

**The Difference between Erotica & Pornography:  
The Difference between the Performative & Performance**



I know that I should focus on Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech* in particular, and in some regard this post is a perlocutionary respond to chapter two in this book, so I suppose I am in good standing, but let me begin by saying that this book has my head scrambled a bit, but in a good way. Reading and thinking about Butler's text reminds me of the feelings I had (okay, I confess, still have) when riding and then walking off one of those playground spinners. In this paradigm are challenge and rewards on several levels: first you have to keep your head down and stay focused on building up momentum, really getting that thing spinning; then after you jump on, you have grip with all your might to stay on; when it starts to slow down, you have to lean in to keep it going a little longer (this would be reviewing a paragraph or two); in the end when you step off the spinner, you are off balance – your body staggering with the residual effects of the spinning pulling you happily in divergent directions until, inevitably, your equilibrium returns and you and walk along path you choose with your own volition. But after recovering my own balance, I often went (go) back for another session of an “altered state.”



So please read this post with this playground spinner context in mind, and bear with me as I describe my thinking while my mind was still spinning after consuming chapter two. The thought circulating off kilter

in my mind during and after my spinning experience with chapter two was: “What is the difference between pornography and erotica?” I kept trying to get my mind back onto a more substantial line of thought related to speech acts and what makes them injurious or not, where power is centered in speech acts and what paradoxical moves shift that power in what circumstances, but Butler’s extensive discussion of Anita Hill and her public testimony that revealed the sexual harassment inflicted on her by Clarence Thomas and how that testimony came be view as pornography got me mind spinning. “What is pornography? I watched her actual testimony on TV back in the day, and it did not look like “that” video I had seen. Hill’s testimony did not pass the “I know it when I see it”<sup>1</sup> test for me, then or now. Why is Butler calling this pornography? And come to think of it, what is the difference between pornography and erotica? Would Butler be upset with erotica? I don’t think so, but why? What’s the difference between erotica and pornography, what’s the difference between erotica and pornography ...?” You can see my thoughts spinning out of my control ... damned spinner, but it was fun.

I tried to keep a straight head and focus, but each return to Butler’s text got my head spinning down that erotica versus pornography path again, so I’m finally giving in and “taking a spin” down that path and writing about the difference between erotica and pornography, but in the end, I think you will see how getting a grip on the difference between porn and erotica can actual help you get a grip on Butler’s idea of the performative in contrast to the performed and their connections to the seating of power in discourse, in speech acts.

The difference between pornography and erotica it seems to me cannot be established on one plane alone. At a minimum, three different aspects must be considered: purpose, power and context. The chart below outlines how erotica and pornography can be delineated using these three perspectives:

	Erotica		Pornography	
Purpose	Producer:	Create a full representation of human emotional connection with a focus on sexuality;	Producer:	make money
	Consumer:	Involvement in an experience of human sexuality that focuses on emotional and consenting physical connection	Consumer:	fast, unencumbered stimulation and reward of sexual desire
Power	Subjects within the representation are contextualized within a story whose scope is larger than the sex acts the subjects engage in and they act in consenting, mutual ways to establish an emotional connection		Subjects within the representation are depersonalized, controlled; consent and/or the physical sex act is non-mutual and not focused on human caring or emotional connectedness	
Context	Back story builds emotional context for sex act.		Minimal back story needed only to situate actors in same location so that the sex act and take place.	

This chart is simplistic, but helps me see the significant difference between these two representations of human sexuality is location of power. Subjects within erotica are empowered to act on their own or in agreed upon subjugation to their partner(s); they make choices and have the ability to act on them. Subjects within pornography are stripped of personal power and identity. They are puppets, controlled by some unseen force, be it an off scene director or “pure animal lust.”

In conjunction with this displacement of power outside of the subjects, or agents of the pornographic creation (they merely represent an outside power – the sovereign – they are not the power brokers themselves), my chart also shows that even when you consider the purpose of pornography production, you can see it as more focused on obtaining a goal outside oneself than it is on an on-going process of building an understanding of one’s own and other people’s sexuality. Pornography is like riding an express train headed to only one station with no stops in route. Erotica is like a road trip without a destination or timetable – you are out there to encounter new experiences and see where the road takes you. Using Butler’s concepts, I see pornography and performance, but erotica and performative – pornography is something you do that does not really change you, but erotica is something you engage in that works to shape and reshape your perception and actualization of your sexuality.

A final differentiation I can make from my chart is that context matters in terms of differentiating between a pornographic and an erotic work. Erotica is “softer” because it relies on context to meet’s purpose of representing human connections on both a sexual and an emotional level. Porn is “hard” because the emotional context is removed.

This has been a weird, wild trip for me, but figuring out how erotica differs from pornography has been valuable because it has given me a lens by which to view Butler’s key concept of the sovereign performative. And I like spinning.

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<sup>i</sup> “I know it when I see it.”

- I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description ["hard-core pornography"]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.

—Justice Potter Stewart, concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964), regarding possible obscenity in movie *The Lovers*.

Useful links: [Erotica & Pornography — what’s the difference](#)