Must Pornography Be Passed Over in Silence?

CAROLA BARBERO and ALBERTO VOLTOLINI
University of Turin, Turin, Italy

This paper critically examines leading feminist philosophical arguments asserting that inegalitarian pornography inherently perpetuates the objectification and silencing of women, thereby warranting moral condemnation or legal restriction. While recognizing the seriousness of these concerns, we argue that neither objection holds, regardless of how objectification or silencing is conceptualized. Central to our position is the distinction between fictional and non-fictional pornography. As fiction, we contend, pornography does not intrinsically validate real-world beliefs or behaviors regarding women's subordination. Even in non-fictional ("documentary") contexts, the purported causal link between pornography and harm remains unsubstantiated. The paper deliberately sets aside ethical concerns about coercion in pornography's production (e.g., exploitation, abuse) to focus on its alleged social effects. By interrogating the assumed mechanisms of influence—whether through fictional representation or documentary realism—we challenge the foundational premises of anti-pornography arguments and advocate for a more nuanced assessment of pornography's role in shaping social norms.

Keywords: Pornography; objectification; silencing; feminist philosophy; fiction; illocutionary acts.

Introduction

In some influential papers, some feminist philosophers have claimed that pornography, or better *inegalitarian* pornography—so qualified: "sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender inequity" (Eaton 2007: 676) (from now on, we will take this specification for granted)[1]—

---

[1] For more on the distinction between egalitarian and inegalitarian pornography, cf. Eaton (2007: 676–679).

should be, if not legally banned, at least civilly actionable, or overall morally blamed.[2] In this context, different theses have been put forward. First of all, by representing reluctant women who give in to sexual pleasure upon being objectified (i.e., in a first approximation, not treated as persons, but merely as objects for sexual gratification, Dworkin 1985; Langton 1995; MacKinnon 1987; Nussbaum 1999; Vadas 2005), this form of pornography incentivizes in their appreciators' beliefs that women enjoy being treated in that way. Moreover, by letting women fantasize only about satisfying men's desires, this form of pornography makes its appreciators to not only subordinate them (Langton 1993), but also take their "no" utterances to actually mean "yes," as a form (to be properly cashed out) of silencing (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988; Langton 1993; Langton and West 2009; McGowan 2009, 2012).

So first of all, if such an objectification really took place in pornography, women represented by pornography would be characterized as instruments of pleasure that can be undressed, disguised, handled, ceded, shared, or violated without taking into account the fact that they are persons. Moreover, because of their subordination, they would be induced to silence. For on the basis of what one reads or sees in pornography, women apparently denying their consent to sex would be taken as meaning the opposite, thereby preventing them from successfully performing certain illocutions (e.g., from refusing sexual advances), in their being silenced in some sense, hence in their failing to secure uptake (Langton 1993; Hornsby and Langton 1998).

If all the above were what *always* happened in pornography, then it would be hard to disagree with the aforementioned positions. As for objectification, how can one remain indifferent to the fact that a man reduces a woman to a mere instrument of pleasure to satisfy his desires? Ditto for silencing. How can one tolerate that women cannot express their will on sexual issues and are not taken seriously in their refusing their consent on such matters?

Clearly enough, the debate on what objectification and silencing respectively amount to is very complex and subtle,[3] but to enter in this

[2] For example, Longino (1980: 45), following Kant, explains how pornographic depictions, by showing women subordinated by men and seen as mere instruments of male's desires, actually promote an immoral (and henceforth unacceptable) treatment of women. Dworkin's (1985) and MacKinnon's (1987) proposals incorporate a Kantian model of sexual morality, too. On the limits of such an approach together with a critique to Kant's original account see Shrage (2005).

[3] As regards objectification, Nussbaum (1999) highlights its seven characteristics at stake in pornography: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertia, fungibility, violability, ownership by third parties, and denial of the individual's subjectivity. Langton (2009) rectifies this characterization. As regards silencing, Bianchi (2008) and Caponetto (2016) explicitly focus on the connection between pornography and silencing by resorting to illocutionary acts. Bianchi starts from Saul's (2006) critique to Langton's (1993) idea that pornography can be construed as illocutionary acts (specifically acts of subordinating/silencing women). According to Saul, works

debate is not the matter of this paper. For we want instead to show that, whatever objectification and silencing really amount to, it is not really the case that pornography leads either to objectification, or to subordination, or even to silence. According to our view, pornography neither displays such reproachable situations concerning women, nor induces one to have weird beliefs about such situations. For first, since we maintain that pornography is basically a matter of fiction, given its fictional character no such consequence derives. Second, this would not even be the case if one were involved with documentary, hence non-fictional, pornography. Section 1 deals with pornography considered as fiction. Section 2 deals with documentary pornography.

Before starting, a caveat. In this paper we will not consider possible objections to pornography based on eventual coercion and exploitation of women in the *production* of pornography. We will not focus on this aspect, since we obviously agree that any sexual action that is not grounded on shared consensus is simply illegal and illicit. Unfortunately, as the #metoo movement has abundantly showed, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and rape culture are typical of many workplaces and not just limited to the pornography industry.

1. *Pornography as Fiction*

To begin with, we claim that pornography is basically a *piece of fiction*, an artifact (as Mikkola (2013) argues by following Thomasson (2003)), in which whatever is represented, explicitly or implicitly, is primarily *fictionally*, hence not really, true; i.e., it is primarily true in the world of the fictional context of make-believe that is activated in the pornographic setting. Indeed, a pornographic piece is basically either a literary story in which a writer makes believe that sexual acts of any kind occur, or a movie whose actors play the role of people involved in such acts. Granted, to say that pornography is fictional is not a new idea (for some previous defenses of it, cf. Cooke 2012; Liao and Protasi 2013), and is supported as well by some insiders, such as the famous director of porno movies Erika Lust (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09cbtjy). Yet, by articulating this idea in more detail, we aim to show how it may resist criticisms of various sorts that can be addressed, and have been already addressed, against it.

So, the *fictional* (and not the supposedly real) context, in which women are portrayed or presupposed as submissive or deprived of

of pornography are not to be considered as speech acts, because only utterances in specific contexts can qualify as such. While agreeing with Saul that only utterances in contexts can be considered speech acts, Bianchi explains how Saul's reformulation can be seen as not undermining Langton's thesis, provided that one appeals to Predelli's (1998) distinction between context of utterance and context of interpretation. Caponetto identifies four categories of silencing (essential, authority, sincerity, and seriousness) and sees illocutionary silencing as a failure in speech acts representing as such a genuine instance of illocutionary disablement, thereby constituting a harmful manifestation of discursive injustice.

their rights, should be taken into account (Saul 2006; Cooke 2012; Heck 2023).[4] For the fact that things are told here in a fictional context makes a fundamental difference. It is one thing to say to a woman, in a pornographic film, "You are my sexual slave," but it is quite another to say the same to a woman we meet in the street. In the first case, the utterance occurs within a fictional context in which the subject is acted out.[5] Hence, it is true, but in the fictional world of that context, thereby at most determining objectifications, or illocutions of subordination, or even silencings that are merely *fictional*. Whereas in the second case, the utterance occurs in a real context. Hence, it would be a genuine problem if it were true in the real world of that context, by determining those phenomena as *real*. Yet, considering an utterance in the fictional context as if it occurred in a real context would be incorrect, since fiction allows utterances to be true *in its own context*. To consider a similar case, just think of the many novels with wrong and offensive content. By adopting the *fictive stance* (Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Davies 1997), one can certainly ignore the fact that such a novel sometimes says something really wrong by means of this content, just to enjoy the fiction, regardless of that content. The same goes for pornographic narrative. If, when reading *History of O*, one realizes that in this fiction a woman—O—likes to be humiliated, one can, in adopting the fictive stance, ignore the fact that this is not *really* the case, but only *fictionally*, in order to be aesthetically involved in the plot. From this point of view, a pornographic narration is no different from a horror or a violent narration (Liao and Protasi 2013), or even from 'bad' jokes (Dennett *et al.* 2011), in which whatever is represented is true, but in the world of the fictional context of such narrations. Usually, the audience is well aware of that.

Certainly, pornography is a case of fiction showing that, as Austin originally understood (1961: 240–241), to be fictionally the case that *p* does not entail that it is really the case that *not-p*. For example, in a porno movie, although it is not really the case that two protagonists make love by being emotionally involved as it is instead fictionally the case, still, if it is fictionally the case that such protagonists copulate, it is also really the case that they do so. Moreover, although it is not explicitly said in the movie, it is also fictionally true that when copulating, their pleasure brain receptors are active, since this is a real truth that is imported in the movie. But *pace* Langton and West (2009) and McGlynn (2021), the fact that real situations also occur in pornography does not undermine the pornography's fictionality. For this is on a par with

[4] *Pace* Heck (2023), that context is not a mere fantasy context, but a properly *fictional* context. For the imagination taking place there does not float free, but is prescribed by the pornography authors.

[5] According to Zamir (2013: 78), there is an analogy between pornography and advertisement because both *use acting* in order to achieve their goal rather than being actually interested in acting.

historical novels. A piece of pornography in which it is both fictionally and really the case that *p*, as in the above example, is just like a historical novel—if you like, it is 'historical' fictional pornography. Indeed, in this respect, historical novels match what happens in pornography. Not only it is fictionally the case in the historical novel of Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, that a branch of Lake Como ranges towards the south, but it is also really the case. Likewise, it is both fictionally and really the case in *The Bethrothed* that the city of Milan is about ten hours walk from the city of Como, although Manzoni is silent about that. For this real truth can be also imported in *The Bethrothed* as a fictional truth. Given that, one may take a historical novel as a piece of history telling how things have unfolded in the real world. But the novel can also be read as a fictional account of how things might have gone in a fictional world parallel to, but independent of, the real one.[6]

On the basis of the above, we could even say that pornography, like any work of fiction, is ultimately about fictional characters who are, metaphysically speaking, objects of the same kind as Madame Bovary or Mickey Mouse. Therefore, the women we focus on in pornographic works are also fictional objects. Indeed, those generated via pornography are not, strictly speaking, ordinary women, but fictional characters whose rights there is no point in worrying about; no more, at least, than there is in worrying about Balthus's *Girl with a Cat* or Sade's sisters we find in *Justine* ("*or the misadventures of virtue*") and *Juliette* ("*or the prosperities of vice*"). Fiction has reasons (and objects) that reason (focused too much on reality) does not (always) recognize.

But there is no need to appeal to fictional characters created by fiction to stress the gap between fiction and reality, as is the case with pornographic fiction. Fictional contexts do not usually involve fictional characters; individuals in those contexts are usually taken to be flesh-and-blood individuals like you and me. But, as we said, whatever is true of those individuals within such contexts is not automatically true outside such contexts. If it is true outside those contexts, it is *independently* true, as with historical novels and, if you like, 'historical' fictional pornography.[7]

[6] Our claim echoes Currie's (1990: 46) idea that a fiction, if actually true, is accidentally so.

[7] Clearly enough, illicit pornographic contents even located in a fictional space may raise the problem of *imaginative resistance*, i.e., the problem of whether one may be unwilling to even fictionally endorse such contents (Barbero and Voltolini 2024). Granted, as some people say (e.g. Stokes 2006), imaginative resistance is *subject-relative*: what is unimaginable for some could be imagined by others. So, to circumvent this relativity, the problem can only sensibly arise in a *prescriptive* form; namely, whether one *should* imaginatively resist such contents. Obviously, immoralists with respect to fiction would see no problem with such contents (Kieran 2002; Eaton 2012; Zhen Li 2021). But even if we put immoralism aside, we may face the problem in a Freudian vein by saying that endorsing such contents fictionally may be a way of fulfilling bad drives *fictionally* rather than *really*, hence of *sublimating* such drives.

But even if one accepts the idea that pornography is basically fictional, many criticisms of it seem to remain untouched. They concern, first, the unbearable things that one can allegedly learn by pornography; second, the bad things that pornography can make you believe anyway; third, the bad actions and emotions that pornography may trigger one to perform or to entertain; fourth, the fact that repeated exposure to pornography can lead even ordinary people to forget the distinction between fiction and reality, by following what it suggests as if it were real. We will address these criticisms in turn.

To begin with the first point, an opponent endorsing the afore-mentioned feminist perspective may retort that it is always possible that people learn wrong lessons from such works. This learning may be taken literally, as amounting to the knowledge of a real situation, or non-literally, as amounting to an appreciator's belief in such a situation.

Let us start with the first, the literalist option. Our opponent might remark that pornography, by making something fictionally true, is made to learn something from what happens in real life, in this case to do with sexual facts. In particular, this has to do with pornographic narrative as a *factory* (Gendler 2000); namely, as an active generator, in its case, of new bad cognitive content, producing new misunderstandings, misleading perspectives, or moral misconceptions.[8]

Yet we may reply that, first, in general, learning something from fiction is a matter of conversational implicatures *to be really true* (Voltolini 2021b; Barbero and Voltolini 2024).[9] For such learning is for us a form of *propositional* knowledge; since knowledge is factive (knowing that *p* entails *p*), those implicatures must be true. But secondly, in the above pornographic cases, even if we accept that their authors want to convey something perverse as being true in the real world (which should not be taken for granted: Cooke 2012: 234), nothing really true is actually conveyed, because no such implicature is really true! For example, suppose that, by fictionally writing, in *Fifty Shades of Grey,* that Anastasia Steele derives pleasure by being submitted and humiliated by Christian Grey, her author, E.L. James, had wanted to convey the idea that for women it is in general extremely exciting to be so treated. Yet, James would have tried to convey something *that is re-*

[8] For Gendler there is another sense in which we can learn something from fiction; namely, when the fictional narration is taken as a *clearinghouse*, which allows us to learn ordinary facts from fiction, e.g. when we read from the Holmes stories how far is Paddington station from Waterloo station in London. Yet as far as pornography is concerned, this sense is irrelevant for the present debate. There is no particular problem in learning from pornography about, say, how human anatomy is made. On the importance of taking into account genre variations for better evaluating different effects of pornography consumption, see Liao and Protasi (2013: 110–113).

[9] If pornography is fiction, one cannot say that one learns from pornography that women have an objectified status, as construed by pornography (McGowan 2005; Jenkins 2017). For again, this cannot be learnt, since it is false. At most, as we have seen before, pornography may *fictionally* construe that objectification.

ally false, since real women do not find that treatment exciting. Hence, given such falsity, no such moral could be learned from her narration.

By defending this point, we do not want to deny in general that one can learn something from pornography, if one manages to derive some true implicatures from it. Yet curiously enough, such a derivation could even have benign effects. Suffice it to say that, thanks to pornography, one could learn about sexual mechanics, explore sexual identities and orientations, and thus conclude that some sexual practices are actually not to be condemned *per se*, as one may originally believe erroneously (maybe for cultural, religious, political, and social reasons).[10]

If the above is the case, it is also wrong to say that pornographic fiction prescribes that something morally bad *ought* to be *really* the case, whether this is supposed to hold for inegalitarian pornography in general (Longino 1980; Eaton 2007) or just in the case of so-called mainstream, response-realistic, pornography (Liao and Protasi 2013).[11] For if *descriptive* implicatures do not hold, *normative* implicatures do not hold either. If it is false that women like to be submitted and humiliated, it is even more false that women *ought* to like being submitted and humiliated, if by chance E. L. James had wanted to convey this prescription via her *Fifty Shades*.

At this point, moreover, comes the second point. Our opponent may advance the second, non-literalist, option about learning from fiction and retort that what counts for distancing from pornography is not whether the kind of real beliefs one draws from pornography are really true, but the mere fact that from it one *may export* such beliefs in real life, independently of whether they are true (McGlynn 2021). This determines, for example, a perlocutionary effect of subordinating women, says Langton (1993). Just as, after reading Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, some people thought it appropriate to see suicide as the proper affirmation of individual freedom, likewise some other people, after watching pornographic movies, may think it appropriate to go around and treat women as they have seen in the movies. Should one then conclude that pornographic works should be censored, or at least morally blamed? In this respect, let's consider again the strongest view against pornography[12] according to which, by implying the subordina-

---

[10] Granted, it is far from easy to find *clear* evidence of what and how consumers do learn from pornography, as emphasized by Litsou et al. (2020).

[11] What grounds the distinction between response-realistic and response-irrealistic pornography, i.e., the amount of importation of truths from the real world (Heck 2023), is irrelevant for our purposes. For that importation only makes it the case that what is really true is also fictionally true in the pornographic context. Yet, as we saw, for us evil *fictional* truths are not problematic. We are focusing here on exportation, not on importation.

[12] The one defended by MacKinnon according to which in pornography "(i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy humiliation or pain; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects experiencing sexual pleasure in rape, incest

tion of women, pornography forces them into silence, violating their most fundamental rights in objectifying them. Many arguments have been put forward in support of this position, but we will only examine one of them (Langton 1993; Hornsby 1993), by generalizing its import. This argument claims that the primary effect of pornographic works is to subordinate and relegate women to a state of inferiority and silence and that the secondary effect is to foster in society the belief that women are merely sexual objects without the right to speak out or rebel against their oppressors. This second effect is further supposed to have three different consequences (MacKinnon 1987): (1) being aware of the fostered hostility against them, women would develop the propensity to express themselves as little as possible (e.g. by not telling about the very discriminatory acts of which they are the victims); (2) being considered in low regard, women would often be mocked and ridiculed; (3) since in pornography women's utterances are given the opposite meaning to what they mean—when they say "no" they mean "yes," when they say "enough" they mean "again"—this would make it the case that the explicit intentions manifested by women in their real utterances are hardly ever taken seriously.

Admittedly, if all this were the case, one would have to take a negative attitude towards pornography. Indeed, one might even adopt a paternalistic attitude and think that because of a few consumers of pornographic works who, on the basis of their pornography-dependent weird beliefs, engage in morally deviant behavior, all possible users should be blamed. However, two problems must be addressed. First, wouldn't this attitude run the risk of infringing the freedom of all other responsible people who do not derive wrong lessons from the works they appreciate? Second, is it plausible to treat spectators as a mass of individuals unable to resist the temptation to project into reality what they see in fiction, as if Bovarysme were a pandemic, while the recent data seem to prove the opposite (Heck 2023: 19–20)? Our opponent argues: in pornographic narrations, women are inferior beings with whom one can have fun, therefore spectators will conclude that women are objects of entertainment; in pornographic narrations, women are happy to be raped, then spectators will conclude that women like to be raped; in pornographic narrations, women are humiliated and silenced, therefore spectators will think it normal to humiliate and silence women. But, really, who are these spectators? Shouldn't we question the idea that pornography is *responsible* for arousing morally deviant beliefs and hence violent or discriminatory behavior in spectators (Garry

or other sexual assault; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up, cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or (v) women are presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility, or display; or (vi) women's body parts […] are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or (viii) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, humiliation, injury, torture" (MacKinnon 1987: 176).

1978; Cooke 2012: 237–239)? If there are suggestible people who develop such beliefs, wouldn't it be safer to arrange appropriate debriefing with such people to help them change such beliefs (Saul 2006: 246)? To move to a similar case yet not involving pornography, consider the case of a disturbed spectator who, after watching *Clockwork Orange* by S. Kubrick, besides beating vagrants in the streets, also rapes women while singing "Singin' in the Rain." Didn't the movie simply made him reactivate a perverse tendency of his that he entertained completely independently and that must be primarily extirpated?

If the above is correct, it is hardly the case that, by prompting in disturbed people deviant beliefs and sexual arousal along with possibly deviant behavior, pornography suggests that such a behavior is acceptable and merited (Eaton 2007: 682). This kind of is-ought connection, which is notoriously problematic in general, is present in many other similar cases. Consider *The Godfather* by Francis F. Coppola, interesting in its portrayal of the gangs through the perspective of the gangsters and in its depictions of Mafia as a reaction to a corrupt society. This representation of a criminal counterculture includes unapologetic gender stereotypes (such as when Vito Corleone intimates to a tearful Johnny Fontane to "act like a man"), the cult of vengeance (the figure of Michael Corleone is essentially based on revenge), and the idea that anything is permissible to protect one's business and loved ones (as when Michael orders his brother Fredo's murder), which are undoubtedly significant factors in the film's appeal. Again, it may engender in some mafia-oriented spectators a feeling of approval, sharing, imitation, and revenge as well as the corresponding behavior. Yet, it does not certainly suggest that in reality such behavior is acceptable and merited (however it might be in fiction).

Yet furthermore, the third point comes to the fore. Our opponent may still retort that, unlike standard cases of fiction, pornography *precisely* aims to *trigger* sexual arousal, hence to have *real effects* on its spectators (Mumford 2013: 62). By inducing admittedly fictional sexual desires, pornography also wants to induce *real* sexual desires, in order finally to affect the spectators' *real* behavior. Consider the trivial fact that pornography leads its spectators to masturbate (Liao and Protasi 2013).

Granted, pornography has such an aim (Cooke 2012: 230). For some, this aim must be incorporated in the very definition of pornography (McGlynn 2021; Zamir (2013: 77) explicitly says: "pornography is a graphic (pictorial, cinematic, photographic, acoustic, staged) depiction of bodily display and action that is projected to generate sexual excitement in its beholder"). Yet first, it must not be taken for granted that such an aim purports to trigger emotions *outside* the fictional context in which the pornographic narration is set. In this respect, appearances notwithstanding, pornography is like other fictional cases: since they prompt to generate emotions only in the context of fiction, no real piece

of behavior must follow those emotions. Consider horror again. It may be the case that a horror movie generates fear in the context of the movie (Walton 1978, 1990, 1997). Yet such an emotion is not accompanied by the typical behavior it would prompt outside that context. For one thing, spectators' heart beating, sweating, and trembling while attending the horror movie do not prompt them to get out of the cinema running and screaming or calling the police. For they remain in their cinema seats eating popcorn and drinking Coke, perfectly aware about the fictional status of what they are watching.

Second, even if pornography managed to induce *real* emotions accompanied by *real* behavior, as in the masturbation case, one may note that the sort of dangerous and violent behavior that might follow watching pornography is not induced by pornography *per se*, but by the specific overall attitude of some of its spectators. Saying that pornography reinforces such deviant reactions does not take into account the actual dispositions of such spectators, which they have independently of pornography. There is just a mere *correlation*, but not a well-established causal relationship, between attending pornography and behaving morally badly (Cooke 2012: 250; on doubts concerning pornography research together with methodological flaws, see Eaton 2007: 697–710). Even if following Eaton (2007) one appeals to a multifactor probability-based model of causality, one may acknowledge that in the above cases, it is more likely that such a piece of behavior is caused by one's independent weaknesses/confusions rather than by the very fact of attending pornography.

Granted, iterated exposition to pornography may raise the probability that already aggressive men perform sexual crimes (Malamuth et al. 2012; Eaton 2017). But again, one may expect that the same happens with, say, violent movies watched by aggressive people. So, just as one should not blame violent stories as such, one should not blame pornography *per se*, but again, help its spectators to remove such independent weaknesses/confusions. To go back to a previous example, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* should not be blamed because some people committed suicide after having read it. They did so not because Goethe's work prompted them to do so, but because they mistook the (fictional) ending of the story as having a sort of moral to be derived from it, and therefore felt authorized to apply it to reality. Yet such a consequence does not highlight a dangerous characteristic of Goethe's work, but instead a deviant appreciation from some (evidently) confused readers.

Finally, and this is the fourth and last point, our opponent may note that watching pornography, in their typically reiterated and compulsive way, is not merely problematic for disturbed people. For it prompts spectators *in general*, even ordinary people, to obliviate the fact that it is fictional and to take the relevant pornographic narration as a documentary narration, to be reacted upon as if what it shows and tells were models to be somehow reproduced in real life, that is, as if the charac-

ters involved in that narration were showing a way people could follow in reality (for some—admittedly disputable—evidence on this concern, see Cooke 2012; Eaton 2007: 707–709). Some works of pornography are precisely aimed at blurring the distinction between fiction and reality. For Langton and West (2009), this explains why in pornography, a huge amount of real truths is imported into the fictional truths.

Yet, if this were the case, as some people have already noted in the debate (Langton 1993), the proper moral to be drawn should be to endorse a pedagogical attitude enabling ordinary spectators, who are not mentally disturbed, to reactivate the awareness that what they attend to is fictional and not real (Voltolini 2021a). By the way, this is usually the kind of strategy adopted in other similarly problematic cases. If, after having watched too many terrifying zombie movies, a subject gets out in the street fearing that she could be attacked and eaten at any hidden corner, we would simply address her with a kind tone of voice saying something like "calm down, relax yourself, it was only make-believe, there are no zombies here." In the case of consumers of pornography who confuse fiction and reality, the situation would be similar to that of someone who makes a cataloguing error, hence not different in substance from the one we find, for example, in the movie *Betty Love*. Betty, a waitress from Kansas who avidly views *A Reason to Love*—a soap set in hospitals—after losing her sense of reality due to a trauma, decides to leave for Los Angeles in search of one of the soap's protagonists, Dr David Ravell, in order to reveal him her love. People would react to Betty as a person that must be rescued from her confusion.

2. *Documentary Pornography*

So far, so good. If we are right, pornography as fiction is not responsible for the weird effects it is taken to engender. Yet at this point, our opponent may altogether reject, wholly or partially, our original assumption about the fictional status of pornographical narrative and say that pornography is, or at least some pornography is, documentary, hence non-fictional (McGlynn 2021). If this were the case, it seems that at least for documentary pornography, there would be no way of avoiding the bad repercussions that we have attempted to discard by relying on the fictionality of pornography. People watching amateurish reproachable documentary movies that had circulated via whatsapp may take them as examples of how to sexually behave. Just as after having watched a lot of whatsapp videos about birthday parties one may think that it is a good thing to arrange such parties.

Once again, first of all, we will not consider documentary pornography that is not based on sexual consensus among its actors. To repeat, if someone films himself raping a woman and shares the video with his friends, this is just a crime to be legally prosecuted.

This said, not even documentary pornography has the above repercussions. Let us allow for this kind of documentary pornography. Yet as a documentary, any piece of pornography would be a mere *singular* witness that would have no *general* motivational force, as any piece of fiction is instead supposed to do—as is widely understood, *Anna Karenina* wants us to believe not that a *particular* family, but that *any* family is happy in the same way, while each family experiences its own unique form of unhappiness. Here iteration is irrelevant. For no number of projections is enough to determine a behavioral *model*. This utterly agrees with Aristotle's distinction in the *Poetics* between history and poetry: "The one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason, poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts" (2013: 1451b). In this vein, consider a terrorist documentary. That documentary would represent something that really happened, hélas, if the documentary is true. Now, terrorists may circulate a huge number of such videos. But one would neither learn from it the general lesson that terrorism will prevail in the world—for that conversational implicature is far from being true—nor would it *eo ipso* prompt any corresponding general real belief. For one may react to it by saying that although the documentary producers may have that belief, watching the documentary does not make it the case that that very belief is to be universally shared. Granted, one might be scared after having watched the documentary. But how one would behaviorally react to it depends again on many other factors that have to do with one's *specific* psychological history. Likewise for documentary pornography, if there is any. Consider gangbang movies supposedly reporting the real sexual practices of certain men simultaneously copulating with a single woman. First, those movies would hardly impart the general lesson that women like to copulate with a male group simultaneously. For there is no such lesson, since that implicature would be false. Nor second, would they prompt the corresponding *general* real belief. One might at most be prompted to believe that *those very real women* involved in such movies like that practice. Third, even if one were sexually aroused by watching such movies, *ceteris paribus* this arousal would hardly lead one to look for other mates to have sex together with some woman or other.

Yet our opponent can finally retort that, just as any documentary narration, documentary pornography may also vehiculate possibilities, and therefore have general effects. Just as a terrorist group may send terrible videos of tortured prisoners in order to frighten people, cannot a member of a gang send his terrible videos of him raping women in order to suggest emulation?

Here we must repeat what we have said about pornographic fiction. Not only would even a pornographic documentary conversationally implicate no weird belief, but either it would be also unable to prompt it, or it would effectively induce emotions whose behavioral consequences

are not only difficult to determine, but whose actors should also be test-ed for their weaknesses. To stress a point already made, if by watching the news, in seeing the video of a crime someone thinks that he could do to the same, we should not only be concerned about the video, we should take care of him.

Conclusion

All in all, we conclude that pornography *qua* fiction concerns only what is true in its own fictional scope. In this respect, our moral beliefs can be subverted, but only *within* that scope; just as it happens, say, in 'bad' jokes. Moreover, appreciators are not authorized to export mor-ally bad false implicatures outside of fiction, nor do they run the risk of being somehow invited to endorse bad beliefs, or adopt a morally bad behavior. Granted, pornography is successful when able to stimulate sexual arousal, unsuccessful if not. Yet this does not make it even a mere trigger of a morally bad way of life, whether it is a piece of fiction or not.[13]

References

Aristotle. 2013. *Poetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Austin, J. L. 1961. "Pretending." In Austin, J. L. *Philosophical Papers*. Ox-ford: Oxford University Press, 253–272.

Barbero, C. and Voltolini, A. 2024. "How One Cannot Participatively Imag-ine What One Could Cognitively Imagine." *Philosophia* 52: 643–660.

Bianchi, C. 2008. "Indexicals, Speech Acts and Pornography." *Analysis* 68: 310–316.

Caponetto, L. 2016. "Silencing Speech with Pornography." *Phenomenology and Mind* 11: 182–191.

Cooke, B. 2012. "On the Ethical Distinction between Art and Pornogra-phy." In H. Maes and J. Levinson (eds.). *Art and Pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 229–253.

Currie, G. 1990. *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davies, D. 2007. *Aesthetics and Literature*. London: Continuum.

Dworkin, R. 1985. "Do We Have a Right to Pornography?" In Dworkin R. *A Matter of Principle*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 335–372.

Dworkin, A. and MacKinnon, C. 1988. *Pornography and Civil Rights. A New Day for Women's Equality*. Minneapolis: Organizing Against Por-nography.

Eaton, A. W. 2007. "A Sensible Antiporn Feminism." *Ethics* 117: 674–715.

Eaton, A. W. 2012. "Robust Immoralism." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70: 281–292.

Eaton, A. W. 2017. "Feminist Pornography." In M. Mikkola (ed.). *Beyond Speech*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 243–257.

Garry, A. 1978. "Pornography and Respect for Women." *Social Theory and Practice* 4: 395–421.

Gendler, T.S. 2000. "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance." *The Journal of Philosophy* 97: 58–81.

Heck, R. K. 2023. "Does Pornography Presupposes Rape Myths?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 1–25.

Hornsby, J. 1993. "Speech Acts and Pornography." *Women's Philosophy Review* 10: 38–45.

Hornsby, J. and Langton, R. 1998. "Free Speech and Illocution." *Legal Theory* 4: 21–37.

Hurley, M., Dennett, D. and Adams, R. B. jr. 2011. *Inside Jokes*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.

Kieran, M. 2002. "On Obscenity: The Thrill and Repulsion of the Morally Prohibited." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64: 31–55.

Jenkins, K. 2017. "What Women Are For: Pornography and Social Ontology." In M. Mikkola (ed.). *Beyond Speech*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 91–112.

Lamarque, P. and Olsen, S. H. 1994. *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Langton, R. 1993. "Speech Acts, and Unspeakable Acts." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22: 293–330.

Langton, R. 1995. "Sexual Solipsism." *Philosophical Topics* 23: 149–187.

Langton, R. 2009. "Autonomy-Denial in Objectification." In R. Langton (ed.). *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 223–240.

Langton, R. and West, C. 2009. "Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game." In R. Langton (ed.). *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 173–197.

Li, Z. 2021. "Immorality and Transgressive Art: An Argument for Immoralism in the Philosophy of Art." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 71: 481–501.

Liao, S. and Protasi, S. (2013). "The Fictional Character of Pornography." In H. Maes (ed.). *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 100–118.

Litsou, K., Byron, P., Mackee, A. and Ingham, R. 2020. "Learning from Pornography: Results of a Mixed Methods Systematic Review." *Sex Education* 21: 236–252.

Longino, H. 1980. "Pornography, Oppression, and Freedom: A Closer Look." In L. Lederer (ed.). *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*. New York: William Morrow, 40–54.

Malamuth, N. M, Hald, G. M. and Koss, M. 2012. "Pornography, Individual Differences in Risk and Men's Acceptance of Violence Against Women in a Representative Sample." *Sex Roles* 66: 427–439.

MacKinnon, C. 1987. *Feminism Unmodified*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

MacKinnon, C. 1991. "Pornography as Defamation and Discrimination." *Boston University Law Review* 71: 793–815.

McGlynn, A. 2021. "Blurred Lines: How Fictional is Pornography?" *Philosophy Compass* 16: e12721. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12721.

McGowan, M. K. 2005. "On Pornography: MacKinnon, Speech Acts, and 'False' Construction." *Hypatia* 20: 22–49.

McGowan, M. K. 2009. "On Silencing and Sexual Refusal." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17: 487–494.

McGowan, M. K. 2012. "Sincerity Silencing." *Hypatia* 29: 458–473.

Mikkola, M. 2013. "Pornography, Art, and Porno-Art." In H. Maes (ed.). *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 27–42.

Mumford, S. 2013. "A Pornographic Way of Seeing". In H. Maes (ed.). *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 58–72.

Nussbaum, M. 1999. *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Predelli, S. 1998. "I Am Not Here Now." *Analysis* 58: 107–115.

Saul, J. 2006. "Pornography, Speech Acts and Context." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106: 229–248.

Shrage, L. 2005. "Exposing the Fallacies of Anti-porn Feminism." *Feminist Theory* 6: 45–65.

Stokes, D. R. 2006. "The Evaluative Character of Imaginative Resistance." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46: 347–405.

Thomasson, A. L. 2003. "Realism and Human Kinds." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67: 580–609.

Vadas, M. 2005. "The Manufacture-for-use of Pornography and Women's Inequality." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 13: 174–193.

Voltolini, A. 2021a. "Beliefs, Make-beliefs, and Making Believe that Beliefs Are Not Make-beliefs." *Synthese* 199: 5061–5078.

Voltolini, A. 2021b. "What We Can Learn from Literary Authors." *Acta Analytica* 36: 479–499.

Walton, K. L. 1978. "Fearing Fictions." *The Journal of Philosophy* 75: 5–25.

Walton, K. L. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-believe*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Walton, K. L. 1997. "Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime." In M. Hjort and S. Laver (eds.). *Emotion and the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 37–49.

Zamir, T. 2013. "Pornography and Acting." In H. Maes (ed.). *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 75–99.