Defining Pornography
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If you wish to converse with me, define your terms.
—Voltaire

There is no way to approach pornography without first struggling with the most fundamental question that anyone can ask: What is it?

For decades, the most common nondefinition of pornography was the one used by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in his concurring opinion on Jacobellis v. Ohio, “I shall not today attempt further to define [hard-core pornography] . . . ; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it . . .”¹

Why is it so important to define pornography?

If people were not trying to pass laws against pornography, a definition might not be so crucial. But when courts become involved, definitions become essential. Whoever controls the definition of pornography will determine which words and images the law will suppress. They will decide the framework of future debate over pornography. Definitions directly influence how people think about an issue and the attitude with which they approach it. There is no mystery as to why anti-pornography feminists have spent so much time and energy in trying to define their terms. It is a quick and effective way to control the debate.

The purpose of definitions is to sketch the legitimate boundaries within which a word can be used. The beauty of definitions lies in their ability to let people know what they are talking about. Their magic is the clarity of thought that can result from drawing distinctions. Definitions are like the focus on a camera lens, bringing the intellectual outlines of an issue into sharp relief.

Eliminating Nondefinitions

One step toward defining anything is to determine what it is not. A popular approach to the word pornography is an appeal to its ancient Greek roots. This approach should be discarded. The word pornography originally meant “writing about harlots or prostitutes.” But its meaning has evolved...
over centuries of use through dozens of different cultures. Like the Greek word *gymnasium*, which originally meant, “place of nakedness,” the word *pornography* has lost its connection with the past.

Nevertheless, Andrea Dworkin, in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, takes this “historical” approach:

“Contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word’s root meaning: the graphic depiction of vile whores, or in our language, sluts. . . . The word has not changed its meaning and the genre is not misnamed . . . the graphic depiction of the lowest whores.”

Even granting that it is possible to understand the contemporary use of a word by referring to ancient Greece, this definition is a vacuum waiting to be filled. For example, in today’s social context, what is a “slut”—especially to a woman, such as Dworkin, who openly denounces monogamous heterosexuality?

D. H. Lawrence—the brilliant novelist who was destroyed by censorship—claimed that a purely semantic definition of pornography offered no useful information at all. “The word itself, we are told, means ‘pertaining to the harlots’—the graph of the harlot. But nowadays, what is a harlot? . . . Why be so cut and dried? The law is a dreary thing, and its judgments have nothing to do with life. The same with the word *obscene*: nobody knows what it means. Suppose it was derived from *obscena*: that which might not be represented on the stage; how much further are you?”

Dworkin’s definition may not transmit useful information, but it does clearly show her hatred of pornography. By calling pornography “the graphic description of the lowest whores”—when the adjective “lowest” is not in the Greek translation, Dworkin tells us more about herself than about the word *pornography*.

Moreover, the spectacle of radical feminists leaning upon the support of etymological authority is a strange sight indeed. After all, they adamantly reject the science and history of Western civilization as manifestations of white male culture. They reject the chronicles of history, because they are not *herstory*. They rail against the hard sciences, because they spring from white male methodology. The white male study of etymology, however, is legitimate—at least, when it suits their purposes.

Enlightenment is not likely to come from anti-pornography feminists, who view the world through the lens of ideology. Their rhetoric is the linguistic equivalent of thermonuclear war. Pornography is called “genocide”; Susan Brownmiller describes it as “the undiluted essence of anti-female
propaganda”; Judith Bat-Ada compares Hugh Hefner to Hitler; Andrea Dworkin’s book on pornography begins by claiming “Men love death . . . men especially love murder.”

Such descriptions are normative, or biased. They embody the viewers’ reactions, and their desire to condemn pornography. It is important to understand why anti-pornography feminists spend so much time and energy trying to define pornography. Definitions not only control the debate, they can control what sexuality itself becomes. Radical feminists view sex as a social construct. That is, they do not believe the current expressions of sexuality are inherent in human biology; instead, they are products of culture. If women’s sexuality is a blank sheet of paper, then defining it becomes tremendously important. Whoever controls the definition will determine the content. The struggle to define pornography is part of radical feminism’s attempt to control sexuality itself.

The stakes are high. High enough for freedom of speech to be jettisoned. Indeed, in her recent book Only Words, Catharine MacKinnon argues that pornography has no connection with free speech whatsoever; it is an act of sexual subordination, of sexual terrorism.

“Empirically, of all two dimensional forms of sex, it is only pornography, not its ideas as such, that gives men erections that support aggression against women in particular.”

Over the last decade or so, the feminist position on pornography has shifted toward this definition. Pornography is no longer viewed as merely offensive; it is redefined as an act of violence, in and of itself. It is the sexual subordination of women, by which their victimization is eroticized and perpetuated. It is the main way patriarchy subordinates women.

Other feminists have pointed out that rape existed long before Playboy appeared in the racks of corner stores. Such voices of reason are lost in the wind of hysteria. Anti-pornography feminists acknowledge them only to launch an ad hominem attack.

For better or worse, it is necessary to treat anti-pornography feminists with more respect than they are willing to give back. It is important to consider the substance of their definitions.

The anti-pornography definitions abound with emotionally charged and highly subjective terms like “humiliation” or “subordination.” And they are commonly offered as the crowning statement of horrifying stories of sexual abuse.

Consider the opening of Only Words: “You grow up with your father holding you down and covering your mouth so another man can make a horrible searing pain between your legs. When you are older, your husband
ties you to the bed and drips hot wax on your nipples . . . and makes you smile through it.”5 Ms. MacKinnon springboards from this scenario into a discussion and definition of porn.

In January/February 1994, Ms. magazine featured the issue of pornography. In an open discussion between a group of feminists, the following definitions were offered:

“Pornography is the use of sex to intimidate and/or control women and children. . . . It has to do with depicting something that is violent and possibly life threatening for entertainment.”

—Ntozake Shange

“I look at pornography as a system and practice of prostitution, as evidence of women’s second class status. It is a central feature of patriarchal society.”

—Norma Ramos

“Pornography is the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women that includes one of a series of scenarios, from women being dehumanized—turned into objects and commodities—through women showing pleasure in being raped, through the dismemberment in a way that makes the dismemberment sexual.”

—Andrea Dworkin6

Radical feminism’s current definition of pornography is the logical outgrowth of its view of heterosexual sex, which was well expressed over a decade ago by Andrea Dworkin. Throughout her still-classic book Pornography: Men Possessing Women, Dworkin’s diatribe on men and heterosexuality borders on hate mongering. “Men develop a strong loyalty to violence. Men must come to terms with violence because it is the prime component of male identity” (p. 51). “The immutable self of the male boils down to an utterly unselfconscious parasitism” (p. 13). “Men are distinguished from women by their commitment to do violence rather than to be victimized by it” (p. 53). “Men want women to be objects, controllable as objects are controllable” (p. 65).7 Dworkin’s 1988 book, Letters from a War Zone, continues this theme by presenting marriage as prostitution and romance as rape.

The bridge linking these two positions—the rejection of heterosexuality and the definition of pornography as violence was forged in 1983 with the proposed Minneapolis Anti-Pornography Ordinance. This remains the touchstone definition used by the anti-porn forces. Because it was a watershed, I quote it in full:
(gg) **Pornography.** Pornography is a form of discrimination on the basis of sex. (1) Pornography is the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following:

(i) women are presented as dehumanized sexual objects, things or commodities; or 
(ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or
(iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or
(iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or
(v) women are presented in postures of sexual submission; [or sexual servility, including by inviting penetration] or
(vi) women’s body parts—including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, and buttocks—are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts; or
(vii) women are presented as whores by nature; or
(viii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or
(ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual.8

Several aspects of this definition cannot pass without comment. First, the set-up to this analysis of pornography baldly and stipulatively defines it as “discrimination based on sex” and the “sexually explicit subordination of women.” This is not a definition; it is a conclusion, and one that is offered without argument or evidence.

Next, the specific images that constitute pornography are described in extremely subjective and value-laden terms, such as “dehumanized,” “humiliation,” “degradation,” and “whores by nature.” What do these terms mean? Humiliation means something different to every single woman. And short of a woman’s waving a handful of cash while having sex it is difficult to even imagine what the phrase “whore by nature” means.

Moreover, some of the images covered by the definition go far beyond what can reasonably be considered pornographic. For example, “women’s body parts . . . are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts.” This description would include everything from blue jean commercials
which zoom in on women’s asses to cream ads which show perfectly manicured hands applying the lotion—the sort of advertisements that have appeared in *Ms.* magazine. Although it is commonplace to criticize such ads for using sex to sell products, it is a real stretch to call them pornographic.

Further, although pornography is predefined as a form of violence against women, several clauses of this definition have nothing to do with such abuse. Instead, they deal with explicit sexual content—e.g. women as sex objects who “invite penetration.” This is more of an attack on heterosexual sex than it is on pornography. After all, if there isn’t an “invitation to penetration,” how can the man know that consent is present?

Other clauses merely refer to images that reflect specific erotic preferences, such as buttocks or breasts.

The ordinance’s definition goes far beyond defining pornography, and well into mandating what is sexually correct to see, hear, and express.

**Pornography versus Erotica**

Words define the parameters of debate. They control thought itself. George Orwell described this process as NewSpeak in his book *1984*, which described a totalitarian societal nightmare. The ultimate goal of NewSpeak was to construct a language such that it was impossible to utter an “incorrect” sentence.

Part of the anti-porn attempt to control the debate has been the forced distinction they’ve drawn between pornography and erotica. Basically, pornography is nasty; erotica is healthy. What exactly constitutes erotica is never clearly expressed. It is merely described as life affirming, while pornography is decried as degrading.

In the book *Confronting Pornography*, Jill Ridington offers her dividing line between the two types of sexual expression:

“If the message is one that equates sex with domination, or with the infliction of pain, or one that denies sex as a means of human communication, the message is a pornographic one. . . . Erotica, in contrast, portrays mutual interaction.”

Is there a real distinction between pornography and erotica? And why does it matter?
Let me draw a parallel. A friend and I have a pleasant disagreement about whether there is a distinction between science fiction and fantasy. These two types of writing are often lumped together, with many books combining elements of both. Although the debate may be fruitless, it is good-natured and of no great consequence.

Not so with the current mania for distinguishing between erotica and pornography. The debate over where to draw the line between these two forms of literature is anything but good-natured. When that line is drawn, those who fall on the wrong side of it may well be arrested and imprisoned by those who control the definitions.

The entire process resembles a scene from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*:

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Humpty Dumpty was engaging in what has been called “stipulative definitions”—namely, the sort of definition which makes the word mean anything you want it to. For example, arbitrarily redefining pornography from common usage—“sex books and sex movies”—to the sexually correct meaning of “an act of rape.”

Fortunately, some feminists, like Joanna Russ in *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts*, are applying common sense rather than ideology to this distinction:

“Until recently I assumed . . . that ‘art’ is better than ‘Pornography’ just as ‘erotica’ is one thing and ‘pornography’ another; and just as ‘erotica’ surpasses ‘pornography,’ so ‘art’ surpasses ‘erotica.’ I think we ought to be very suspicious of these distinctions insofar as they are put forward as moral distinctions.”

With such a Wonderland of definitions floating about, it is prudent to take a step backward and ask, What constitutes a proper definition of anything?
Defining a Definition
At the risk of sounding like an instructor of Logic 101, let me run the word *pornography* through a definitional process.

A good definition consists of two basic components:

The *definiendum*. This is the word or concept being defined. In the tentative definition “pornography is sexually explicit literature,” the term *pornography* is the *definiendum*;

The *definiens*. This is the defining part of the definition. In “pornography is sexually explicit literature,” the phrase “sexually explicit literature” is the *definiens*.

The process of defining a word involves analyzing it in several ways:

What is the *genus*? That is, what is the general class or category to which the word belongs? In “pornography is sexually explicit literature,” the term *literature* is the *genus*. It is the wider category to which *pornography* belongs. Once the broad context for *pornography* has been established, the process of definition becomes a matter of narrowing things down. The next question becomes:

What is the *differentia*? That is, what distinguishes *pornography* from all other forms of literature? What essential characteristics make pornography different from murder mysteries or historical novels?

Establishing the differentia means following certain rules, the most basic of which are:

1. The essential characteristics—or the common denominator found in all instances of the *definiendum*—cannot be too broad. Consider the definition “human beings are animals that walk on two legs.” Since gorillas also walk on two legs, this differentia is too broad.

2. The essential characteristics should not be too narrow. Thus, “human beings are animals that negotiate contracts” is too narrow because it excludes those people who have never signed a contract.

To state these two principles in one sentence: The definition should apply to all possible cases, and only to those cases.

By these standards, definitions can be regarded as either true or false. Competing definitions can be evaluated as better or worse.

What Is Pornography?
I propose a value-neutral definition: *Pornography is the explicit artistic depiction of men and/or women as sexual beings*. The modifier *explicit* excludes such gray areas as women’s romance novels. The modifier *artistic*
distinguishes pornography from psychological analyses of sex, such as those found in Freudian textbooks. The term depiction includes a wide range of expression, including paintings, literature, and videos. Thus, the genus of my definition of pornography is “the explicit artistic depiction.”

The differentia is “of men and/or women as sexual beings.” This means that pornography is the genre of art or literature that focuses on the sexual nature of human beings. This does not mean pornography cannot present people as full well rounded human beings. But, in order for the piece of art to be part of the “genre” of pornography, it must explicitly emphasize their sexuality.

Two things are missing from my definition of pornography, which are generally found elsewhere. It is common to refer to pornography as “material intended to sexually arouse”; I have excluded the intention of the author or producer. I have also excluded the reaction of the reader or viewer.

In other words, I claim that The Tropic of Cancer is inherently pornographic, quite apart from Henry Miller’s intentions. To put this in another way: What if Miller protested that he was doing a political commentary on fascism, not a piece of pornography? Would his intention somehow convert the book into a work of political science? By my definition, no. The Tropic of Cancer would be a work of pornography whether or not Miller had hoped to achieve something else.

Equally, what if a reader became tremendously aroused by Animal Farm and not at all by Miller’s book? The reader’s response would not alter the fact that Miller, not Orwell, is the one presenting pornography.

“Pornography is the explicit artistic depiction of men and/or women as sexual beings.” This is not merely a working definition. It is a definition I propose as a new and neutral starting point for a more fruitful discussion of pornography.

**Is Pornography Good or Bad?**

With a working definition in place, it is possible to move on to the next question, Is pornography good or bad? This question is usually asked in one of two manners:

1. Is the explicit depiction of sex, *in general*, a good or bad thing?

   Opinions on this range widely. At one extreme are the Religious Right and the anti-porn feminists, who condemn any graphic expression of sexuality, including straightforward nudity. At another extreme are those people
who view any sexual censorship as being far worse than pornography could ever be. Most people fall in the middle. They tend to judge pornography on a case-by-case basis.

2. Is a specific piece of pornography good or bad art?

This is an aesthetic question. It revolves around identifying the major themes being expressed and evaluating how well the themes have been executed.

Most pornography is bad art. Indeed, pornography probably contains less artistic value than any other genre of literature and art. The reason for this is simple. Whenever a genre is stigmatized (or criminalized), the best writers and minds tend to abandon it. Those authors—such as D. H. Lawrence or James Branch Cabell or Henry Miller—who persist in bringing their genius to bear are persecuted without mercy. No wonder the industry is dominated by those who rush to make a quick profit rather than a profound insight.

Nevertheless, I believe the quality of pornography is often maligned. Pornography tends to be judged by the worst examples within the genre. Anti-pornographers do not hold up copies of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* or Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*. They choose the most repulsive examples they can find and call them “representative.” What other genre could withstand being judged by its poorest instances?

**Conclusion**

To repeat: The definition used in this book is: *Pornography is the explicit artistic depiction of men and/or women as sexual beings.* No area of human psychology needs exploration and understanding as much as sexuality does. At the turn of the century, Freud revolutionized the world’s view of sex. Suddenly, it became a popular topic. It became almost a social duty to discuss and examine sex. Now anti-pornography feminists are trying to turn back the clock and shut women’s sexuality away behind the locked doors of political correctness. Their first line of attack is to define the debate in their own terms.

The first line of defense is to flatly reject such maneuvering.

**ENDNOTES**

5. *Only Words*, p. 3.

**NOTES AND DEFINITIONS**

Voltaire: François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), a celebrated French satirist, philosopher, and historian whose writings are still relevant to today’s society.

D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930), a gifted writer whose works such as *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* were deemed pornographic rather than literary in his lifetime. (para. 10)

*herstory*: a neologism (newly coined word) in which something is told from a feminist point of view rather than from “history,” a male perspective or bias. (para. 12)

*ad hominem* attack: against the person rather than the argument, appealing to the emotions instead of reason. (para. 18)

George Orwell: the pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair (1903–1950), an English writer who in his satirical novel *1984* invented words such as Newspeak to show how the meaning of words can be perverted. (para. 31)

Henry Miller (1891–1980): an American writer renowned for novels such as *Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn*, and *Quiet Days in Clichy*, which were considered pornographic. (para. 56)

James Branch Cabell (1879–1958): an American novelist who was tried for obscenity in his writings. (para. 62)
Erica Jong (née Mann, 1942): an American feminist writer whose novels emancipated sexuality in women. Her best-known work is Fear of Flying. (para. 63)

**STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE**

McElroy starts with a quotation from the French philosopher Voltaire. The passage not only introduces her topic and methodology, but also aligns her with an anti-establishment author of the past. In short, she subtly announces that her work challenges the definitions of others before her.

Because the word *pornography* has such emotive implications and values, McElroy examines the various meanings given, from its root to current application. She does so by quoting selected passages from other writers such as Andrea Dworkin, Susan Brownmiller, and Judith Bat-Ada. In addition, she evaluates these definitions, explains the flaws in imprecise meaning, and offers her own.

The writer is scrupulous in giving due references, in balancing various opinions, and in striving towards objectivity. Notice how she begins with word history before venturing into critical discussion.

**TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING**

1. What is your definition of pornography? Why is it necessary to have a definition?
2. Should there be a distinction made between pornography and erotica?
3. How can pornography be harmful?
4. How do we balance different cultural attitudes in our society? For instance, in some cultures, showing the female form at all is taboo. In a multicultural society, should Canadians dress more modestly?
5. This reading is an excerpt from a book published in 1995. Since that time, the Internet has made pornography more available. How does this change the debate?
6. The standards for nudity and sexuality have changed a lot in North America. Is this a good thing?