

Call for papers

PORNOGRAPHY IN BABEL **Translation, sexuality, obscenity**

International bilingual conference

23–24 October 2025
University of Antwerp, Belgium

Time and again, “pornographic” literature – from the ancient Greek *πορνή* (prostitute) and *γραφω* (writing/painting) – has been vilified for its brutal, transgressive and obscene nature. Alternating erotic and philosophical passages, it lends itself to a double reading: a literary one on the one hand, and an aphrodisiac one on the other. This ambivalence, both thematic and suggestive, often makes it the target of fierce criticism in societal debates, where it becomes the battleground for ideological confrontations, or even a hidden topic, relegated to the unspoken. Even though it conveys sexual representations in a variety of forms, pornographic literature has gradually gained a foothold in academia, where researchers are attempting to examine the ways in which these representations are made and what drives their underlying motives. Adopting this approach, *porn studies* challenges the complexity of the pornographic without seeking to defend or condemn it on moral grounds (Hubier, 2021).

From this perspective, it is worth examining what truly constitutes the essence of pornographic literature, beyond its sociocritical reception. Admittedly, this literature defies the boundaries of what can be said by frequently resorting to the vulgar and the obscene, but its pronounced stylistic realism clearly serves to make the narrative more palpable and evocative, whether the aim is to arouse excitement, shock or violence. Pornographic texts and their heterodox thinking invite us to reflect on the strategies they use to circumvent censorship and challenge dominant ideologies. Is it not precisely because pornographic literature must contend with power that it is censored, or even banned, and forced to circulate clandestinely? Or that it is requalified as “erotic literature” in paratexts to avoid overtly outraging decency? These euphemistic detours and toned-down labels demonstrate the extent to which this literature is subject to social norms and dependent on how its readers perceive it. Its ever-changing definition reflects the mutations of sexual taboos over time – think, for example, of the psychoanalytic pathologisation of fetishes or the tension that Foucault identifies between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis* (1976).

Bearing witness to sexuality and voluptuousness, pornographic literature has travelled to the four corners of the world, including Babel, the epitome of translation. By crossing – and often transgressing – multiple cultural boundaries, it has been translated and adapted. Yet this transcultural journey raises a thorny question: how can we *traduire pour faire jouir*? (Boulanger, 2013)? How do you translate the transgressive poetics of pornographic literature? Translating the pornographic inevitably means engaging with the dominant discourse and shifting representations of sex, gender, sexuality, bodies and identities. Hence, of course, that the translation of the pornographic requires particular attention to the target language and culture. If the translation is supposed to reflect an “equivalent” sexual imagination, it prompts us to question the ways in which cultures shape what is perceived as erotic or even pornographic. Lexical choices and the semantic field employed in the translation therefore play a crucial role in reconstructing the erotic nature of the text. Another question is the relationship between translation and the double reading of pornographic literature: depending on the applied translation strategies and the accompanying peritextual apparatus, the translation may favour a literary or, on the contrary, an aphrodisiac reading. Building on the ideas of Toury (1995), how does the acceptability of pornographic translation adjust to what the target culture deems adequate?

Therefore, echoing Kaminski (2018), we might ask whether this cultural and ideological intertwining might not cause pornographic translation to slide into a form of pornographic adaptation. Indeed, adapting, circulating and publishing pornographic texts in translation, and thus texts with a strong transgressive charge, sometimes requires

the implementation of innovative strategies to recontextualise the work in the target culture: to what extent do paratexts reveal positions taken within the societal and ideological debates on pornographic literature? An attentiveness to the reception of these translated texts may reveal why we translate texts that we tend to conceal. If this literature is, by its very nature, transgressive, could it not be argued that translating is in itself a transgressive act?

In the wake of these reflections, contributors are encouraged to rethink translations of pornographic literature in terms of its double reading, to consider these translated texts from a philosophical perspective, to interrogate the ways in which translation reformulates or reconfigures notions of the pornographic, the obscene and sexuality across cultural boundaries, and to reconsider the impact of the sexualisation of culture on literary and translational production. Although this conference's working languages will be French and English, we welcome case studies from any language combination, from any historical period, as well as theoretical or methodological submissions. We welcome proposals on the following themes (indicative and non-exhaustive list):

- Theory and methodology of translating the pornographic
- Circulation/sociology/marginalisation of pornographic literature in translation
- History/emergence of pornographic literature in translation
- Erotic/pornographic translations and adaptations
- Translation of pornographic works/passages
- Translating erotic language: stylistics, discourse, semiosis, the imaginary, desire
- Pornographic literature in translation and censorship, discourse, power, ideology
- Roles of translators of pornographic literature, paratexts, publishing
- Manipulation of sex, sexualities, genders, bodies, identities in translation
- Obscenity, transgression, perversion, vulgarity, lewdness, obsession, taboo in translation
- Feminist/activist translation and pornographic literature
- Pornographic literature in translation and flesh, corporeal reading, erotic reading, performativity
- Philosophy of the translation of pornography: ontology, epistemology, hermeneutics, phenomenology, praxeology, ethics

Keynotes

Frédéric Lagrange (Sorbonne Université, CEREJ)

Pauline Henry-Tierney (Newcastle University)

Petra Van Brabant (Sint Lucas Antwerp)

Will McMorran (Queen Mary University of London)

Scientific committee

Philippe Vanhoof, Katrien Lievois, Kris Peeters (University of Antwerp, research group TricS)

Guidelines for submitting abstracts

Proposals for abstracts **in French or English** of no more than **500 words** (including references) accompanied by a short bio-bibliographical note should be uploaded via this form **by 30 June 2025** at the latest: <https://forms.gle/yRCAC6gQcfmWRrRh7>. The paper presentations are expected to last 20 minutes, followed by 10 minutes of discussion. The scientific committee will notify the contributors of its decision by 15 July 2025. If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact Philippe Vanhoof (philippe.vanhoof@uantwerpen.be).

Selected bibliography

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