

I'm interested in exploring the ways in which pornography may be understood phenomenologically in relation to the sublime, and in its effect on body and identity boundaries. Philosophical and theoretical ideas in the writings of Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke, Rene Descartes, Julia Kristeva, Barbara Freeman and Lynda Nead will be used to support a thesis that both "pornography" and notions of "the sublime" can be deployed dialectically to discuss the many layers of ambiguity that undermine the certainty of knowledge.

I am not using the word pornography here simply as that category of sexually explicit, commercially produced, vernacular imagery or text. Although I cannot exclude it completely from this analysis, I'm using the word pornography as a term which suggests a physical engagement of the body. I am actually more interested in a philosophical inquiry into pornographic strategies created with the intent of titillating mind and body in order to discuss the precarious border that has separated art and non-art, art and pornography, the beautiful and the sublime, contemplation and action, self and other.

Pornography is meant to induce an effect, a pleasurable effect, one not traditionally associated with the enjoyment or appreciation of art. There's a difference between pleasure and enjoyment just as there's a difference between pornography and erotica, or pornography and art. I'm also using the concept of pornography to speak about the unspeakable - something beyond language, where you loose your head, exit your body to be shaken loose from everything that grounds you.

Postmodern theory and psychoanalysis seek to disclose the unified subject as a fetish, that is, a construction, a desire, a wish. The modern subject, developed sometime between the end of the 17th and the middle of the 18th century, still bears the imprint of enlightenment philosophy - the clash of the natural and the cultural, the subject who

is both free and determined, the subject who is fragmented but searching for a utopian wholeness. The challenge is how to exist with that tension and the impossibility of its resolution.

Pornography magnifies this tension; it creates an excess. Because it triggers a libidinal overdrive, pornography can be said to cause a sublime reaction or effect, one that is beyond the ability of the rational mind to control, and perhaps beyond the ability of language to accurately describe. In a culture that wants to promote superego responses over id reactions, pornography becomes a threat. If it didn't concretize unconscious fantasy, it wouldn't pose such a threat. Carol Clover has written: "There is something awesome about the way pornography can move our bodies, even when we don't want it to, and even if we don't approve of the images that make it happen. If the unconscious were a politically correct place, it wouldn't need to be unconscious."
(Dirty Looks)

This surplus effect is what I'm calling the pornographic sublime. I'm not limiting the sublime only to pornography, just remarking on the pleasure it gives me to excavate a concept that provides a way of understanding something for which I previously had only a limited vocabulary with which to speak.

I'm interested in recuperating pornography, playing with its social mark of disgrace, and moving it performatively from the private to the public realm. I'm NOT interested, however, in sensuality or the erotic, which are both easily accommodated by, and subsumed within the category of art because sexual desire can be arrested and transformed into an institutionally sanctioned form.

Sex is an activity not well integrated into every day life. So this is a philosophical inquiry into an order of experience within the sexual realm that makes evident the precarious

border that has separated art and pornography, art and non-art, the beautiful and the grotesque, intellectual contemplation and action, self and other .

Pornography is the cultural "Siren" who sings us toward the verge of psychological dissolution.

the beautiful and the sublime:

The concept of the beautiful is a highly gendered formulation which offers little of the theoretical or transcendental implications of the sublime. However, what I'd like to do is briefly consider the beautiful/sublime opposition. For Kant and Edmund Burke, Kenneth Clark and perhaps for most who have written about beauty (with the exception of Dave Hickey), the experience of beauty is predicated on the harmony, rationality and intelligibility of that which is considered beautiful. Beauty is tightly circumscribed by conventions which limit formal contours, and restrain a potential which threatens to exceed itself. If we use the female nude as the standard icon of the beautiful in the manner in which Kenneth Clark formulated it, we can see how beauty must be kept in check, and that nothing but the "harmonious simplifications of antiquity" (in Clark's words) can be satisfactory to eyes grown accustomed to those standards. In fact, even photography falls short for Clark who is immediately disturbed by wrinkles, pouches, and other imperfections which can only be controlled by retouching. (Sounds like someone with a complete collection of Playboy magazines.)

The beautiful then is matter/mater (m-a-t-t-e-r-slash-m-a-t-e-r) tamed by rationality. And should this ideal form somehow breach its culturally imposed limits, it can no longer be perceived simply as beautiful. This is perhaps where beauty can be its most compelling (even the plastic beauty of popular culture) and where beauty plunges into the limitless, becoming sublime. Demi Moore's pregnant publicly naked body on the cover of Vanity Fair, the hair that undoubtedly sprouts from the mole on Cindy Crawford's upper lip, Monica Lewinsky's fingers still chubby with baby fat.

The sublime and the abject reflect a disavowal of physical and psychological elements which disrupt identity and the illusion of order, each presenting the subject with the possibility (temporarily experienced as real) of disintegration and dissolution. Here I'm intending "real" to refer to all "reals" including "the real" of Lacan.

The sublime, the abject, the uncanny, the death drive, jouissance, the real: all are concepts formulated by the modern subject to indicate the unrepresentable, the "that" which is beyond the ability of language or the rational mind to express, but well within the capacity of the body and the imagination to experience. Kant's discourse on the sublime was formulated and has been used to neutralize the excess that produces and sustains the sublime effect.

The experience of the sublime is located in an 'apprehension' of excess (and by this I refer to the simultaneous definitions of apprehension as 'trepidation' and 'awareness'). However, the rational mind can take one of two routes to so-called enlightenment: it can "rationalize" the experience, that is draw back from it, enlist rationality to control the imagination and distance itself through a protective mechanism as western minds are wont to do in dangerous circumstances, OR it can go with it, leap into the void, sink into the id, ride the pony, surrender, submit, and at least temporarily relinquish any semblance as to who or what one thinks one is. This later route, as you might expect, is my preferred mode of transport.

Why should the privilege of 'moving the body', of stimulating the observer's sensory zones (eyes, ears, genitals, gut, mind), be confined to pornography alone? Any strong reaction including euphoria, seduction, embarrassment, and anger would qualify here under 'moving the body,' or perhaps, leading the viewer astray.

About two years ago, a friend sent me a copy of Dave Hickey's essay entitled, "Why Art Should Be Bad." It was later published in [Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy](#) as "Frivolity and Uction." In it he talked about the art world and the seriousness with which it takes its business, that of professing art's essential goodness. Now, he admits that art education and all the cultural benefits we gain from the arts are indispensable. "No society with half a heart would even think to ignore them." But the presumption of an essential goodness is a political fiction. The art world is no more about art than the sports world is about sports. Let me a few more of his thoughts from the essay which summarize his crucial main point:

"The art world conducts an ongoing referendum on how things should look and the way we should look at them." So he asks the reader to "consider for a moment the enormous benefits that would accrue to all of us if art were considered bad, silly, and frivolous. Imagine the lightness we would feel if this burden of hypocrisy were lifted from our shoulders - the sheer joy of it." ... "We could just say: Okay! You're right! Art is bad, silly and frivolous. So what? Rock-and-roll is bad, silly and frivolous. Movies are bad, silly and frivolous. Basketball is bad, silly and frivolous. Next question. Wouldn't that open up the options a little more for something really super? And what if art were considered bad for us? - more like cocaine that gives us pleasure while intensifying our desires, and less like penicillin that promises to cure us all, if we maintain proper dosage, give it time and don't expect miracles. Might not this empower artists to be more sensitive to the power and promise of what they do, to be more concerned with good effects than with good intentions?"