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 worried 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 disdaining 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 commands 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.

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 disdained 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 con-
cern here, in the same way that why Mr. Jones is or isn't a sci-fi fan isn't the con-
cern 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 tech-
nologies 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 subgen-
res—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-
wracking thing it is. These are the limits we yearn to defy and transcend—some of
us more than others, apparently. (And of course taboo 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 tenuosity of our own psychic borders, composed as they are of
this same flimsy system of refusals and repressions. Pornography's allegiances to
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 thrwacking: "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. 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 perverse, 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—always the enacted recognition of the other. To tickle is above all to seduce, often by amusement." 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 erotica 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. 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 showing 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. Flouting its contempt for all the properties, 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.

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 acts both. This question of privacy is by no means a simple one. Pornography is often cited, by antiporn 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. 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 ascendency 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—a 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 demeanor 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 down through the tiers of popular culture—down through teen-pics, soap operas, theme parks,
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 similarly 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 exploitation 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. 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. 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.)

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. 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 retrenched 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.

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

4. The first quote is in “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” (1924), the second is in “On the Universal Tendency to Debascement on the Sphere of Love” (1912). Both essays can be found in Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality* (New York: Penguin, 1977).
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 38,817 gunshot deaths in 1991. “Guns Gaining on Cars as Bigger Killer in U.S.,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1995.
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