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“*Imagines* 8. Pagan Pornotopias? The Reception of Antiquity in Eroticism and Pornography”: A Report

Abstract “*Imagines* 8. Pagan Pornotopias? The Reception of Antiquity in Eroticism and Pornography” was the eighth conference organised by *Imagines Project*¹. It took place 27th, 28th and 29th September 2023 at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, and its conference programme covered a total of 18 papers grouped into five panels. These contributions focused on the reception of the ancient world – especially Greece and Rome – in erotic and pornographic products ranging from the 19th century to today. The conference engaged with concepts such as “pornotopias” in Western popular culture, ancient Greece’s role in the shaping and legitimisation of homosexuality, and the characterisation of ancient Rome as inherently opposed to Christianity in erotic moral terms. Its aim was to explore to what extent and in what ways Antiquity and its conscious, unconscious, direct or indirect reception have shaped the construction of not just eroticism and pornography, but also desire, attraction, sexuality, sexual orientations and identities, and performance gender.

Keywords Pornotopia, eroticism, pornography, sexuality, *Imagines Project*

¹ For further information about the project, its activities and conferences, visit <https://www.imagines-project.org/>

INTRODUCTION

“*Imagines 8. Pagan Pornotopias? The Reception of Antiquity in Eroticism and Pornography*” was held in Madrid between 27th and 29th September 2023. “La Corrala”, a cultural centre belonging to the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, hosted the first day, while the event moved to the university’s Facultad de Filosofía y Letras for the two following days. After the greetings by the authorities, professors Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam) and Luis Unceta Gómez (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) opened the conference with an Introduction, which also set up the methodological and theoretical framework of the event. This was followed by the first panel, “What Aroused Our Forefathers and Foremothers? Antiquity in 18th and 19th Century Eroticism”, which covered what was left of the day. The 28th’s session began with the panel “Ancient Models for Modern Sex”, and was followed by two other panels, “So We Dare Speak Its Name: Antiquity in (and for) Homosexual and Queer Desire” and “Spatialisations of Lust: Sexualised Antiquity in Architecture and Decoration”. This last panel was followed by a lecture by photographer Carmelo Blázquez Jiménez, “De héroes y efebos. Referencias clásicas en mi fotografía”, which closed the session. The fifth and final panel was named “Antiquity Goes Hard: Greece, Rome and the Pornography Debate” and covered the entirety of the 29th’s morning. After the conference’s end, the workshop was completed by a cultural tour at Prado Museum, guided by organising committee member Sara Palermo, where the most remarkable artworks depicting ancient mythological themes were explored.

The workshop was run by *Imagines Project*, and the organising committee was composed by Filippo Carlà-Uhink, Luis Unceta Gómez, Sara Palermo, Cristina Salcedo González, Zoa Alonso Fernández, Helena González Vaquerizo, Rosario López Gregoris, Carlos Sánchez Pérez and Samuel Carreño Ramos. Additionally, the event was made possible by the auspices and funding of UAM’s Classical Philology Department and the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain.

WHAT AROUSED OUR FOREFATHERS AND FOREMOTHERS? ANTIQUITY IN 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY EROTICISM

The first panel had Filippo Carlà-Uhink as chair and began with the paper “Practical Enlightenment: Pagan pornotopia in Casanova’s encounter with Winckelmann” by Katherine Harloe (University of London). Harloe covered the pederas-

tic relation Johann Winckelmann had with the prostitute ‘Bathyllus’ as narrated by Giacomo Casanova in his memoirs: according to Harloe, these writings could have reflected, instead of an actual account of facts, what Winckelmann called ‘connaissance’ of Greek art and the ‘sexual underworlds of the Enlightenment’ which would play a central role in the construction of homosexual identities for the next two centuries. Next, Athena Leoussi (University of Reading) brought up “‘La joie de vivre’: Modern Hellenism and the revival of the life of the senses”, disserting again on eroticism during the Enlightenment, how the focus on the human body and the Aesthetic Movement that appeared under the 18th century intellectual trend aligned themselves with the Greek canons of beauty, and how this resulted in the shaping of eroticism during the period.

The third lecture was provided by Nikolai Endres (Western Kentucky University). As the title shows, “A pornotopia in Sicily? The Baron von Gloeden’s reception of Antiquity” presented von Gloeden’s pictures of naked Sicilian teenagers as a departure from the pre-19th century hegemonical vision of Classical Antiquity men as hypermasculine, white and closely tied to war into vulnerable figures of diverse skin colours and feminine features. The panel was closed by Stefania Arcara (Università di Catania) with “‘Dark, virulent, divine’: the fin-de-siècle invention of Sapphic eroticism in Britain”. Following a material feminist approach, Arcara covered Sappho’s role on the first instances of modern erotic lesbian culture at the end of the 19th century, a period in which heterosexual interpretations and male homoeroticism in Hellenism predominated. The paper looked at the context of the first British women-only colleges, at the iconographic work of Jane Ellen Harrison and the poems by “Michael Field”.

ANCIENT MODELS FOR MODERN SEX

The second panel, chaired by Irene Berti (Universität Heidelberg), was opened by Anastasia Bakogianni (Massey University) and her paper “Can Greek tragic heroines ever be sexy? Eroticism vs. female revenge”. Bakogianni analysed the reception of Electra’s portrait as a canonically ‘undesirable’ woman in ancient Greek tragedy, and the evolution from this into a sexy and transgressive image in modern day representations, even when these depictions still clash with what is considered ‘normative behaviour’ for women. This was followed by Thomas E. Jenkins (Trinity University) and his paper “Getting to the bottom of Rufus Wainwright’s *Hadrian*: Identity and bravery in contemporary opera”: this paper

presented a sexual scene from *Hadrian* (2017–2018) in which Antinoos topped the Roman emperor, reverting the classic *erastes/eromenos* roles of Platonic male homosexual love. According to Jenkins, this would have been made in order to cause shock in the audience, used to the sexual categories received from ancient Greece. Lastly, Anise Strong (Western Michigan University) delivered the paper “Ancient sexuality and modern video games”, which presented the videogames *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018), *Hades* (2018) and the interactive novel *Melos* (2015) as portraying Ancient Greece settings within the codes of pagan pornotopias and the idealisation of this period as open to a diversity of genders and sexualities.

SO WE DARE SPEAK ITS NAME: ANTIQUITY IN (AND FOR) HOMOSEXUAL AND QUEER DESIRE

Chaired by Luis Unceta Gómez, the first paper from the third panel was “Performing Doric and Ionic love: Ancient Greece in gay male pornography” by Filippo Carlà-Uhink. He presented the reception in male homosexual porn and soft-porn of two models: the model of Doric love, originally established by Karl Otfried Müller (1824), – representing an ideal related with sports and between men of similar ages –, on the one hand, and the paedophilic Ionic love-model, where the young member of the relation becomes a “pupil” of the older one, on the other. “Subversive Hercules. How to fashion queer desire in popular culture and Instagram”, by Patricia A. Gwodz and Markus Lenz (Universität Potsdam), was next: they put the focus of their dissertation on the pagan fashioning of queer desire in popular culture, and on the reception of classical models in the Herculean ideals of the 20th century. Examples included the graphic artist Tom of Finland, as well as Instagram communities seeking to portray homoeroticism while evading the social network’s bans on nudity. David Delbar (University of Chicago) closed the panel with “Domination and the Minotaur”, where he explored the queer, BDSM and furry erotic and pornographic fan art around Theseus and the Minotaur, how the labyrinth adopts BDSM imagery, how these representations subvert the taboo of bestiality associated with the Minotaur since ancient times, and, ultimately, how this bestiality has been in turn fetishised in online communities.

SPATIALISATIONS OF LUST: SEXUALISED ANTIQUITY IN ARCHITECTURE AND DECORATION

Marta García Morcillo (Durham University) chaired the fourth panel, which was introduced by the paper of Jorge Elices Ocón (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas): “Marble breasts and phalli of stone: Classical statues as erotic reference and pornographic transgression in the Islamic world”. Elices Ocón explored the ways in which classical statuary has been received in the Islamic society all the way from Medieval times to nowadays, both in cases in which they have become subjects of legitimisation of traditional sexualities and genders, and in those cases in which, in contrast, they have been interpreted as transgressive and inducing to inappropriate obscenity. Next up, Ricardo del Molino García (Universidad Externado de Colombia) delivered a paper entitled: “*El clasicismo de burdel* en América Latina. La antigüedad egipcia, griega y romana en prostíbulos, moteles y hoteles de tránsito hispanoamericanos”. He presented what he referred to as “clasicismo de burdel” (“brothel classicism”) in Latin America, that is, the masculine, mediated reception of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome in several prostitution spaces along different countries in the region, with examples ranging from deity and historical character names, to architecture and decoration inspired in the ancient Mediterranean world, all of which have shaped them into performative, pornotopic spaces. The panel came to an end with “‘Sexy goddesses and handsome gladiators’ – Eroticized stereotypes of the Antiquity in the US-American hotel business of Jay Sarno in the 1960s” by Tanja Kilzer (Universität Siegen), which showed the use of erotic clichés about ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt in Jay Sarno’s hotels in Las Vegas, in the context of the sexualization of this city in the 1960s and the influence of successful Hollywood movies at the time, such as *Cleopatra* (1963) or *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964).

September 28th’s session was closed by Carmelo Blázquez Jiménez (Barcelona) and “De héroes y efebos. Referencias clásicas en mi fotografía”. During the talk, the artist shared how his personal story led him towards erotic photography, how his first professional steps were inspired by the Greek *kouroi*, and how he uses ancient sculptures and their marble shapes as models to follow. Among his most frequent sources, he listed several classical myths, Homer’s epics, heroes and epebes, as well as allegories. The conference’s official poster was illustrated by one of Blázquez’ works inspired by Greek myth: “Apoteosis”.

ANTIQUITY GOES HARD: GREECE, ROME AND THE PORNOGRAPHY DEBATE

The last panel had Anja Wieber (Westfalen-Kolleg Dortmund) as chair and started with “X-rated classics – Cinematic Antiquity and the impossibility to classify pornography”, by Martin Lindner (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen), who explored the role of classical reception throughout the history of pornography, the challenges posed by the ever-changing definitions and formats of pornography, and the methodological approaches that should be adopted towards this topic. In “But is it pornography? Locating obscenity in the classicising photographs and films of mid-century physique culture”, Alastair Blanshard (University of Queensland) brought up an analysis of the reception of classical imagery in what is known as “physique culture” and the controversies this graphic production went through in the middle of the past century, such as the public scandals associated with it or the legal matters and boundaries between art and obscenity. The paper “Traditions revisited and continued: Antiquity in the new *Physique Pictorial*”, by Florian Freitag (Universität Duisburg-Essen) also delved into classical reception in physique culture, particularly on the re-release in 2017 of the San Francisco-based physique or “beefcake” magazine *Physique Pictorial*, with cases of direct and double classical reception, since it also includes reinterpretations of the references to antiquity that were displayed by Bob Mizer in the original *Physique Pictorial*.

Charlotte Gregory (University College London) presented “The dynamics of interracial pornography in *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018)”, which explored how the series portrayed certain conceptions of sex between black and white individuals in the context of an adaptation of Homeric epic. Examples range from a threesome between Achilles, Patroclus and Briseis to an invented assault of Achilles on Helen, which would have reflected sexual dynamics such as the engaging of women with multiple black men, the inversion of the master-slave roles regarding race, or the perceived sexual danger of black men. The last paper, “Pagan pornotropes. Ancient Rome and the erotics of power in pornographic comic books” was presented by Luis Unceta Gómez, and it analysed how several comic books set in ancient Rome, by authors such as Michel Duveaux, Jean-Yves Mitton and Erich Von Gotha, depict the pornotopical construct built around this period in popular imagination. More specifically, the paper explored how sexual abuse committed by men towards women is used by the latter in these narratives as a means to empowerment and to switch the hierarchies socially and sexually imposed over them.

The conference was closed by the organizers, Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Luis Unceta Gómez. After a summary and positive assessment of the event, they announced that the next Imagines conference will take place in London in March 2025. Thus, this conference came to an end, after gathering researchers from all around the globe to dissert on one of the most frequent and remarkable points of dialogue between the ancient Mediterranean and contemporary society. Pornography and eroticism were not only an important topic to discuss, but one that raised up questions and interest from the audience on every panel and paper, leading to lengthy and relevant debates after each panel. Each paper delved deeply into specific matters that built a full map as originally proposed: as outlined by the organisers in their assessment, ancient eroticism and its related areas have shaped modern eroticism and cultural history in more ways than one could expect on a first thought.

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