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The phenomenon of pornography & 20th century Polish prose

Abstract

The authors compare various Polish and English definitions of pornography attempting to show the changes the term underwent in the 20th century. Focusing on visual messages appears to be essential part of the contemporary discourse on pornography. Obscene literary texts seem to evade modern law. The authors briefly analyse 20th century Polish literature (till 1990s) identifying potential pornographic content to return the definition of the phenomenon.

■ Introduction

It shall not be a big departure from the scientific paradigm if we start our considerations with a definition seemingly naïve: “everyone can see what pornography is”.

When the first Polish encyclopaedia was created in 18th century, its author, Benedykt Chmielowski, defined in a similar way a ... horse: “everyone can see what a horse is” (Chmielowski, 1745), the animal was so common that, most likely, no one was surprised by the simplicity of the definition. Nowadays, it is quoted as a joke unmasking the author’s naivety and his lack of scientific competence. The priest definitely was lucky not to have to combat the Trojan horse – i.e. the definition of pornography. The authors of this work have chosen another quotation from the above mentioned memorable source: “A dragon is hard to combat but one must try hard.” (Chmielowski, 1745)

Chmielowski’s encyclopaedia did not become world famous but it appears to be an inspiration for a number of scientists interested in the phenomenon of pornography. And one particular Chief Justice seems to lead the way.

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I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it (Justice Stewart in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 US 184 [1964]).

The apparent simplicity of the above quotation appears to conclude all the attempts at defining the term *pornography*. That also seemed to be the conclusion of the members of Attorney General Commission on Pornography established in 1986 in USA; year-long efforts of the Commission resulted in an almost 2000 pages long report which still failed at defining the key issue.

Whenever we do use the term, we do not mean for it to be, for us, a statement of a conclusion, and thus in this Report a reference to material as “pornographic” means only that the material is predominantly sexually explicit and intended primarily for the purpose of sexual arousal. Whether some or all of what qualifies as pornographic under this definition should be prohibited, or even condemned, is not a question that should be answered under the guise of definition. (Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography 1986: 227–228)

Interestingly, both the Commission from 1986, and one prior to it from 1970, debating the potential harmfulness of pornography excluded obscene texts almost entirely from their scope of interest, assuming that sexual images generated by the receiver’s imagination constitute phenomena in every respect different than visual presentation and, as such, produce far less dangerous effects (Attorney General Commission on Pornography 1986: 386).

■ Defining the phenomenon

Nevertheless one should remember that originally the term pornography defined a certain literary category describing the lives of prostitutes. The etymological origins of that term are Greek words *porne* – prostitute, and *graphein* – write, scratch, and, as indicated by Walter Kendrick (1987: 11), one of 18th century discoveries turned out to be of special importance in the process of its defining: homesteads in ancient Pompeii were furnished with paintings, sculptures and other objects of explicitly sexual character. Obscenity of those presentations contrasted with contemporary moral standards to such an extent that it was decided to confine them in the so-called Gabinetto Segreto. Thus, there appeared a collection inaccessible to the public, a collection the content of which was described as pornography.

Rationing of the access to above mentioned presentations (started with the edict of Ferdinand I, the king of Naples, and lasting with several exceptions to 2000) resulted in the fact that the term pornography started to be identified with representations of sexuality banned from public circulation i.e. excluded from official culture. A question about the purpose of those presentations followed closely the discoveries. According to one of the most probable theories the majority of the buildings where those artifacts occurred were houses of prostitution (at least 25 such institutions existed in ancient Pompeii), while the drawings depicted available services – functioning as advertisement.

Steven Marcus (1966: 278) in his book *The Other Victorian* draws the readers' attention to the fact that the effects of pornography are of physical character, thus they are measurable, and the common search for the truth must end in an impasse. In that sense, pornography falls into the same category that simpler forms of literary expression, such as propaganda or advertisement. It – first of all – encourages people to do something and it is its purpose. At the same time pornography is obsessed with the idea of infinite ecstasy and satisfaction.

The conclusion of the Attorney General Commission on Pornography, James Dobson, a member of the above mentioned Attorney General Commission on Pornography, might seem a bit too radical:

It is provided primarily for the lustful pleasure of men and boys who use it to generate excitement. And it is my belief, though evidence is not easily obtained, that a small but dangerous minority will then choose to act aggressively against the nearest available females. Pornography is the theory; rape is the practice (Attorney General's Commission on Pornography 1986, 1: 78).

As Linda Williams (1989: 16) states the above quoted fragment exhibits strong influence of anti-pornographic feminist criticism. The commission's conclusions emphasised the dangers created by the brutal images of the sexual acts of the so called hard core pornography. The slogan "Pornography is the Theory, Rape is the Practice" was coined by Robin Morgan.

Whether we agree or disagree with the above statement, explicit nudity and showing sexual acts may result in sexual arousal and, thus, becomes a trigger for action – to relieve the tension. Just like the artifacts discovered in Pompeii, all pornographic messages aim at re-creating the images of sexual activity in the minds of the audience, and constitute an invitation to participate in a real or imaginary act where the viewer is not only a part of

the audience but participates actively in the very act. The pre-defined concept of a virtual recipient is not only an immanent part of the project but also a possibility of identification with the partaker.

That feature of pornography appears to be constructive to its very existence. Almost all contemporary definitions focus on the aim of the phenomenon – a pornographic message is one which was created to evoke sexual arousal.

The main problem of the definition aimed at illocution is the question of defining the purpose of a given artifact; in order to state if something is pornography we would have to define the intentions of its creator. The situation is clear when the authors describe themselves as pornographers. It is possible, however, that given works generate sexual excitement contrary to the will of the authors who declare entirely different purposes of their works. The author is then required to provide a justification for the obscenity used. When open eroticism appears, art is demanded to continually provide excuses and explanations, it has to continuously defend itself from the attacks of the guardians of morality.

It was claimed that pornography was of particularly harmful character to children, women and common folk. It was them who were protected from the abominable content of the hidden museum collections. For that reason pornography was still a product for the chosen ones. To belong to this privileged caste one had to be a well-educated, opulent male. These were only the oncoming civilisation changes that would modify the character of pornography transforming it into a commonly accessible product.

The main reason for that was the newly emerging, usually literate, more affluent proletariat in towns and cities (*demand*) and the development of printing techniques enabling the makers to benefit from inexpensive print and image reproduction (*supply*).

In this period of time also the meaning of the word *pornography* underwent significant changes. It can be observed when comparing dictionary definitions of the word; one of the first explanations of the term found in Webster's Dictionary from 1864: "treatment of, or a treatise on, the subject of prostitutes or prostitution" (quoted after Kendrick 1987: 13) is followed by a definition considerably closer to the modern one: "licentious painting employed to decorate the walls of rooms sacred to bacchanalian orgies, examples of which exist in Pompeii".

The order of those definitions was reversed in 1913 together with a small but significant addition to the second one – from that moment pornography

was defined as “licentious paintings or literature”. A definition thus constructed appeared highly analogous, and often synonymous, to those of *obscene* (“Offensive to chastity and delicacy; impure; expressing or presenting to the mind or view something which delicacy, purity and decency forbid; to be exposed; as obscene language; obscene pictures”) and *obscenity* (“impurity in expression or representation; that quality in words or things which presents what is offensive to chastity or purity of mind; ribaldry”), which, in turn, had not undergone any substantial changes from the moment of their appearance in Webster’s Dictionary in 1828 (*American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1928).

Linda Nead (1992: 25), followed several years later by Isabela Tang explains the origins of the word *obscene* within the context of the Latin word *scene* as an term expected to describe everything that exists beyond the scene i.e. the content that should not be presented “off or to one side of the stage” (Tang 1999: 21).

The modern Webster’s dictionary (Merriam-Webster, Online 2007) defines *obscene* as: “abhorrent to morality or virtue”; specifically: “designed to incite to lust or depravity” (second definition). This juxtaposition of definitions shows that possible interpretation of a given artifact as obscene or pornographic might be difficult and depends solely on axiological judgment and establishing the sender’s intentions. Pornography today, according to Webster’s Dictionary, is above all: “the depiction of erotic behaviour (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement” (Merriam-Webster, Online 2014), which, if accepted, would equal excluding nude photographs, as well as semi voyeur photographs. Thus, not only such publications as *Playboy* but also journals depicting nude bodies or genitals, commonly accepted as pornographic could not be in every case described as such. “*Erotic behaviour*” also remains a controversial issue – does a couple kissing passionately classify? While in magazines for fetishists figures dressed in leather whip each other, and in those for people with a passion for voyeur defecation might be of interest – the question appears – is it erotic for everybody or, if it is not for the majority – does it make it less, or, perhaps, not at all pornographic?

The vagueness of the definition generates problems with the potential control and regulation of the access to materials of sexual content.

Perhaps this is the reason why Polish contemporary penal code does not provide any definition of pornography, but merely defines its forbidden types or dimensions – like child pornography. In the past “any depiction of sexuality breaking the social norms was described as pornographic. In that sense

the semantic field of pornography, like it was in the case of Webster dictionaries' definitions, was, to a large extent, synonymous to the contemporary meaning of the word *obscene*.

Probably in mid-19th century Poland the terms *pornography* and *obscenity* were completely unknown, and they were not mentioned in the Linde's dictionary (1854–1860). The innovations were introduced in the so called *Warsaw Dictionary* by Jan Karłowicz, Adam Kryński and Władysław Niedźwiedzki. It not only lists *pornography* – „writings and images of lustful character”, but also no longer used forms – such as the verb *pornografować* [pornograph] – “create pornographic works.” (*Słownik Języka Polskiego*, vol 4, 1904: 702)

In literature the word *pornography* appears in print at the end of the 19th century. The collection of stories *Melancholicy* [*Melancholics*] by Eliza Orzeszkowa published in the 1890s contains the expression “pornographic books and songs” (Orzeszkowa, 1951: 109); Władysław Reymont mentions in 1897 reading “pornographic love stories” (Reymont, 1950: 68).

In legislation the word pornography was mentioned for the first time as late as 1922 when Poland entered the „international agreement concerning the fight against the circulation of pornography” (Tekely, 2001: 36) which does not mean that there previously had not been legal restrictions concerning nudity and sexuality. Under the Austrian annexation the penal code from 1852 stated that:

§516. Whoever violates morality or modesty with obscene drawings or actions blatantly and evokes public depravation is guilty of infringement and will be sentenced to a strict confinement for a period of time from eight days to six months.

But when such a violation appears in print it shall be punished as misdemeanour with a strict confinement for a period of time from six months to a year. (Tekely, 2001: 36)

■ Pornography & Polish prose in the 20th century

A peculiar evidence of interest and concern over the growing number of publications of allegedly sexual character is the work: *Pornography: Polish voices in the most important case of public morality*. Of course the range and possibilities of distribution of the time were much smaller. Literature, more and more openly exploring the themes of sexuality, was in the centre of interest. A fragment of a well-known novel – *Przedwiośnie* [*The Spring to Come*] by one of the greatest Polish authors of the first half of 20th century – Stefan

Żeromski can be an evidence of the conservative nature of Polish society of the time. (The book was censored by the author himself in fear of being accused of pornography).

The author's prudery and his great respect towards the prudery of the reader, and – first and foremost – the OBSEQUIOUSNESS towards the super-prudery of the literary critic does not allow us to cite the details and incidents of that evening, that took place behind the locked door to Miss Laura's door.

That's unfortunate! Dear reader we do not live in the great times of honesty of the Renaissance and the master of masters Ludwik Aristot [...] at those times the writer wasn't forced to remove the most valuable part of his or her idea and throw it into rubbish [...], and here in this horizontal and down-to-earth realization of 'the early spring' of life, the most crucial, healthiest, and strongest image of spring and its healthy and lively essence we must lock and leave to unhealthy, spoil and cynical insight of the reader (Żeromski, 1961: 143).

Contrary to Żeromski, Emil Zegadłowicz was not prone to auto censorship, and his novel – *Zmory* [*Nightmares*] published in 1935 was a scandal because of its open – for the time – descriptions of sexuality connected to autobiographical plot. The second edition of the novel was confiscated. That type of publicity contributed to the novels popularity, introducing pornographic work into the public circulation. Amongst the noise of the discussions about *Zmory*, two years later *Motory* [*Machines*] another novel by Zegadłowicz was published. It was more provocative and more obscene than the first one. The author decided to use everything that people found outrageous and scandalous in his first book – but there was no critical discussion about his second work – it was stopped – at least officially – by the confiscation of the book and a ban on its distribution.

Even today *Motory* exist in the mind of the readers mainly as an obscene text, and the not really successful attempt at philosophy referring to Freud's theory and communist revolution appear to be peripheral. Analysis of the correspondence seems to confirm the idea that the book was supposed to be, from the very start, a moral scandal, not because of the leftist attitudes of the protagonists, but because of erotica. Additionally, this novel was, similarly to *Zmory* of autobiographical character, which made supposedly real relationships, and potential sexual activities of real people scandalous, which, together with naturalistic descriptions made the work even more pornographic. The book was also to be completed with realistic pictures of the protagonist and selected scenes of the novel, but the illustrator would not accept that idea.

In the context of the above mentioned examples the attempts at regulating the realm of erotic texts were not surprising. The concept of Juliusz Kroński

(1936: 499] from 1936 appears interesting – the author tries find reasons to separate pornography form other types of messages directly in the plot – i.e. in the relation between the usage of erotic motifs and the storyline. That type of distinction was still unclear and left scope for manipulation. The works of Paweł Staśko become extremely popular before WWII. The author used stereotypical image of modernistic artists – their supposed sexual freedom and opportunities appear when describing black characters to create almost pornographic texts, but he would never describe the sexual act itself as the action – *deus ex machine* – always stopped at the very last moment before the intercourse.

In the second half of the 20th century the control over messages of erotic character became more and more difficult. While in post-war Poland the distribution of pornography was illegal, in the West – with its Sexual Revolution and the advancement of video technology – previous restrictions were no longer valid.

The Main Office of Control of Press, Publications and Shows. (Dz. U. 1946 r. Nr 34, pos. 210). On the basis of the Act of State National Council from Jan. 03 1945 controlled not only all the publications not only from the point of view of the political doctrine but also generally – of the potential infringement of the law, morality and social order (Article II). Social realism in literature was almost completely devoid of erotic plots. It was only in the period of the so called Little Stabilization (from 1956) when the theme of sex was discussed more openly. Polish films would more and more frequently depict nudity (e.g. *Faraon [Pharaoh]* by Jerzy Kawalerowicz in 1965) and popular literature would become more and more popular. In 1960 Stanisława Fleszerowa-Muskat published *Lato nagich dziewcząt [The Summer of Naked Girls]*, a book tempting its potential readers with the intriguing title and the cover with erotic motifs although the plot turned out to be very preservative as far as erotic threads were concerned.

The real revolution started in 1978. It was the time *Uwodziciel [the Seducer]*, a novel by Zbigniew Nienacki, an author of books for teenagers, was published. That time the book was written for adult readers, and erotica, treated in a rather peculiar way, was in the centre of its interest.

The love adventures of the character constitute a contribution to a wider perspective on the issue of sexuality, and the question of the culturally conditioned mystification of the sexual drive appears the most crucial concern for both the author and the readers. The protagonist and the narrator of the novel is a writer – thus, the readers gets to know both the fate of the protagonist and the characters he creates. The plot seems, however, secondary to

the theoretical literary discussion present in the text. The work of the protagonist – i.e. the narrator becomes an impulse to the analysis not only of the text created but the literary tradition in general. As it was mentioned before, the question of the depiction of erotica and its conformity to the non-literary reality. The then critics seemed to be able to notice only the obscene imagery

Raz w roku w Skiroławkach [*Once a year in Skiroławki*], a two – volume work published in 1983 met with even more criticism over the allegedly too explicit presentation of the erotic motives. That kind of publicity had great influence on the publishing success of the novel which became a bestseller for years.

The author, accused by the critics of having purposefully created a strictly pornographic text, would undermine their competences claiming they were unable to understand both the construction and the message of the work. At the same time, he would deny his alleged pornographic inclinations claiming that the erotic motifs in his novels are both artistically and morally justified.

Nienacki purposefully mixed different stylistic registers in his work so that it was impossible to define it as a pornographic work. On the other hand, the grotesque descriptions in the text are accompanied by fragments facilitating pornographic reception of the work. It is mainly the case when he describes the sexuality of young female characters – the grotesque seems to give way to voyeuristic pleasure.

The appropriate tools and competences to definitely describe the character of Nienacki's works do not exist.

After 1989 the publishing market in Poland changes completely, and the censorship is gone. In 1990s first novels of popular literature – with erotica being essential to the plot are published (*Hiszpańskie Oczy* [the *Spanish Eyes*] by Nurowska 1990 or *Serafina i jej kochankowie* [*Serafina and her lovers*] by Nepomucka 1996). The publishing market is, at the same time, flooded with translations of western literature, a considerable percentage of which are erotic romances. Any control over the potential pornographic content is not only no longer necessary but also impossible.

■ Pornography as a set of convention

The changeability of the term together with the lack of possibilities to define features necessary and indispensable for pornography to exist resulted in the attempts to change the focus of the definition from the intention of the creator to its effects moving it, thus, into the domain of phenomenology. The spokesperson for that contention was Jerzy Ziomek who, using

the terminology of Roman Ingarden, puts together the pornographic reception with pornographic (individual) realization which do not necessarily agree with the author's intentions.

Art possesses both devices safeguarding the audience against pornographic reception and those facilitating such reception [...] (Ziomek, 1981: 289).

As it is impossible to control reception, such devices i.e. conventions are examined and defining a given convention usually amounts to studying the context and code of a given description.

Let us consider a picture of a naked woman in the rain – if we decided to give two different titles to two prints of the same picture we might obtain two different artifacts. *Hot Wet Teen* for an average receiver is something completely dissimilar to *Danae at the Shower of Gold* despite the fact that both pictures would be the same. The name of the artist and the place of the presentation are also crucial: a photograph taken by a famous photographer, with an appropriate title, constituting a part of a museum exhibition or placed in a catalogue will be received as a piece of art, while the same photo printed in a porn magazine without any additional information will become just another nude photography.

We are, however, interested mainly into textual messages, but the situation is, in this case, similar.

Speaking and writing about sex during a medical conference is not pornography but if we replace the terms defining body parts with diminutive forms or hypocorisms adding some emotional tones, the text might be interpreted as pornographic. It would be a similar case when the same, unchanged text was presented amongst medical fetishists. Interestingly, a change into a pornographic context can appear in a situation when a physiological description (even the one from the medical conference) is combined with a non-pornographic text such as, for example, a sentimental memory of a first love. The potential dissonance between those two fragments is a part of the poetics of pornography, under the condition that it, in fact, exists, as such works usually derive from traditional genres.

■ Pornography as a genre?

A pornographic text has, as such, certain typical determinants i.e. formally (in most cases) it fulfils the requirements of a novel: plot + narration, while

its distinguishing feature, differentiating it from other novels is the content and the methods of its presentation (similarly to for example war stories).

In other words – a pornographic novel when treated as a genre is a text based on a plot the main action of which is sexual activity. Any potential adventures of the characters are subordinate to the rule of broadening the context. That context allows the introduction of diversity and multiplying of erotic situations. The intercourse can take place both because of the aliens desire to examine human physiology and a leaking tap the existence of which explains the presence of a handsome plumber in the house. The situations do not refer to the real but rather to the cultural experiences of the audience. Pornography exploits various forms of fiction using well known attributes or motifs moving aside their standard functions and turning them into elements of its game (sexual adventures on a cosmic ferry are not a vision of the future but simply broadening the possibilities of using a human body in the state of zero gravity).

On the other hand, pornographic plots do not really have to explain anything, their basic aim being – firstly – placing the action in a context familiar to the reader, secondly – creating a continuity between particular intercours-es, thirdly – changing the attributes (scenery, partners etc.)

The rule of a broadened context is frequently used in order to make the action familiar to the potential readers. The problem is that the potential recipient of the text tends to organize the world according the rules of cause and effect and merely a description of a sexual act, devoid of any broader context might seem fragmentary. What is more, the very act is, by its nature, limited as far as variants and techniques used to depict it are concerned. The introduction of diversity is the basis of eroticism and pornography obtains that feature due to its broadened context. Formally, the broadened context is everything drawn from different fictional reality. A genre adapted for the sake of pornography makes the recipient perceive the consecutive descriptions of the same event, the same movements and images as new/different variants.

At that point it is indispensable to define the term “genre”. Michał Głowiński provides the following definition:

[...] a phenomenon both systemic and historical, simultaneously a fact of literary consciousness and a set of rules, an element of historical and literary reality and a tool for description – that is one of the most crucial matters for historical poetics [...] a genre (similarly to stylistic or thematic phenomena) is an element of a broader phenomenon – that of literary conventions as the basic subject of the historical poetics research [...]. (Głowiński, 1967: 60)

We can assume that a genre is not only an element of literary conventions but it can be defined as a set of selected conventions. What differentiates it from other genres is the issue of repeated usage of one of the crucial dimensions (theme, stylistics, type of verse) in various (in all examples of that genre) arrangements – i.e. the change of the convention constitutes the difference. That change, accepted and used repeatedly creates a new convention which, depending on the degree of its resemblance to the original can become a variant of the given genre or a separate genre. To put it simply one could say that the name of the genre is a name of a selected set of conventions repeated in particular literary works. The problem is that one convention can include elements of other conventions. In other words – a repeated set of conventions becomes a convention itself. Thus, it is admissible to use a name of a genre as a name of a convention.

The fact that a literary work has been classified as belonging to a certain category informs the potential reader about its compositional and stylistic content.

A genre is, in fact, one of the elements of a particular agreement between the writer and the reader. It informs the reader, in a way, what he or she can expect projecting, to some extent, his or her behaviour as the recipient of the text. In the social circulation of literature the genre might fulfil the role of a label [...]. Genre as the element of mass culture is connected to the methods of distribution (e.g. a satirical page in a popular magazine) and thus suggests its character. In that dimension what is essential is the fact that a comedy is “something to make one laugh”, and a melodrama “something to make one cry”. (Głow-
iński, 1967: 48)

Thus, pornography would be “something about sex” or “something to make one sexually aroused”.

Thus, pornography is a certain convention (or a set of conventions) decisive in the process of creation of particular types of (pornographic) genres in film, literature or press.

A convention which consists of depicting scenes or acts of sexual character, the conscious usage of which together with the correct identification by the audience would be the basis for the existence of a pornographic work. It is still questionable, however, how to interpret a given work in a situation when one of the conditions remains unfulfilled.

As it is, in fact, possible (not very likely, though) that an incompetent literate creates by accident and unintentionally a pornographic work, just like an incompetent creator of pornography might create a work which, against his or her intentions, would be interpreted by the audience as, for example, profound metaphor of the human existence.

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