necessarily invite and involve only fantasy (in Scruton's sense), as opposed to non-fantasy, sexual desires. Some pornography may involve fantasy essentially, but it does not thereby follow that all pornography essentially involves it. Why, after all, could there not be non-fantasy sexual desires aimed at an imaginative engagement with the sexual activity and desires of another through pornographic engagement? In lieu of an argument against such a possibility we have little reason to hold that, given the nature of non-fantasy sexual desire, transparency is essential to pornography qua pornography.

I don't wish to quibble with Scruton's particular account of fantasy desire, and indeed I think it is important to distinguish the types of imaginative engagement that give rise to fantasy desires in his sense, from those which seek a type of aesthetic understanding. There is, in this way, an important distinction to be made between the different functional roles played by sexual desire in different appreciative projects that I shall return to below.

But let us first address the notion that pornography necessarily affords the surrogate objects to satiate the real desires of sexual fantasy. Even on its own terms, this appears doubtful. For even if watching pornography is a substitute for actual sex, it seems false to say, as Scruton does, that the subject thereby desires the object of his lust *in the form of a substitute*. In fact, it's difficult to know exactly what this means in the current context, but however it is interpreted it seems rather to be the case that many pornography consumers want the real thing that they cannot, for whatever reason, obtain. It might be the case that some pornography consumers, for whom there exist no potential suitors in real life who approach the relevant perfections of pornographic 'actors', prefer *de facto* the pornographic experience to the real life encounter. Yet arguably, in that case too the pornographic representation does not supply surrogates, but rather the real thing.

Naturally there may be people whose sexual desires stem partly from some kind of prohibition and perhaps the prohibited nature colours too the nature of their desires. No doubt engaging in sexual taboos carries its own special sexual frisson. Yet it is surely not the case that all consumers of pornography necessarily subject themselves to the relevant prohibitions, and again, even where they do, it is still not clear that they want the surrogate *qua* surrogate. A more obvious candidate for a fantasy surrogate object of sexual desires that meets Scruton's stipulations would seem to be the prostitute. The customer wants the prostitute *as* a substitute for sex with unpaid 'real' women, precisely because, for example, he prohibits himself from fulfilling his particular real desires with 'real life' women.

The scope of Scruton's claim is thus limited to those sexual desires arising from fantasy in his sense, but at best this will include only a certain limited class of pornographic appreciation, namely, where pornographic representations are desired *as* surrogates that stem from the relevant prohibitions. We still have little reason to assume that pornographic appreciation necessarily involves only fantasy sexual desires and the concomitant transparency that necessarily precludes simultaneous aesthetic interest.

III. Fictional Pornography

There is, nonetheless, clearly something intuitively right about the transparency thesis. Manifestations of strong sexual desire do seem to consist, at least in large part, in the subject eschewing everything that might hinder or distract from the primary goal of achieving sexual union with another person (or whatever the object of their sexual desire happens to be). In this way, it might seem that the appreciation of pornographic representations, aiming essentially at satisfying sexual desire – though generally through masturbation rather than sexual union – will achieve this best through transparency; that is, through ignoring the mere medium features to concentrate exclusively on the sexual content, and ideally, being helped to do so by the representation itself. After all, sexual arousal can be a fickle beast, easily deflated in reality by any number of events and shifts in awareness that deflect attention from the task at hand. Likewise in attending to pornography, where arousal can be undermined by unwanted attention being drawn to the awkward acting, poor camera angles, background chatter about the latest cricket score amongst the camera crew, or the defecating dog in the background shot.

Insofar as sexual desire operates like this, requiring a particular kind of unitary, direct, immediate satisfaction, transparency in representation may well be crucial. However, quick reflection on the various forms and content of real sexual arousal and desire shows that such a story offers an overly simplified picture, describing just one aspect of the psychologically complex phenomenon that is human sexual desire. Even excluding the extreme cases of pathological desires and sexual perversions, this phenomenon is incredibly heterogeneous, and the vast and intricate panoply of forms and objects that it involves in reality is naturally transferred to the quintessential object of appreciation that we have invented to help satisfy our sexual urges: pornography.

In reality, our perception of the object of our sexual desires is not governed solely by brute physical lust, but indelibly coloured by the complex psychological nature of those desires. These are heavily affected by changeable factors such as mood and attitude, our own and those of the people we are sexually assessing – what we find sexually desirable one moment may leave us indifferent, or even repel us, the next. Sexual arousal and desire also depend, crucially, on the perception and evaluation of subtle and particular movements and gestures, a particular look, a particular phrase or vocal tone, particular textures, colours, clothes and surroundings, all of which may play important roles in the formation and maintenance of our desires.

This much is obvious. But it is equally obvious both that there is a vast array of types of pornography devoted to satisfying particular desires, and that our ways of appreciating any given instance of any type of pornography will be equally subject to all the variety and complexity governing our sexual desires in general. Some pornography will simply involve depicting (in various ways) mere brute sexual acts, while some will involve various narrative elements that, as it were, lead up to these sexual acts. Some pornography, for instance, may involve lengthy story lines and have the titillation involved in expectation as its main goal, perhaps even avoiding the representation of explicitly sexual acts altogether. Sometimes me may desire one type one day, another the next; sometimes we may be aroused by the very same representation that previously left us unmoved. We may sometimes, in watching a pornographic film, skip ahead to the more explicit parts, at other times we may linger on certain narrative elements, savouring the excited state of expectation of sexual

satisfaction. Such are the whims and heterogeneity of sexual desire in general, and they apply equally to our sexual engagement with pornography.

Clearly there is no space here to make a comprehensive list of the types of pornographic representations and the variegated sexual interests they aim to satisfy. However, in order to demonstrate that pornographic appreciation may involve as an essential element simultaneous aesthetic appreciation, it is important to invoke a central distinction between what I shall call 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' pornography. This distinction, like that between art and pornography, is a blurry and relatively indeterminate one, subject to degree, and resting on a hazy web of threads connecting the intentions of the film-maker and various conventions, but most importantly on the appreciative goals and attitudes of the appreciator. A failure to recognise this distinction and the heterogeneity of our sexual desires and pornographic appreciation undermines the scope and plausibility of the transparency thesis and Scruton's account of fantasy.

Roughly, non-fictional pornography simply presents – or is taken to present – real people having sex, and the objects of sexual desire will in such cases often be the real people and scenes therein depicted. Fictional pornography, on the other hand, presents – or is taken to present – fictional narratives, where actors take on character roles and where fictional actions and events are represented for us to be imaginatively engaged with. Here the object of the sexual desire may be a fictional character or fictional state of affairs.

In the appreciation of non-fictional pornography, the transparency thesis seems most applicable. The straightforward depiction of real people simply having sex will often fulfil its aims by eschewing 'convention', just as our attention to it will normally avoid engaging with the aesthetic features of the image for their own sake. To the extent that we become distracted by them, to that extent our sexual arousal will be hindered and the aim of sexual desire potentially thwarted. This desire is real, involving our own sexual selves, but we engage with the scenes being presented merely as spectators, as voyeurs of the activities of the chief performers which serve as instruments for our own onanistic actions. If, however, we begin to imagine ourselves implicated in the scene, or to use the scene as a 'prop' in some imaginary project that goes beyond what is literally being presented, we have thereby begun to regard the film (in part) as a piece of fictional pornography.

Fictional pornography invites us to imagine that some situation or other is taking place and to view the actors as fictional characters in the drama. For example, we see a storyline unfold in which a pizza delivery boy arrives at a house where an older lady proceeds to take advantage of him; or we see actors dressed as doctors and nurses, or secretaries and bosses, or whatever, and we are to imagine of them that they are really doctors and nurses engaged in sexual acts with each other. Often we remain imaginary voyeurs of such representations, but we may also participate in imagination in the fictional scenes, either as ourselves, or as standing in the shoes (or embroiled in the bedclothes) of the participants we are observing. Our sexual fantasies are generally fantasies about ourselves involved sexually with others (even if merely implicated in the scene as voyeurs), and fictional pornography offers us concrete representations to serve as the context for such fantasies.

In contrast to the type of engagement characteristic of at least some instances of non-fictional pornographic appreciation, I suggest that in the case of fictional pornography there is every reason to think not just that we are generally interested in the formal features of the images for their own sake, nor that this interest merely enables us to enjoy the content, but that such interest may itself constitute (at least in part) the sexually arousing content. Form and content are inextricably intertwined in fictional pornography because appreciation of the way in which the content is presented plays an essential – and not merely instrumental – role in our imaginative engagement with the sexually arousing nature of this content.

Particularly striking examples of such cases occur when one finds the projected point of view of the implied voyeur or narrator itself sexually arousing. It is the precise, erotic way in which our gaze is directed by the camera – and perhaps also by dialogue – at the scene and its participants, and hence the way in which they are presented for us, that we find sexually arousing. In such cases both the perceptual features of the medium and the way in which one's gaze is directed to them (both really and in imagination) can be appreciated for their own sake as well as in virtue of the sexually arousing content they are employed to convey. In other words, what is simultaneously appreciated is both the form and the content *and* the particular relationship between them. More prosaic examples can be pointed to: the costumes that the participants are wearing, the background scenery, and the way in which the narrative develops, may all be aesthetically appreciated, and are the features in virtue of which we simultaneously find the content thereby manifested to be sexually arousing.

It would be wrong to say that such aesthetic attention can only play an instrumental role and otherwise necessarily entails some loss of pornographic appreciation. Even if this may be true of some cases of individual sexual psychology, it seems perfectly possible, even relatively normal, to be sexually aroused *in virtue of* the appreciation of these sorts of features when engaged with much fictional pornography – and even perhaps to a more limited extent when engaged sometimes with non-fictional pornography. There simply seems to be no good reason to deny that any of the representational features – camera angles, lighting, clothing, backdrop, script, narrative structure and so on – constituting the fictional narrative (however simple) with which we are imaginatively engaged can be appreciated simultaneously with the content that is determined by them.

This denial gets all of its force from (a) an implicit and rigid separation of form and content that simply need not exist in practice, and (b) the consideration of cases where medium awareness does indeed distract us from the content we are trying to appreciate and thereby impede sexual arousal. But there doesn't seem to be anything about the nature of sexual desire as such which entails that such cases are essential to pornography qua pornography, or to the type of appreciative attention we pay to them.

More generally, the difference between the transparent appreciation typical – though subject to degree – in our engagement with non-fictional pornography, and the opaque 'form-content' appreciation typical – also subject to degree – of our attention to fictional pornography, depends in part on the different functional role of sexual desire in each. Indeed, it is even arguable that both involve different conative states.

IV. Sexual I-Desire

Some philosophers have argued that engaging with fictional narratives requires not only imaginative correlates of belief, but also of desire – or 'i-desires' as they have been called. (e.g. Currie 2002; Dogget & Egan 2007; Cf. Scruton 1983) Our affective responses to the tragic deaths of Romeo and Juliet, for example, require not merely our *imagining that* the story unfolds in the way that it does, but also that we desire in imagination that they do not die. Without appealing to the presence of some relevant desire-like state, we simply cannot explain these types of reactions. If we had no desires about the welfare of Romeo and Juliet, we would be indifferent to their tragedy. In practical reasoning scenarios, too, we frequently need to imagine ourselves deciding to act in certain circumstances, and taking on in imagination desires that we do not actually possess. I-desires can thus be broadly, and not very informatively, characterized as 'mental representations whose functional role is analogous to, though not the same as, that played by desires.' (Dogget & Egan 2007: p. 9).

Why not hold that these are real desires? First, normal desires are generally conceived of as essentially motivational states: to desire X is to be disposed to bring it about that X. But our i-desires, it is argued, do not necessarily have motivational consequences, or at least not the same ones as ordinary desires, which is just as well because the actions they would lead to would run a problematic spectrum from the ludicrous (e.g. jumping on stage to save Desdemona) to the downright dangerous (e.g. jumping off a cliff in order to fly). Second, i-desires violate the normative constraints governing real desires:

'Desires can be shown to be unreasonable, or at east unjustified, if they fail to connect in various ways with the facts; the reasonableness of my desiring punishment for someone depends on the facts about what they did. But the reasonableness of my…wanting punishment for Macbeth…is not undercut by the fact that there is no such person…' (Currie 2002: p. 211)

Of course, some philosophers have expressed strong scepticism about the existence of this distinct class of mental representations. (e.g. Nichols & Stich 2000; Funkhouser & Spaulding 2009; Kind 2011) There is no space here to enter into this debate, but whether we wish to anoint the distinctive role played by sexual desire in fictional imaginative engagement with a distinctive i-identity or not, the important point is to stress the different role played by sexual desire here vis-à-vis the role it plays in the transparent and non-fictional. It is thus useful to make this distinction in terms of i-desires, while remaining neutral about their ultimate neuro-psychological status.

As I noted above, our appreciation of non-fictional pornography appears to involve real sexual desires aiming at and achieving satisfaction partly in virtue of the degree of transparency employed by these representations. Of course, given their actual non-presence, the nature of the desire that is satisfied (in the normal case) will be in part determined by the awareness of X-as-representation. Nonetheless, the objects of the real desire are in some sense the real people as depicted. A natural suggestion is thus that the desires aroused in the appreciation of fictional pornography are really sexual i-desires, functioning in just the same way as non-sexual i-desires operate in our engagement with non-pornographic fictions. We i-desire to have sex with the fictional characters depicted, or we i-desire that the secretary seduces her boss.

This is an attractive view because, plausibly, the i-desires that are involved in our appreciation of standard, non-pornographic fiction are indelibly coloured and formed by an awareness and appreciation of formal features. The ways in which fictional content is conveyed through a work's formal features play a central role in the vividness, coherence and richness of our imaginative engagement and in the nature of our emotional responses arising from it. It is the powerful way in which Shakespeare uses poetic language to depict Hamlet's deep psychological conflicts that partly grounds our sympathy for him, and our appreciation for and interest in the complexity of his character. It is the way in which suspense is built, through the careful editing and directing choices made about lighting, sound, staging, and so on, that partly render films – pornographic and non-pornographic alike – so affecting and arousing.

Unless we are suffering from some sort of illusion or irrationality, we are never unaware of formal features, and although it seems evident that we can switch between more or less attention to formal features or to the content which these are used to convey, it is arguably a *sine qua non* of normal fictional experience that we simultaneously attend to and appreciate both form and content, as I outlined earlier. Moreover, part of what we appreciate in fiction, and art in general, just is the interconnection of form and content in these ways.

In short, it looks like any plausible account of fictional experience must require that our experience of form and content cannot be readily separated. Moreover, it is down to the skill of the artist/author/director to combine form and content in such a way that our attention is not undesirably and *wholly* drawn to the ways in which the fictional world is manifested at the expense of attending to the emotionally relevant content.

There thus appears to be little reason – given the heterogeneous nature of sexual desire in general, and pornographic representations – to think that, in respect of the role of i-desires, our appreciation of pornography *qua* pornography is saliently different from our appreciation of standard fiction. On the one hand, our sexual i-desires generally appear to follow our real sexual desires quite closely, just as fiction arouses our affective states by engaging exact i-desire correlates of our real desires. We naturally fantasize about and are attracted to those things that mirror the satisfaction of our current real sexual desires. Significantly, too, the imaginative engagement of our sexual i-desires is sufficient to cause certain physiological states of arousal, and the motivational upshot of the appreciation of non-fictional and fictional pornography seems to be more or less identical – some form of physiological sexual arousal combined with prolonged attention to the arousing scenes and masturbation.

On the other hand, however, it does seem to be in the nature of sexual fantasy, and of the kind of engagement we have with fictional pornography, that our desires *may* violate the normative constraints governing normal desires. We may be sexually aroused by scenarios that in real life would not be arousing at all, and we might imaginatively adopt sexual desires at odds with our current sexual desires. Indeed, many fantasy sexual desires do seem to aim precisely at the fantastical nature of what is desired.[6]

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[6] Moreover, it looks false to hold (and is in any case would be an unverified empirical claim) that the reality of the people in non-fictional pornography will inevitably or generally induce a more intense effect in viewers, as our confrontation with real-life scenarios results in more intense and action-prone responses than our confrontation with fictional ones.

In these ways, real sexual desires may encourage the appreciation of transparent non-fictional pornography, but our engagement with fictional pornography will draw also on sexual i-desires, the satisfaction of which will generally involve – or at can least happily accommodate – an aesthetic appreciation of the formal features of the representational medium.

An all-too-easy objection one might make to everything I have said concerning the differences between types of pornography and their concomitant desires and appreciative projects, is simply to point out that the relevant differences are precisely those between erotic art and pornography. After all, it was partly in respect to this difference that the transparency thesis was initially formulated. That is, pornographic works are necessarily those governed by transparency and which are aimed at satisfying a certain type of engagement satisfying real sexual desires. Erotic art, in contrast, forms the class of what I have been calling fictional pornography.

This now looks, however, like a merely verbal dispute about classification, and hence without much philosophical interest. But in any case, it is not, I have tried to show, the classification of works that is important, so much as differentiating between different appreciative projects and the different roles played by imagination and desire therein. It is thus crucial to recognise that the way in which we make the distinction between fictional and non-fictional pornography depends profoundly on particular, contingent circumstances involving degrees of attention, and an indefinite range of possible imaginative appreciative engagements, sexual desires and fantasies, and types of pornographic works. The supposed distinction between erotic art and pornography is thus at best very blurry, and cannot be drawn independently of an appeal to contingent individual psychological acts of appreciation. Even if most non-fictional pornography is often formulaic, unimaginative and artistically uninteresting, enjoining no sustained attention to formal features and offering the utmost transparency, there is still no reason to think that it must necessarily be so. In short, the transparency thesis looks, at best, contingently true of only a limited class of objects and appreciative projects.

V. De Se Imagining and Cognitive Value

It is worth concluding with a very brief reflection on the value of pornography, given the account of appreciation I have outlined. Fictional pornography in particular has the potential to possess certain cognitive values concerning our own sexual nature and desires. As some philosophers have noted, it is generally more difficult to get people to adopt imaginative desires that conflict with their own real desires. (e.g. Currie 2002; Gendler 2000) The reasons for this are disputed, but plausibly our i-desires are closely connected to our real desires, generally mirroring them without being subject (as discussed above) to quite the same constraints. By engaging in the *de se* imaginative projects characteristic of much of our engagement with fictional pornography, we can clearly come to learn about our own real, current desires, and of desires of which we may even be unaware. This will especially be the case where our fantasizing engages desires that actively conflict both with what we think we desire, and with what we would normatively, morally endorse as worthy of desire.[7]

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[7] Cf. Scruton (1983: p.133) on the difference between fantasy and imagination, mentioned earlier.

The ability of fictional pornography – no less than standard non-pornographic fiction – to encourage such engagement, therefore, clearly has the potential to enlighten us about our own sexual desires, but also to reflect on the norms governing them. Because i-desires, rather than 'real' desires, are centrally involved, we remain sufficiently detached (through medium awareness) from the representational content we are aroused by to reflect on these aspects of ourselves. We may realize that we actually desire something we thought we did not, or we may (or may not) come to realize that this new object of desire, were it to be actualised, would no longer be really desired, and hence endorse its remaining mere fantasy. We may thereby hold ourselves and others responsible for our sexual i-desires as much as for our real desires, for the former reveal much about the latter.

Finally, because of the intimate connection between sexual desires, imagination, and physical arousal, part of what we develop in pornographic appreciation may even be construed as a kind of kinaesthetic awareness. Indeed, certain types of fictional pornography, including the prospect of virtual, interactive pornographic representations, might serve to further this kind of awareness and thereby awaken and illuminate uncharted depths of human sexuality. Whether such cases would be best thought of as pornography at all, however, is a question that must be left for another day.

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