



Paul MATHIAS

*Collège international de Philosophie*

**“Towards a PPP Theory of Porn”<sup>1</sup>**

It really is a wonder why a philosopher should be interested in pornography, if not from a totally particular and private point of view. Certainly, for Philosophy the problem is not to describe the variety of porn and its paraphernalia, nor is it to evaluate and judge porn from the standpoint of morality, or to show its dangers and despicable personal or social consequences. But Philosophy should be able to ask the supposedly simple question “what is...?” and apply it to pornography. Raising such a question has undoubtedly something to do with the idea of an “essence” of porn or its “nature”. And indeed, one may ask whether or not such an essentialist’s or platonist’s perspective is legitimate, and what could possibly mean to imply that there is such a thing as an “essence” of pornography. Or, to say it otherwise: what legitimacy does Philosophy have to talk about pornography?

---

<sup>1</sup> This presentation was given at the international conference “The Art and Politics of Netporn” organized in Amsterdam by the Institute of Network Cultures, September 30<sup>th</sup> and October 1<sup>st</sup> 2005. — URL: <http://www.networkcultures.org/> (valid as of April 2006).

## Embracing porn

We might give two answers to this set of questions.

*One* of them would be to assume that there is in fact no such thing as an essence of pornography, which would be defined in sociological and historical terms. As a qualification of practices, texts, images, and the like, “porn” is only meant to designate marginal iconographic and behavioral patterns, commercially mainstream, if we consider the economical turnover of pornography, but in general despised and morally condemned. Of course “marginal” is in itself quite difficult to define, as it is grounded into actual social ideals and, as a matter of fact, contingent axiological patterns. It is not “as such” that porn is condemned, it is from the point of view of a certain present, which may at some point, in the past for instance, have considered that the French writer Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* is totally out of bounds, or Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, or D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley* — all of which are part of today’s “normal” cultural background. The succession of presents is the very reason for a succession of redefinitions of porn.

From a relativist’s perspective, the moral grounds on which would be based a description of porn would allow for no proper *definition* of its nature. The only thing we could thus do is try and show how extreme discrepancies are from one time to another — Gerard Damiano’s *Deep Throat* in the 70’s and John Thompson’s *GGG* series in the present days —, or from one region of the Globe to the other — America and Saudi Arabia, Australia and Germany. Unfortunately for the enquiring mind, there remains the question to understand what makes people, religious or laic institutions, States or societies, actually decide that such and such forms of textual or iconographic expression *are* to be characterized as “pornographic”.

Whence the *second answer* to the question of the philosophical inquiry into the phenomenon: whatever the variety of “porn creativity” and “porn awareness”, pornography is *always* supposed to correlate the individual to his or her own *desire*, be it by subverting its nature, as some moralists would say, or by expressing and increasing it, as porn activists might put it. Porn consumption should not be considered as a deviation of the libido, but as one particular form of the very process of its realization, its coming into being and into its meaning. And this is exactly where the Internet comes in and functions as a catalyst. With the Internet, porn has found new ways to spread, thanks especially to the bypassing of traditional

moral and/or legal barriers, even to its being by non-industrial means of proliferating, such as P2P networks. Anonymity and the transparency of connections between producers and consumers together propitiate the increased availability of porn, even the transformation if not the very *mutation* of pornographic material. This is why we should consider that networks not only do favor the spreading of porn or change the aspect of its products, but they also *reveal its essence* and allow one to understand *what is* pornographic, by making clear what is hidden into our socio-moral framework, and by indicating the inner structure of the *desire for pornography*.

It is quite obvious that the essence of porn is not exclusively related to the imaging of our sexual activity. For instance Mark Rylance in Patrice Chéreau's *Intimité* or Eiko Matsuda in Nagisa Oshima's *The Realm of the Senses* perform sexual intercourse without this leading to the qualification of the movies as pornographic. Thus it is not the representation of sex that is at stake, it is some form of excess of imaged sex over preexisting forms of sexual representations and general acceptance of what an image and its limits should be. If we may designate something like an "essence of porn", it should be expressive of the way porn is produced and presented, the way it is realized or comes into being.

It seems there are indeed two proprietary characteristics of porn:

- a) One is that it shows something of an *atomization of the body* in its wholeness and significance. Pornography does not show naked people having sexual activities of various kinds, it shows body parts that are connected together to acquire some sort of specialized sexual significance: e.g. hands over thighs, intermingled sexual organs, faces over-expressing pleasure, desire, etc. Why not say that we experience even less than "body parts"...?
- b) The other is that it shows something of an *atomization of sexuality itself and its historicity*. Neither pornographic text nor porn movies do express the process of sexual encounter as a whole. The goal of these products is to go to the point as straightforwardly as possible, according to rules discussed and defined by marketing

specialists, supposedly inspired by (pseudo-)scientific studies.<sup>2</sup> To say things simply, sex is not represented in porn as “humane” but as “functional”, since it aims at producing psychological and/or biological effects such as the stimulation of the viewer, his/her pleasure, and some form or another of sexual satisfaction.

These two characteristics allow for the interpretation of porn a technological reduction of desire and sexuality in general. Indeed, experiencing porn requires no more than an *encounter* between: on the one hand one’s virtually temporary desire, its singular patterns, an *imago* and its symbolic structure; and on the other hand a product, not necessarily a movie or a book, but an image or a few images, a few moments (sometimes seconds) of sexual activity, a sound, a face, a stance. This “encounter”, structurally identical to our net surfing, is the very framework of a *point per point experience of porn*, where a punctual instantiation of porn reaches a punctual existential instantiation of one’s libido and singularity. In other words, the networks and the generalization of porn availability lead to a phenomenon of “quantum porn” which makes possible through an “infinitesimalization” of our sexual drive and the “pornographication” of our imagination.

### **A PPP theory of porn**

Now what does exactly “point per point experience of porn” mean? And why is it relevant to the question of the “essence” of porn?

It is well known that “PPP” stands for “point-to-point protocol”, a technology used on the networks to guarantee that a datagram sent from one machine reaches its destination notwithstanding any problems that may occur on its way.<sup>3</sup> Structurally speaking, our experience of porn has a similar pattern, which is even more obvious when our net surfing is involved. Pornography is not a general idea. In fact, it is more like a visual or textual event that comes into being, slightly by chance. If indeed on the one hand (net-)porn consumers are looking for pornographic material and develop skills in finding what they like, on the other hand “liking” does not necessarily follow “seeking” as its natural consequence. Especially on

---

<sup>2</sup> The French movie producer Marc Dorcel is said to have said (maybe...) that a “good” sex scene should not take (a lot) more than 7 minutes from preliminaries to ejaculation.

<sup>3</sup> Technical specifications may be found at URL: <http://www.ietf.org/rfc/rfc2153.txt>.

the web, our searching practices are accompanied by noise, which means that fishing for porn implies returning home empty handed. This may seem paradoxical in a context where anything, any “*spécialités*”, are a few clicks away. But that is because experiencing porn requires the findings be matched to the searching, thus a direct connection be established between the product provided and the user’s mind and libido. In fact we never turn to porn “in general”, we are turned on by very specific, singular, or *punctual* representations of sexually *meaningful-to-us* events.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the true paradox lies in the fact that the difference between what is pornographically relevant to us and what is not is much more important than the difference between what is pornographic “in general” or not. A “PPP theory of porn” is one that takes seriously into account the fact that a punctual manifestation of the libido reaches a punctually satisfactory representation of its sexual trends, thus creating a “PPP situation” where pornography, *as such*, comes into being.

Understanding this “punctualistic” interpretation of the nature of pornography allows for a development of the argument in three converging directions:

- a) The first is the presentification of the body as in excess of itself. Porn quanta outline the disintegration of the body “as such” and present it as essentially fragmental, each fragment being potentially overloaded with enhanced sexual significance. Indeed, porn rhetorics are all about “face shots”, “cream pies”, “squirting pussies”, and the like. It is generally not the body that is seen as acting on the scene/screen/computer-window, since images, even text, focus on some particular fragments of one or many bodies, sometimes various disparate fragments being supposed to represent one same single performer/human being. It is then obvious that body parts exceed the body as a whole, and are substituted to it as its sexually meaningful representatives.
- b) The second is another form of substitution, that of the user’s subjectivity to the performer’s subjectivity. Admittedly sex is a practice implying the Subject, though it may be discussed how much of “subjectivity” or “objectivity” (cultural, social, etc.) together compose the very nature of the Subject. Now though the performer has to be

---

<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, there is no need for “porn” to be sexually explicit. It is usually the case, but other forms of “porn” are imaginable that range from “soft core” to extremely realistic — even *real* — “gore”.

---

acting “in person” — because it is indeed with various forms of penetration and intercourse that we deal here — his or her acting is somehow annihilated by the viewer’s/user’s own desire and sexual drive. It is not the subjective participation of the performer that interests the user — his or her feelings, or pleasure, etc.—, it is what the user sees, or desires or wants to see in the performer’s actions and performance. Framed into the technicality of the finalized pornographic product, the actors are reduced to whatever the users minds are projecting on their screens — actual forms of their own personal libido. What then is crucial here is the encounter between the user’s desire and inner libidinal patterns, and the product’s “affordances” he or she is presented with.

- c) An ultimate consequence is the blurring of sexual practices, identities, and gender patterns. Paradoxically enough, projecting one’s fantasies onto a pornographic product is not at all projecting, expressing, betraying one’s sexual identity, rather it is more or less (in-)consistently, (un-)consciously, and (un-)willfully projecting one’s *audacity*: “I thought I was a guy/gal, well — look at me/that/it now!” What we should take into account is the fact that in the practical solitude of porn consumption, the roles of the male and the female, the roles of the straight and gay, are subverted through an always singular, solitary, even reflexively secret expression of the libido and its trends.

As “real” as a geometrical point may be, its reality is only that of the crossing of two straight lines. Likewise, the pornographic experience of porn — not an experience led from an academic point of view, or as a policeman or a judge — is a (mis-)match between the local, singular, and private logics of one individual’s impulse; and the actual flow of universally available pornographic material. An encounter of the n type if you will, but an encounter which bears the realization of sexuality as its ultimate consequence. A “PPP theory of porn” is a theory of sexuality as punctualized and diffracted into as many images of itself as it may cope with.

\*

Netporn is probably a partial, but obviously true to nature representation of pornography in general. Even more, it might be considered a precipitate of the layman’s openness to his or

her own sexual endeavor. In fact netporn is a processual crystallization of an experience — the experience of pornography — which is in essence fragmental and processual. This is not to say that pornography is only a matter of varying images, sound, and text. Rather, it shows which ways and intricate paths the libido needs to follow to manifest itself in its most genuine and contradictory nature.

Pornography is therefore about one's self and the over-observed reflexivity of one's sexuality. We cannot expect to know exactly what we project upon images that meet our desire, or what the trends and logics of our desire may be. What we do know is that our libido cannot avoid images and axiological enhancements of sexuality and its corporeal representations. In his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, the French Renaissance writer Montaigne came to evoke some tricks the Ancients had invented to provide themselves with an increased sex life and more intense bodily pleasures. They used, he wrote, magnifying mirrors aimed at their genitalia, upon which they could admire themselves as — in excess of themselves:

*Those who to increase and aide their luxury were anciently wont to use perspective or looking glasses, fit to make the object they represented appeare very big and great, that so the members they were to use might, by that ocular increase, please them the more: to whether of the two senses yeilded they, either to the sight presenting those members as big and great as they wisht them, or to the feeling that presented them little and to be disdained?*<sup>5</sup>

Isn't this what porn and netporn always relate us to? *Autoporn!* ♥

---

**This work is distributed under the following “Creative Commons” license:**



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/deed.en>

---

<sup>5</sup> Translation by Florio (1603) available online at URL : <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/montaigne/2xii.htm>.

---