

University of Pécs  
Doctoral School of Arts

Domonkos Benyovszky-Szűcs  
RUBENS AND HARD GLAMOUR  
The Necker Cube of Desire  
Theses of DLA Dissertation

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2025

In the first cycle of my series titled *Metamorphosis*, I used glitches from porn films—those that visually echoed the tradition of nude painting—as the basis for my paintings. Despite visual overlaps, art and pornography fundamentally seemed incompatible to me, which is why I organized my doctoral dissertation around exploring the relationship between these two fields.

Starting from the relaxation of Hollywood censorship in the 1960s, through *transgressive* artworks marking the 1990s (such as exhibitions by *Robert Mapplethorpe* or *Jeff Koons*), up to the emergence of *porn studies*, pornography gradually integrated into cultural and academic discourse. The dissertation primarily focuses on the so-called *hard glamour* pornography (Rouyer, 2002) that appeared in the 1990s, in which the industry posited directors evoking high culture as *artists*. Within this genre, I analyzed the films of *Antonio Adamo* (b. 1957) in more detail, as I observed that they often employed solutions reminiscent of the paintings of *Peter Paul Rubens* (1577–1640). Although an interview with the director clarified that these were not direct quotations, my research outlined that the incorporation of artistic qualities was not merely a stylistic matter but also a cultural positioning. I analyzed these unmarked quotations as sites of shifting meanings within the broader process of the *pornification of culture* (McNair, 2002). It is important to highlight that the dissertation aimed neither to legitimize pornography nor to label artworks as pornographic, but rather to present the paradoxical experience that despite my initial resistance, the two fields proved increasingly permeable in many respects.

After Introduction, in the second and third chapters I examined those strategic decisions of the modern porn industry that may have contributed to the emergence of a distinct *auteur* position for porn directors by the 1990s.

In the second chapter, I approached the interrelations of art and pornography through examination of the terms. Since Western civilization (mostly) places pornography beyond acceptable limits, it views it as the counterpoint to cultural achievements embodying humanity's highest values—such as art (Nead, 1990). However, with the constant transformation of the concept of art, works that today are canonically protected as almost asexual may once have belonged to the cultural margins. Studying the conferences of the *French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture* in the late 17th century shows that Rubens' work was such an example. Led by the poussinist *Charles Le Brun*, the Academy emphasized intellectual superiority in drawing, making Rubens' sensual, effect-driven painting a challenge to its ideology and paradoxically revealing its hegemony (Miesel, 1963).

For the analysis, I considered it important to examine the role of transitional concepts in maintaining their antagonistic relationship between art and pornography. Since technical image production has redefined images that are physically stimulating, the frameworks for regulation and culture have also changed. From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, the concept of erotic art became central in cultural discourse. On the one hand, it marked values considered acceptable and culturally protected; on the other hand, as a transitional category, it also made visible the permeability of boundaries. For this very reason, the porn industry was keen to appropriate the concept in order to blur the lines between categories.

I continued the conceptual mapping following Walter Kendrick's definition of pornography, who approached the issue from the perspective of visibility in relation to the Pompeii and Herculaneum excavations. According to Kendrick, pornography has always been defined by who had access: those in power restricted certain content from lower classes, thought incapable of responsibly viewing it (Kendrick, 1987). Yet well before these excavations, from the Renaissance onward, it was common practice for overly sensual works to be confined to private quarters of the ruling class. Paintings in these spaces served not merely as decoration or aesthetic pleasure but as sites for evoking sexual fantasies for a narrow, privileged, exclusively male audience, often solely the ruler himself. In these spaces, mythological scenes—often suggesting sexual violence—and female nudes mutually reinforced each other's provocative impact. Avoiding anachronism, I argue theoretically that Rubens' paintings deemed overly sensual and thus hidden or painted over may be brought into dialogue with Kendrick's conception of pornography.

Following the conceptual investigation, Chapter Three examines how value is assigned to pornography—specifically, how the context of art has been involved in making the products of the modern pornography industry more visible or acceptable throughout its history. This chapter offers a historical overview of the strategic integration of art and the process through which hard glamour was elevated into an art form. Hard glamour can be regarded both as the final and semiotically richest subgenre of *feature* pornography from the seventies, and also as the swan song of video as a medium from the eighties. This is why these previous formats of porn films, along with their distinctive features and social reception, have powerfully shaped the status and perception of this genre. For this reason, the historical arc outlined here places Adamo's films within a broader cultural network.

Since the development of the pornographic genre is closely intertwined with the continuous shifts in regulatory expectations imposed on the industry, its stylistic and thematic renewals are

not necessarily the result of internal evolution. In terms of marketing, for instance, the industry often prioritized form over content (Alilunas, 2016). Whereas in early moving images artistic references primarily served as a means of concealing explicit content, during the era of hard glamour they aimed instead at embedding pornography within a broader cultural network.

For the market expansion of the porn industry, it was crucial to reach new audiences beyond the traditionally solitary male viewer; the means to achieve this was often aesthetic refinement and artistic allusion, particularly in the effort to attract women viewers. Accordingly, hard glamour appropriated not only conceptual but also visual codes to endow its products with the attributes of culturally safeguarded objects. Beyond mobilizing the well-established codes of desirability, this strategy, of course, also played a key economic role.

Following the analysis of the conceptual and historical contexts of art and pornography, the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters constitute the core of the dissertation, where I examined the relationship between Rubens's painting and Adamo's hard glamour—already engaged in dialogue as elements of visual culture. In Rubens's oeuvre, the primary representational site of sexual interaction was the mythological narratives of rape. These paintings can be brought into dialogue with Adamo's films on both formal and conceptual levels. In the films, the similarity is most discernible through the evocation of two cultural references: the mythological worldview and the canon of fine art. In my view, these references provided legitimacy through their cultural connotations, while simultaneously creating distance from the social reality of pornography through symbolic dimensions.

An example of this is the mythological imagery in Adamo's films, incorporating elements such as historical or legendary settings, archetypal characters, magic, or enchanted objects. Even the sexual act itself, as part of stylized rituals, often connects to patterns of testimony, initiation, or sacrificial offering.

Chapter Four explores the concept of *eroticized hierarchy* as a shared conceptual foundation, framed within mythology. Beyond the fact that pornographic films fundamentally possess a mythological worldview (Király, 1993), Greco-Roman myths contributed to the development of the genre's formal language even in the early history of pornography (Hunt, 1993). The dichotomy between male and female constitutes a central organizing principle in both myth and pornography, reinforced in each domain by further binary oppositions. The most radical yet most fundamental mythological configuration of power asymmetry is rape, which appears as a paradigmatic structure within ancient narratives (Richlin, 1992). Moreover, in myth it is often

difficult to separate acts of violence from one another, since bodily sadism, mutilation, or even murder frequently appeared as consummating acts of sexual desire (Curran, 1978). While literature depicts violence to heighten sensuality, Rubens incorporated violence into the pleasurable structure of his paintings in a way that partly renders it invisible. In his works, the victims of sexual abuse are often depicted with expressionless faces in the midst of violence, while sensual codes—such as red lips and blushing cheeks—suggest pleasure (Eaton, 2003). This fusion of passivity and desire constitutes a dominant element of Rubens’s imagery of violence. In my view, Adamo’s pornographic films—framed with aesthetic codes—align with this tradition, presenting sexual practices – which the industry has promoted since its inception for their inherent sadism – as normative forms of sexual pleasure. Like Rubens’s paintings, Adamo’s films aestheticize violence and transform it into a sensual experience, thereby shifting the ethical horizon of both production and reception. Although Rubens based his work on latent sexuality and Adamo foregrounded manifest sexuality, their representations of violence, in my interpretation, function similarly yet in opposite directions. In Rubens’s paintings, the context of violence is explicit, but the visual experience culminates in sensuality. In Adamo’s films, by contrast, the explicit event of rape is nearly absent. Even though the sexual practices depicted are promoted by the porn industry as humiliating, the aesthetic codes partially normalize them.

Alongside rape, another foundational form of eroticized power is the imagery of wealth, which the fourth chapter also explores. The interplay between social status and sexual potency was central both to the visual propaganda of absolutism that defined Rubens’s era and to the imagery of *hard glamour*. I suggest that Rubens’s works commissioned by rulers—which celebrated power through mythological images of rape—embody a conceptual and aesthetic program similar to Adamo’s acts staged in luxurious settings, where violent deeds are presented as part of a desirable order. Although their methods differ, in both cases violence is clothed in aesthetics: suffering becomes invisible within an environment of abundance. This mechanism is closely tied to the contemporary notion of glamour. In the early modern period, the Catholic elite—encompassing both secular and ecclesiastical authorities—used opulence ideologically, persuading lower social classes of their right to power. The illusion seemed so distant and unattainable that it appeared divine. From this enchantment arises the present meaning of glamour, now more associated with affluence than its original magical connotation (Thaemlitz, 2009).

Despite the fact that in pornography not only concrete mythological narratives dissolve (Király, 1993), but also cultural citations, I maintain that Adamo’s pornographic language consciously

integrated the representational order of ancient myths and of the artworks reworking them, in the interest of greater social acceptance.

Chapter Five takes the form of a visual essay, presenting images that are directly connected to the points previously discussed and serving as a bridge to the formal solutions examined in Chapter Six. Through visual analogies, this chapter proposes that Rubens's culturally validated mode of representation—one focusing on sexual instinct and often substituting scenes of sexual violence—may have contributed, in Adamo's films, to diminishing the explicit brutality of pornographic sex and marginalizing the industry's abusive practices.

Chapter Six investigates the tools of sensual representation shared by Rubens and Adamo. The first focus is on the totalization of beauty, a central element for both. For centuries, the female nude embodied the highest values of civilization; accordingly, in art the female body typically appeared in generalized and idealized form. Pornography likewise adheres to aesthetic norms, thereby reinforcing its fetishistic effect (Waldrepp, 2021). Next, the chapter examines the desire-inducing function of concealment in both modes of representation. Drapery in nude paintings not only granted artistic legitimacy within accepted boundaries but also activated mechanisms of desire through the experience of absence. In my interpretation, drapery in Rubens' paintings acts as a painterly gesture—a medium of sensuality—that arrests the gaze at the threshold between the concealed and the revealed. . In this way, Rubens implicates the viewer in the act of voyeurism, while his brushwork, as the imprint of a stroke gliding lightly over the painted body, binds the erotic theme to a sensual method.

In contrast to the traditional nude, pornography seeks maximum visibility for the sexual act, especially access to the female body. Yet Adamo so frequently incorporated clothing into the sexual scenes that in the scenes I studied there were six times as many completely nude men as women. This striking imbalance suggests that the sexualization of the female body in Adamo's films is defined less by nudity and more by stylized concealment, akin to conventions in painting. Therefore I viewed garments as a medium that intensifies desirability. Their constant presence can be explained partly by the logic of pornography, where stereotypical costumes accentuate gender differences (Kuhn, 1998), and by the medium's nature: since film images exist only in the present and leave no trace, the moment's intensity is enhanced through a proliferation of visual stimuli. The films aim to saturate sexual fantasy, compensating for the fleetingness of the medium through visual excess; clothing thus functions as a tool for amplifying sexual intensity—a form of *baudrillardian* sign proliferation (Baudrillard, 1992).

Finally, the chapter analyzes the use of cool-warm color contrast as a device supporting the illusion of sensual proximity. In Rubens's painting of the body, cold-warm contrasts carried, on the one hand, social and psychological meaning (van Wyhe, 2018), while on the other, the chromatic temperature dynamics of flesh tones functioned as a means by which representation partially exceeded the visual and became corporeal experience. Cold-warm contrasts activate bodily perception, facilitating the emergence of *carnal resonance* (Paasonen, 2011) in the act of reception, thereby allowing the initial distance between representation and viewer to dissolve. Though for different reasons, this mechanism is fundamental to pornography as a radically corporeal genre; moreover, the cold-warm contrast is one of the key features of Adamo's visual imagery.

To summarize, in my research pornography was linked to painting through aesthetic formation, and to mythology through the erotization of violence—connections that made it possible to uncover ever more intertextual relations. These relationships made it clear that the pornography industry has deliberately employed the tools and citations of art. Examining the historical layers of the Baroque era and pornography brought to light political, gender, and representational dimensions, allowing these seemingly incompatible fields to converge.

From the outset, I regarded the presence of the visual arts in hard glamour as a form of illusionism, a view confirmed by my findings: scenarios of sexual coercion appear as mythology, while simultaneously reflecting ancient society; pornography presents itself as pleasure, while on both personal and social levels it speaks of inequality; art promises disembodied and disinterested enjoyment, yet the incitement of desire is inscribed into the material reality of artworks. Although Baroque painting and pornographic film differ, they share a kinship in the logic of illusory representation—a conscious mechanism for eliciting impact. Their illusions do not force the viewer to choose between reality and imagination, but rather draw them into the tension between the two; thus illusion becomes an essential part of the receptive process, shaping the very mode of perception. In this sense, glamour is not only a bewitching allure but also a deception, employed by the porn industry for cultural positioning.

The recurrent, unfixable meanings made me increasingly aware that the true driving force of my research was in fact the operation of illusion—that uncertainty which continually compelled shifts of perspective, each time enriching the dissertation with new meanings. It was then that I arrived at the cube drawing that can be interpreted in two ways yet never seen in both simultaneously: the Necker cube illusion. For me, the ambivalent relation between art and pornography was reflected in this perpetual perceptual oscillation. The paradox did not merely

produce disturbance; it also set in motion the instability of meaning-making, activating oppositions as illusion. In the course of my work, beginning from stylistic similarities, vision became not only an aesthetic but also an ethical and conceptual perception, a dynamic in which perspective shifts constantly disclose new meanings, ensuring that nothing is ever fixed once and for all. I hope that, by contextualizing illusion in this way, the scientific approach has been meaningfully enriched and enabled a more effective exploration of this complex relationship.

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