

## **When Fantasy Leaks into Reality: the Case of Pornography**

In the debate over the permissibility of pornography, both sides have expressed paradoxical attitudes. On the one hand, the advocates of the permissibility of pornography defend it both as innocuous fiction, implicitly assuming that it has no effects on reality, and as a sexually liberating instrument, thereby implying some causal efficacy. On the other hand, those who accuse pornography of being an instrument of oppression and inequality, and therefore acknowledge its harmful effects on reality, rarely provide an account of how entertaining fantasies can be so effective to shape people's mental attitudes and behavioral dispositions. What is missing from the debate is an appropriate emphasis of the fictional and narrative aspect of pornography, and considerations of how fictions generally can have real-world consequences—or what happens when fantasy leaks into reality. To fill in this lacuna, our paper develops a consistent attitude toward pornography that both recognizes the fictional nature of pornography and its harmful effects in reality, as caused by the attitudes and dispositions it cultivates in its consumers.

The paradoxical attitudes have their source in overlooking the role of imagination in sexual practices—intercourse, masturbation, and perversions. When imagination's role is properly recognized, the fictional and narrative nature of pornography, as representations of sexual fantasies, becomes more apparent. Section 1 thus argues that pornography is not a stimuli merely to the senses, but also to a part of the mind that is integral to sexual practices.

Recognizing pornography as fiction, however, does not absolve it of real-world responsibilities. On the contrary, emphasizing this aspect of pornography means that we can turn to the extensive philosophical literature on the role of fictional narratives in moral education in understanding how pornography, as fiction, can indeed have impact in reality by shaping the consumers' attitudes and dispositions. An especially notable idea that theorists in this literature, such as Martha Nussbaum and Noel Carroll, converge on is that, through engaging with fictions, consumers can cultivate their moral

sensibilities by deploying them in imagined scenarios. Which sensibilities are cultivated, of course, depend in part on what scenarios are prescribed by the fictions. Section 2 briefly reviews this literature and discusses its implications for the pornography debate.

What is problematic—from a feminist perspective, at least—about engaging with pornographic fictions stems from the oppressive conventions of the *genre* of (heterosexual) pornography.<sup>1</sup> Pornography conventionally hyperbolizes sexual fantasies and typifies narratives that promote inequality. For example, it is a *standard feature* of pornography—to borrow a term from Kendall Walton's “Categories of Art”—that intercourse only ends pleasantly when the man ejaculates. The dependence on genre conventions holds equally true of pornographic fictions as fictions of other genres, such as fantasy. Recognizing such conventions is necessary to make sense of the representations that deviate from reality in pornographic fictions, in the same way that recognizing the conventions of fantasy is necessary to make sense of the existence of hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*. However, pornographic fictions do not merely demand their consumers to be intellectually aware of the conventions of the genre, or accept some implicit presuppositions to make sense of the narrative, as feminist philosopher Rae Langton argued. Pure intellectual agreement with, or acceptance of, fictional conventions would not explain the main function of pornography, which is neither defense of free speech, as it would seem from reading some advocates, nor subordination of women, as it might be concluded from reading some adversaries. Instead, as tools of sexual satisfaction, they demand consumers to *internalize* the genre conventions, often through repeated exposure, so that they can engage with the fictions effortlessly. Through engaging with pornographic fictions, consumers thus cultivate sexual sensibilities—ones in line with the typical narratives that promote inequality—that are morally undesirable in reality. In particular, by projecting conventions of pornography onto reality, consumers blind themselves to the existing variability of sexual practices—for example, intercourse could also end pleasantly with the woman's orgasm or, indeed, no orgasm at all. Section 3 builds on the

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<sup>1</sup> To limit the scope of our discussion, we will only focus on heterosexual pornography and on men consumers. These qualifications are implicit throughout the rest of the paper, where we omit the parenthetical for the sake of simplicity.

earlier understanding of how pornography, as fiction, can have impact in reality by highlighting the significance of genre.

Finally, focusing on the conventions of the genre suggests the possibility of progressive pornography. As social constructs, genres do not remain static, but evolve through time with the society. In the same way as the best strategy to fight obesity is to make healthy food look and taste delicious, the best way to reshape sexual desire and lead humanity to a healthy, fair and equal approach to sexuality is to make it look enjoyable and truly sexy. Which features are standard, variable, or counterstandard for the genre of pornography could evolve as new works are produced. Although it is not possible for one work to subvert all existing conventions at once—without exhibiting enough of the standard features as currently defined, it would not even be pornography—multiple works could eventually redefine the boundaries of the genre. Section 4 sketches the foregoing, admittedly optimistic, suggestion, which arises from recognizing the significance of genre.

## References

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