‘A Lady on the Street but a Freak in the Bed’: On the Distinction Between Erotic Art and Pornography

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How, if at all, are we to distinguish between the works that we call ‘art’ and those that we call ‘pornography’? This question gets a grip because from classical Greek vases and the frescoes of Pompeii to Renaissance mythological painting and sculpture to Modernist prints, the European artistic tradition is chock-full of art that looks a lot like pornography. In this paper I propose a way of thinking about the distinction that is grounded in art historical considerations regarding the function of erotic images in 16th-century Italy. This exploration suggests that the root of the erotic art/pornography distinction was—at least in this context—class: in particular, the need for a special category of unsanctioned illicit images arose at the very time when print culture was beginning to threaten elite privilege. What made an erotic representation exceed the boundaries of acceptability, I suggest, was not its extreme libidinosity but, rather, its widespread availability and, thereby, its threat to one of the mechanisms of sustaining class privilege.

From classical Greek vases and the frescoes of Pompeii to Renaissance mythological painting and sculpture to Modernist prints, the European artistic tradition is chock-full of art that looks a lot like pornography.[1] This is a vexing fact to the many who consider ‘art’ to be a commendatory, rather than purely descriptive, category. To those who think of art as a repository of our highest and most enduring values, art appeals to and brings out the best in us. According to this common way of thinking, pornography is by contrast dirty, low, and base: it speaks to and elicits the sexual animal in us. The large quantity of sexually titillating art from nearly every period in European history threatens not only to taint the hallowed category of art itself, but also throws into doubt our purported special capacity to rise above our bestial urges.

How should we deal with this problem? Radically revising the canon by rejecting the ‘art’ status of these sexually titillating works is, for most, undesirable. A more cautious response might reserve the label ‘*erotic* art’ for canonical sexually titillating works while appending the epithet ‘pornography’ to the rest. But one honest look at the oversized

1 For a detailed art historical treatment of the body in Ancient Greek art, see Andrew Stewart, *Art, Desire, and the Body in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For Pompeii see Michael Grant, *Eros in Pompeii: The Secret Rooms of the National Museum of Naples* (New York: Morrow, 1975). For a useful overview of modern erotic art see Gilles Néret, *Erotik in Der Kunst Des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Köln: Taschen, 1992). Just as this essay was going to press, I learned of a valuable resource on Italian Renaissance erotic art that, I believe, supports and enriches the arguments made here: James Grantham Turner, *Eros Visible: Art, Sexuality and Antiquity in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

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erect phalluses and acrobatic sexual poses omnipresent in the art of Pompeii or Egon Schiele's drawings, for instance, again raises the nagging question: what exactly is the difference between erotic art and pornography, if there is one at all?

This question will occupy the better part of this essay. Section 1 considers Jerrold Levinson's well-known attempt to ground a firm distinction between 'erotic art' and 'pornography' and offers a new critique of his view. Section 2 explores the specific case of a Renaissance artist who produced, or had a hand in producing, both works that we would call 'pornography' and works that we would call 'erotic art.' Section 3 draws some tentative conclusions about the distinction as understood in the Renaissance. Section 4 asks whether these conclusions are generalizable by looking into the function of the mythological nudes of Giorgione and Titian. Armed with conclusions from these historical cases, Section 5 returns to erotic art/porn distinction and offers some more general thoughts about how to do philosophical aesthetics in a historically informed manner.

1. A Functionalist Distinction

Many attempts to distinguish 'erotic art' from 'pornography' centre on assumed differences in features internal to the constitution of the members of each category.[2] For instance, erotic art is sometimes distinguished from pornography in terms of representational content: whereas porn is sexually explicit in the sense that it depicts sexual acts or genitals, erotic art merely suggests or alludes to these things. Or the two are distinguished in terms of their artistic quality: whereas porn is formulaic, erotic art is inventive; or, whereas porn is one-dimensional, erotic art is complex. Other times the two are differentiated in terms of moral valence: while pornography is presumed degrading, objectifying, or exploitative to the people it represents, especially to women, erotic art represents persons *as persons* and respects their agency and psychological depth.

These attempts to distinguish 'erotic art' from 'pornography' must contend with a multitude of counter-examples of undisputed artworks—that is, works whose high-art status is unquestioned—that are sexually explicit, objectifying, formulaic, or degrading to women.[3] In fact, such examples are so numerous as to inspire pessimism about making any kind of robust distinction between the two categories.

However, there is a more promising way to ground the erotic art/pornography distinction—namely, via functional role. A functionalist approach to the question of the distinction between pornography and erotic art would locate each category's distinguishing

2 Hans Maes, 'Who Says Pornography Can't Be Art?', in Jerrold Levinson and Hans Maes (eds), *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 17–47. Maes offers a clear, detailed and thoughtful examination of the various attempts to distinguish between 'erotic art' and 'pornography', so I only briefly gesture at the purported distinguishing features here.

3 Hans Maes nicely summarizes the objections and counter-examples offered by Kieran and others and also offers some original objections and counter-examples of his own in 'Drawing the Line: Art Versus Pornography', *Philosophy Compass* 6 (2011), 385–397. See also A. W. Eaton, 'What's Wrong With the Female Nude?', in Levinson and Maes (eds), *Art and Pornography*, 277–308.

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features *not* in the internal constitution of the category's members but, rather, in the members' shared function.

At first blush it may not be clear how functionalism can help here. After all, one way of describing the initial problem is that 'erotic art' and 'pornography' appear to share the same function, namely stimulating the audience's sexual appetite (hereafter *libidinous function*). Shifting our focus to functions could seem to recapitulate the problem rather than solve it.

But maybe not. In an influential essay from 2005, Jerrold Levinson argues that the libidinous function that pornography and erotic art are presumed to share must surely admit of degrees, ranging from mild sexual titillation to full-blown arousal and orgasm.[4] This lays the groundwork for Levinson's thought that erotic art and pornography lie at opposite ends of a spectrum: whereas erotic art simply excites 'sexual thoughts, feelings, imaginings, or desires', pornography induces the 'physiological state that is prelude and prerequisite to [orgasm]'.[5] (Levinson's terms are 'sexually stimulate' and 'sexually arouse', respectively.)

A difference in degree, however, rarely suffices to ground the sort of crisp distinction in kind that Levinson intends. But his functional distinction does not stop there. In addition, Levinson maintains that erotic art serves a function that pornography lacks and this, he aims to show, can actually explain differences in the degree of libidinous function. Erotic art, Levinson says, serves the function of provoking aesthetic delight and it is this that pornography utterly lacks (where this is not a contingent lack; rather, Levinson thinks that pornography must lack this function).[6] As with other attempts to distinguish between sanctioned and unsanctioned libidinous works (i.e., works with libidinous functions), the purported aesthetic function does the heavy lifting in Levinson's account.[7]

Since form often follows function, we might expect erotic art and pornography to take noticeably different forms. This Levinson usefully describes in the following way. Pornography, he says, is *transparent* in the sense that it presents the object of fantasy directly and vividly with little intrusion from the medium. Transparent images invite us to see through

4 Jerrold Levinson, 'Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures', *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (2005), 228–240. Although he does not make this explicit, Levinson understands 'function' teleologically rather than, say, merely causally (as the role an item plays within a system). Further, Levinson construes function in terms of artistic intention. While I endorse a teleological account of the function of art, I reject intentionalism. I develop a teleological, anti-intentionalist, and naturalistic account of artistic function in 'Artifact Function', in Ivan Gaskell and Sarah Carter (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture* (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming 2018).

5 Levinson, 'Erotic Art', 229.

6 Ibid., 234.

7 Whether formulated in functional terms or not, the attribution of an aesthetic goal to the category 'erotic art' is a common way to set it apart from obscenity. One famous example is distinguished art historian Kenneth Clark in the Longford Report, 99–100. Longford Committee Investigating Pornography, Frank Pakenham Longford (Earl of), *The Longford Report* (London: Coronet Books, 1972). Another is the so-called 'Miller Test' (Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 [1973]) – still used today in the USA to distinguish expression that is protected by the Constitution from offensive works that can be legally prohibited—which explicitly relies on 'serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value' as one of three criteria for protected expression, whereas regulable expression lacks any such value. Matthew Kieran mentions several other examples in *Revealing Art* (London: Routledge, 2005), 151 and 260 n. 3.

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their material and formal properties to the thing(s) that the image represents.[8] Erotic art is, by contrast, *opaque* in the sense that it draws the viewer's attention to features of the vehicle of representation itself. So whereas erotic art invites us to, say, contemplate the relationship between an image's stimulating content and the formal means of producing this stimulation, pornographic images should be, in Levinson's words, 'as transparent as possible—they should present the object for sexual fantasy vividly and then, as it were, get out of the way'.[9]

The transparency/opacity distinction helps to explain why, on Levinson's account, a single work cannot be both erotic art and pornography—namely, because art's aesthetic function is deeply at odds with pornography's arousal function. Consider two categories of glass (my examples, not Levinson's): stained glass of the sort used in churches and windshield glass used in cars. Although both share translucency, the better a section of glass functions as stained glass, the worse that very same section can serve as a windshield, and vice versa. In other words, the windshield function, which requires optical transparency (allowing light to pass through without being scattered), actually inhibits the stained-glass function which requires absorption of some frequencies of light and scattering of light. This example helps us to make sense of Levinson's idea that the functions of erotic art and of pornography are not just incompatible, but the function of one actually *undermines* the function of the other. As Levinson puts it, erotic art and pornography:

> war against one another. One induces you, in the name of arousal and release, to ignore the representation so as to get at the represented, the other 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.[10]

This raises an important question. If the medium's opacity serves the aesthetic function but undermines the libidinous function, whence derives the *erotic* dimension of erotic art? That is, why does the aesthetic function not simply cancel out the erotic dimension? The answer is that on Levinson's account the erotic dimension is *diminished* but not wholly destroyed by the aesthetic function. This explains why erotic art has a weaker libidinous function than pornography (recall that erotic art merely 'stimulates', according to Levinson, while pornography 'arouses' to orgasm). Without further explanation, however, we should also expect that, on Levinson's account, the aesthetic function of erotic art is likewise diminished by its libidinous function, leaving erotic art aesthetically anaemic as well. Since the category of 'erotic art' centrally includes uncontested masterpieces like Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*, Levinson's notion of 'warring functions' forces an unpalatable conclusion.[11]

8 Levinson, 'Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures', 240 n. 3. Levinson points to Kendal L. Walton's seminal essay 'Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism', *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984), 246–277, as a source for his use of the concept of 'transparency'. This is odd since Levinson appears to use 'transparency' to mean something much broader than Walton's narrow technical sense. A *transparent* representation, for Walton, preserves belief independent of counterfactual dependence whereas, for Levinson, it seems that any picture that allows the viewer to focus on what it depicts (as opposed to drawing attention to the image itself) is 'transparent'. In this essay I use 'transparency' in Levinson's broader and looser sense.

9 Levinson, 'Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures', 233.

10 Ibid., 237.

11 This is especially true since Levinson's explicit aim is 'to preserve as many considered intuitions about the opposition as possible' (ibid., 228).

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There is a deeper question to ask about Levinson's argument—namely, why should we grant the presumed incompatibility between the libidinous function and the aesthetic function in the first place, as well as the concomitant notion that erotic art has a weaker libidinous function than pornography? Matthew Kieran has challenged these assumptions by adducing many examples of uncontested artworks by Courbet, Rodin, Klimt, and other modern 'masters' that serve both an aesthetic function and an arousing (in Levinson's sense) function.[12] These counter-examples, Kieran maintains, show that it is possible for a work to be 'valuable as pornographic art', a thesis to which we return at the end of this paper.[13]

One might wonder how Kieran, and for that matter Levinson, can so confidently discern the function of a given work. What is Kieran's evidence that Rodin's drawings serve to arouse to orgasm? And on what basis is Levinson equally confident that they do not? Neither of them justifies their claims about function other than by pointing to the pictures themselves. In the final section of this paper I urge that this is a mistake and that we cannot infer an artwork's function from its appearance alone.

There is another problem with Kieran's view—namely that his appeal to modern works is a bit of a cheat since it is precisely the business of much modern art to transgress established boundaries (such as that dividing 'art' from 'porn'). The many modern works that look so much like pornography—from Gustav Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* to Jeff Koons' oversized photographs of himself having sex with his porn-star (then-)wife—do so on purpose in order to undermine pieties, violate conventions, and erode the conceptual boundaries between 'erotic art' and 'pornography'. While Kieran's examples demonstrate that the function of 'pornography' and that of 'erotic art' are not necessarily mutually exclusive, one might reasonably worry that this holds only in the exceptional case of artworks that purposefully mimic pornography or take it as their subject matter.

In part to respond to this worry, the following section starts afresh by considering erotic material from 16th-century Italy that is almost entirely overlooked in philosophical discussions. I am especially interested in two things: the functions of certain masterpieces of erotic art and how the licit/illicit distinction was drawn in the past. By considering the historical and material specificity of a handful of works, I aim to shed some new light on the question of the distinction between erotic art and pornography.

2. Giulio Romano

I begin with the case of Giulio Romano, a Roman painter and an architect who lived from 1499 to 1546. A prominent pupil of Raphael, Giulio assisted several of the master's major projects in the Vatican. After Raphael died in 1520, Giulio inherited the workshop and finished several of Raphael's important projects, including the Sala di Costantino in the Vatican. He also decorated the Villa Madama for Cardinal Giuliano de' Medici (who

12 Matthew Kieran, 'Pornographic Art', *Philosophy and Literature* 25 (2001), 31–45.

13 Ibid., 31.

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later became Pope Clement VII). After the sack of Rome in 1527, Federico Gonzago (the future Duke of Mantua) sent Baldassare Castiglione to Rome to woo Giulio for various projects. Giulio accepted and designed the Palazzo del Te in Mantua and decorated it with frescoes (1524–34) that are among the most important of the Mannerist period (e.g. the Salone dei Giganti).

There is, of course, much more to say about Giulio's career, but I stop here since my aim is simply to give a sense of his considerable importance in the art world of his time; an importance reflected, for example, in the fact that he was the only Renaissance artist to have been mentioned by Shakespeare.[14] This is significant for the matter at hand because Giulio was also the artistic mastermind behind a provocative sexually explicit set of prints that caused a terrific scandal in Rome.

Giulio made a set of sixteen drawings showing heterosexual couples in a variety of sexual poses: see Figures 1–3. Their title, then, was apt: *I modi*, 'the positions'.[15] Giulio gave the drawings to the engraver Marcantonio Raimondi, who ran the most important print shop in Rome, and in 1524 Marcantonio turned the drawings into a set of sixteen engravings that were available for sale in the streets.[16] These prints were extremely popular and eventually made their way around Europe.

Despite this popularity—and perhaps because of it—the prints were widely considered *disonesto* by those in power. (*Disonesto* was the contrary of *onesto*, a term denoting



Figure 1: Jean Frédéric Maximilien de Waldeck. *After Giulio Raimondi's Position 2*, 19th century. Brush drawing in grey wash, over red chalk on paper. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

14 In *The Winter's Tale*, V. ii, Queen Hermione's statue is said to be by 'that rare Italian master, Julio Romano' (William Shakespeare, '*The Winter's Tale*' *in The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn, Stephen Greenblatt et. al. (eds.) (London & New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 3198). Giulio was not, however, a sculptor.

15 Unless otherwise noted, my knowledge of *I modi* and the scandal surrounding them is largely due to Bette Talvacchia's excellent book *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also Turner *Eros Visible*, especially 143–156 and 329–394.

16 I do not mean to suggest that everyone was in a position to buy the prints. Such artefacts were affordable only to people with expendable income, such as the nobility and the expanding mercantile class.

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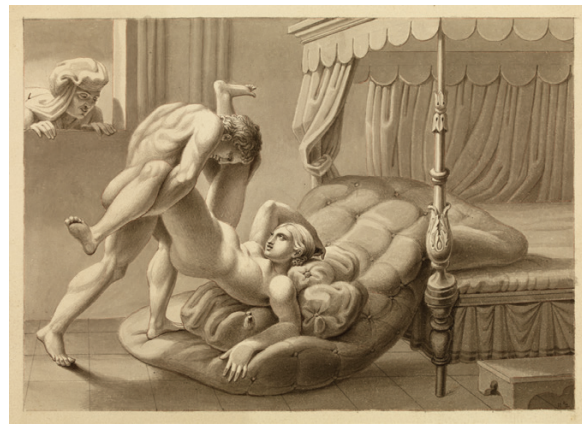


Figure 2: Jean Frédéric Maximilien de Waldeck *After Giulio Raimondi's Position 11,* 19th century. Brush drawing in grey wash, over red chalk on paper. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 3: Jean Frédéric Maximilien de Waldeck. *After Giulio Raimondi's Position 14*, 19th century. Brush drawing in grey wash, over red chalk on paper. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

both moral virtue and social standing.[17] The important thing about this distinction for our purposes is that either term could be used to qualify something erotic, like a person, an act, or a representation; that is, erotism by itself did not automatically qualify something as *disonesto*.) Pope Clement VII was enraged by the prints and, as a result, they were outlawed and destroyed en masse. (Sadly, none of the original prints survive, nor do the original drawings. We know about their appearance only from later copies. Reproduced here are 19th century copies by Jean Frédéric Maximilien de Waldeck.[18]) Not only were the prints censored but Marcantonio was imprisoned. Giulio Romano, on the other hand,

17 On the *onesto/disonesto* distinction, see Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*, 101–124.

18 For a detailed account of the various copies and the relations between them, see James Grantham Turner, "Woodcut Copies of the Modi", *Print Quarterly* 26 (2009), 115-23.

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appears to have escaped any negative consequences for the drawings and left for Mantua unscathed, neither publicly condemned nor even reprimanded.[19]

But what, one wonders, if Giulio had remained in Rome? Bette Talvacchia, a leading historian of *I modi*, speculates that Giulio would not have suffered Marcantonio's fate because 'the drawings themselves were not criminal; it was only their appearance in prints that was culpable'.[20] Her conjecture is that the same depicted content—essentially the same figures in the same postures shown with the same degree of sexual explicitness—was *disonesto* and legally prohibited in one context yet legally permitted and *onesto* in another. To put the point anachronistically, the (virtually) same depicted content was 'erotic art' in one context yet 'pornography' in another.[21] Talvacchia's provocative suggestion is that what distinguished the scurrilous from the socially acceptable, the legally prohibited from the sanctioned, was neither a work's degree of eroticism, nor its aesthetic function, nor its degree of sexual explicitness, nor its formulaic-ness. Rather, what distinguished an *onesto* picture from a *disonesto* one was the context in which the work appeared and was used. Let us pursue this line of thought.

There is quite a bit of evidence from the early modern period to support this thesis, but for the moment let us stay with Giulio Romano and consider another of his sexually explicit pictures—namely, *Giove and Olympias* in the Sala di Psiche of the Palazzo del Tè (1526–34) at Figure 4. This fresco depicts the rape of the mortal queen Olympias by Giove (which, according to Plutarch, resulted in the birth of Alexander the Great).[22] The fresco's composition is clearly inspired by several of *I modi*, especially Position No. 11 (see Figure 2) in the woman's left arm raised above her head while her right arm braces at her side for support and Position No. 2 (Figure 1) where the legs are positioned similarly.

19 Much of this is speculation. Giogiro Vasari says that 'if, when it was published, Giulio had not already left for Mantua, he would have been harshly punished for it by the pope in his anger'. (Giogiro Vasari, '*Life of Marcantonio Raimondi' in Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* (ed.) Gaetano Milenesi, (Florence: Sansoni, 1880), Vol. V, 418). But Vasari is often not reliable about particular details and Talvacchia makes a good case based on good evidence that Giulio left for Mantua *after* Marcantonio's publication of the prints, (Talvacchia, *Taking Positions* 7–10).

20 Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*, 9.

21 The term 'pornography' was coined only in the 19th century, first appearing in English in a translation of K. O. Müller's *Handbuch der Archäologie der Kunst* (Breslau: Max, 1848): see Walter M. Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 11ff. Many historians, including Talvacchia, eschew using recent terms to describe phenomena that pre-date the terms on grounds of anachronism. See C.O. Müller, *Ancient Art and Its remains; or a Manual of the Archaeology of Art*, 2nd edn. trans. John Leitch (London: A. Fullarton and Co., Newgate Street, 1850). For a discussion of the problem, see Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*, 101–104. This is a piece of historicist dogma that I am tempted to reject. I see no reason *in principle* to avoid applying terms to things that pre-date the terms, as if a kind of representation came into existence only once we had a word for it. It strikes me that the body of unsanctioned libidinous representations that emerged in 16th-century Italy—works for which the term *disonesti* was used—count as some of the earliest cases of pornography in the European tradition. To my mind this shows that they had the concept of unsanctioned libidinous works, even if they had not yet coined a term for it.

22 According to Plutarch, Olympias, wife of Philip of Macedon, was impregnated by Zeus and gave birth to Alexander the Great. Plutarch reports that Olympias was a follower of the orgiastic and snake-worshipping cult of Dionysus and slept with snakes, hence Giove's snake-like form in Giulio's fresco. Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives,* ed. Arthur Hugh Clough, trans. John Dryden (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), Vol. II, 139–199, at 140.

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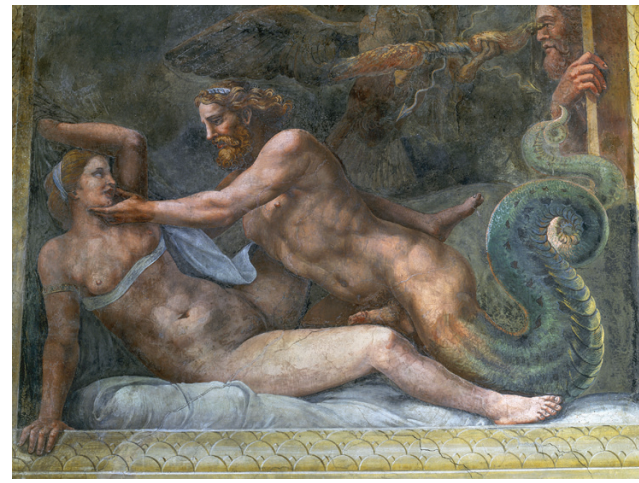


Figure 4: Giulio Romano, *Jupiter and Olympias*. Fresco, 1526–28. Sala di Psiche, Palazzo Te, Mantua, Italy. Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

Despite strong formal similarities between the fresco and several of the prints, the fresco is considerably more transparent, in Levinson's sense, and also more vivid and sexually explicit. The latter is in part due to the fresco's large size which requires no squinting in order to see salacious details like Giove's erect penis located near the centre of the picture. The fresco's colour and detail here make for a strong visual impression: we can see clearly the reddish tone of the engorged head of his penis as well as the blonde pubic hair and the brownish scrotum hanging below it. Further, the fresco offers more substantial modelling of bodies (firm buttocks, full breasts, muscular torso) and a more graphic rendering of sensuous details like flesh and hair. In short, the fresco is better-suited to the very function that Levinson attributes exclusively to pornography—namely, 'presenting the object for sexual fantasy vividly and then getting out of our way'.

One point to take away from this brief examination of a few of Giulio's works is that in the early modern period, a strongly libidinous function (a function typically associated nowadays exclusively with pornography) would have been well-served by works that have been firmly ensconced in the artistic canon since their inception. Because it is especially well-adapted to modelling unclothed (or partially unclothed) bodies, evoking the feel of textures, and vividly capturing nuances of colour and light, painting was the most suitable medium for conjuring the kind of intense and lively sexual fantasy that leads to orgasm (the function Levinson and other attribute to pornography). This holds even more so for oil painting than for fresco, as we shall see shortly.

Does this mean that paintings like *Olympias and Giove* were the pornography of their day? I do not think so. Giulio's fresco—like his drawings that were the basis for *I modi* as well as the paintings discussed in Section 4 below—was not considered *disonesto*. In fact, until the Counter Reformation (when virtually all depicted nudity came under attack), libidinous *prints* were the target of the pious and of censors, whereas libidnous *paintings*—which could be considerably more vivid and sexual, as we have seen—not only went unsanctioned but

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were even highly praised, bringing their makers and owners honour rather than dishonour.[23] The next section will explore reasons for this differential evaluation and treatment.

3. Public vs. Private Iconic Circuits

One important difference between Marcantonio's prints and Giulio's fresco—between the *disonesto* and the *onesto*—is that they trafficked in different 'iconic circuits', to use a concept from historian Carlo Ginzburg.[24] An iconic circuit is an image's circle of ownership and reception. What Ginzburg calls the 'public circuit' was widespread and socially undifferentiated: it included everyone, from the lowest ranks of society to the highest. The 'private circuit', by contrast, was highly circumscribed and socially elevated: among its constituents were royalty, lords, prelates, nobles, and sometimes merchants.[25]

Until the time of *I modi*, explicitly libidinous images trafficked exclusively in the private circuit and were not admitted to the public circuit in much of Europe. The possession of erotic images was not just a privilege of the elite; it was also a mark of social distinction. The new medium of printing threatened to muddy this distinction by disseminating libidinous images to a less-exalted clientele. Though I do not mean to suggest that Renaissance libidinous prints were as widespread as the mass culture of today, they did allow erotic images to spread beyond the control of a narrowly privileged group.[26] Whereas Marcantonio's prints were, one might say, promiscuous in the sense that they were indiscriminately available to anyone who could afford them, Giulio's fresco, like almost all erotic art up to this period, was safely tucked away in a pleasure palace to be seen by only a select few.

I do not mean to imply that the *onesto/disnonesto* distinction rested *merely* on a work's physical location or even the contexts in which it functioned. After all, not just any libidinous work could gain admission into the private iconic circuit in the first place; rather, several things conduced to rendering a libidinous picture *onesto*.[27] First, being the product of a celebrated artist lent a work clout. Second, medium meant a lot for a work's social standing. Whereas fresco had a long respected history and was the preferred medium for decorating religious institutions and elite palaces, prints were quite new, lacking the weight of venerable tradition. Moreover, printed media readily allowed for multiples, making each individual instance much less precious than a painting. Third, erotic themes exclusively for elite audiences of the private circuit almost without exception appeared

23 My account here relies heavily on Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*.

24 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Titian, Ovid, and Sixteenth-Century Codes for Erotic Illustration', in his *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi 1st edn (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 77–95.

25 Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 26.

26 Ibid.; Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*, 71–84. Patricia Emison, 'Prolegomenon to the Study of Italian Renaissance Prints', *Word & Image* 11 (1996), 1-15; Henri Zerner, 'L'Estampe érotique au temps de Titien', in Massimo Gemin and Giannantonio Paladin (eds), *Tiziano e Venezia: Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Venezia, 1976* (Vicenza: Pozza, 1980), 85–90.

27 I deliberately avoid putting this in terms of conditions, either necessary or sufficient.

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with a mythological pretext. Whereas *I modi* make no explicit literary allusions whatsoever, the fresco's more explicit, libidinous, and vivid scene is couched in an elevated mythological code (in this case Plutarch) that was accessible to only those with considerable cultural competence of a lofty sort.[28] At the time at which the fresco was painted, only a learned person could have moved beyond what art historian Erwin Panofsky calls the 'primary subject matter' to the iconographical identification of mythological personages and authors (in this case Olympias and Jupiter and Plutarch) and then ultimately to the deeper iconological significance (e.g., Federico Gonzaga as the new Alexander the Great).[29] My point is that the mythological code plays a central role in rendering *onesto* what would have been otherwise socially unacceptable not simply by providing a pretext to skirt social censure—though it did serve this function—but also by explicitly addressing an audience with what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital'.[30] In this way the mythological code is part of a claim for high social status on the part of both artist and patron. (As we shall see in the next section, this kind of mythological code played an important role in all of the works from this period that we now consider 'erotic art.')

This distinction between illicit and licit libidinous representations in some respects mirrors a distinction between kinds of female prostitute that emerged in the late 15th century.[31] A woman who sold sexual favours for money might be considered socially and morally unacceptable—a whore (*puttana*)—or a socially respectable courtesan (*cortigiana*). This distinction had nothing to do with the sexual services rendered which were, by all accounts, the same in each case; rather, the distinction primarily depended on the social status of client she served. Whereas the *puttana* served anyone, from the poorest ranks of society to the highest (though the latter clandestinely), the *cortigiana* reserved her sexual services for the upper classes and did so openly.

This openness meant that courtesans cultivated a host of refinements. For instance, courtesans of this period were famous (or notorious) for wearing extremely luxurious

28 The notion of 'code' used here is Ginzburg's and also Bourdieu's. The basic idea, I take it, is that mythological representations employ signs and symbols the deciphering of which requires considerable knowledge of the mythological stories and this, in turn, requires having a certain cultural competence that was at the time available only to elites. Speaking of art more broadly, Bourdieu writes: 'Consumption [of an artwork] is, in this case, a stage in a process off communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. … A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 2.

29 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Westview, 1972), 3–16.

30 Bourdieu in *The Forms of Capital* and also in *Distinction*. Cultural capital is conceptually distinct from economic capital (wealth) and social capital (one's friends and associates). 'Cultural capital' refers to non-financial assets—such as knowledge, skills, dispositions, taste, and manners—that confer social power, prestige, and/or privilege.

31 This was not, of course, the first or last time in Western history that there were 'high-class' prostitutes distinct from common prostitutes. In ancient Greece there were *hetaerae*, in ancient Rome *meretrix*, and today in the USA we have 'escorts' who serve rich and powerful men (e.g., Eliot Spitzer).

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clothing and jewelry, as seen in Vittore Carpaccio's famous painting, *Two Venetian Ladies* (c. 1510) where two courtesans are shown in extremely high shoes, known as *chopines*.[32] In fact, courtesans' dress was so fancy as to render them indistinguishable from noble women, a blurring of class boundaries that the state tried to undermine with sumptuary laws directly targeting only courtesans.[33] Courtesans also maintained stylish abodes and flaunted accomplishments considered worthy of their clients' rank. For instance, courtesans had sophisticated manners, musical abilities, could often read and write (the most famous were poets), and were skilled conversationalists.[34] In the eyes of many—including some 16th-century humanists—these refinements earned courtesans the title of *cortigiana onesta*.

Nevertheless, beneath the veneer of refinements the courtesan was still a prostitute, albeit one made decent and even a credit to her client's elevated social status. As hip-hop artist Ludacris might have put the point, the courtesan was 'a lady on the street but a freak in the bed'.[35] This is to say that the courtesan, like the common *puttana*, had the function of kindling and satisfying the sexual desires of her male clients. But the courtesan's refinements themselves also served important social functions: not only did these refinements offer genuine pleasures (typically of a non-sexual sort), but they were also an important part of the way that elite men set themselves apart from the lower ranks of the social hierarchy.[36] I mean to suggest that in addition to their sexual function, courtesans also served to reinforce class distinctions.

My hunch is that similar functions were served by libidinous images during the Renaissance. *Onesti* libidinous images were not necessarily more opaque, more artistically subtle, or less sexual than the *disonesti* images; on the contrary, the socially sanctioned libidinous images were often *more* transparent, more explicit, and more sexual than the unsanctioned images. What distinguished the two, like the distinction between the

32 Painted in about 1510, this painting is widely accepted to depict Venetian courtesans. On *chopines* and courtesans, see Harold Koda, 'The Chopine', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (published online October 2002) <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chop/hd_chop.htm> accessed 25 July 2016.

33 On the class implications of courtesans' dress and sumptuary laws, see Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (eds), *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New York: OUP, 2006); Diane Owen Hughes, 'Sumptuary Law and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy', in John Bossy (ed.), *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69–100; Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

34 On the accomplishments of Renaissance courtesans, see Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*; Margaret F. Rosenthal, 'Cutting a Good Figure: The Fashions of Venetian Courtesans in the Illustrated Albums of Early Modern Travellers', in *The Courtesan's Arts*, ed. Feldman and Gordon, 52–74; Tessa Storey, 'Courtesan Culture: Manhood, Honour and Sociability', in Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (ed.), *Erotic Cultures of Renaissance Italy* 1st edn, (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 247–273.

35 From the song 'Nasty Girl' by Ludacris (from the album *Theater of Mind*, 2009). In contemporary urban parlance, a 'freak' is a person who has sex often or enjoys kinky sex.

36 Historian Guido Ruggiero argues that the courtesan was an 'arbiter of status' for elite men in 'Who's Afraid of Giulia Napolitana: Pleasure, Fear, and Imagining the Arts of the Renaissance Courtesan', in Feldman and Gordon (eds), *The Courtesan's Arts*, 280–292. Following Ruggiero's lead, Storey's 'Courtesan Culture' makes the case that connection with courtesans was a way for elite men to associate themselves with antiquity, and in particular the antique practice of high-class prostitution (mentioned in writings by, for instance, Terence, Cato, and Plutarch).

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puttana and the *cortigiana*, was their position within class hierarchy and, secondarily, the complex of attributes that underpinned the elevated status of one over the other.

The next section pursues this thesis by exploring the mythological nudes of Giorgione and Titian, a group of paintings comprising some of the most widely admired and influential artworks of the European tradition. I shall argue that they also served a highly sexual function.

4. Mythological Female Nudes

This section considers the female nude as it was revived and developed by Giorgione and Titian. There is a large and highly influential art historical literature that works very hard to downplay the libidinous function of this body of work by attributing to these paintings a sophisticated, complex, and learned mythological iconological and allegorical program.[37] In some cases the pictures seem to sustain such complex interpretations; in other cases not. But it is not my point to adjudicate the matter here. Instead, I aim to uncover these works' highly libidinous function and then consider what kept them from being considered *disnonesti* in the eyes of contemporaries.

We begin with what is arguably the prototype in the early modern revival of the female nude, Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (*c.*1508–10, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden), a picture whose mythological pretext—a *putto* (or cherub) just above the woman's left leg—is no longer visible because it was painted over in 1843. The *putto* most explicitly identifies the figure as Venus, but another identifying attribute is her so-called pudica gesture, a gesture dating back to antique sculptures of Venus covering her private parts in modesty (*pudicus* = pure, chase, modest).[38] As several art historians have noted, however, the gesture of Giorgione's Venus 'hardly serves the cause of modesty'.[39] Rather, her left hand draws attention to the pudendum that it pretends to conceal and is, moreover, a visual metaphor for that which it so poorly conceals (notice the vulvar shape created by the space between thumb and first finger). Furthermore, Venus' curving fingers give the strong impression that she is pleasuring herself. Underscoring the picture's sexuality is the evocation of highly sensual textures: for example, Venus' creamy skin cradled on a bed of white satin and red velvet, the latter enhancing the scarlet colour of her lips.

Titian's so-called *Venus of Urbino* (1538, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) clearly takes Giorgione's picture as its model.[40] I say 'so-called' because, as Charles Hope notes, the woman pictured 'has no attributes which unambiguously identify her as a goddess' (unlike Giorgione's painting) nor was she referred to as 'Venus' by any contemporaries except for

37 Erwin Panofsky is one of the most influential: see his *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic* (New York: New York University Press, 1969).

38 For a feminist history of the gesture, see Nanette Salomon, 'Making a World of Difference: Gender, Asymmetry and the Greek Nude', in Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire L. Lyons (eds), *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 197–209.

39 David Rosand, 'So-and-so Reclining on Her Couch', in Rona Goffen (ed.), *Titian's 'Venus of Urbino'*, 1st edn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 37–62, at 49.

40 It is generally accepted that Titian in fact completed details of Giorgione's picture. See Rosand, 'So-and-so Reclining on Her Couch', 43.

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Giorgio Vasari (in the *Vite* in 1550).[41] Further, she is shown in a domestic interior with contemporaneous furnishing and women and attire (of the two in the background). We return to these points shortly.

Of particular interest at the moment are the following elements: the attention drawn to Venus's pudendum not only by the 'pudica' gesture (inherited from Giorgione) but also by the intersection of the line of the curtain with that of the bed, the woman's inviting gaze at the viewer, and the warmly sensual rendering of hair and flesh for which Titian was famous. With her soft and glowing fleshy body fully on display, caressing herself while slyly looking out at us, it is hard to deny the painting's transparency (in Levinson's sense), vivacity, and libidinosity.[42]

None of this went unnoticed by Titian's contemporaries. For instance, on 9 March 1538 Guidobaldo della Rovere (soon to be the Duke of Urbino) wrote to his agent in Venice to ask when he would receive from Titian, among other things, the picture of the naked woman ('la donna nuda').[43] The Duke does not mention the goddess of love. In 1598 a man used the same phrase in writing to the Duke to inquire about obtaining a copy of this painting—again the goddess of love does not come up. In his response, the Duke asked that he not be identified as the owner of the painting and said that he only kept the 'lascivious work' because it was by Titian.[44]

Not long after, Titian embarked on an ambitious series of mythological themes that were highly sexualized and offered ample opportunity for eroticizing display of the unclothed female body. One of the first is the *Danaë* (1544–5, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples: see Figure 5), a highly sensual painting depicting the moment when Giove, disguised as a shower of gold, falls into the lap of the unsuspecting Danaë, thereby raping and impregnating her. This painting was almost instantly famous for its strong libidinous function. For instance, Giovanni della Casa saw the painting before it even left Titian's workshop and described its vivid sensuality in a letter dated 20 September 1544 (to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese): the *Danaë*, he notes, makes the *Venus of Urbino* look like 'a Theatine nun' (*una teatina*).[45]

The Danaë's strong libidinous function did not, however, put it in danger of being *disonesto*: it was, after all, an oil painting by one of the most celebrated artists of the century and it had a literary pretext that allowed it to be interpreted as a rich allegory for all sorts of high-minded things.[46] This made the painting socially acceptable enough that Philip II

41 Rosand, 'So-and-so Reclining on Her Couch', 42.

42 As Charles Hope puts it, 'it is hard to escape the feeling that the sexual invitation of Titian's figure is entirely explicit' ('Problems of Interpretation in Titian's Erotic Paintings', in Massimo Gemin and Giannantonio Paladin (eds), *Tiziano e Venezia: Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Venezia, 1976* (Vicenza: Pozza, 1980), 111–124, at 118.

43 This letter is widely cited, including in Goffen, *Titian's 'Venus of Urbino'*. The original source is Georg Gronau, *Documenti artistici urbinati* (Florence: Sansoni, 1936), 93 (doc. XXXI).

44 Cited in Charles Hope, ' "Poesie" and Painted Allegories', in Jane Martineau and Charles Hope (eds), *The Genius of Venice 1500–1600* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1984), 36.

45 This letter was first published by Charles Hope in 'A Neglected Document about Titian's *Danaë* in Naples', *Arte Veneta* 31 (1977), 189.

46 For some history of such interpretations of the painting, see Hope, 'Problems of Interpretation'.

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Figure 5: Titian. Danaë. Oil on canvas, 1544-5. Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy. Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

of Spain—a Catholic King during the time of the Counter-Reformation—commissioned not only a Danaë of his own (1553, Prado, Madrid) but an entire series of mythological paintings prominently featuring unclothed female bodies in a variety of poses. To underscore the high-minded interest of these paintings, Titian called them *poesie*.

The true interest of such pictures, however, was apparently evident to all. In a 1554 letter to King Philip, Titian notes that, since with the *Danaë* 'one could see everything from the front', he promised to send another painting of Venus and Adonis which would show 'the other side'.[47] It is worth mentioning that this is all that Titian says about these paintings. About this very same *Venus and Adonis* the writer Ludovico Dolce (who was a friend of Titian's) wrote in a letter to a friend:

> That divine spirit [Titian's] is also reveled in her intimate parts where we recognize the creases on the flesh caused by her seated position. Why, it can in truth be said that every stroke of the brush is one of those strokes that nature executes with its own hand… I swear to you, sir, that there is no man so keen in sight or judgment, that seeing does not believe her alive; nor anyone made so cold by the years … who does not feel a warming, a softening, a stirring of the blood in his veins. It is a real marvel, that if a marble statue could by the stimuli of its beauty so penetrate to the marrow of a young man that he stained himself, then what must she do who is of flesh, who is beauty personified and appears to be breathing.[48]

47 'And as with the Danaë, which I have already sent Your Majesty, one could see everything from the front, I wanted to vary it in this other poesia, and show the other side, thus the room in which they are to hang will be made more appealing.' own translation ['E perché la Danae che io mandai già a Vostra Maestà si vedeva lutta dalla parte dinanzi, ho voluto in quest'altra poesia variare, e farle mostrare la contraria parte, accioché riesca il camerino dove hanno da stare, piû gratioso alla vista']. Quoted in Annie Cloulas, 'Documents concernant Titien conservés aux Archives de Simancas', *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* 3 (1967), 198–288 227.

48 'Raccolta Di Lettere Sulla Pittura Scultura Ed Architettura Scritte Da' Più Celebri Professori Che in Dette Arti Fiorirono Dal Secolo XV. al XVII', (Rome, 1759), Vol. III, 259–60. A translation can be found in Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 81–2.

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As I discuss in the next section, it is noteworthy that according to this description *both* the painting's transparency and its vivacity contribute to *both* the painting's libidinous and aesthetic functions. It comes as no surprise, then, that in an inventory from the early 17th century of the Alcazar it was recorded that Titian's *poesie* were hanging in the king's bedroom (i.e., in the bedroom of Philip IV, grandson of Philip II).[49]

This, it seems, was the recommended use of such pictures, at least as prescribed in the *Considerazioni sulla pittura* of Giulio Mancini, a writer and art collector who became personal physician to the Pope Urban VIII in 1623. In a lengthy discussion of the appropriate location for pictures in this compendium of information about painters and painting, Mancini notes:

> Libidinous things are to be placed in private rooms, and the father of the family is to keep them covered, and only uncover them when he goes there with his wife, or an intimate who is not too fastidious. And similar libidinous pictures are appropriate for the rooms where one has to do with one's spouse; because once seen they serve to arouse and to make beautiful, healthy, and charming children.[50]

5. Concluding Thoughts on the Distinction Between 'Erotic Art' and 'Pornography'

> …[you] proceed to that most-visited little gallery in the world—the Tribune—and there, against the wall, without obstructing rag or leaf, you may look upon the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses—Titan's Venus. It isn't that she is naked and stretched out on a bed—no, it is the attitude of one of her arms and hand. If I ventured to describe the attitude there would be a fine howl—but there the Venus lies, for anybody to gloat over that wants to—and there she has a right to lie, for she is a work of art, and Art has it privileges … There are pictures of nude women which suggest no impure thought—I am well aware of that. I am not railing at such. What I am trying to emphasize is the fact that Titan's Venus is very far from being one of that sort. Without any question it was painted for a bagnio and it was probably refused because it was a trifle too strong. In truth it is too strong for any place but a public Art Gallery.[51]

This essay began by examining what I consider to be the most philosophically compelling attempt to distinguish between 'erotic art' and 'pornography'—namely, Levinson's functionalist account. While I agree with Levinson's commitment to the general idea that categories of representation should be distinguished functionally, I argue that he not

49 The 1636 inventory of the king's private apartments in his palace in Madrid comes to us from Cassiano del Pazzo. Part of it is reproduced in Mary Crawford Volk's essay, 'Rubens in Madrid and the Decoration of the King's Dummer Apartments', *The Burlington Magazine* 123 (1981), 513–529.

50 Quoted in David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.

51 Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad* (Hardford: American Publishing Company, 1880), 357.

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only mischaracterizes the function of each category of representation, but that he is also wrong about how these functions relate to one another. On Levinson's view, pornography is primarily an aid to orgasm, while erotic art aims to merely sexually stimulate as well as to please aesthetically; further, Levinson argues that these functions 'war against one another', making it conceptually impossible for a single work to have both functions. I have shown not only that cherished masterpieces of high art can indeed have the function of aid-to-orgasm, but also that both of these functions—the sexual and the aesthetic—are much more integrated than Levinson's analysis allows.

Part of my disagreement with Levinson comes down to the question of how one discerns an artwork's function. Levinson appears to think that one need *merely* look at a work in order to determine its function. By contrast, I maintain—and have tried to demonstrate—that an artwork's function must be determined historically. In this paper I employ an *etiological* analysis according to which one looks at the history of a type in order to understand the type's origins and the reasons for its proliferation. The 'type' under consideration here is a particular subset of works that contains paradigmatic instances of 'erotic art', namely Italian mythological erotic painting from the period commonly referred to as the 'High Renaissance'. We briefly considered this type's origins in Giorgione and Titian, speculated about the uses to which these paintings were actually put, and then considered the reasons why this type of work was reproduced, all the while attending to the material details of the paintings that support these uses.[52] Although my analysis is incomplete, it points in the direction of functions of erotic art that are importantly different from Levinson's.

This paper has revealed several other problems with Levinson's analysis. First, a medium's level of transparency must be gauged historically against contemporaneously available options. While we today may think of painting as relatively opaque (in Levinson's sense), until the advent of photography painting was the most transparent medium of representation available. Second, until the late 19th century—and even here the break is not so clear—painting's *aesthetic value* was often understood as precisely its exceptional capacity for transparency (in Levinson's sense). Since ancient times and especially during the Renaissance, painters were regularly lauded for their ability to make us see *through* the representation to the things depicted.[53] It is not uncommon in many periods of European art for aesthetic approbation to take

52 One need not adopt this particular understanding of function to accept the point that determining an artefact's function is an empirical, rather than stipulative, matter. The particular understanding of function employed here is deeply akin to the notion of 'proper function' advocated by Ruth Millikan, where the basic idea is this: to say that a trait's performance is its *proper function* is to say that the trait has a history where it was selected for that performance: see Ruth Garrett Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories: New Foundations for Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1987), 17–49. Millikan, it should be noted, does not extend her conception of proper function to artefacts; instead, she is a pluralist who attributes an intention-based understanding of function to artefacts (see Ruth Garrett Millikan, 'Wings, Spoons, Pills, and Quills: A Pluralist Theory of Function', *The Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999), 191–206, at 191). I take these issues up in 'Artifact Function'.

53 It was considered that, for instance, Titian's major artistic accomplishment was what Ludovico Dolce called 'il colorito proprio della natura'. There are many such examples from the period.

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the form of a claim that the picture in question is so lifelike as to be confused with the person or thing depicted (as we saw with Dolce's praise for Titian's *Venus and Adonis*).[54] Levinson's alignment of opacity, rather than transparency, with aesthetic delight betrays a modernist bias that is simply ill-suited to most works from the early modern period, some of which are the most highly prized works of erotic art in the European tradition.

Third, and following from these last two points, contrary to Levinson's proclamation that the aesthetic function and the libidinous function are incongruous, we have seen a host of works whose aesthetic function (properly and historically understood as a capacity for transparency in Levinson's sense) actually served the libidinous function—that is, the capacity to vividly conjure bodies as if they were before us in the flesh made works *both* good aesthetically and good in terms of sexual arousal.

I have argued that Levinson's way of drawing the erotic art/pornography distinction is deeply flawed. But does this mean that we should accept Kieran's and Maes' conclusions that the sorts of works discussed here count as both pornography and art, as 'pornographic art'?

This paper might seem to militate in favor of such a conclusion, especially my suggestion that in the 16th century, works with undisputed 'art' status served an equally, if not more, libidinous function than the unsanctioned works. If this is right, then the distinction between 'erotic art' and 'pornography' might appear merely nominal. Perhaps we should join art historian Charles Hope in calling these works 'for the most part mere pin-ups, [where] the girls were seen as little more than sex objects'?[55] While I agree with Hope that a significant part of the *raison d'être* of the libidinous paintings discussed in this paper is to ignite and satisfy libidinous desire, I think that we should resist the 'mere' and 'little more than'.

My resistance to Hope's formulation, however, is not Levinsonian in spirit—that is, it is not because I think Hope overlooks erotic art's deep aesthetic function. Some instances of erotic painting from this era are of very high quality while others are not. Rather, my resistance to Hope's idea stems from the fact the concept 'pornography' has always been used to single out those libidinous works deemed illicit; that is, works deemed improper, shameworthy, and forbidden (though not necessarily legally forbidden).[56] This is a central component of the concept 'pornography' that often gets overlooked both by both supporters (like Levinson) and critics (like Kieran) of the erotic art/porn distinction.

One explanation for singling out a particular subset of libidinous pictures as 'pornographic' is, as we have seen with Levinson, their purportedly stronger libidinosity than that of sanctioned libidinous works. I have argued that this explanation is misguided. In the cases we have explored here, the root of the erotic art/pornography distinction was

54 For abundant evidence from both the ancients and the Renaissance, see Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

55 Charles Hope, *Titian* (London: Jupiter, 1980), 62.

56 See Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 1–32; Lynn Avery Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone, 1996).

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in significant part something like what we now call *class*. I mean to suggest that the erotic art/pornography distinction (of which the *onesto*/disoneto distinction is an ancestor) itself functions as a mechanism of class distinction: that is, the art/porn distinction was, and still, is one of the ways of demarcating high culture from that of the masses.[57] We saw in the case of Giulio Romano that a special category of unsanctioned illicit images arose at the very time when print culture began to threaten the elite privilege of owning erotic images. What made a libidinous representation exceed the boundaries of acceptability, then, was not only its extreme libidinosity; it was also its widespread availability and, thereby, its threat to one of the mechanisms of sustaining class privilege.

Of course this paper has only superficially explored this matter with respect to one time and place and so the scope of its conclusions are limited. But my investigation does support two broader methodological points.

First, conceptual analysis of the particular sort in which Levinson engages has its limits. At some point we need not simply to explicate and sharpen the concepts of 'erotic art' and 'pornography', but also to consider the pragmatics of employing the concepts in the first place.[58] That is, we need to inquire into the function(s) of the concepts themselves: What tasks do they accomplish? What do we use them for? Do we need them, after all? Insofar as the distinction between 'erotic art' and 'pornography' functions to reinforce and maintain class hierarchy, as I have suggested, I think that we should seek to overturn them.

Second, my analysis indirectly highlights a problem that plagues the field of aesthetics/philosophy of art as a whole. There is a pervasive tendency for philosophical discussions of art to hover at a very high level of abstraction above actual artworks, thereby overlooking the complexities that arise from considerations of their material and historical specificity. Further, the field of aesthetics suffers from a kind of historical myopia, concentrating almost entirely on works from the 20th and 21st centuries while almost completely ignoring earlier traditions.[59] This myopia is most severe when it comes to visual art: insofar as philosophers of art do discuss particular artworks, they give excessive attention to works such as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* that deliberately pose philosophical questions. As noted earlier when discussing Kieran's exclusive focus on modern libidinous works that challenge the erotic art/pornography distinction, the conclusions that we can draw from examining modernist art are limited because so much of it is deliberately defiant.[60] Precisely because modernist art set itself the task of questioning, opposing, or undermining prior art-making practices, we ought not use it to draw

57 This thought owes much to Bourdieu's *Distinction*, although he does not specifically discuss the distinction between art and pornography.

58 Here I follow Sally Haslanger's explication of the difference between conceptual analysis and what she calls an 'analytical approach' in 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?', *Noûs* 34 (2000), 31–55.

59 Aesthetics is also very Eurocentric and in this way it is no different from philosophy in general. While this essay tries to shift the historical focus, it regrettably does nothing to shift the Eurocentrism.

60 For an excellent account, see Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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conclusions about the nature of art *tout court*. One task of this paper is to begin to correct these misguided tendencies in aesthetics by focusing on older artworks and attending to their material and historical particularities. I hope to have demonstrated how this kind of art-historically-informed analysis can shed new light on philosophical problems.[61]

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