Carnegie Mellon University
Research Showcase

Department of Philosophy | Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences

1-1-1988

Obscenity and the Arts

Clark Glymour
Carnegie Mellon University

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.cmu.edu/philosophy

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
Glymour, Clark, "Obscenity and the Arts" (1988). *Department of Philosophy.* Paper 312.
http://repository.cmu.edu/philosophy/312

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Research Showcase. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Philosophy by an authorized administrator of Research Showcase. For more information, please contact research-showcase@andrew.cmu.edu.

Obscenity and the Arts, Times Literary Supplement, Feb. 1988

Some years ago, when an exhibition of relics from Pompeii reached the city of Chicago I went to see what was there. The museum that briefly housed the exhibition had arranged things so that one could see a great deal of what remained from Pompeii, but none of it for very long. Partitions had been attached to the walls of a large room, forming a series of cardboard alcoves in which the objects were shown. Viewers formed a line of march sailing into each alcove and then out and around and into the next. In such circumstances, one notices one's neighbors. Immediately behind me in the queue was an extraordinarily beautiful girl, perhaps sixteen years old. Behind her was a matronly woman, obviously her mother. From the glares with which any glances at the daughter were repelled by the mother, I constructed in imagination an interesting family tension.

Near the end of the exhibition I came around a partition wall into a new cardboard alcove filled with erotic mosaics. One wall was covered with scenes of copulations conducted from a variety of positions. The figures were slightly stylized, but otherwise the depictions were detailed and realistic. The tiled participants all wore smiles. Reluctantly, I passed out of the alcove and into the next. From motives I shall not detail I could not keep from turning to look at the girl as she came around the partition wall – direct from the alcove of erotica. She looked pleasantly stunned and her eyes were large enough not to miss any reflected beam of light. Her mother followed behind her, waggling a finger, and fairly shouting into her ear: "And that's why the mountain fell on them!"

What is merely erotic for some of us is obscene for others; the difference is no more than one of disapproval, and sometimes of offence. To do what someone disapproves of is not necessarily to do anyone any harm, but to give offence is always to do some harm, however trivial. Speech may similarly offend, and we think it good public policy not to forbid such offences. That there is a legal right to produce and exhibit art that is obscene does not itself imply that the offence such objects and performances may give is excusable, and yet it generally is. What excuses it? Why is it sometimes permissible, and even admirable, to give offence?

The popular defences of obscenity in art – for example, that pieces of literature or statuary or lyric have other virtues, whether beauty or social importance or whatever – are unconvincing because they make the aspect of the object that gives offence seem gratuitous. Where the offence is gratuitous, no justification for it is easily provided. There are better answers, surely. That which gives offence to some can give pleasure to others, and if we knew how to count and weigh them, the pleasures might outweigh the offence. That is a general defence that justifies both pornography and exhibiting the pleasures of Pompeii. Or the offence given may be deserved, as in the great German mathematician David Hilbert's dinner conversation with functionaries of the Third Reich. Giving offence may be the best way to some benign and more urgent goal, whether broadening tastes or inducing tolerance or simply saying what is true. And an offence can be excused because it is so witty, so clever, so ingenious, so courageous, or even so _____. Art that some find obscene may have any of these defences, or none of them, as the case may be.

The offence that art may give can be more serious than the offence any private individual gives by lewdness or obscenity or other means. Obscenity is only one way to offend, and only one way art has of offending. There is nothing privileged or especially important that differentiates the offence of obscenity from other offences to sensibilities. Works of art may offend because of thoughts they express. Artistic works can even offend by their implicit claims

to beauty, or to importance, or rightfully to occupy public space. Contemporary art, especially contemporary public statuary, offends many people for many of these reasons, quite aside from any obscenity. Where the viewer sees no value, he or she may well be offended by the claim that there is value there, and by the concomitant claim that if the value is not seen the defect is with the viewer not the viewed. The offence is all the more serious because the labeling of something as *art* is a kind of communal judgment, against which the philistine stands accused. Of course where art is private, or at least only voluntarily viewed, *hoi polloi* need only be not too curious to avoid being offended; where art is public and permanent, as in most public sculpture, the offence some art gives may be serious, as with New York's unhappy "Tilted Arc." Most contemporary sculpture cannot be obscene because it does not represent, but that does not guarantee that it is inoffensive, or make the offence it may give less serious. Indeed, I think the offence of obscenity is typically excusable on many grounds. The matron's indignation was more than compensated by her daughter's instruction. The other offences art may give are not always so easy to excuse. As a philosophical friend remarked recently, between art and obscenity, I'll take obscenity.