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EROTICISM — BEAUTIFUL PORNOGRAPHY ?

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an effort to open a debate on whether a valid separation can be made between the erotic, and the pornographic. Definitions of both eroticism and pornography are very difficult to establish, because although in theory erotic art is not intentionally pornographic, often the effects of erotic and pornographic works are indistinguishable. Eroticism it is said, is about sexual love and desire, whereas pornography is about explicit presentation of sexual activity in the visual media and literature. Pornography aims to stimulate sexual and not aesthetic feelings.

What I aim to show through this thesis are some opinions on what the erotic and pornographic are believed to be. Critics have tried (although it is difficult) to interpret and find the meanings of the differences between erotic and pornographic images. Establishing some of the understandings of what erotic art and pornographic art are supposed to be, it is then necessary to consider how a viewer's opinions can change the meanings of these images. Depending on the moral and social values of the spectator, each individual's opinions and interpretations will be different. Ultimately the erotic/pornographic distinction lies in the interpretation of the individual spectator. It is necessary to be aware of the importance of the viewer's interpretations and the artist's intentions when we evaluate the work of artists who deal with a sexual theme. I have chosen to focus on some of the works by

Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt in an attempt to make a distinction between erotic art and pornographic images.

Having taken consideration of the artist's intention when making an erotic image, and being aware of the myriad of interpretations made by the viewers, I ask because of the images unintended pornographic effect, should we as viewers dismiss the works of such artists as pornographic, or whether we can ignore the erotic/pornographic content and concentrate on the aesthetic? I believe that in some cases the erotic, pornographic, and aesthetic elements are interdependent, and balance to make an image a unified whole. If this is so instead of trying to ban or destroy such work, should we not look at the question of the education of the viewers?



The distinction between photography and art is very hard to make as there are no hard or fast lines distinguishing one from the other. However, referring to what criticism and paragraphers are supposed to be doing is to make some of the distinctions for ourselves.

*Article is of or tends to do with much manner*  
or *art*

*Of forming or tending to attain much  
skill*

*Paragrapher is of things or persons dealing with  
many matters of art*

*Art and the*

*of a collection or series of any*

*artfully regarded as showing*

*of their own distinctive*

## CHAPTER ONE

Paragraphs in all media, say, photography, film, literature and art, are used intentionally to provide some feelings and is doing so in accordance with objectification, usually that of words. The use of photography as a phenomenon is in its view, a calculated and descriptive scheme by paragraphers, as the people's sensitivity and social awareness, mainly for profitable gain. With more is the fact that paragraphers have the power to manipulate the way words, be it words or words the visual appeal in the medium, for the paragraphers, can gain. In photography the relationships between the paragraphers, the viewer, and the subject are arranged so that usually one gains the other's loss. The paragraphers make the words, the viewer gets to provide his visual object and transfer into the words, but exchanged as reduced through objectification.

The distinctions between pornography and eroticism are very hard to make as there are no hard or fast lines distinguishing one from the other. However, looking at what eroticism and pornography are supposed to be help us to make some of the distinctions for ourselves.

*Erotic (1) Of or having to do with sexual passion or love.*

*(2) Arousing or tending to arouse sexual desire.*

*Pornography (1) Writings or pictures dealing with sexual matters in a manner intended to incite lust, and therefore considered obscene.*

*(2) A description or portrayal of any activity regarded as obscene*

*( World book dictionary, 1986)*

Pornography in all media, eg. photography, film, literature and art is used intentionally to provoke sexual feelings and in doing so is concerned with objectification, usually that of women. The use of pornography as a phenomenon is in my view, a calculated and deceptive scheme by pornographers, to use people's sexuality and sexual pleasures, mainly for profitable gains. Much worse is the fact that pornographers have the power to manipulate and use women, to promote or evoke the sexual arousal in the consumer, for the pornographers' own gains. In pornography the associations between the pornographer, the viewer, and the subject are arranged so that usually men gain and women lose. The pornographer makes his money, the viewer gets to project his sexual desires and fantasies onto the woman, but womankind is reduced through objectification.

Pornography is concerned mainly, with sexual difference, sexual difference obviously leading to power or control. The issues of control are as follows: there is the control of the image maker over the subject and the manipulation of that subject; the control of the pornographic industry over the consumer to ensure his continued purchases; the consumer himself, acquires an aspect of control over the subject, through the feelings and desires within himself. Finally the subject, the woman involved, loses her identity as female, she is dehumanised and awarded the same importance as a piece of fruit or a piece of meat. Therefore pornography is immoral in that it claims to have the right to debase, and have complete control over someone else.

Rosalind Coward says that it is difficult to define pornography as it is an industry that thrives on its designation as illicit. For example, when something is labelled forbidden or objectionable it brings out the curiosity and inquisitiveness of individuals. Pornography accumulates its audience partially through the attractiveness of its taboo nature. It then sells to them an expectation of pleasure in images. In pornography the expectation of pleasure is the expectation of arousal. It is this expectation of arousal that ensures the continued subscription to pornographic magazines.

Coward says the pornographic industry is based on these codes: submission, fragmentation and domination. In pornography the submission is by the subject to the pornographer, who in turn arranges the image so that it



appears to the viewers that the woman is submitting to them. With the fragmentation involved, the body of the subject is broken into areas of sexual importance. Breasts, buttocks and genitals are normally focused upon more so than other parts of the body. It is here that the woman loses her identity as a human, and becomes as unimportant as a piece of fruit. In essence she becomes a commodity, an object of desire. Objectification leads to domination, domination leads to submission, the continuation of this pattern helps maintain the unjust balance of power.

*There are three factors which should be foregrounded in thinking about pornography. One is that there are very few clearly agreed definitions of what pornography is and in particular, how it differs from 'erotic' images of naked bodies in general. Given this, there is an obvious need to specify how images produce meanings. Another is that when we talk about intervening in anything to do with sexuality, sexual practice and sexual activity, we are not talking about a society where men and women are lined up in clear and obvious opposition to each other on every single issue. We are talking about intervening in a society where sexuality has historically been regulated by the state and by legal and social policies. It follows from this that however we explain theoretically the emergence of the state, it is dangerous to ignore the specific ways in which the state operates in this society and how this effects what is strategically possible, feasible or indeed desirable. Finally, we have to recognize that positions on pornography are now well staked out in terms of either 'liberalism' or 'censorship' and so ask whether we can escape from this way of posing the issue.*<sup>1</sup> (Coward, 1987, p.309)

Coward goes on to say that definitions of pornography are difficult to make because what is designated as pornography is

<sup>1</sup> COWARD, Rosalind. 'Sexual violence and sexuality' in FEMINIST REVIEW (Ed.). Sexuality a Reader. London: Virgo Press Ltd., 1987.

not fixed. This can be seen by comparing a 19th century pornographic image with its modern counterpart. [see illustration number (i) page 38], and compare it with a modern Playboy image. Society continues to encourage a distinction between what would offend a 'reasonable person' and what is best kept for private or adult viewing. This affects both the illicitness and the attractiveness of pornography. The pornographic industry depends on such distinctions between the acceptable and the unacceptable, distinctions which Coward says are embodied in legal recommendations, that is laws relating to pornography etc.

The first factor discussed by Coward is that there is an obvious need to specify how images produce meanings. It is true that images do produce meanings but, quite definitely, consumers of images will have their own viewpoints on what is or is not permissible, relative to their moral and social backgrounds. Although images produce strong meanings of their own and contain an element of control over the viewer, the viewer's moral stance may produce a different meaning than was intended.

Her second factor deals with how important it is to be aware of the specific ways that the state operates within society. The way the state operates becomes important because in trying to bring about changes, an anti-pornographic movement must plan their ideas or campaign knowing that society (she says) is patriarchal. This society has the ultimate power (through laws) of what is and is not acceptable in the area of pornography.



Thirdly she has said that pornography is now in a position of being staked out in terms of 'liberalism' or 'censorship'. On most issues there is little difference between feminism and liberalism. However, in the issue of pornography, liberalism, if it means each individual has the right to do what he or she wants, is unacceptable. The feminist's idea of censorship of pornography is completely different to the right wing conservative aims, which would also include anti-divorce, abortion, etc.

Kathy Myers investigates the exploitation of women which operates within pornography:

*Exploitation operates on several levels. Firstly, through the process of representation, women are 'objectified'. Women's gender and social status is reduced to the level of a commodity which may be possessed and exchanged by men. Secondly, pornography restricts female sexuality by reducing it to specific characteristics: eg, the repetitive fetishisation of breasts, legs, vagina, etc. Through this fetishisation, sexuality is fragmented, the part is left to stand for the whole.<sup>2</sup> (Myers,1982,284)*

Without a doubt, her opinion on what pornography does through its methods of representation, is correct and can not be argued with. All instances of pornography are based on objectification. It has already been established that pornography aims at eliciting sexual arousal through its representations of images of women, in very subservient roles. The nature of the images themselves most often depict naked or practically naked women, and nudity in itself connotes a

<sup>2</sup> MYERS, Kathy 'Towards a feminist erotica' in ROBINSON, Hillary. (Ed.). Visibly Female. London : Camden Press Ltd., 1987

vulnerability. The females become objects and are usually shown to be exhibiting themselves, and offering sexual favours to the consumers. They are not only shown to be inviting sexual intercourse but, more frighteningly, are also inviting forms of violence onto themselves. Another common feature of pornographic images is the tendency of the image maker to fragment the body into areas of sexual interest. The most common response of females to this fetishisation is to feel that it depersonalizes woman.

Rosalind Coward responds differently to this however, she believes that a representation of the whole body would be no different, and would not stop the depersonalizing. Her example is, that if one were to look at an image of anything in particular, individuals would focus on some detail of interest to them, for instance 'a certain expression of the eyes, the nape of the neck, [or] the way a hand rests on a part of the body'. Thus, a representation of the whole female body as opposed to the fragmentation would make no difference in replacing the woman as a person, rather than an object. Annette Kuhn has also focused some attention to this fragmentation, she says:

*In consequence, the tendency of some pornographic photographs to isolate bits of bodies may be read as a gesture of dehumanization.*

*But porn's attention to bits of bodies is never random. Pornography is preoccupied with what it regards as signifiers of sexual difference and sexuality: genitals, breasts, buttocks.....Although it is not difficult to find examples of fetishised representations of the male body, it is much more often the female body*

*and its representation which receives this kind of treatment.*<sup>3</sup> (Kuhn,1985,p.37)

Pornography is quite definitely concerned with provoking and stimulating sexual desire through the representation of women as objects. These objects are then further reduced into areas of sexual importance, that is, the woman's body is taken apart and arranged as sexual signifiers. It is important to be aware that in the making of pornographic images, there are no attempts made to regard the feelings of the women used. Pornography is a deliberate plan to excite and arouse people, and give them powers of control over someone else's body. It is a crude, deliberate offence to women. As with prostitution, many girls would only turn to model for pornographers because their economic situation left them with no alternative. I don't think there are many women who would see nothing wrong with joining this industry in the light of what it does to women.

Unlike pornography, eroticism is based on sexual love, rather than sexual desire. It's intention is quite definitely different in that eroticism promotes love between individuals, perhaps in the act of intercourse. The artist who portrays erotic images intends to depict eroticism, and does not intend to objectify. Pornography as was said earlier, is concerned with sexual difference, and power of one group over the other. Pornography is about straight forward sex and possession. Eroticism, as the latin word it comes from suggests, is about

<sup>3</sup> KUHN Annette. The Power Of The Image. : London : Routledge and Kegan plc.,1985



love. In theory at least, it is intended that erotic works should not be pornographic. In practice however, the effects and outcomes of erotic works are usually similar if not the same as pornographic work as may be seen in the work of Schiele.

*....images themselves cannot be characterized as either pornographic or erotic. The pornographic/erotic distinction can only be applied by looking at how the image is contextualized through its mode of address and the conditions of its production and consumption.<sup>4</sup>(Myers,1982,283)*

Kathy Myers indicates that the differences between pornography and eroticism depend on the circumstances of its production, consumption, and mode of address. If, for instance, the image is produced in a glossy magazine, it will be different to a similar image in a painting. The consumption of the image will help differentiate pornography from eroticism, in that if one image is viewed in a gallery for example, it becomes available for public consumption, the other because it isn't acceptable for general consumption, will be kept for private viewing. Of course the mode of address may suggest one is pornographic more so than erotic, but sometimes, how it is contextualized doesn't always define one over the other.

Discussion of the viewer is a little more complex. Each individual has his or her own ideas as to what pornography is, depending on various issues, such as social background, moral

<sup>4</sup> MYERS, Kathy 'Towards a feminist erotica' in ROBINSON, Hillary. (Ed.). Visibly Female. London : Camden Press Ltd., 1987

standards and gender. Basically it is difficult to distinguish what pornography is as opposed to what eroticism is, especially if we take a work of art for example. The work may have been intended as an erotic piece but because of one's standards, beliefs etc. the effect of the piece may be as ugly and as blatant as a pornographic work. One can only trust the maker of the image in that he intended it to be erotic, in theory that is, but in practice it is pornography. Robert Sobieszek's opinion of the subject of erotic art is that eroticism is a 'negation of the subject's essential character of humanity'. This in effect means that in his view eroticism is the same as pornography.

*An image of an erotic object is a negation of the object's essential character or humanity.. The model thus becomes a token of nature, an objectified artifice that allows the viewer to handle her mentally and to fantasize about her; The human becomes a mannequin, a doll. (Sobieszek, 1980, p. 75)*

To deal with eroticism or erotic work is also difficult, as there are many things to be taken into consideration. One of these is the intention of the artist. Take for example, an artist depicting an image of male and female lovers engaged in sexual intercourse. Here, there can be power relations involved within the image, and the artist has the ability to make one sex dominate the other, if he so wishes. The artist may also want to depict the love between the two. However, once the image is made public, it is then open to many varied

<sup>5</sup> SOBIESZEK, Robert. Quoted by KENT, Sarah 'The erotic male nude' KENT, in Sarah & MORREAU, Jaqueline. Women's images of men. London: Writers and Readers publishing, 1985.



opinions on the representation. The characters in the image become read as objects, and as objects will then become mouldable in the hands of the viewer. From the viewer's point it proves that eroticism is the same as pornography, because the images appear to have the same qualities and are dealt with in similar ways, ie. real people become objects. The most vicious form of this objectification or reducing of the female to a creature is pornography, whereby obscene things are projected onto the figure as summed up by Georges Bataille:

*In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation.. What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners? -a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder?*

<sup>6</sup>(Bataille,1980,p.75)

When we keep in mind that most art works will become public at some stage, it is interesting to discover that no one can, or is able to make an erotic piece of art that cannot be read as pornography. In essence eroticism and pornography come hand in hand.

<sup>6</sup> BATAILLE, Georges. Quoted by KENT, Sarah 'The erotic male nude' KENT, in Sarah & MORREAU, Jacqueline. Women's images of men. London: Writers and Readers publishing, 1985.

## CHAPTER TWO

*To possess a woman's sexuality is to possess the woman; to possess the image of a woman's sexuality is, however mass produced the image, also in some way to possess, to maintain a degree of control, over woman in general. In this situation the female spectator of images of woman has until very recently been faced with a single option- to identify with the male spectator and to see woman, to see herself, as an object of desire. <sup>7</sup>(Kuhn,1985,p.11)*

Annette Kuhn speaks in terms of possession and ownership of female sexuality when it is represented in image form. The ownership lies in the hands of the image makers and the spectators. However, whilst the spectators are accused of this handling and control over women in the image, it is the pornographer who has more control over the female in his image. The spectator is only given the freedom of mental control over the female in the image by the pornographer.

Kuhn goes on to say that because of the degree of control exercised over women by men, women have had to, or been forced to, identify with the male, that is to take on a male attitude when confronted by an image of a female, and see herself or woman as a desirable commodity. In relation to looking, John Berger wrote, that women and men look differently because their social experience is different.

*Men act and Women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relations of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turn herself*

<sup>7</sup> BORZELLO, F. 'Living dolls and real women' in KUHN, Annette. The Power Of The Image. : London : Routledge and Kegan plc., 1985

*into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.* (Berger, 1972, p. 47)

These ideas and opinions do nothing more than reinforce the difference between the passive and active, that is, the dominance of the male over the female. Berger firmly believes that the two genders are on both sides of the fence, and stand differently on these representational issues.

Perhaps women and men do look differently, but it is purely because of social conditioning in a predominantly patriarchal society that a woman has been forced to adopt a male attitude towards looking at images of her self. However from the advent of feminism and its' deconstruction of pornography, women are now beginning to see how pornography works and don't have to identify with the male gaze anymore. Berger says that because of the adoption of the male gaze that a woman has to take, she herself makes herself into an object. His appears to be a very sexist opinion (as it isn't clear if he is critical), in that it is covering up the reasons why women have had to take on this male view point. Because men have objectified women in images for their own purposes they have made it so that women also have to view themselves as objects. Until lately, women have had no alternative way of looking at representations of themselves. But Berger says 'She turns herself into an object'. This seems to be a deliberate attempt of shifting the responsibility (ie. that men have objectified women) from men to women.

<sup>e</sup> BERGER, John. Ways Of Seeing. Middlesex: Penguin, 1981.



When faced with a single option women are forced to look at themselves through a male gaze. Through objectification, men have more control over the female model. Furthermore they exercise this same power over the female spectator also, by giving her no other choices when looking at images of herself. However, those women who understand the construction of the images are not forced to comply with the male way of seeing women.

*The relation of women to their images is profoundly uncomfortable, a relation which, describing the negative sense women have of their own self image matched against the ideal, Coward terms "narcissistic damage".<sup>9</sup>(Betterton,1985,p.256)*

In this predominantly patriarchal culture we live in, we are constantly confronted with images of women, in advertisements, magazines, film and television, women who are promoted as being the ideal. They represent the type of women the advertisers think we should all strive to be. The images of the ideal woman show attractive stereotypes which appear to be at peace with the knowledge and power of their own beauty. Of course the attractiveness of the beautiful ideal is desirable, for women want to be desired and attracted by men. It is the weaknesses of human nature that advertising plays upon. Through the images of the ideal, we are constantly reminded to be aware of the differences between ourselves and

<sup>9</sup> BETTERTON, Rosemary. 'How do women look? The female nude in the work of Suzanne Valadon.' in ROBINSON, Hillary. (Ed.). Visibly Female. London : Camden Press Ltd., 1987



what is imagined to be the ideal, and to compare ourselves to that ideal.

Betterton studying the male look says it is characterized by voyeurism, observing and taking pleasure from looking at a distance, whereas a female looking at an image of another female is claimed to be narcissistic, finding a pleasure in closeness, reflection, and identification with the image. She goes on to say that narcissism, when associated with women, suggests an entirely different notion than when associated with men. When transferred to women, narcissistic tendencies are believed to be unhealthy obsessions with the self 'and has been traditionally cited as a confirmation of innate frivolity and self indulgence'. One can look at numerous paintings especially in classical art where often nude studies of women accompanied by a mirror, suggest that the woman is wrapped up in her own image. Because the female is seen to be enjoying her own sexuality, it gives permission for men to enjoy her sexuality too. If the female is looking at herself she will probably be unaware of the spectator's look, thus giving him the freedom to explore her sexuality uninhibited.

In advertising, one of the reasons for objectifying woman is so that women will identify and compare themselves to the ideal. In doing this they will adopt stereotyped signs of femininity in order to be desired or accepted socially. Women are dictated to through the images, but only indirectly. The dictation is done by the advertising industry which once again, is predominantly male dominated. In essence the advertising industry aims to sell commodities to women, to

make them more attractive, that is in order for them to make themselves more attractive commodities.

Quite recently, advertising has also begun to promote the attractive ideal man, to attract more male consumers. The aim however, is not solely to now make men attractive to women but instead so that their ideal man gains power over his rivals by making them jealous. Women only become involved in order that their beauty will reinforce the jealousy. However, the advertising industry is still primarily concerned with reaching or maintaining its hold over female consumers.

*A glamorous image of a woman (or an image of a glamorous woman) is peculiarly powerful in that it plays on the desire of the spectator in a particularly pristine way: beauty or sexuality is desirable exactly to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable. <sup>10</sup>(Kuhn,1985,p.12)*

Annette Kuhn sums up the whole idea that because images of women promote ideal beauty it becomes necessary for the spectator to reach that ideal too. Because of their apparent unattainability, beauty and sexual attractiveness become desirable. Advertising aims at making modern man and woman less satisfied with what they are and what they possess, in order that the continued consumption of products is secured. In comparison with the ideal, the consumer is made to feel totally inadequate. As I have mentioned, it is mainly towards the female population that the advertising industry focuses its attention. The pornography industry is similar to that of

<sup>10</sup> BORZELLO,F. 'Living dolls and real women' in KUHN, Annette. The Power Of The Image. : London : Routledge and Kegan plc.,1985

the advertising industry in that it also aims to ensure the consumption of its products. Whereas the advertisers use images of women to sell products, in pornography, the woman or part of her is the product.

*There is a commonsense view that visual representations like film and photography show what is really happening, that they show reality just as it is..... Their meanings arise from how various elements are combined, how the picture is framed, what lighting is given, what is connoted by dress and expression, the way these elements are articulated together. The meaning of one object can be completely changed by the addition of a caption, the juxtaposition of another object (montage), by cropping the photo in various ways. In other words just like language, there is no intrinsic meaning in a visual image; The meaning of an image is decided by the way it is articulated, how the various elements are combined together.<sup>11</sup> (Coward,1987,p.311)*

The combination of above elements are used to reinforce an image. The elements which aid in the construction of the overall image—lighting, dress etc—are all devices which the image makers use to create meanings in the image relating to the subject, which in pornography is woman, and in advertising is the product. In pornographic images, the fetishisation of bodily parts can be aligned to photo montage. This involves the cutting up of various images and replacing them to make one image, to enhance or strengthen an overall meaning. The degree of change that can occur may be seen in Jill Posener's book Spray it loud where examples are shown of how meanings can be changed by the introduction of a second image or a caption installed with it. The fetishisation we talk about in

<sup>11</sup> COWARD, Rosalind. 'Sexual violence and sexuality' in FEMINIST REVIEW (Ed.). Sexuality a Reader. London: Virgo Press Ltd., 1987.



pornography doesn't change the intention of the image, it merely controls the focus of attention.

Visual images have very definite cultural meanings. I believe that it is important to try and understand these meanings. Once we begin to understand the effects of these meanings, we can then formulate our own opinions and ideas relating to the images. This will reduce the control media industries have over us.

How does the pornographer allow the spectator a certain amount of control over the image? In doing this he himself plays the larger part of the two in the objectification of women. Annette Kuhn addresses this aspect of control using photography as an example of the visual image, but this can be applied to any visual medium.

*While in various respects the photo proposes that the woman in the picture is unaware of the spectator's look, the risk of her indifference is mitigated by the fact that her body may at the same time be arranged as if on display for him. This implies an unspoken exhibitionism on the part of the object of the look, thus permitting the spectator a two fold pleasure.* <sup>12</sup>(Kuhn,1985,p.41)

Through the use and the combination of elements involved in producing an image, I have established that the maker is given most control over both the subject and the spectator. However, the producers are clever. They also allow the spectator's some degree of control over the subject matter in the image. Here I refer to pornographic representations of women, the way in which a woman is located in the image and

<sup>12</sup> KUHN Annette. The Power Of The Image. : London : Routledge and Kegan plc.,1985

related to other elements in the image which will suggest meanings to the spectator. The spectator can then look and assess for himself what he wants to get out of the image, usually, mentally imposing his sexual urges onto the woman. In the quote, Kuhn speaks of an image where the woman is placed so as not to seem aware of the spectator, the twofold pleasure she mentions means the spectator can be indulgent in his voyeurism because of the way in which the woman is positioned.

In this chapter I have aimed at illustrating the various degrees of control, which arise in the production of a pornographic visual image. Usually men are the image makers and men the spectators, woman is the represented. The image producers objectify the women, to be nothing other than an outlet onto which the male spectator can project his intimate sexual desires and fantasies. In the objectification process, for a long time, woman as spectator has had to accept her sexuality as a thing to be objectified, and join with the male spectator in viewing an image of herself.



Male artists and writers have traditionally sustained their engagement to the male by working to idealize conceptions of male form, beauty, and sexuality. But a new pattern develops: the relationship of power and subordination becomes what a male artist depicts the female body. It ignores and denies the difference between looking at the body of a woman and looking at a site of work. Therefore a feminist work that of the male has focused upon analysis of the ways in which the act of viewing itself constitutes power. (Hartmann, 1986, 112)

### CHAPTER THREE

According to Kenneth Surin, by implying that the female body is the site of work, male form, beauty, and sexuality work very much against the intention. They confirm themselves of their objectification of women and enjoyment of domination. She says that in a way of discouraging looking or desire, that the artist is rejecting the relationship of power and dominance over the female body. At the end of the chapter as we discussed in the previous chapter in the context of an image, the artist is not for his own enjoyment, gives the male viewer some enjoyment of power over the woman. It is through the idealization and relationship within an image, that where men and to what men, the artist thinks about the image. It is really a question of how male form and beauty, as it is ideologically constructed with sex, sexuality, and representation.

It is when the image are presented as images of the artist, a female technique for representation.

<sup>14</sup> Hartmann, Kenneth. "The male body: The female body in the work of Robert Rauschenberg." In *Robert Rauschenberg, 1925-1985*. The J. Paul Getty Center, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 1987.

*Male artists and critics have consistently justified their enjoyment of the nude by appealing to abstract conceptions of ideal form, beauty and aesthetic value. Such a view renders invisible the relationships of power and subordination involved when a male artist depicts the female body. It ignores and denies the difference between looking at the body of a woman and looking at a pile of fruit. Therefore a feminist critique of the nude has focused upon analysis of the ways in which the act of viewing itself reinstates power.*<sup>13</sup>(Betterton,1985,p.252)

According to Rosemary Betterton, by implying that the female body is the epitomization of ideal form, beauty, and aesthetic value, many male artists for centuries, have excused themselves of their objectification of woman and enjoyment of domination. She says this is a way of discouraging notions or beliefs, that the artist is enjoying his relationship of power and dominance over the female model. By the use of the elements as were discussed in the previous chapter in the context of an image, the artist if not for his own enjoyment gives the male viewer some enjoyment of power over the woman. It is through the distinctions and relationships within an image, that prove how, and in what ways, the artist thinks about the woman. Is he really in reverence of her ideal form and beauty, or is he basically concerned with her sexuality and objectification ?

*In all cases the women are presented as unaware of the artist, a classic technique for convincing*

<sup>13</sup> BETTERTON, Rosemary. 'How do women look? The female nude in the work of Suzanne Valadon.' in ROBINSON, Hillary. (Ed.). Visibly Female. London : Camden Press Ltd., 1987

*the spectator, of the documentary truth of what is seen.*<sup>14</sup> (Kuhn,1985,p.15)

It is probably correct to say that most images of women have been represented in positions which presuppose an audience. That is to say some artists have thought about who their work is going to be seen by and what type of spectator they are trying to reach. Therefore, assuming that this attitude is taken by the artist, it shows the powers he has through the execution of his work and the various techniques and contexts he uses, to communicate with the spectator and convince him of what the artist is saying in his images.

*Art in our society enjoys a status comparable to religion in earlier societies, requiring an a priori belief in art and an unshakable faith in its embodiment of the self-evident Good. As a result of this faith, works of art are apparently beyond criticism and beyond change.*

<sup>15</sup>(Kappeler,1987,p.327)

Kappeler raises the idea, that although we would hold the belief that pornography suppresses and oppresses women and aspire to end this, yet she says, we stop in awe and reverence before a work of art which is openly pornographic, oppressive of women and advocating domination simply because it is a work of art. Although of course, each spectator has his own opinions, generally the devices the artist uses in his images to produce meanings will direct the viewer's opinions. This is the example given by Kappeler of the power of control of the

<sup>14</sup> BORZELLO,F. 'Living dolls and real women' in KUHN, Annette. The Power Of The Image. : London : Routledge and Kegan plc.,1985

<sup>15</sup> KAPPELER,Suzanne. 'The white brothel: The literary exoneration of the pornographic' in ROBINSON, Hillary. (Ed.). Visibly Female. London : Camden Press Ltd., 1987



artist over the spectator. Because the work of art is seen usually in a gallery situation, hung, framed, and signed by the artist, it is given a glorified place in society. It will therefore be recognised and admired because of where it is and the pornographic damage to women will be thus overlooked. Again I must stress that it couldn't be possible for the artist to have control over every viewer as each viewer, depending on reasons such as his background in the appreciation of art and his social and moral viewpoints, will have his own opinions regardless of what the artist intended.

Kappeler says that we tend to stop in awe and admiration before a piece of art work, no matter how oppressive it is to women, purely because it is a work of art. But maybe it is because the audience places a trust in the artist and their representations that they don't denounce the work. Should we, as an audience, condemn immediately all pieces we think are pornographic? Should we not first study the reasons why and how the artist dealt with this subject? If this were carried too far, we might begin to see all male artists dealing with the female nude as misogynists or sexual perverts.

I wish at this point to investigate some of the work by Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt, both of whose work is undoubtedly openly erotic and therefore, in effect, pornographic. Both artists have worked with the female, creating sexually loaded images. Because of the very nature of the images of both these artists they are read as pornographic. The declared intention of the artists was to produce sexual feeling through aesthetic awareness. This



erotic work therefore in effect became pornographic. The question I ask here is, is it possible to separate the rendering and the aesthetic in the work, from the pornographic?

*That there is much more to such drawings than the desire to arouse and titillate can be ascertained by comparing almost anything by Schiele with contemporary photographs of similar objects. Pornographers are idealists. For them every woman is physically perfect and a creature of her sexual desires. She is instantly and permanently available. Her flesh is firm and smooth, her breath sweet, her feet clean. By contrast Schiele's girls and women are real. They are not conventionally beautiful. Their bodies are mottled and, in places raw. Skinny and awkward, they are anything but ideals. Their flesh is stretched taut over the bones beneath.<sup>16</sup> (Whitford, 1981, p.89)*

We may say that a pornographic picture is a pornographic picture and that it cannot be read as anything else. But when an image of a female, nude or otherwise is used in a piece of art, is there a difference between this and a hard core pornographic representation, remembering that eroticism is about sexual love and aesthetic feelings, as opposed to pornography which is concerned with representing explicit sexual activity and the stimulation of sexual arousal? Egon Schiele wrote of his feelings towards eroticism, and of its put down by society. In his prison diary, he says that 'no work of erotic art is filth if it is artistically significant'. He goes on to say that the work is 'only turned into filth through the beholder if he is filthy'. What Schiele says seems

<sup>16</sup> WHITFORD, Frank. Egon Schiele. London : Thames and Hudson, 1986.

to suggest is that the artist doesn't have the responsibility of controlling the viewer's interpretation.

If Schiele is correct in saying that the beholder contains a power to interpret the image in a different way than the artist intended, then it is the viewer and not the artist that has made the work pornographic. Looking at Schiele's work and depending on the spectator's opinions the images may be read for their aesthetic value or purely their erotic/pornographic elements. In the work of Schiele I find the combination of the erotic subject and the aesthetic qualities of the painting and drawing, creates a tension which increases and strengthens both elements to make a superbly strong and powerful image. In this way the beauty of the rendering becomes more beautiful, but also the ugliness of the pornography becomes uglier. If it is erotic in its intention but pornographic in its' outcome, I ask is it possible to accept the erotic or pornographic in order to experience the aesthetic, or should we condemn the work without any further thought? Frank Whitford<sup>17</sup> believes there is an obvious tension between the erotic elements and the style in which they are described. Therefore the erotic depends on the aesthetic values and vice-versa, to make the unified whole, stronger.

For me, The female study by Egon Schiele is a representation of reality which the artist would have reshaped into the context of his own vision and experiences. Every image of Schiele's is overtly shocking and provocative due to

<sup>17</sup> WHITFORD, Frank. Egon Schiele. London: Thames and Hudson, 1986.

his own obsession with sexuality. Putting aside the initial effect one can see his sensitivity and genuine emotions and feelings towards the subject. Schiele has an outstanding sense of line which he uses to portray the fragility or the strength of the woman. His superb use of colour suggests various notions. For example, the redness of a body depicts the rawness of the flesh and also gives clues to the personality or social background. His aesthetic awareness is as strong as the vulgar positions and actions of his women. If it were not so, the image would fail as an aesthetic piece of work. If Schiele is concerned with representing the reality of sexual awareness, is this not different to pornographic representations of women representations which are preoccupied with objectification and the promotion of the ideal woman.?

*I do not deny it: I have made drawings and watercolours that are erotic. But they are still always works of art—that I can attest, and people who understand something of this will gladly affirm it. Have other artists made no erotic pictures? Rops, for example, made only such kinds. But one has never imprisoned an artist for this. No erotic work of art is filth if it is artistically significant; it is only turned into filth through the beholder if he is filthy. I could mention the names of many, many famous artists, even that of Klimt, but I do not want to excuse myself by this at all—that would not be worthy of me. Therefore I do not deny it. I do declare as untrue, however, that I showed such drawings intentionally to children, that I corrupted children. That is untrue !.... And I believe that man must suffer from sexual torture as long as he is capable of sexual feelings. <sup>18</sup>(Schiele,1974,p.58)*

<sup>18</sup> SCHIELE, Egon. Quoted by COMINI, Alessandra. Schiele in Prison. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1974.



Klimt's women are always depicted as sensuous creatures, 'the riotous decoration in which they are fixed acting as visual signs of their magnetic sexuality'. Like Schiele, Klimt appeared to treat his women with some consideration of their characters. Klimt adorned his women with spectacular garments reading these as symbolic interjections of sexuality and dominance. This time, however, Klimt is not concerned with the domination of women but with the glorification of mythologically powerful women. He is primarily concerned with painting women; he does not objectify them as pornography would. In some of his work, it is man who is dominated, this time by woman.

*Klimt's women and girls are filled with a knowing, refined sensuality, ranging from the fragile pose of a portrait to the open self-surrender of a Danae.* <sup>20</sup>(Hofmann,1971,p.17)

Undoubtedly Klimt's work is also openly erotic and full of sexual meaning and symbolism. It is certainly representative of women engaging in or anticipating sexual activities. Another way his work differs from pornography is the fact that most of Klimt's females are not seen nude. Klimt first drew his figures naked and then covered them with splendid ornately decorated clothing or robes, abundant with sexual symbols of spermatozoa and ovum etc. However one similarity that Klimt's images have with pornography is discussed by W. Hofmann:

<sup>20</sup> HOFMANN, Werner. Gustav Klimt. Austria: Verlag Galerie Weltz Salzburg, 1971.



It can be read in his admission that his work is erotic that he did intend the work to represent sexual awareness and aesthetic value.

I believe that artists should have a freedom of creation remembering at the same time this is not necessarily the same as freedom of exhibition. It is here that misunderstandings of the artist's intentions arise. Once the piece of work has been made public, it is open to all interpretations from the audience: an audience with a wide spectrum of opinions. That is, if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so too will ugliness. It is important to be aware of the fact that, apart from the general public, there will also be an audience who have studied the appreciation of art. This prepared viewer will obviously have more educated opinions. He/she will have more of an insight to the meanings and intentions of the artist. This gives him or her a privileged position in deciding whether the work's aesthetic qualities validate the erotic/pornographic elements. But in general society can only place their trust in the artist and expect him to make honest representations.

*Klimt's paintings, and above all his drawings, are dominated by a powerful and heady eroticism..... Klimt's eroticism is direct and uncomplicated. His soft, caressing line emphasizes the femininity and passivity of his women who lie, more often than not, luxuriating on rich and delicate materials, their faces transfixed by sensual delight. The spectator is both voyeur and potential participant.* <sup>19</sup>(Whitford,1981,p.93)

<sup>19</sup> WHITFORD, Frank. Egon Schiele. London : Thames and Hudson, 1986.

*The full frontal stance, an important dramatic formula of symbolist art (not only in the late nineteenth century), is used by Klimt to stress the hieratic pose. It is chiefly found in his female figures, giving their outlines an untouchable, menacing force, drawing the observer under its spell with the power of a revelation.*  
<sup>21</sup> (Hofmann, 1971, p.25)

In pornographic representations of women, the pornographer certainly draws the male spectator's scrutinisation towards the woman's body through the revelation and fetishisation of her bodily parts. Her stance and positioning and the exposure of her body are deliberate attempts made by the image maker to evoke sexual pleasure in the male consumer.

From an educated point of view it can be read that both Klimt's and Schiele's works were certainly intentionally erotic; this has been admitted by each artist. However, what if the effects of the images can be the same as pornographic images? The distinction between eroticism and pornography is complex. Even the notion of what is an erotic image may be questioned. Although Klimt and Schiele both made erotic images their approaches were substantially different.

*The problem of the erotic, the sexual is common to Klimt.....to the Kokoschka of The dreaming of youths and to the Schiele of the drawings of 1910 and 1911. In Klimt and Schiele the common interest becomes a true affiliation, a related manner of seeing and experiencing. But what in Klimt is a music of intoxicating sweetness and lyrical magic*

*becomes in Schiele shrill, rough dissonances,...a demonic vision.*<sup>22</sup> (Benesch,1981,p.94)

The question is, do we have the right to dismiss great works of art including Klimt's and Schiele's because they are apparently pornographic to some viewers ? or can we accept that there are degrees of pornography. Could these works be ironically be described as beautiful pornography ?

<sup>22</sup> BENESCH,Otto. Quoted in WHITFORD, Frank. Egon Schiele. London : Thames and Hudson, 1986.





My interest in the subject of this thesis arises from my own use of the female nude model in studio work. I began to research with the view that eroticism was completely different from pornography. Investigation by the women's movement into the effects of pornography has established that, through objectification, women become dehumanised and degraded. When I focused my attention on erotic work, I found that often the effects of eroticism can indeed be the same as pornography.

Through this thesis I attempted to distinguish erotic images from pornographic ones, and found differences quite difficult to establish. While eroticism is said to be about sexual love and desire, and pornography is said to be the promotion and stimulation of sexual, rather than erotic feelings, because the effects can be the same, the only real difference I could find is the difference in intention.

I chose to examine the works of Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt in order to investigate how the artist's intention of producing an erotic image can, in effect, be read and interpreted as pornographic, once the work is displayed to public view.

I discovered for myself that ultimately the erotic/pornographic distinction lies in the interpretation of the image by the viewer, regardless of the artist's intention. The essay ends with a question: if erotic art can be read as pornographic, can it still be considered aesthetic by a prepared viewer? - which leads to the paradoxical question: Is such work 'beautiful pornography'?

Because many misunderstandings arise when using the female figure in the production of art, the implications of these misunderstandings are important to the artist, so that he or she can actively try to counter any misinterpretations of their work.

A further issue of interest, although not raised in this paper, would be the investigation of the use of the female model by female artists to see how this work differs from their male counterparts.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



(i) VIENNESE POSTCARD circa 1910





(ii) NUDE GIRL WITH FOLDED ARMS.

Egon Schiele, 1910



(iii) SEATED FEMALE NUDE, ELBOWS RESTING ON RIGHT KNEE.

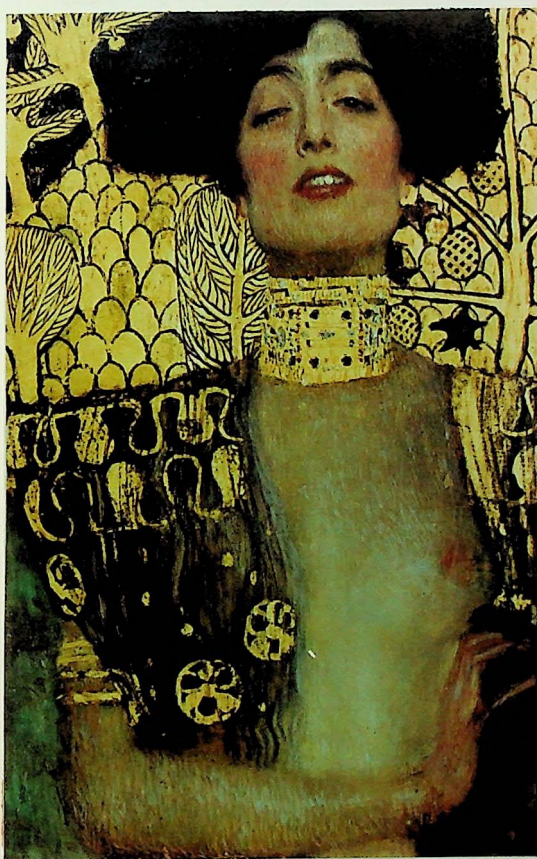
Egon Schiele, 1914



(iv) OBSERVED IN A DREAM.

Egon Schiele, 1911





(v) JUDITH I.

Gustav Klimt, 1901





(vi) JUDITH II.

Gustav Klimt, 1909



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