



Leon F Seltzer Ph.D.  
Evolution of the Self

# What Distinguishes Erotica from Pornography?

Gazing or leering? The erotic versus pornographic.

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Although I generally like to research a topic before writing on it (to make sure I'm fully "informed"), for this post I purposely avoided doing so. Why? Well, ultimately, this whole area seemed so subjective to me--the criteria used for distinguishing between the erotic and pornographic so steeped in personal moral, aesthetic, and religious values--that I feared immersing myself in the controversial literature might end up "diluting" my own viewpoint. Even though many people regard these two orientations to human sexuality as overlapping (and some even as identical), I see them as existing on essentially different planes. And in this brief essay I'll attempt to explain why.

It's not a coincidence that when scholars reflect on eroticism in the fine arts, they're frequently considering the human form as the artist has more

or less idealized it. Whether the visual medium is drawing, engraving, lithography, painting, sculpture, photography, or film, they view the creator as striving to capture a certain almost inexpressible beauty about the human anatomy, or the act of love. And since the very perception of beauty--or that which is aesthetic--is ultimately subjective, they're generally aware that one artist's sense of the beautiful might actually be another's plain or homely. Further, they can appreciate that an artist's perception of beauty might have as much to do with *inner* attractiveness, charm, or loveliness than with any *outward* glamour or seductiveness. What is laudable may not be "skin-deep" at all.



Helmut Newton, portrait of Bridget Bardot

Source:

The key element here isn't whether the composition of the face or figure is anatomically correct, or whether the art object's style is realistic, impressionistic, expressionistic, or anything else. If the work has been executed erotically, it's generally assumed that the creator viewed the subject matter as praiseworthy. Something to take pleasure in, celebrate, exalt, glorify. . . . And in this sense, the erotic and the aesthetic merge.

real as an untouched photograph. It may be black and white, or in color. Male or female. The humans portrayed may be contemporary and real, ancient or mythic. What finally determines the work's eroticism is how the artist (or, for that matter, author or composer) *approaches* their subject.

All art is interpretive, just as what's perceived as erotic is interpretive. And if eroticism represents a *kind* of beauty--though of a more alluring, provocative sort, and one that can engender a certain longing or desire--then erotic works actually can be seen as a "subset" of art in general. And if artists *don't* view their subjects as erotically beautiful--don't in some way betray their love (even lustful adoration) for them--it's unlikely that you'll be so moved either. But assuming their creative intentions have been realized, you may be made privy to a joyful sensuality that feels at once exciting and enriching.

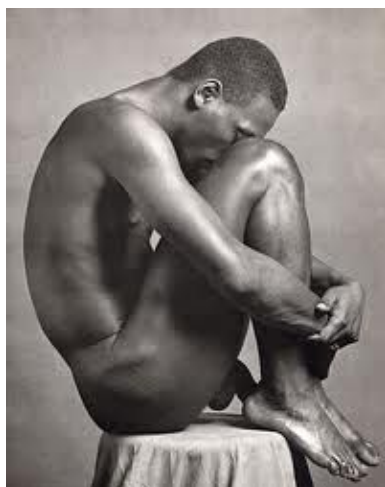


Renoir, The Bathers

Source:

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There's substantially more overlap between the aesthetic and the erotic than the erotic and the pornographic. Unquestionably, erotica and pornography both present the human organism in a manner that's sexually compelling. But the aim of the pornographer is hardly to help his or her (most likely his) audience rejoice in the human form--or in some way honor physical intimacy, or the joys of the flesh. Rather, the objective (typically leaving little or nothing to the imagination) is to "turn on" the viewer. It's less evocative or suggestive than exhibitionist. The unabashed goal is simple and straightforward: titillation and immediate, intense arousal (skip the foreplay, please!). Or, to put it even more bluntly, an instantaneous stirring of the genitals.



Mapplethorpe, Nude

Source:

Admittedly, the erotic might end up having the same effect. Still, the ideal behind erotica is to transcend its literally provocative subject--to add a third dimension, if you will. In aspiring to celebrate the varieties of sexual bliss, and the universal desire for carnal union (which, deep within, just might carry hints of the divine), the

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Also, with pornography, it's basically "sex for sale." Artists pursue eroticism, I think, as they pursue beauty. It *may* sell, but if their goal is genuinely to transmit what they apprehend as almost ethereal in its beguiling sensuality (i.e., is *fine* art rather than *commercial* art), then the work's 's monetary value must remain a secondary consideration to them. Pornographers, on the other hand, are far less motivated by the desire to faithfully represent what they may (or may not) regard as beautiful or aesthetic. Rather, their undertaking is contrived to "produce" what they believe will turn the largest possible profit.

Besides pornography's being principally a money-making venture, the very word *pornography* (or better, *porn*) almost invariably connotes a certain exploitation--at times *degradation* or *deseccration*-- of human sexuality. Many writers (particularly feminists) have rightfully complained that pornography, by objectifying women, reduces them to sex objects whose core value is to satisfy a man's libidinous needs.



Source:

But I believe it actually does much more than that. For I see pornographic literature, songs, images, or films as inevitably cheapening--for *both* sexes--the whole experience of physical intimacy. It takes acts that may express affection, love, adoration, or even profound caring, and dehumanizes them into something animalistic. Acts that combine love with lust, that can value giving quite as much as receiving--acts in which our partner's pleasure can be every bit as important as our own--are "mechanized" into mere outlets for alleviating stress or sexual tension. That which we humans aspire to make almost spiritual is derogated to an exploit almost barbaric in its egoistic *lack* of caring and concern. Pornography is literally sex *sans* relationship.

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If the erotic celebrates sexuality, placing it on a plateau above any essentially masturbatory act of copulation, then it can be seen as diverging markedly from the pornographic. Pornography proposes a temporary "fix" for our sexual frustrations; eroticism offers us something more elusive--an opportunity to experience sensuous



Source:

Something, perhaps, like gazing (hopefully, not leering!) at Michelangelo's physically arresting statue of the youth, David, and--even as we're reacting to its captivating depiction of naked sensuality--simultaneously feeling uplifted by the sight. On the contrary, pornography directs its appeal to our more savage carnal instincts, its portrayal of human flesh calculated to arouse our most primitive appetites.

Not that the pornographic might not reveal *some* interest in beauty--but only insofar as it serves to heighten sexual allure. Obviously, human beauty can have both aesthetic and sensually enticing dimensions, but the purpose of artistically *creating* such beauty (vs. employing it to effect materialistic ends) is to express something revelatory, something that allows us to *see* and *experience* what, in everyday reality, is all too rare. On the contrary, pornography doesn't so much pay tribute to universal yearnings as "capitalize" on them.

Finally, what differentiates the erotic from the pornographic isn't whether or not it's hard-core explicit, graphically delineating any of the whole gamut of sexual acts. For, historically, erotica has hardly refrained from depicting male and female genitalia, or just about any sexual act (or position!) you might think of--and not just with heterosexuals but with gays and lesbians as well.



Modigliani, Nude

Source:

Nor is the distinction whether the visual, written, or even musical stimulus appeals to our more prurient interest.

No, what in general separates the erotic from the pornographic is an *attitude* toward sex and human sexuality that can be inferred from looking (dare I use the word, "objectively"?) at the finished product. If the subjects are portrayed in a manner that focuses on their inner and outer radiance, their fleshy vitality, and the work itself seems to manifest a passionate and powerful affirmation of life and the pleasures of this world, then I think we're talking erotic. If, however, the subjects seem reduced to so many body parts, if any beauty appears subordinate to the overriding purpose of arousal, if the sex depicted seems depersonalized, controlling, non-mutual, and devoid of fun or play (but rather seems about "getting down to business" and "getting off")--*and* if the sex acts pictured contain not a hint of human caring or emotional connectedness to them--that, to me, would definitely secure the work's place in the realm of pornography.

NOTE: It's hardly a coincidence that I've avoided including in this post any images that would likely be seen as pornographic. Certainly, I didn't want to offend the editors at *Psychology Today* (who doubtless would have felt obliged to remove them!). Nor did I wish, gratuitously, to offend any readers of this piece (though others probably would have applauded the gesture!).

And that's one final thing about pornography: Almost all of us shy away from going public with any interest we might have in it. Intuitively, we recognize it's somewhat crude, unsavory, tasteless, and tawdry. It's not simply that it somehow *fee/s* illicit or dirty, but that it seems a bit "nasty" as well--whereas with a beautiful woman who also



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Botticelli, The Birth of Venus (detail)

Source:  
I welcome your comments on this extremely controversial topic. No matter how hard I've tried to avoid it, I'm sure my discussion has in some ways oversimplified its subject. After all, what is one individual's erotica may well be another's pornography . . . and vice versa. And what is beckoning or exciting to one person--for it appears to dynamically illustrate the ethos of [Eros, or the Life Force](#)--may yet be offensive, obscene, and repugnant to another. So I invite you to express your own thoughts on the matter. Whatever they are, I guarantee that they'll have their own (subjective) validity.

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**NOTE 2:** If you'd like to check out other posts I've done for *Psychology Today* online--on a broad variety of psychological topics--click [here](#).

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About the Author



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