



The Metaphor of Desire: Eroticism, Pornography, and the Sanctity of Art in an Age of Sexual Materialism

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Abstract— This paper examines the increasingly complex relationship between art, literature, pornography, and the commodification of sexuality in the contemporary cultural marketplace. It proposes that the twenty-first century may be understood as an emerging age of sexual materialism, in which sexual desire, representation, and the human body are increasingly transformed into commodities governed by systems of production, consumption, and exchange value. While both literature and pornography are products of labour and respond to market demand, the paper argues that their distinction cannot be determined solely by the presence or absence of sexual representation or by the degree of explicitness. Instead, it is located in the relationship between representation, meaning, and metaphor. Drawing upon Marxist theories of labour, commodity, use value, and exchange value, alongside literary and aesthetic theories of representation, form, the gaze, and artistic technique, the study examines the thresholds that regulate the production and reception of cultural commodities. It argues that the erotic in art is distinguished from pornography by its capacity to signify beyond the immediate sexual act. Through metaphor, sexuality may acquire psychological, philosophical, symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural meanings that exceed the demands of physical gratification. Pornography, by contrast, tends towards the collapse of metaphor, reducing the body and the sexual act to objects of immediate consumption. The paper further contends that the market, despite its capacity to commodify desire, remains constrained by consumer expectations. The consumer's refusal to accept a representation that fails to meet the perceived aesthetic or intellectual value of art establishes a threshold beyond which commodification becomes unsustainable. This threshold constitutes a potential safeguard for the autonomy and sanctity of art. The study therefore argues that although sexual materialism may increasingly influence cultural production, the continued operation of metaphor and the critical agency of the consumer preserve a distinction between erotic representation and pornography, thereby resisting the complete reduction of art to commodity and sustaining the possibility of art as a mode of meaning beyond immediate consumption.



Keywords— Eroticism; Pornography; Metaphor; Sexual Materialism; Commodification of Art

Introduction

Every historical epoch is shaped by an overarching ideological formation that influences its social institutions, cultural practices, and systems of representation. The sixteenth century, for instance, is frequently associated with the Age of Discovery, while the intellectual transformations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries inaugurated the

Age of Reason. In the contemporary moment, it may be argued that the twenty-first century is increasingly characterised by what might be termed an Age of Sexual Materialism—a period in which sexuality is not merely represented, discussed, or experienced, but is increasingly commodified, mediated, circulated, and consumed through the mechanisms of global capitalism and digital culture. The unprecedented availability of sexually explicit material, the

expansion of the digital marketplace, and the increasing commercialisation of the human body indicate the extent to which sexuality has become embedded within contemporary systems of production and consumption.

The visibility of this phenomenon is accompanied, paradoxically, by an equally significant culture of concealment. The so-called “Porngate Scandal” in the British Parliament represents one among numerous instances that reveal both the pervasive nature of pornography in contemporary society and the extent to which its consumption remains displaced, denied, or swept beneath the surface of public discourse. Such episodes are significant not merely as isolated scandals but as symptoms of a larger cultural condition in which the boundaries between private consumption, public morality, commercial enterprise, and artistic representation have become increasingly unstable. The central concern, therefore, is not simply to establish the prevalence of pornography but to examine the implications of the growing culture of sexual commodification for the production, reception, and valuation of art.

At the heart of this inquiry lies the distinction between the erotic in art and the vulgarity of pornography. This distinction cannot be adequately explained by the mere presence or absence of nudity, sexual desire, or bodily representation. Rather, the crucial difference lies in the operation of metaphor. Art transforms the body and the erotic impulse into symbolic, aesthetic, psychological, and cultural meanings that exceed their immediate material presence. The erotic is therefore not reducible to the explicit display of sexuality; it is mediated through suggestion, ambiguity, symbolism, and the capacity of representation to signify beyond itself. Pornography, by contrast, tends towards the reduction of the body to an immediately consumable object, in which representation is primarily subordinated to direct stimulation and exchange. The metaphor, in this sense, functions as the threshold between the erotic and the vulgar: it preserves the possibility of distance, interpretation, and transcendence, preventing the represented object from being exhausted by its immediate material or sexual function.

The question of art in an age of sexual materialism is consequently inseparable from the logic of the market. Within a capitalist system, commodities are produced in response to perceived demand, and their value is determined through a complex interaction between labour, utility, scarcity, exchange value, and consumer desire. The proliferation of sexual commodities, images, and representations may therefore be understood as a consequence of the market's ability to transform desire into a saleable product. Yet this process is not without limits. The

consumer is not an infinitely malleable subject who can be compelled to accept every commodity or every form of representation placed before them. There remains a threshold of expectation beyond which the consumer may refuse to be pushed. It is precisely at this point of refusal that the dynamics of commodification encounter resistance.

This resistance is crucial to the preservation of the sanctity of art. The market may attempt to exploit desire by continually expanding the range of commodities available for consumption; however, exploitation is ultimately limited by the consumer's recognition that a particular product, experience, or representation no longer corresponds to its perceived value. When the perceived utility or symbolic significance of a commodity fails to justify its exchange value or price, the transaction is interrupted. Demand collapses, and production must consequently respond. In this sense, the consumer possesses a degree of agency within the very system that seeks to convert desire into profit. The recognition that the desired object does not warrant the price demanded constitutes a moment of resistance to the logic of commodification.

This principle has particular significance for the relationship between art and pornography. If the production of commodities is ultimately dependent upon demand, then the transformation of art into a purely consumable sexual commodity is contingent upon the willingness of its audience to accept that transformation. The central issue, therefore, is whether the consumer's expectations and aesthetic judgements can establish a limit beyond which the market cannot successfully commercialise artistic representation. The preservation of art's sanctity may consequently depend not only upon artistic intention or institutional regulation but also upon the critical consciousness of its consumers.

This paper argues that the distinction between the erotic in art and the vulgarity of pornography is fundamentally constituted by metaphor: while art transforms sexual representation into a field of symbolic and interpretative meaning, pornography tends to reduce the represented body to an immediately consumable commodity. It further contends that, although the contemporary age is increasingly characterised by the commodification of sexuality and may therefore be understood as an Age of Sexual Materialism, the market remains constrained by a threshold of consumer expectation and refusal. When consumers recognise that the exchange value demanded by a commodified representation exceeds its perceived utility, meaning, or aesthetic worth, the transaction is disrupted; this moment of refusal may, in turn, constitute a significant limit to the exploitation and commodification of art.

Literature, Pornography, and the Threshold of Representation

The preceding discussion has established that both artistic production and the production of sexually explicit material are shaped, at least in part, by the relationship between labour, demand, utility, and exchange value. The two objects under consideration in this study—literature and pornography—are therefore both products of human labour and both participate in systems of production and consumption. At certain points, however, their boundaries may become difficult to determine, particularly when literary or cinematic works incorporate sexually explicit representation. The possibility of such overlap makes it necessary to examine the criteria by which literature and pornography are distinguished from one another.

The existence and continued production of both literature and pornography may, in the broadest sense, be attributed to the presence of a market for each. Commodities are produced because there is a perceived demand for them, and the extent of production is influenced by the willingness of consumers to exchange value for the desired product. Nevertheless, demand alone does not fully determine the nature or value of the commodity produced. As argued earlier, consumers possess expectations and establish thresholds beyond which they may refuse to proceed. The production of literature and pornography must therefore be examined not only in relation to demand but also in relation to the aesthetic, cultural, and ideological expectations that regulate their reception.

To establish the parameters within which this argument operates, it is first necessary to define the two principal terms under consideration. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines literature as “writings that are valued as works of art,” particularly fiction, drama, and poetry. *Dictionary.com*, meanwhile, identifies two relevant meanings of the noun *literature*: first, “the profession of a writer or author,” and second, “literary work or production.” These definitions are significant because they establish a relationship between the labour of the author and the literary product generated through that labour. The first definition foregrounds the producer and the labour invested in production; the second identifies the resulting work as the product of that labour.

Such a definition, however, remains insufficient for the purposes of the present study. Literature cannot be understood merely as writing produced by an author, since not every act of writing is automatically granted literary status. The term *literature* carries with it a set of expectations, conventions, aesthetic assumptions, and culturally determined criteria. These criteria may be consciously articulated by critics and institutions, but they

are also frequently internalised by readers and operate unconsciously in the process of literary judgement. Literature, in other words, is subject to a series of thresholds: expectations regarding form, language, technique, narrative, characterisation, thematic complexity, and the relationship between expression and meaning.

This observation is consistent with the arguments of literary theorists who have emphasised the constructed and formal nature of literary discourse. Russian Formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky, in his essay “Art as Technique,” foreground the importance of literary devices and the transformation of ordinary perception through artistic form. Similarly, structuralist approaches, such as those associated with Jonathan Culler, emphasise the conventions and systems of literary competence through which a text becomes recognisable as literature. Literature may therefore be understood as an artificial mode of writing that operates within, and frequently challenges, the conventions of a literary grammar. Its reception requires a form of literary competence, whether consciously acquired through education or unconsciously developed through cultural participation.

At a more fundamental, non-academic level, the operation of these thresholds may be observed in the responses of ordinary readers. Readers possess certain expectations of what literature should be, and works that transgress these expectations may be rejected, ridiculed, or denied literary status. The threshold is therefore not determined exclusively by literary institutions or critical authorities. It is also established through the interaction between the text and its consumers. The reader's response consequently becomes an important component in determining whether a work is accepted as literature, dismissed as popular fiction, or categorised as something else entirely.

Literature may thus be understood as a collaborative relationship between an idea and its expression. The two are not, however, necessarily equal in significance. A powerful idea may sustain a work despite technical limitations, while technical brilliance without intellectual, emotional, or imaginative substance may produce a work that is formally accomplished yet ultimately insubstantial. At the same time, the human desire to transform experience into aesthetically compelling form suggests that artistic production cannot be reduced to the communication of ideas alone. Human beings seek not merely to experience but also to represent, interpret, reshape, and aestheticise experience. The creative impulse therefore becomes simultaneously an intellectual, sensory, and cultural demand.

It is at this point that the distinction between literature, the erotic, and pornography becomes particularly significant. Literature may incorporate sexual representation without being reducible to it. The presence of sexual desire, the body, or explicit sexual experience does not automatically transform a literary work into pornography. Rather, the decisive question concerns the function of the sexual representation within the larger structure of the work. In literary and artistic representation, sexuality may operate symbolically, psychologically, philosophically, or metaphorically. The erotic, in this sense, exceeds the immediate gratification of desire.

The term *erotic* derives etymologically from *Eros*, the Greek god of love, and has traditionally been associated not merely with sexual desire but also with love, creativity, and the generative principle. Feminist debates concerning pornography have frequently attempted to distinguish between erotica and pornography on the basis of this difference. Erotica is often understood as representing sexuality within a context of mutuality, emotional connection, creativity, or human agency. Such a distinction, however, remains complex and historically unstable, since the boundaries between the erotic and the pornographic are culturally and ideologically determined.

Nevertheless, a significant distinction may be proposed. The erotic is not necessarily defined by the absence of explicit sexuality but by the presence of meanings that exceed sexuality's immediate material expression. It is here that metaphor becomes central to the present argument. The erotic preserves a distance between the represented act and the meaning generated by that act. Sexuality becomes a means through which the work explores mortality, desire, power, identity, love, repression, or transcendence. In pornography, by contrast, the sexual act tends to become the primary and often exclusive object of representation and consumption. The metaphor collapses, and the represented body is reduced to its immediate function as an object of visual or sexual consumption.

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" illustrates this distinction. The poem contains strikingly corporeal and even disturbing images of sexuality, decay, and bodily dissolution. Yet to interpret the poem merely as a plea for sexual gratification would be to overlook the larger philosophical argument that structures it. The poem's urgency arises from the awareness of human mortality and the irreversible passage of time. Sexual desire is therefore integrated into a broader meditation on mortality, temporality, and the necessity of living intensely within the limits of human existence. The erotic is consequently not an end in itself but a vehicle for the articulation of a larger idea.

The distinction between literature and pornography, therefore, cannot be established solely through the presence or absence of sexual content. Nor can it be determined exclusively by the degree of explicitness. A more useful distinction lies in the relationship between representation and meaning. Literature may represent sexuality, including explicit sexuality, while retaining a structure of metaphor, implication, symbolism, and interpretative possibility. Pornography, by contrast, tends towards the exhaustion of representation in the act itself. It offers the sexual act as the primary object of consumption, while narrative, character, symbolism, and metaphor remain secondary or instrumental.

This distinction is particularly important in the context of the present study because both literature and pornography are commodities produced through labour and circulated within markets. Their difference, therefore, does not lie in the fact that one is produced and the other is not, or that one responds to demand while the other does not. Both are shaped by systems of production and consumption. The question is rather what kind of demand they satisfy and what expectations they are required to meet. Literature is subject to a complex threshold of aesthetic and intellectual expectations; pornography, in its most reductive form, is subject to a more restricted demand for sexual stimulation. The central question that follows is whether the increasing commodification of sexuality threatens to erode the threshold that distinguishes artistic representation from mere sexual consumption—or whether the consumer's own expectations of art ultimately preserve that distinction.

CONCLUSIONS

The argument of this study is that the distinction between the erotic in art and the vulgarity of pornography is ultimately sustained by the operation of metaphor. Metaphor prevents representation from being exhausted by its immediate material content and enables the sexual to signify beyond itself. Through metaphor, the body may become a site of memory, desire, mortality, power, identity, transcendence, or resistance. The erotic, therefore, is not defined simply by the absence of explicitness but by the presence of meanings that exceed the physical act. Pornography, in its most reductive form, represents the collapse of this distance: the act becomes the object, the body becomes the commodity, and representation is reduced to immediate consumption.

The continued existence of a threshold of artistic expectation is consequently crucial to the preservation of art's autonomy. Even in an age increasingly characterised by sexual materialism, the consumer may refuse to accept a work in which sexual representation displaces the aesthetic,

intellectual, symbolic, and imaginative dimensions that constitute its value as art. In this sense, the market may commodify sexuality, but it cannot entirely determine the meaning or value of artistic representation. The final threshold remains the point at which the consumer recognises that the commodity being offered no longer satisfies the expectations associated with art.

This capacity for recognition may, in fact, constitute one of the essential qualities of being human. Human beings do not merely respond to stimuli; they interpret, distinguish, classify, evaluate, and assign meaning. The capacity to recognise that an image is more than an image, that a representation is not identical with the reality it represents, and that an act may signify beyond its immediate physical occurrence is fundamental to language, art, religion, philosophy, law, and culture itself. Metaphor is therefore not merely an artistic device but a manifestation of the human capacity to move beyond the literal and the immediate. The ability to perceive this distinction between the thing and its representation, between desire and its commodification, and between the erotic and the pornographic may thus be understood as a crucial form of cultural and intellectual discernment.

The preservation of this distinction is not merely an aesthetic concern. It has implications for the well-being of society and the continued vitality of civilisation. A culture that loses the ability to distinguish between representation and reality, between artistic transformation and mere consumption, risks reducing all human experience to its exchange value. When the body becomes only a commodity, desire only a market, and art only a product, the symbolic and imaginative structures through which societies understand themselves are impoverished. Civilisation depends not only upon the production and consumption of material goods but upon the capacity to create meanings that exceed material utility.

The challenge, therefore, is not to deny sexuality, suppress desire, or impose an inflexible morality upon artistic representation. Such attempts at prohibition may, paradoxically, intensify the fascination with the forbidden. The more significant challenge is to preserve the capacity for distinction. The erotic need not be denied in order to resist pornography, just as art need not reject the body in order to resist its commodification. What must be preserved is the ability to recognise when sexuality functions as a means of exploring a larger human truth and when it has become an end in itself, reduced to a consumable spectacle.

Ultimately, the threshold that protects the sanctity of art is neither entirely imposed by law nor guaranteed by morality. It resides in the continued exercise of human judgement. The consumer, reader, viewer, artist, and critic

each participate in determining whether a representation remains capable of generating meaning or has been exhausted by consumption. The market may continually attempt to extend the boundaries of what can be commodified; however, its power remains limited by the moment at which human beings refuse to accept the reduction of meaning to price.

The future of art in an age of sexual materialism will therefore depend, in part, upon the preservation of this capacity to distinguish. As long as human beings retain the ability to recognise metaphor, to value suggestion over mere exposure, to perceive the symbolic within the material, and to demand that art offer more than immediate gratification, the complete commodification of artistic representation will remain impossible. The sanctity of art survives not because art is untouched by the market, but because human beings continue to expect from it something that the market, by its very nature, cannot entirely supply: meaning beyond consumption, imagination beyond utility, and the possibility of transcendence beyond the material.

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