

# relocating Pornography Post-9/11

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What would be the value in knowing if one only acquired a certain degree of knowledgeableness rather than the knower's straying afield of oneself...?

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*

however varied the composition, location and intent of photographs, viewers experience similar stimuli of interest and arousal—a claim based upon physiological rather than psychological processes: the act of seeing requires specific optical and nervous activities; contextualization of the seen/viewed as a framed image; identification, based in the mysterious retrieval of memory. To this definition of seeing I add the perhaps contentious claim that art, pastoral and documentary photography alike generate the type of responses common to the viewing of pornography; in fact, as the documentary *British Sex* comments, “Art is often the word used to cover up that something is pornographic”.<sup>1</sup> What this means in the context of post-9/11 viewing is only slightly moderated, or modulated, from its pre-9/11 context: prior to 9/11 documentary photography could also be said to be pornographic. But the attitude towards this viewing, the proliferation of images, their frequent reproduction and swift dissemination, have changed the reach and therefore the power of the image. Issuing from the United States and iconographic of the “new (post-9/11) America,” these images have swept what is felt as an American force. Thus some images have assumed a centrality in the global imagination not possible before.

<sup>1</sup> *British Sex*, in an episode broadcast in New Zealand on 7 October 1999.

The visual field yields a plenitude of material not packaged, purveyed or self-identified as pornographic. Historically, pornography exists as a preoccupation of active spectatorship: without viewers' complicit and sexualized viewing pornography ceases to exist. Traditional pornography has backed its way into intellectual discourse, a result of boundary shifts between low and high culture, a rejection of feminist claims to superior morality, and the embrace of sexuality as an academic study. This movement engendered a relocation of pornography from imperialist to literary discourses and a demand for the reassessment of what constitutes “pornography” in a postmodern arena. I suggest the removal of pornography altogether from moral discourse, and its radical re-evaluation outside sexuality. Further opening the arguments of Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup> and Christian Metz<sup>2</sup> on still photography and pornography, I propose that pornography is as positional and elastic as gender, as subject to taste as any other culture, and as contextually determined and defined as acceptable forms of consumption. The fundamental difference between delivery and reception creates this aporia: photographs not intentionally pornographic—photographs taken for non-pornographic purposes—succeed in operating pornographically due to their context, conception and consumption.

Accustomed to a coupling of the exotic and the erotic, the critical reader is a symbiotic viewer: the Other is desired with an eye that then closes to preserve the image. The defining subject chooses, casts and conscripts an Other as a viewable object. Looking at pictures elicits a pleasure only partly spectral: the photo is that text which always exists as simulacra. To be the exotic, erotic Other is to be adored and rejected with the same critical apparatus. Yet partly because of the guilt of the not Other, the self (faced with the burden of always being), the post-modern author writes about a fallacy. The desiring Gaze is not always erotic; eroticism is not the object's true frame. Rather, “eroticism” is a euphemism designed to circumnavigate an un-illuminated world, to escape the political ramifications and perturbations of the term “pornography.” The well-placed tear in the arena's curtain > window > os > entrance > mouth > pupil > hole) is a pornographic aperture for looking at and for a human subject and object, not instead of but as if touching. The hole reflects the eye as hand-opening and closing, the eye as skin—veiling and uncovering. In the kingdom of vision, Oedipus is the original voyeur. To make oneself Oedipal, the simultaneously desiring and desired object, is the pornographic contract, the moment or act of Other and not-Other becoming Self. Oedipus, modernity's first psychoanalytic subject, touched what he observed and killed what he encountered. Oedipus knew what it was to become obscene. The curtain with its provocative eye-slit permits a glimpse of the fleshy actor's body beyond the separation. The curtain frames the hidden as pleasure, pleasurable. The eye at the slit belongs to the pornographic viewer: that “I” gazing upon something no longer (or never) “erotic” (literally, loving). It is not the slit itself but the eye at the slit that proves the pornographic orifice; for what is inherently pornographic about bodies themselves? Absolutely nothing—they lack the pornographic

<sup>1</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard. London: Vintage, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Metz, Christian. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

-hic frame—in their humanness they are too ordinary to be pornographic. Even in the case of Oedipus, the obscene observer and his Gaze are not enough to render the body pornographic; it is rather that his looking overpowered him; he became the object of his own desire, and blind to anything else. In post-9/11 scopophilia—the repetitive, over-determined viewing of images of terror in the post-9/11 landscape—the image of people in pain and humiliation become porno-graphic, or awfully delightful: visual schadenfreude.

## the sex and pornography debate

Pornography is a much and long debated concept in feminist discourse. Whereas the entry does not even appear as such in Mary Daly's intergalactic dictionary *Wickedary*, the word does surface in another context—under “Biggest Lies”—used as:

Fundamental strategy of the Cockocratic State for breaking minds/spirits/ senses...dismemberment of consciousness through enormous and often flagrant deception [...] Examples b: the pornographic lie that all women secretly desire to be humiliated, possessed, abused, raped, mutilated, and even murdered... (Caputi, Daly)

Pornography figuratively and materially functions as a pleasure apparatus created and controlled by patriarchal structures. In the early 1980s, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon championed a United States amendment to grant women the authority to bring pornographers to prosecution, defining pornography as an act rather than a cause of violence against the represented (those viewed). Dworkin's 1981 book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* argued that pornography is not metaphorical, theorizing representation of women and children, but embodied, violently portraying and consuming people placed in positions of inferiority. She argued, moreover, that pornography led to more embodied violence, particularly battering, rape, prostitution, and incest. In “Advertising Femicide,” Jane Caputi writes:

...[M]any feminists have demonstrated the intimate relationship of pornography and sexual violence, manifested in a multiplicity of ways, including:

1. In many cases, pornography actually is sexual violence, a document of actual degradation, rape, torture, and even murder (as in the snuff film).
2. Pornography is used manipulatively to undermine women and children's capacity to avoid or resist abuse.
3. Pornography causes sexual violence through its capacities to normalize that violence, give ideas to receptive male viewers, and break down some men's personal and social inhibitions against behaving in a violent manner.

Caputi makes a strong point for the power of pornography to suggest violent viewer behavior, based on the power of advertising imagery to rapidly convert viewers to purchase, consume and support marketed brands. Susan Griffin rejects the suggestion that pornography is an erotic form of viewing. In *Pornography and Silence* she states:

(P)ornography is an expression not of human erotic feeling and desire, and not of a love of the life of the body, but of a fear of bodily knowledge, and a desire to silence eros... the bodies of women in pornography, mastered, bound, silenced, beaten, and even murdered, are symbols for natural feeling and the power of nature, which the pornographic mind hates and fears.

Pornography is a kind of power, specifically male power over women. In Griffin's formulation, pornography does not exist alongside the erotic, but instead destroys it. In accordance with a 1970s American feminist politics that located itself foremost as pro-choice, pro-voice and anti-pornography, Griffin despises pornography for annihilating its object through the act of viewing.

But Caputi discriminates, “like many other feminists” (as she says), between pornography and erotica, commenting that “all sexual representation is not, as the right-wing would have it, by definition pornographic”;<sup>1</sup> she refers, of course, to the Dworkin/ MacKinnon camp. Caputi offers her own ringing phrase: “Pornography is sexually explicit propaganda.”<sup>2</sup> Definitions of pornography, especially regarding its intentions and results, have long divided feminists. Pat Califia, Gayle Rubin, Susie Bright and others have defended their right to take pleasure in pornographic imagery; in 1983 the Samois collective's volume *Coming to Power*<sup>3</sup> presented myriad sexual reflections from the perspective of bondage and sado-masochistic role-play, arguing a libertine response to sexuality and sex, and reclaiming the eroticism inherent in power differentials. The sex debate became so heated that many radical lesbian feminists withdrew altogether from the US Women's Movement (notably, Joan Nestle), refusing to align themselves with pejorative and parochial sexual codes that denied a lesbian herstory. Although the struggle over pornography has quieted since the 1980s, partly due to the rise of women in production and dissemination of their own pornographic imagery, it remains a divisive issue for women. My desire is not to promote or condemn pornography per se, but rather to explicate its incursion into popular culture and usage within that realm; to show how, devoid of its accustomed contexts or loci of sexual transactions, pornography flourishes as art, document and culture; and to demonstrate how images devoid of explicit sexuality become pornographic through their contextualization in the power matrix.

I am not equating the erotic with the pornographic. Also I am not concerned with recuperating the argument against pornography as an iconographic silencing of women—or with refuting this “moral” position. Yet I cannot entirely avoid the social ramifications of pornographic viewing. In theorizing a form of spectation and scopophilia that works covertly or even unconsciously to establish a pornographic relationship of subject/object-viewer/viewed, I consider pornographic viewing a mundane and perhaps inevitable way of experiencing an image in a Western post-modern context. The awakening of sexual desire is dependent upon the signals of sensual response, and in contemporary parlance the desire to see is nearly inseparable from the desire to have, however temporally. Plainly, sex and consum-

1 Caputi, 206.

2 Caputi, 206.

3 Samois, ed. *Coming to Power*. Boston: Alyson Press 1983.

-ption govern capitalist economy. As Griffin admitted in 1982, "The pornographic mind is a mind in which we all participate. It is the mind which dominates our culture."<sup>1</sup>

By means of external bodies, live or in representation, pornography permits "objective" viewers to become subjective voyeurs, to physically entertain fantasies and even sensations of self through the medium of another repositioned as an Other. The object remains paramount, spectrally central to the viewer's experience. The pornographer does not merely represent bodies but presents them, ensures their presence in the act of looking, an act that promises to make those bodies even more present than they already are. That is the paradox of their provision, and their production. Yet there is another paradox in their reception. For these bodies, generally contextualized by ill-defined locations or situations, are provided for phantasmagoric effacement, the insertion of the self into the frame, and the subsequent (or consequent) erosion of the Other. In looking, the subject places its object under erasure. It is the viewer's bliss to exercise subject-hood in the presence of these human objects, receiving sensory if not actually sexual pleasure.

In examination of pornographic work as literature, text, or culture, especially visual culture—watching the watcher's scopic experience—the researcher repositions herself as a reader rather than more simply a viewer; thus, the subject is able to distance herself from her object (as in conventional empirical research). The mediation of objects that enhance voyeurism provides for secure reception of pornography, and this is crucial to its popularity. Pornography also affords the luxury of self-reflexivity, a site for self-examination, scopic violence and the effacement of an Other who remains (at least relatively) nameless. The ordinary sites for viewing pornography, however marginalized (i.e., "French" photographs, adult bookstores, sex shops, skin flicks, peep shows, and "exotic" dancehalls) clearly and legally contract to offer pornography to their viewers. Popular pornography created for private as well as public viewing requires individuals to enter into sensual contract with performers, to forge a consensual pretence that the performance is directed towards a single individual who is watching (and paying). That is, a pornographic performance is structured as a private contract between each audience member and each performer. This runs counter to the consensual contract found, for instance, in theatre or dance, where the performance contract exists between a cast and audience as mutually collective entities. Audiences of pornographic performances, filmed and live, therefore become pornographic audiences as well as pornographic actors, imaginatively entering a space to pay for and play with sexualized bodies in an environment of illicit and complicit fun. Despite this contractual design, the most effective pornography is displayed not privately but publicly, in institutional sites and under mundane conditions where it is habitually regulated by powerful yet generally invisible forces. Pornographic performers or sex workers are required to verifiably contact, lubricate, fondle, rub, penetrate, and perhaps violate other bodies or objects. This kind of performance at times emulates but does not fundamentally correspond with performance in its simple sense of "acting," by which I mean behaving as if one were someone else, assuming a "character" with a different identity as opposed to merely another name.

In such viewing and performance sites, the presence and constitution of pornogra-

1 Griffin, 110.

-phy is not at issue; its absence would be regarded as undesirable or even ruinous to business health. To define and critique pornographic representation in the realm of expected locations would also limit recognition of the power of pornography. Thus I have resisted the conventional notion of pornography as an intrinsically sexual, oppressive, and ontologically abusive representation of passive, sexualized bodies (whether the actors' or the viewers'), deliberately working against accepted portrayals and loci of pornography. Elsewhere I analyze diverse forms of photography mounted in the cultural domains of theatre and cinema. In examining these models, I argue that pornography is common to places of high culture, but the pornographic content generally remains unacknowledged. As Susanne Kappeler writes in *The Pornography of Representation*:

What women find objectionable in pornography, they have learnt to accept in products of "high" art and literature. What feminist analysis identifies as the pornographic structure of representation—not the presence of a variable quality of "sex", but the systematic objectification of women in the interest of the exclusive subjectification of men—is a common place of art and literature as well as of conventional pornography. It is in the expert domains of cultural representation and the critical discourses which support them that the attitudes to representation, the "acceptable structures of representation, are developed and institutionalized.

Because images are, in part, constructed from the contexts of their viewing, the bodies photographically "captured" in the "war on terror" have transformed into pornographic objects, illicit and voyeuristic. Photography's historical reputation for f/actuality ironically lends credence to the document's pornographic usage: viewers are pre-conditioned to accept photographs as historical and social "proof", to view photographs as simultaneously artefacts and art. This duality inspires the kind of deep, active reflection true to voyeurism. As Oedipus confirmed, the tyranny of the gaze controls what is to be, what is to be seen, or what it is to be seen; knowing this, Oedipus continues to look, never seeing himself.

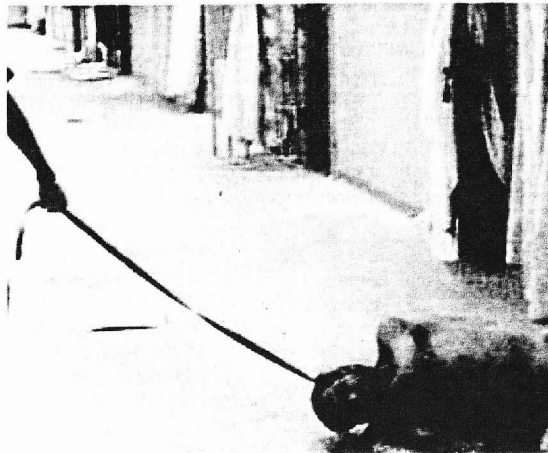


*The Falling Man* is only one example, though now a quite famous one, of the weight of narrative and mystery that can attach to a single image—in this case, of a man falling, head down, from one of the Twin Towers, in the long moment of their collapse. From the original horror at the idea, protracted through the camera's eye, of a man falling to his death, the image was transformed into a question of identity (in the documentary film of the same name), and thence into a notion of the Unnamed Soldier in a 9/11 context. Watching the documentary the viewer can experience, re-experience, in fact repeatedly experience the falling, so often that it becomes grotesquely ordinary: a conversation about the color of the man's shirt, speculation about the gentle movement of his legs in free-fall. The man falling to his death becomes "American" by

default, by context, a body lost from its natural location. The Falling Man ceases to be a man with subject-hood, becomes a cipher for the loss of national identity experienced by the people of the US from 9/11.

One of the more replicated of images in the post 9/11 reactive war is also, curiously, one that is "cropped" as well as "spliced"—that is, the still image is connected or shown with one or two other images from the same time (spliced) and shown in part (cropped). This image from Guantanamo Bay, taken in the Abu Ghraib prisoners' holding block, destroyed several individuals' military careers. More significantly, it severely—immediately and globally—damaged the reputation of the most powerful military in the world. In all versions of the photograph, Private Lynndie England, of the 372nd MP Company stands holding a lead attached to a collar round the neck of an exposed and blindfolded man, lying on his side on a concrete floor. The photographs are viewed as obscenities: images of an American soldier, but moreover a female soldier, torturing a bound and vulnerable man. The disparity between power and vulnerability, prosperity and poverty, military and civilian, West and East, is luridly displayed. (That she now claims her own loss of power in relation to her boyfriend Specialist Charles Graner does not mitigate the actions.) In the reiteration of black leather boots and the dark lead, the image cites sado-masochistic play-without, however, the consent involved in S/M. While the customary balance of gender, in which male overpowers female, appears rescinded, the photo-

graph's citation of S/M effectively re-reverses this power differential. The truncated version of the photograph appears pornographic, a female soldier's participation in torture. In the proto-object or photo, however, it is obvious that the leash is slack—Lindsay is neither tugging at nor dragging the prisoner—and she is not even looking at the man but is gazing instead off-camera (at the man who has commanded these actions and the photographs). At first viewing, we can expect to feel some horror at the evidence of corruption (if not actually at its existence). But after such frequent and repeated viewing, the photographs no longer shock the viewer; they pass into the realm of titillation or simple obscenity, in which the viewer can remark on the slow dip in the leash (is it about to slip from her hand?), contemplate the look on Lindsay's face (dull? bored?), wonder at the passivity of the man on the floor (was he moving? is he acquiescing in the photo shoot?). The self-refle-



-ctive fervor of post-9/11, along with its patriotic waving of flags and invocations of Homeland, has dwindled to reproducible and infinitely dispersible images of US pollution, a bully gloating over its naked and defenceless enemy.

In its offering of a fantasy, all pornography exists as or in this kind of space. The pornographic viewer participates in the conventions of the photograph as a framing element for this kind of desire, co-creating a sexualizing image. The horror does not lie in the images themselves but rather in the realization that these images, once and repeated viewing, the photographs no longer shock the viewer; they pass into the realm of titillation or simple obscenity, in which the viewer can remark on the slow dip in the leash (is it about to slip from her hand?), contemplate the look on Lindsay's face (dull? bored?), wonder at the passivity of the man on the floor (was he moving? is he acquiescing in the photo shoot?). The self-reflective fervor of post-9/11, along with its patriotic waving of flags and invocations of Homeland, has dwindled to reproducible and infinitely dispersible images of US pollution, a bully gloating over its naked and defenceless enemy.

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