

A HARD DISTINCTION: APPLYING THE SCIENCE OF SEX TO ART HISTORY'S PORNOGRAPHY PROBLEM

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A number of scholars have argued that pornography and art are fundamentally incompatible. Of these, one of the most influential arguments has been put forth by Jerrold Levinson, who argues that pornography can never be art, and that in-between categories such as 'pornographic art' cannot exist, on the grounds of the intended response they create in a viewer. However, incompatibility theories such as this often rely on conceptions of sexuality that do not align with scientific findings on how sex works in the body, thereby weakening the assertion that a hard line can be drawn between the two categories. This article unpicks scientific findings on sexual arousal to complicate Levinson's argument.

This paper is primarily concerned with incompatibility theory on the divide between art and pornography, particularly that of Jerrold Levinson, the central premise of which is that a work cannot belong to both categories, owing to the different states created in a viewer by each medium. I will focus on his claims about these supposedly separate states and question his decision to conceptualize them based on their psychological and physiological effects. Though I am not the first to criticize Levinson's theory, this particular angle of criticism is one that has not been explored before. I will bring in scientific findings on sexual arousal, using a range of data to see what they can add to this debate.

In *Come As You Are*, Emily Nagoski (2015) presents scientific findings on the physiological and psychological phenomena around sexual response. Over the course of the book, she debunks many myths surrounding the functioning of sex, some of which have great bearings on this discussion. Though many findings are recent, some date back as far as the 1960s. Nevertheless, there remains a delay between the findings of the scientific community and the entry of these studies into popular thought. For example, the term 'sex drive' is still widely used today, but is a construct which Nagoski rejects (2015, 226-227). A quick Google search of the term will yield results in the millions, with the top ones all claiming to help an individual increase or lower their drive, despite the concept having been largely discredited by scientists, on which I will go into more detail shortly. Not only is the concept still widely adhered to, it is positioned as a constant source of perceived inadequacy; a prevalent belief from individuals, regardless of their sex or gender, that their supposedly hard-wired 'sex drive' is either too strong or too weak. Thus, it is not only inaccurate but can have harmful effects when consistently used with a lack of proper understanding. Its use in philosophical discussions of pornography and art are no exception; the concept shows up in many areas of literature, either in a direct reference or as an underlying, implicit basis of a scholar's knowledge about sex.

There is a counterargument to be made here that it is not beneficial to bring biological phenomena into philosophical debate, that the two are simply methodologically and functionally different. One could argue that using scientific studies to refute arguments about philosophical concepts is a slippery slope; one could attempt to thwart many theoretical discussions in this way, to no real benefit. I am conscious of this, but my response is that this disciplinary leap has already been made by Levinson. His insistence on rooting his theory in physical bodily response, not only without fully researching said response, but operating on a false conception of it, constitutes a methodological blind spot, which weakens his argument. Therefore, I intend to explore the intersection of these fields more fully to discover what results bridging this gap can yield.

Levinson's overall thesis is that both erotic art and pornography aim at a certain type of reception in a viewer, but these modes of reception are fundamentally incompatible, and, hence, no material can be both art and pornography (2005, 239). He emphasizes the relationship between a creator's intended response to their work and a receiver's actual experience, which seems logical in many ways. It places no importance on the content of either erotic or pornographic pictures, which should, in theory, allow for a diverse range of material to belong to each category. Many have praised Levinson for not being as reductive as other incompatibility theorists, many of whom base their arguments too heavily on content, inevitably leading to narrow categorizations of what gets to count as either art or pornography (Van Brabandt and Prinz 2012 169; Kania 2012, 255). Levinson's argument becomes difficult to follow when it comes to his definitions of the different experiences which creators aim to bring about in their audience.

Levinson places a great deal of importance on the somewhat elusive state of 'sexual stimulation'. This is defined as being distinct and separate from 'sexual arousal', and while the latter is a term we are surely

more familiar with, the former lacks clarity. Hans Maes has criticized this terminology on the grounds that these two states are too inter-linked to be clearly separated (2011, 392). Even if one could accept their mutual exclusivity, it seems a stretch to say that they are what all art or pornography knowingly aims to provoke in a viewer. David Davies has developed a thorough criticism of Levinson's argument on the grounds of his disavowal of the potential category of pornographic art, and on the grounds of the examples he chooses to support his argument (Davies 2012, 74-76). Kania also gives a thorough criticism of Levinson, questioning his assertion that a work cannot aim at an aesthetic and arousing response at the same time (Kania 2012, 257). But Davies and Kania are not much concerned with these 'arousal-versus-stimulation' terms, which warrant more criticism.

Levinson defines 'sexual stimulation' as "the inducing of sexual thoughts, feelings, imaginings, or desires that would generally be regarded as pleasant in themselves" (2005, 229). This is arguably already an oversimplification; not all sexual thoughts and feelings could be described as pleasant, and not being pleasant would not necessarily invalidate their erotic nature. It is possible to feel aroused whilst simultaneously disgusted, or similarly negatively affected. Levinson then goes on to define 'arousal' as the state "that is prelude and prerequisite to sexual release, involving, in the male, at least, some degree of erection" (2005, 229). This approach is problematic in and of itself, as it excludes the female body entirely from its measurement of arousal. But even more crucially, it plays into an ultimately harmful cultural myth that arousal is measurable based on bodily response, which is demonstrably untrue due to the phenomenon of arousal non-concordance.

Arousal non-concordance

Arousal concordance and non-concordance are terms which refer to the correlation of bodily arousal, such as the response of the genitals to a particular stimulus, and subjective arousal, meaning a person's sub-

jective experience of feeling aroused. In 2010, Chivers et al. published a meta-analysis of 132 studies that measured genital concordance, published between 1969 and 2007, with sample sizes totalling 2505 women and 1918 men across all the studies (2010, 5).¹ Though the methodology and results vary from study to study, there is overall a significant difference between the sexes, with women typically demonstrating lower concordance than men (Chivers et al. 2010, 16).²

To give an example, one of the studies, conducted in 2007, measured genital response and subjective arousal in a group of both male and female participants, who were shown a range of clips that included people exercising, masturbating and having sex. While they were watching these, vaginal pulse amplitude (VPA)³ was measured in female participants and penis circumference fluctuations measured in male participants (Chivers et al. 2007, 1111). At the same time, participants also self-reported their subjective level of arousal on a scale throughout the presentation of the films, measured as a percentage with 0 being no arousal at all and 100 being “most sexual arousal ever felt” (Chivers et al. 2007, 1111). When measuring the correlations between their reported subjective and genital arousal, a significant difference was found between the sexes. (Chivers et al. 2007, 1116).⁴

Another study conducted in 2009, which was not included in the

1 I use ‘women’ and ‘men’ here only to be consistent with the studies’ own terms; participants’ self-described gender identities were not measured and to my knowledge no studies of this kind have yet been conducted on trans, gender non-conforming or intersex people.

2 The average correlations between subjective and genital arousal observed across all the studies can be defined as $r=0.56$ (male) and $r=0.25$ (female), which is noted as a significant statistical difference overall (Chivers et al. 2010: 16).

3 Vaginal pulse amplitude measurement, or vaginal plethysmography, involves using a small probe to measure pulse and blood flow changes to the vagina, as these are what enable vaginal lubrication.

4 The recorded correlations for male subjects were 0.82 for heterosexual and 0.85 for gay men, where for heterosexual and lesbian women they were 0.56 and 0.58, respectively (Chivers et al. 2007, 1116).

meta-analysis, measured the same data and had participants watch a variety of film clips with both sexual and non-sexual content (2015, 191-193). For the male participants, there was roughly a 50% overlap between their subjective and genital arousal, which is considered statistically significant, while for female participants, it was roughly 10%, which is considered statistically insignificant (Suschinsky et al. 2009, 568; Nagoski 2015, 177-179). These are, of course, only a couple of examples and the samples used are not perfectly representative, being limited in size, age range, and geographical location. The methodologies of studies measuring non-concordance, and therefore the results, vary widely, and interpreting them in one fell swoop to draw neat conclusions is tricky. I have used the above examples because they highlight some important trends within this research, and the 2007 study used one of the largest sample sizes in the meta-analysis, so its results are significant. There are many methodological difficulties when measuring these kinds of responses, and any experiment involving subjective self-reporting is, of course, fallible. Despite the fallibility of these data, however, they are still the best data currently available to us with which to understand genital non-concordance.

What these data demonstrate for this argument is twofold. Firstly, these data show how misguided it is to posit male bodies as the default example, as Levinson does, when the experience of arousal is not universal across the sexes or within them. Even if it could be neatly separated from mental arousal, genital arousal alone is not even a reliable measurement of male sexual response—a statistically significant 50% overlap is still only a 50% overlap—and is wholly unreliable as a measurement of female sexual response.

Secondly, the mental factor of arousal, what a person perceives themselves to be feeling, is incredibly significant; a stimulus' effect on the body alone cannot be used as a measure of whether or not a person finds that stimulus arousing. This presents some intriguing challenges

to Levinson's proposed categories of experience when viewing erotic art or pornography. At first glance, there appear to be some similarities between the states of 'subjective' versus 'genital' arousal, which the studies measure, and Levinson's theorized states of 'stimulation' and 'arousal'. Both he and the studies define the former as changes in thought and feeling, and the latter as physical genital changes. This might initially seem to add credence to Levinson's theory. However, if one pursues this line of thinking whilst taking the studies' findings into account, it quickly becomes impossible to maintain that these two states are distinct and mutually exclusive from one another, as Levinson suggests. The two kinds of arousal are surely different facets of the same mechanism. One could argue that they represent different points along a spectrum of arousal, but it still does not seem plausible to experience the genital without the emotional.

Levinson's suggested categories, therefore, cannot be conflated with those of the studies, but moreover, in light of the studies' findings, they also do not hold up to scrutiny on their own terms. Levinson refers to his conception of 'arousal' as "full-blown" and "prelude and prerequisite to sexual release" (2005, 239; 227), which suggests that he views it, as proposed earlier, as a particularly intense point on a spectrum of sensation. This, however, does not seem in keeping with his assertion that it is a totally separate experience from 'sexual stimulation' (2005, 239). Even if it were possible to physically experience intense sexual arousal without psychologically feeling sexual stimulation, the sensation would surely not be more intense, but less; it would certainly be lacking something. If thoughts and feelings are the truer indicator of one's level of arousal, as the scientific findings seem to suggest they are, then bodily arousal alone, without the presence of those feelings, would surely not be a more pleasurable, or more sexually enticing, experience.

What is arousal?

Added to this, some researchers have suggested that having a bodily response to a sexual stimulus at all is a learned reflex, not a reflection of whether a person enjoys or is emotionally engaged with it (Bancroft and Graham 2011, 719). This, coupled with the findings on non-concordance, would explain why it is possible to have a bodily response to material that one finds morally objectionable. If genital arousal is to be taken as a measure of 'real' arousal, as Levinson suggests, this leaves room for a person's reaction to, for example, violent sexual material, to be taken as evidence that they secretly enjoy watching sexual violence. This would be misguided, and no doubt cause many to worry about their moral compass. If we view genital arousal as the reflex it is, we can then begin to question anew the different ways in which both pornography and art appeal to us.

To adequately interpret the implications of this, it is necessary to also understand some other relevant discoveries and models of sexuality. Firstly, that sex is not a drive, secondly, what it is instead and thirdly, the dual control model. Let's begin with the first: that sex is not a drive. The term 'drive', in biological contexts, refers to a mechanism in the body that sustains an organism's life. Drives in the human body include hunger, thirst, sleep and thermoregulation. Without maintaining a comfortable stasis of all these factors, a person cannot survive. To suggest that sex is on a par with any of these things is to place far too much importance on it, and ultimately justify a range of unacceptable behaviour in the name of satisfying sexual desire. This perpetuates rape culture and has been used countless times throughout history to justify predatory sexual behaviour, particularly in men. In Nagoski's words, "if sex is a drive, like hunger, then potential partners are like food" (2015, 212).

I am not suggesting that Levinson consciously holds this belief, but this cultural attitude implicitly underpins his understandings of desire, a factor which goes unacknowledged in the text. He is by no means the

only pornography scholar for whom this is the case; Michael Rea even uses appetite as an analogy to demonstrate his arguments (2001, 137). This seemingly innocent linking of sexual desire and hunger positions sex as a quota that must be met. Rea's and Levinson's arguments play into a masculinized conception of desire, one rooted in a heteronormative and patriarchal sexual culture, which is positioned as the default experience instead of one subjective standpoint out of many. Within this ideology, sexual desire is a pursuit or chase with one goal, that of sexual 'release', as Levinson calls it (2005, 229). The use of this word constructs an idea of an end-point that needs to be attained (orgasm, presumably) in order to experience sexual satisfaction. This is a view of orgasm which already is not consistent for everyone, particularly those of queer identities or possessing female bodies, for whom sexual experience may not be wholly contingent on having an orgasm at all, or having just one, or on viewing orgasm as the only and ultimate goal. This view condenses sexual experience to a quest with a definite beginning-middle-end structure, when many people's lived experience may be far less easy to define. This notion of having to achieve sexual 'release' is intrinsically tied to the sex-as-drive myth.

Instead of a drive, sex can be more accurately described as an incentive motivation system, meaning that desire for sex is motivated by a potential pleasant reward, rather than by a need which must be fulfilled. Thus, what we might call a person's 'sex drive' is more accurately represented by the Dual Control Model proposed by Bancroft and Graham (2011, 725), wherein each person has sexual exciters and inhibitors. Nagoski terms these the 'accelerator' and the 'brake' (2015, 51), and for ease I will adopt the same language. A state of heightened sexual arousal will be achieved by both appealing to a person's accelerator and eliminating factors that might activate their brake, and exactly what may influence these two mechanisms is specific to each person and varies day-to-day depending on their social and environmental context.

This model leaves far more room for individual variations between people than previous conceptions of sexuality, as it considers more factors at play in the process of achieving and sustaining arousal. What it demonstrates for this argument is that a sexual stimulus will only influence a person proportionately to their capacity to be influenced. The most alluring piece of pornography in the world would be much less appealing if viewed in an incongruent or unpleasant context. ‘Context’ could here refer to a physical location, or to a person’s mental state on a particular day, including their mood, stress levels, beliefs about sex, cultural background, and so on. In other words, a work’s content and intention, while they are crucial for their capacity to enable a viewer’s accelerator, cannot be taken as the sole determining factor of whether they could be considered pornographic, when we take into consideration the existence of the brake.



Figure 1. Courbet’s *L’origine du monde*, 1866, in context at the Musée d’Orsay. [Image by Michele M.F. CC. 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>]

By Levinson's assessment, appreciating a work of erotic art, as opposed to pornography, would effectively activate a person's brake, thereby preventing a state of 'full-blown' arousal. I am not wholly convinced that this is what is at play when we encounter erotic art. Given the crucial role of context, added to the different factors that may activate a person's brake, part of what may prevent arousal when viewing erotic art is the physical location in which we view it. It would be unlikely to experience heightened sexual arousal when viewing erotic art in a museum or gallery. Even though the brain may recognise a sexual stimulus, which may in turn lead to a genital response, a person's inhibitor would prevent the cycle of arousal from progressing because they have learned that a public space, such as a gallery, is not a sex-appropriate context. Whilst we do not only encounter erotic art in these spaces, they are the main context for our interactions with it in contemporary times. It is hard to say with certainty that a person viewing Courbet's *Origin of the World* in a vacuum would feel the same way about it as they do in the Musée d'Orsay (Fig. 1), because one can never view it in a vacuum. By contrast, the relationship of pornography to a viewer is usually an isolated and private one, where a person is free to create a safe context for themselves in which to experience more intense desire. It is impossible to entirely remove the role of context from the discussion of a recipient's response, and I would argue that this has just as much, if not more, bearing on a person's response to art or pornography than the intent behind its creation.

Concluding thoughts

The research that Nagoski details demonstrates that an isolation of the states of 'stimulation' and 'arousal' is not as clear-cut as Levinson wishes to believe. If we define stimulation as having sexual thoughts or feelings, it becomes impossible to separate it from arousal when considering the many studies which show that those thoughts and feelings are the all-important factors in a person's embodied experience. If a per-

son's subjective psychological experience of feeling aroused is a clearer indicator of what they are feeling than their genital response, as the research suggests, then one could even argue for a reversal of Levinson's categories. This would mean that erotic art could be considered more sexually arousing, and therefore pornographic, than pornography itself.

What this research shows, at the very least, is that drawing a hard line between pornography and erotic art on the grounds that Levinson suggests is difficult. Though he has been praised for providing a more expansive incompatibility theory than other scholars, he still bases his arguments on a demonstrably narrow and uninformed view of sexuality and desire. One can only assume that much of his argument is unconsciously based on personal experience, with little self-reflection or acknowledgement of his own subjectivity. The clearest example of this is when he allows for the possibility that some pornography performs its function through the very act of engaging the viewer artistically, thereby constituting a "complex mode of pornography" (2005, 236). He concedes that this constitutes the chief counterargument to his view that something cannot engage a viewer both artistically and sexually. However, he ultimately dismisses this point by claiming that this type of material is aimed at a "cognitively atypical viewer" (*ibid.*). He then briefly mentions in a footnote that this would only amount to a cognitively atypical male viewer, and that it has been suggested to him by a colleague that it may actually be the norm for females. Though this greatly threatens the validity of his argument, he does not elaborate on it (2005, 236).

His unwillingness to examine this idea further, and the fact that he neglects to even explain why he will not, is telling. He simply does not seem to think it relevant, which clearly demonstrates his willingness to position subjective male experience as default, and female experience not only as 'other' but as effectively abnormal. Perhaps this is motivated, consciously or unconsciously, by a belief that women do not

engage with pornography, though this is, of course, untrue. This lack of acknowledgement weakens many of the points he is attempting to make; how can one attempt to create an all-encompassing definition of an area of sexual behaviour that does not consider how subjective sexual behaviour is? These misconceptions ultimately overshadow and discredit Levinson's wider argument.

Sex is still contentious and conflicting, and it is difficult to enter any discussion about it, or pornography for that matter, without unwittingly bringing along our own biases and beliefs. This is perhaps unavoidable, but it must at the very least be acknowledged. To make any ultimately meaningful headway in how we talk about porn in scholarship, an attempt must be made to create scholarship that is informed, truly sex-neutral, and that does not play into long-held, ultimately harmful attitudes that have no basis in reality. As Mari Mikkola has neatly argued, "Pornography cannot be analyzed from the philosopher's arm-chair a priori, and speaking authoritatively about issues relevant to pornography requires knowing something about those issues" (2019, 259). Though it might not be necessary for all scholars discussing pornography to have a thorough understanding of the science of sex, a lack of seeming interest or research into sex and sexuality is a curious phenomenon in a functionalist argument about pornography. To seek, for whatever reason, to provide a linear distinction between art and pornography by way of the effects of each on the body without conceptualizing them accurately is, at best, an unproductive venture and, at worst, spreads misinformation about a crucial aspect of human experience.

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