

## How to Look at Pornography

Pornography grabs us and doesn't let go. Whether you're revolted or enticed, shocked or titillated, these are flip sides of the same response: an intense, visceral engagement with what pornography has to say. And pornography has quite a lot to say. Pornography should interest us, because it's intensely and relentlessly *about* us. It involves the roots of our culture and the deepest corners of the self. It's not just friction and naked bodies: pornography has eloquence. It has meaning, it has ideas. It even has redeeming ideas. So what's everyone so wrought up about?

Maybe it's that buried under all the nervous stereotypes of pimply teenagers, furtive perverts in raincoats, and asocial compulsively masturbating misfits, beneath all these disdainful images of the lone pornography consumer, is a certain sneaking recognition that pornography isn't just an individual predilection: pornography is central to our culture. I'm not simply referring to its immense popularity (although estimates put its sales at over \$11 billion a year). I mean that pornography is revealing, and what it reveals isn't just a lot of naked people sweating on each other. It exposes the culture to itself. Pornography is the royal road to the cultural psyche (as for Freud, dreams were the route to the unconscious). So the question is, if you put it on the couch and let it free-associate, what is it really saying? What are the inner tensions and unconscious conflicts that propel its narratives?

Popularity doesn't tell you everything, but it can tell you a lot. Like the Hollywood blockbuster or other cultural spectacles, what transforms a collection of isolated strangers with different lives, interests, and idiosyncrasies into a mass audience is that elusive "thing" that taps into the culture's attention, often before it's even aware that that's where its preoccupations and anxieties are located. Audiences constitute themselves around things that matter to them, and stay away in droves when no nerve is struck. Behind mass cultural spectacles from *Jurassic Park* to Ross Perot to the O. J. Simpson trial or any other spectator attraction, what commands our attention, our bucks, our votes are the things that get under our skin, that condense and articulate what matters to us. I want to suggest however, perhaps somewhat perversely, that the endless attention pornography commands, whether from its consumers or its protesters (who are, if anything, even more obsessed by pornography than those who use it), has less to do with its obvious content (sex) than with what might be called its political philosophy.

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When writing about the pornography of the past, whether visual or literary, scholars and art historians routinely uncover allegorical meanings within it, even political significance. The question of how its content relates to its social moment and historical context supersedes questions about whether it should or shouldn't have existed, or how best to protect the public from offense to their sensibilities. Historians have made the case that modern pornography (up until around the nineteenth century) operated against political and religious authority as a form of social criticism, a vehicle for attacking officialdom, which responded, predictably, by attempting to suppress it. Pornography was defined less by its content than by the efforts of those in power to eliminate it and whatever social agendas it transported.<sup>1</sup>

Even knowing this, it seems quite impossible to begin to think about contemporary pornography as a form of culture, or as a mode of politics. There's zero discussion of pornography as an expressive medium in the positive sense—the only expressing it's presumed to do is of misogyny or social decay. That it might have more complicated social agendas, or that future historians of the genre might generate interesting insights about pornography's relation to this particular historical and social moment—these are radically unthought thoughts. One reason for this lacuna is a certain intellectual prejudice against taking porn seriously at all. Those who take pornography seriously are its opponents, who have little interesting to say on the subject: not only don't they seem to have spent much time actually looking at it, but even worse, they seem universally overcome by a leaden, stultifying literalness, apparently never having heard of metaphor, irony, symbolism—even fantasy seems too challenging a concept.

I've proposed that pornography is both a legitimate form of culture and a fictional, fantastical, even allegorical realm; it neither simply reflects the real world nor is it some hypnotizing call to action. The world of pornography is mythological and hyperbolic, peopled by characters. It doesn't and never will exist, but it does—and this is part of its politics—insist on a sanctioned space for fantasy. This is its most serious demand and the basis of much of the controversy it engenders, because pornography has a talent for making its particular fantasies look like dangerous and socially destabilizing incendiary devices.

Sweating naked bodies and improbable sexual acrobatics are only one side of the story. The other is the way pornography holds us in the thrall of its theatrics of transgression, its dedication to crossing boundaries and violating social strictures. Like any other popular-culture genre (sci-fi, romance, mystery, true crime), pornography obeys certain rules, and its primary rule is transgression. Like your boorish cousin, its greatest pleasure is to locate each and every one of society's taboos, prohibitions, and proprieties and systematically transgress them, one by one.

As the avant-garde knew, transgression is no simple thing: it's a precisely calculated intellectual endeavor. It means knowing the culture inside out, discerning its secret shames and grubby secrets, and knowing how to best humiliate it, knock it off its prim perch. (To commit sacrilege, you have to have studied the

religion.) A culture's pornography becomes, in effect, a very precise map of that culture's borders: pornography begins at the edge of the culture's decorum. Carefully tracing that edge, like an anthropologist mapping a culture's system of taboos and myths, gives you a detailed blueprint of the culture's anxieties, investments, contradictions. And a culture's borders, whether geographical or psychological, are inevitably political questions—as mapmakers and geographers are increasingly aware.

Pornography is also a form of political theater. Within the incipient, transgressive space opened by its festival of social infractions is a medium for confronting its audiences with exactly those contents that are exiled from sanctioned speech, from mainstream culture and political discourse. And that encompasses more than sex. Our legacy of Puritanism makes sex a vehicle for almost anything subject to repression and shame: sex becomes a natural home for all forms of rebellion, utopianism, flaunting, or experimentation. Like adolescents who “use” sex to express their rebellion, anything banished from social sanction can hitch its wagon to sex and use pornography as a backdoor form of cultural entrée. (Of course, that any kind of social rebellion is instantly dismissed as adolescent is indicative of how shaming and silencing tactics are employed to banish a vast range of meanings. Which is precisely why pornography becomes such a useful vehicle for hurtling those meanings back into view.) Pornography has many uses beyond the classic one-handed one.

Like the avant-garde's, pornography's transgressions are first of all aesthetic. It confronts us with bodies that repulse us—like fat ones—or defies us with genders we find noxious. It induces us to look at what's conventionally banished from view. Pornography is chock full of these sorts of aesthetic shocks and surprises. Here's another one: in a culture that so ferociously equates sexuality with youth, where else but within pornography will you find enthusiasm for sagging, aging bodies, or for their sexualization? There is indeed a subgenre of porn—both gay and straight—devoted to the geriatric. The degree of one's aesthetic distress when thumbing through magazines with titles like *40+*, with its wrinkly models and not-so-perky breasts, or *Over 50*, with its naked pictorials of sagging white-haired grandmothers (or the white-haired grandfathers of *Classics*, with their big bellies and vanishing hairlines, and, turning the page, the two lumbering CEOs in bifocals and boxer shorts fondling each other), indicates the degree to which a socially prescribed set of aesthetic conventions is embedded in the very core of our beings. And our sexualities.

It also indicates the degree to which pornography exists precisely to pester and thwart the dominant. The vistas of antediluvian flesh in *Over 50*, or its features like “Promiscuous Granny,” counter all of the mainstream culture's stipulations regarding sex and sexual aesthetics. One may want to argue that these subgenres of pornography simply cater to “individual preferences” or to dismiss them as “perversions,” depending on how far you carry your normativity. But for the individual viewer, it's not just a case of different strokes for different

folks. Pornography provides a realm of transgression that is, in effect, a counter-aesthetics to dominant norms for bodies, sexualities, and desire itself. And to the extent that portraying the aging body as sexual might be dissed as a perversion (along with other “perversions” like preferring fat sex partners), it reveals to what extent “perversion” is a shifting and capricious social category, rather than a form of knowledge or science: a couple of hundred years ago, fat bodies were widely admired.

Why a specific individual has this or that sexual preference isn't my concern here, in the same way that why Mr. Jones is or isn't a sci-fi fan isn't the concern of a popular-culture critic. What the cultural critic wants to account for is the “why” behind forms of fandom, and behind the existence of particular genres of popular culture, and to distill from them the knowledge they impart about the social: she might say, for example, that sci-fi is a genre in which anxieties about human possibilities in the context of expanding science and out-of-control technologies can be narratively articulated. We know, or learn, certain things about ourselves because we find them registered in our cultural forms. So, too, with the existence of these variegations within pornography. What shapes these subgenres—their content, their raw materials—are precisely the items blackballed from the rest of culture. This watchfully dialectical relation pornography maintains to mainstream culture makes it nothing less than a form of cultural critique. It refuses to let us so easily off the hook for our hypocrisies. Or our unconscious.

The edges of culture are exquisitely threatening places. Straddling them gives you a very different vantage point on things. Maybe it makes us a little nervous. (And what makes us nervous makes us conservative and self-protective.) Crossing that edge is an intense border experience of pleasure and danger, arousal and outrage—because these edges aren't only cultural: they're the limits that define us as individuals. We don't *choose* the social codes we live by, they choose us. Pornography's very specific, very calculated violations of these strict codes (which have been pounded into all of us from the crib) make it the exciting and the nerve-racking thing it is. These are the limits we yearn to defy and transcend—some of us more than others, apparently. (And of course taboos function to stimulate the desire for the tabooed thing *and* for its prohibition simultaneously.)

The danger and thrill of social transgression can be profoundly gratifying or profoundly distasteful, but one way or another, pornography, by definition, leaves no social being unaffected. Why? Because pornography's very preoccupation with the instabilities and permeability of cultural borders is inextricable from the fragility and tenuousness of our own psychic borders, composed as they are of this same flimsy system of refusals and repressions. Pornography's allegories of transgression reveal, in the most visceral ways, not only our culture's edges, but how intricately our own identities are bound up in all of these quite unspoken, but quite relentless, cultural dictates. And what the furor over pornography also reveals is just how deeply attached to the most pervasive feelings of shame and desire all these unspoken dictates are. Pornography's ultimate desire is exactly to

engage our deepest embarrassments, to mock us for the anxious psychic balancing acts we daily perform, straddling between the anarchy of sexual desires and the straitjacket of social responsibilities.

Pornography, then, is profoundly and paradoxically social, but even more than that, it's acutely historical. It's an archive of data about both our history as a culture and our own individual histories—our formations as selves. Pornography's favorite terrain is the tender spots where the individual psyche collides with the historical process of molding social subjects.

This may have something to do with the great desire so many pornography commentators have to so vastly *undercomplicate* the issue, to ignore studiously the meanings that frame and underlie all the humping and moaning. It's as if they're so distracted by naked flesh that anything beyond the superficial becomes unreadable, like watching a movie and only noticing the celluloid, or going to the revolution and only noticing the costumes. It is not *just sex*, *just violence*, *just* a question of First Amendment protection. It's exactly because the experience of pornography is so intensely complicated and fraught with all the complications of personhood, in addition to all the complications of gendered personhood, that pornography is so aggravating. It threatens and titillates because it bothers those fragile places. It tickles our sensitive spots. Tickling is in fact one of the categories of pornography that's particularly interesting in this regard. Why is there a variety of pornography devoted to the experience of tickling, being tickled, and, especially, being tickled against one's will?

Of course, neither the culture nor the individual have had their particular borders for very long. These aren't timeless universals. The line between childhood and adulthood, standards of privacy, bodily aesthetics, and proprieties, our ideas about whom we should have sex with, and how to do it—all the motifs that obsess pornography—shift from culture to culture and throughout history.

The precondition for pornography is a civilizing process whose instruments are shame and repression. One of pornography's large themes is that we're adults who were once children, in whom the social has been instilled at great and often tragic cost. (And by definition incompletely, if you follow the Freudian understanding of the unconscious as a warehouse for everything that's repressed in the process of becoming a social being—for example, wanting to fuck your parents.) Of course, one major thing our society doesn't want to contemplate in any way, shape, or form is childhood sexuality. If you regard pornography in these somewhat more complicated terms (that is, if you start out from the presupposition that it *has* cultural complexity), then many of its more exotic subgenres may start to seem a little less peculiar, particularly since so many of them—from your standard bondage and dominance to the slightly more kinky terrain of spanking and punishment, to the outer frontiers of diapers and infantilism—seem such evident, belated, poignant memorials to the erotics of childhood.

In *Strictly Spanking*, an array of fairly ordinary-looking men and women get what's coming to them, and good. The spanker is always a woman. (Mother-

dominated child-rearing *is* the norm in our society.) A frilly yellow dress is hiked up to reveal the red flush of recently spanked buttocks; a scary Joan Crawford-ish suburban matriarch is poised to do some serious damage to your posterior with the business end of a hairbrush; you're forced to bend over a pillow and get a good thrashing for whatever naughty thing you did. The standard poses include naked and facing the corner, garments around the ankles, or bent over the disciplinarian's knee. Hairbrushes, paddles, and switches are the preferred disciplinary apparatuses. You've been bad and need to be punished. You can almost hear the running commentary under the sound track of rhythmic thwacking: "This hurts me more than it hurts you," "When will you ever learn?" "Clean up your goddamn room!" There's no particular mystery about the origin of the erotics of humiliation.<sup>2</sup>

I mentioned tickling. In "A Plume for the Pledge," the lead feature in the premiere issue of *Tickling*, we're introduced to Tess and Helen: "Tess waits patiently—though a bit on the nervous side. Helen, a junior, knows that a feather can hurt more than a paddle. . . . It's initiation time on campus. The pledges are going through Hell Week. Paddles have been outlawed, but the university authorities forgot that tickling can be the most excruciating form of punishment." Let's think about the tone of this for a minute—after all, it's not exactly high realism. There's a certain knowingness about the enterprise: the creation of a fantasy scenario with stock elements. Two interchangeable twentyish ponytailed blondes in white underwear inhabit the living room of Sorority House, USA. Helen holds the pledge's hands behind her back, tickling the bottoms of her feet mercilessly with feathers. Soon the underwear comes off, and the tickling continues. Twenty black-and-white pictures of the same two girls, the same scene, the same feather, with minor variations. A few closeups on feet. A rope is produced; now Tess is tied down—she doesn't seem to mind, though, she's laughing away. A few photos catch Helen looking a little pensive, maybe a bit melancholy, but she quickly returns to her usual fun-loving self and it's just another gigglefest at Delta Gamma.

What sort of homage is this? As psychoanalyst Adam Phillips points out, "A child will never be able to tickle himself. It is the pleasure he can't reproduce in the absence of the other. The exact spots of ticklishness require—are—the enacted recognition of the other. To tickle is above all to seduce, often by amusement."<sup>3</sup> For Phillips, this would seem to be something of a memorial to childhood seduction, but seduction in the sense that we all crave it: as a form of attention and recognition. And perhaps, in the case of tickling, one charged with erotics as well. It's this erotic component of childhood that's routinely censored and goes widely undiscussed. Phillips points out that psychoanalysis too is essentially a theory of censorship—a catalogue of materials that are repressed and not allowed into consciousness. Pornography, which as we see covers quite a similar terrain (which is what makes psychoanalytic theory such a useful explanatory device for it), is similarly subject to the wrath of censors—both internal and state—border police both. Tickling is one of those permeable borders: between play and sex, between sadism and fun, certainly between adult and childhood sexuality.

This border between childhood and adulthood is both the most porous and the most zealously patrolled, which may be why a magazine like *Diapers* is so consternating—even though it's just a series of pictorials of a winsome young man, maybe late twenties, but dressed throughout in extra-large Pampers, rubber pants, and a succession of pretty bonnets and frocks. Speaking of censorship, it's interesting to note that when Freud's notorious quote, "Anatomy is destiny," is cited, it's invariably employed to refer to the differences between male and female sex organs, and to taunt Freud for his always-lurking misogyny. But Freud actually used this quote (a paraphrase from Napoleon) twice, and the other reference is to the psychological consequences of nature's weird decision to put the sex organs and elimination functions into the same "neighborhood," as Freud so charmingly puts it.<sup>4</sup> His point is that this proximity has a series of affective consequences: from the disgust that so often seeps over into sex to the child's sexual arousal during parental hygiene ministrations. There are certain things we just don't want to know about ourselves, and about our formations as selves. These seem to be precisely what pornography keeps shoving right back at us.

Well, if you want to go around in diapers, why not just do it in the privacy of your own home, or under your rock? Why do these people have to parade their squalid little obsessions in front of the rest of us? One reason is that pornography would be nowhere without its most flagrant border transgression, this complete disregard for the public/private divide. Flaunting its contempt for all the proprieties, it's this transgression in particular that triggers so much handwringing about the deleterious effects on society of naked private parts in public view. These deeply held standards of privacy of ours are, of course, relatively recent, historically speaking. They're a modern invention, tied to the rise of the middle class, the invention of the modern autonomous individual, and the consequent transformations of daily life into an elaborately complicated set of negotiations between body, psyche, and the social. Equally modern, and perhaps even more relevant, are the corresponding inventions of sexual and bodily functions as sites of shame and disgust, which arise simultaneously, around the early Renaissance, further fueling the necessity of privacy.<sup>5</sup>

But this public/private boundary is ever shifting. In fact, it's flip-flopping so fast these days it's hard to keep up, and it's precisely these shifts that form the subtext of so much else that's disturbing the cultural equilibrium: for example, the recent focus on the pervasiveness of incest and domestic violence, privacy rackets both. This question of privacy is by no means a simple one. Pornography is often cited, by anti-porn feminists, as a causal factor in many bad things that happen to women. But the fact is, these domestic abuses depend completely on the protections of privacy (which is clearly not the Arcadia pornography's critics would have us believe), whereas pornography's impulse is in the reverse direction: toward exposure, toward making the private public and the hidden explicit. Given the kinds of power abuses that privacy so usefully shields, and the social changes

that exposure can, at times, engender, the privacy/publicity opposition doesn't have any clear heroes.

What's often referred to as the tabloidization of American culture also reflects shifting standards of public and private. When lower-middle America takes to the airwaves to brandish the intimate details of their lives—their secret affairs, their marital skirmishes, their familial contretemps—and talk show guests duke it out on air, high-minded critics invariably respond with contemptuous little think pieces snorting about what bad taste this all is. But taste is a complicated issue, and the history of the concept is entirely bound up with issues of social class and class distinctions.<sup>6</sup> "Keeping things to yourself," the stiff upper lip, the suppression of emotions, maintenance of propriety and proper behavior, and the very concept of "bad taste" are all associated historically with the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie and their invention of behaviors that would separate themselves from the noisy lower orders. All of our impulses (and snobbery) about what should be private or what shouldn't be public are enormously complex, historically laden cultural machinery. Given that all these public/private dilemmas are intricately connected to governing affects of deep and overwhelming shame and embarrassment, our immediate impulses and our "taste" aren't always the most reliable indicators of anything but obedience to a shifting set of conventions, whose purposes we're constitutionally disinclined to question, as *Hustler* makes so clear.

This recent dedication to exposure and propriety violations, this "tabloid sensibility" that seems to now dominate American cultural life, may not be unrelated to the economic decline that has forced downward mobility down the throats of a once economically optimistic Middle America. If a lifetime of hard work is no longer any guarantee of financial security—of a home, or continued employment, or a pension—and if upward aspirations now look like so much nostalgia for earlier times, why adopt the deportment or the sensibility of the classes you can't afford to join? Class, after all, isn't simply a matter of income, or neighborhood. It's also embedded in a complex web of attitudes and proprieties, particularly around the body. (This is something "Roseanne" viewers know all about.)

Pornography, of course, dedicates itself to offending all the bodily and sexual proprieties intrinsic to upholding class distinctions: good manners, privacy, the absence of vulgarity, the suppression of bodily instincts into polite behavior. It's not only porn's theatrics of transgression that ensure its connotation of lowness, it's also pornography's relentless downward focus. This is one explanation for why pornography doesn't appear ripe for serious critical interpretation. Imagine culture as a class system, with the "top" of culture comprised of rarefied, pricey, big-ticket cultural forms like opera, serious theater, gallery art, the classics, the symphony, modernist literature. Moving down a bit you get your art house and European films; down a bit more, public television, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and other middlebrow diversions. If you keep moving on down through the tiers of popular culture—down through teen-pics, soap operas, theme parks,

tabloid TV, the *National Enquirer*, Elvis paintings on velvet—then right down at the very bottom rung of the ladder is pornography. It's the lowest of the cultural low, on perpetual standby to represent the nadir of culture, whenever some commentator needs a visible cultural sign to index society's moral turpitude.

But let's be honest about this cultural hierarchy. If pornography is at the bottom of a cultural class system whose apex comprises the forms of culture we usually think of as consumed by social elites with deep pockets—after all, take a look at the price of an opera ticket, or at the clothes at the opening night of the symphony—then questions of social class seem to lurk somewhere quite near all this distress over pornography. If culture is grouped along a hierarchy from high to low, and the rest of our social world is grouped along a hierarchy from high to low, then this puts pornography into analogy with the bottom tiers of the social structure. This isn't to suggest that the "lower classes" are pornography's consumers, but that insofar as porn is relegated to a low thing culturally, it takes on all the *associations* of a low-class thing.

Take the dual associations antipornography feminists make between pornography and violent male behavior. It hardly needs saying that the propensity to violence is a characteristic with strong class connotations—you might even say stereotypical connotations. A propensity to violence is in opposition to traits like rationality, contemplation, and intelligence, which tend to have higher-class connotations: the attributes associated with the audiences of higher cultural forms like theater or opera. The argument that pornography causes violent behavior in male consumers relies on a theory of the porn consumer as devoid of rationality, contemplation, or intelligence, prone instead to witless brainwashing, to monkey-see/monkey-do reenactments of the pornographic scene. This would be a porn spectator who inherently *has* a propensity to become violent (not presumably the members of the Meese Commission, who spent years viewing pornography without violent consequences). Maybe it becomes clearer how fantastical this argument is when you consider how eagerly we accept the premise that pornography causes violence—and are so keen to regulate it—compared to the massive social disinclination to accept that *handguns* cause violence (and it's certainly far more provable that they do): guns, without the same connotation of lowness, don't seem to invite the same regulatory zeal, despite a completely demonstrable causal relation to violence.<sup>7</sup>

The fantasy pornography consumer is a walking projection of upper-class fears about lower-class men: brutish, animal-like, sexually voracious. And this fantasy is projected back onto pornography. In fact, arguments about the "effects" of culture seem to be applied exclusively to lower cultural forms, that is, to pornography, or cartoons, or subcultural forms like gangsta rap. This predisposition even extends to social science research: researchers aren't busy wiring Shakespeare viewers up to electrodes and measuring their penile tumescence or their galvanic skin responses to the violence or misogyny there. The violence of high culture seems not to have effects on *its* consumers, or rather, no one bothers to

research this question, so we don't hear much about how *Taming of the Shrew* expresses contempt for women, or watching *Medea* might compel a mother to go out and kill her children; when a South Carolina mother did drown her two kids in 1994, no one suggested banning Euripides. When Lorena Bobbitt severed husband John's penis, no one wondered if she'd recently watched Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*, the Japanese art film where a male character meets a similar bloody fate. Is that because the audiences of Euripides and Oshima have greater self-control than the audiences of pornography and other low culture, or is this a class prejudice that masquerades as the "redeeming social value" issue?

The presumption that low cultural forms are without complexity is completely embedded in media effects research. I was quite startled to read that one of the country's leading pornography researchers routinely screens the notorious sexploitation movie *I Spit on Your Grave* as an example of sexual violence against women, then measures male audiences for mood, hostility, and desensitization to rape.<sup>8</sup> But as anyone who's actually seen this movie knows, it's no simple testimonial to rape. This is a rape-*revenge* film, in which a female rape victim wreaks violent reprisal against her rapists, systematically and imaginatively killing all three, and one mentally challenged onlooker—by decapitation, hanging, shooting, and castration. Film theorist Carol Clover, who does see low culture as having complexity, points out that even during the rape sequence, the camera angles force the viewer into identification with the female victim.<sup>9</sup> If male college students are hostile after watching this movie (with its grisly castration scene), who knows *what* it is they're actually reacting to? Antiporn activists are fond of throwing around data from social science research to support the contention that pornography leads to violence, but this research is so shot through with simplistic assumptions about its own materials that it seems far from clear what's even being measured. (Or how it's being measured: data collection in sex research based on sexual self-reporting is so frequently unreliable and plagued with discrepancies that researchers resort to cooking the numbers to make them make sense: the general population apparently doesn't report on its sexual experiences in ways that translate into neat statistical columns.<sup>10</sup>)

If pornography, too, is laden with complexity and meaning, and even "redeeming value," then the presumption that only low culture causes "effects" starts to look more and more like a stereotype about its imagined viewers and their intelligence, or their self-control, or their values. Pornography isn't viewed as having complexity, because its *audience* isn't viewed as having complexity, and this propensity for oversimplification gets reproduced in every discussion about pornography.

Raising these loathsome issues of class also offers another way of thinking about the current social preoccupation with pornography. This intensified focus on regulating and suppressing the lowest of all low things comes just as the legacy of Reaganomics has been fully realized, as gaps in U.S. income levels between high and low ends of the social spectrum have become the widest in the

industrialized West, as middle-class wages are dropping, as the lower classes are expanding *and* becoming increasingly impoverished.<sup>11</sup> A new social compact is being negotiated by the right, with an intensified ideology of distinctions, as those at the bottom end of the class structure (the homeless, the welfare classes, minimum-wage workers) are nonchalantly abandoned to their fates. Shifts in economic ideology require a retooled social conscience, and arguments about culture are one place these new forms of consent get negotiated—and this is the subtext of what's come to be known as the Culture Wars.<sup>12</sup>

Current economic realignments may seem far afield from pornography. But pornography is a space in the social imagination as well as a media form . . . interestingly, the issue of pornography is never very far away from any political argument about culture: it's been an explicit focus of these culture debates the right has been waging over the last ten years [ca. 1996]. What do the Culture Wars stage but a duel between the canon (imagined as the high thing) and pornography (clearly, the low)? Wherever arguments in favor of elite culture are made, they seem unable to resist invoking pornography (or its kissing cousin, masturbation), to represent the dangerous thing that has to be resisted. What this means, of course, is that pornography ends up being spoken about more and more frequently, and becomes ever more culturally indispensable.

## NOTES

1. Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 9–45.
2. On the relation of spanking to rhythm, specifically to poetry, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Poem Is Being Written," *Representations* (Winter 1987).
3. Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 9–11.
4. The first quote is in "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1924), the second is in "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement on the Sphere of Love" (1912). Both essays can be found in Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality* (New York: Penguin, 1977).
5. Elias, *The History of Manners* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 129–169.
6. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 264–266. Elias also has much to say about taste throughout *The History of Manners*.
7. Gunshot wounds are the second leading cause of accidental death in the country after auto accidents, and these deaths have increased by 14 percent over the last ten years. There were 38,317 gunshot deaths in 1991. "Guns Gaining on Cars as Bigger Killer in U.S.," *New York Times*, January 28, 1995.
8. Edward Donnerstein and Daniel Linz, "Mass Media, Sexual Violence and Male Viewers: Current Theory and Research," *American Behavioral Scientist* 29 (May–June 1986), 601–618.
9. Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 139. Clover makes an extended analysis of *I Spit on Your Grave*; I borrowed the term *rape-revenge film* from her.
10. The problem seems to be that men overreport and women underreport sexual activity. In a widely publicized University of Chicago sex survey, 64 percent of male sexual contacts can't be accounted for—or rather, could be accounted for only if in this survey of 3,500 people, 10 different women each had 2,000 partners they didn't tell researchers about. To solve this problem, one statistician suggested eliminating from the data all respondents who reported having more than 20 sex partners in their lifetime; she found if she eliminated all people who said they had more than 5 partners in the last year, the data made more sense. David L. Wheeler, "Explaining

the Discrepancies in Sex Surveys," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27, 1993, A9. This sounds less like crunching numbers than inventing them.

11. Keith Bradsher, "Gap in Wealth in U.S. Called Widest in West," *New York Times*, April 17, 1995, cites new studies reporting that the wealthiest one percent of Americans now own nearly 40 percent of the national wealth, that the gap between rich and middle classes widened throughout the 1970s and 1980s, just as the new planned welfare cuts and tax breaks for the wealthy will further widen that gap and further impoverish the poor.

12. I've been much helped in thinking about the specifics of current economic shifts and their relation to cultural distinction-making by Roger Rouse's "Thinking Through Transnationalism: Notes of the Cultural Politics of Class Relations in the Contemporary United States," *Public Culture* (Winter 1995): 353–402.