

## The Ontology of the Pornographic Image: Some Speculations

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The remarkable foliation of porn studies in has led to a far more nuanced understanding of pornography. But what is largely missing from these discussions is any extended inquiry into what might be called the essence – the *quidditas* – of porn, the thing that constitutes it as porn in the first place, of what Andre Bazin, speaking about cinema in general, calls its ontology.

Common-sense might lead us to assume that porn is constituted by its subject matter, by what it is a representation of. But a little reflection calls this argument into question, for different pornophiles are notoriously various in what they crave, and the same material that seems so arousing under one set of circumstances can seem trivial or tawdry on another. If, then, we, at least provisionally, eliminate subject matter – *that which is represented* in porn – as its defining characteristic, as what is both necessary and sufficient adequately to define it, we're left with looking at the transaction that takes place in the process of accessing porn, that is, the process of representation.

Andre Bazin has noted that the process of photographic representation provides, with minimal mediation, access to the real, to some otherwise unrepresentable part of human experience. The ubiquity of the come shot, could then be read as the guarantor of that authenticity. Yet animated porn, to say nothing of strictly verbal porn that dominated the first great efflorescence of porn in Victorian England, provides no access to that authenticity; unlike Bazin's photographic image, it gives us no degree at all of unmediated access to "the real thing." Thus, if we take verbal, animated, and photographic porn as sharing the same "quidditas," the question becomes what *does* it give us access to. This has to be the great challenge for porn studies, partly because it itself is so crucial for our understanding of the relationship of sexuality to representation, but even more so because it is a laboratory for understanding the nature of representation – especially pictorial representation – in toto. In fact porn is the ideal laboratory in which to explore the relationship between cinema as an access to the real and cinema as a conventional code, a language.

And they were both *naked*, the man  
and his wife, and were not ashamed.  
Genesis 2.25

## Part 1: Thinking Bazin – Porn and the Real

This essay – in the literal sense of an attempt or exploration – began as an inquiry into what I'll call the documentary quality of much contemporary pornography, that is its – more or less convincing – promise to show us real people really engaged in real sex acts, without faking, and, as it were, without acting. The inquiry was to be framed by three characteristics of porn and three critical perspectives that, while not specifically about porn are readily applicable to it. In the first group, porn's characteristics, I include the come shot, the direct address of the performers to the camera, and the rhetorical emphasis on either the youth and freshness of the woman performer or on her "nastiness" and "sluttishness," or, more interestingly, on both of those contradictory qualities simultaneously. The three critical views were Andre Bazin's idea of the im-mediacy of the photographic image; Frederic Jameson's notion that "the visual is essentially pornographic," and C.S. Pierce's trichotomy of signs according to which there are three kinds of signs which he calls icon, index, and symbol. My purpose was just to begin to sort out the ways that some combination of these critical views could throw a useful light on the place of the documentary quality in any larger conception of porn.

That, as I say, was my starting point. Along the way I encountered some major obstacles, two very germane to the inquiry. First, I came to discover that Bazin's view of the ontology of the photographic image, when viewed through the lens of Pierce categories, reveals a crucial ambiguity – more about this later. Second, I chanced to come upon a remarkable and challenging essay on porn that Magnus Ullén recently published in *Jump Cut*, an essay that calls into question a lot of the conventional contemporary wisdom about porn and that, in the process, introduced some unexpected complications into my argument.

I started with a specifically formalist agenda, hoping to analyze the rhetoric and semiotics of porn while paying little attention to its sexual content. It was not, I need to emphasize, that I meant to downplay the role of sex – quite the contrary: porn is about sex, and while we may interrogate the nature of that "about" its importance should be indisputable. But I assumed that the sex, however powerful, was not changed through the process of representation but remained a more or less stable element in an otherwise complicated process. My premise was that different people have different sexual predilections and fantasies, and that the rhetoric of porn mediated and thus served these fantasies without itself being formally inflected by the specific character of the sexuality being depicted – that the specific act being represented mattered merely as content, more or less active depending on the viewer's taste but neutral insofar as an analysis of the medium was concerned. In short, I thus thought that you could talk about the images without talking about the fucking. I was wrong. It now seems to me that the "pornographicity" of porn – to use the splendid term coined by Ullén – engages in radical ways with the sexual activity being depicted.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me say something of the original plan for this essay. In his seminal essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin famously argues that [one of] the most significant achievement[s] of photography was that it "freed western painting . . . from its obsession with realism and allowed it to recover its aesthetic autonomy." The heart of his argument is, of course, that the camera, in capturing something like an unmediated – i.e., immediate – reality for the first time in human history, created a radical realignment of the various meanings involved in the concept of representation because the photography counts as reliable indication that something happened, even if mediation is always required in determining what that something is and what it means. In short, the photograph – and more especially the moving photograph – is evidence of reality.

This seemingly common sensical claim turns out to be far from simple, at least in retrospect. For one thing, Bazin's formulation implies that the "aesthetic" – whatever that might be – is properly something other than or distanced from the function of the image as evidence. It also raises the vexed question, of the relationship between evidence and representation. To illustrate, consider the difference between a security camera's recording of an event, say a crime, and a well made film dramatizing that event; the former is the better evidence of what happened, the latter a better illustration of what happened. We might also formulate this somewhat differently: the one is a record *that* something happened, the other an illustration of *how* it happened. The difference between these two kinds of visualizing, between asserting *that* and showing *how*, is a question that I believe Bazin never confronts. He does, however, acknowledge it – however briefly – in the provocative final sentence of his essay: "On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language."

No doubt in most cinematic cases Bazin's "also" – "cinema is *also* a language" – is not inherently problematic. A film can simultaneously record/reveal the "actual" and submit that "actuality" to some degree of aesthetic shaping through cinematic language. In porn, on the other hand, this "also" may sit on a critical fault line, for the difference between an image of something and evidence of something may be essential to conceptualizing how porn works. Here we need to cite the truism that in watching porn, a soon as the fucking starts we are no longer watching the characters fuck, we're inescapably watching the actors fuck. To see the rhetorical significance of this distinction we might, for a moment, consider fictional representations of violence. To take one example: when watching staged violence, we really want to know, need to know, that after the curtain falls King Lear – that is, the actor playing Lear, will get up. The crucial difference is that in tragic drama the idea that the person we saw on stage actually died would ruin the experience for us while in porn – at least hard core porn – it's an essential part of the experience. The porn experience thus may be seen as the search for visual visible evidence, as little mediated as possible, that certain actors – *not* characters – did certain transgressive things, and that a critical part of the transgression was that they did these things publicly. If this were not the case then there would no point whatsoever to the efforts of the porn industry to assure us that we're seeing real people, typically real women. The evidence of this is everywhere: in the insistence that we're seeing "amateurs"; in the ubiquity of badly produced videos, serving as markers of the "real" status of the performers; in the inclusion in the videos of introductory sequences showing the performers preparing, talking about what they do, talking about who they don't want to know of their performing, even taking money and/or expressing some, but not too much, reluctance to engage in some of the more *recherché* maneuvers that the producers ask for.<sup>1</sup>

Bazin's emphasis on the ability of cinema to document the actual – rather than its aesthetic potential – is clear enough. But even within the area of cinematic documentation – cinema as evidence of the real – there is an ambiguity. Here C.S. Peirce's classification of three types of signs can be helpful. Pierce argues that a sign – any representation of anything – may be an *icon*, an *index*, or a *symbol*, according to its relation with that which it represents. An icon – of which a picture is the best example – evokes the thing it represents through what Pierce calls a demonstration of the characteristics of that thing. More simply, it evokes through

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1 In her contribution to *Porn Studies* (pp. 50-76) Minette Hillyer, using the famous Pam Anderson sex tapes as her case in point, labours mightily to think through the categorical differences between home movies and porn. Home movies are almost by definition movies that work as indices of "real" experience, not as replicas of what the experience looked or felt like. If we recognize that the impulse to provide evidence is central to porn, at least video porn, then the overlap of the two genres is not circumstantial but ontological. Not only is Hillyer's problem solved, the two categories turn out to be perfectly in synch and porn is (or aspires to be or pretends to be) simply one especially privileged instance of home movies. Or, following Jameson, we might be inclined to see home movies as themselves categorically pornographic.

resemblance; in the case of pictures, that would be through visual resemblance. An index – a medical symptom, for example, or the wake of a boat – is causally connected to its object; it points to something as having been its cause. A “symbol” – of which the best example is a word – is a purely conventional sign, which evokes its referent purely by agreement. It also, alone among Pierce’s signs, needs to be “interpreted.”

No doubt films do mobilize a distinctly symbolic dimension; editing codes are one good example of cinematic narration based neither on resemblance nor on causality but anchored firmly in a set of conventions. It’s this aspect of cinematic ontology that Bazin, in his closing sentence, has to admit to. But the more important kind of cinematic signs, both for Bazin and for our inquiry, are those that bear a more “natural” connection to actuality, the icon and the index. We note immediately that film is both iconic and – at least in the days before CGI – indexical. The development of digital cinema and computer generated images has added a new urgency to the question of the ontology of film – perhaps the central issue in the history of film theory – with D.N. Rodowick’s work in particular asking that this development be theorized in new ways. That problematic, however, relates to the relationship between the documentary and the aesthetic dimensions of movies, the gap between recording and creating.

For our discussion I think what’s more important is the relationship of icon to index in Bazin’s thinking, and its implications for porn. Bazin argues that the ontology of film gives it special value as a “record” – that is, a recording – of visual reality. As he puts it, “the essential factor . . . is not to be found in the result achieved but in the way of achieving it.” And while he admits that there are “aesthetic qualities” in film, he uses the term very loosely – in a way quite different from that of the cine-formalist tradition, since for him these qualities “are to be sought in its ability to lay bare the realities.” What Bazin doesn’t do in any systematic way is distinguish between the visual record and the visual representation, between the index and the icon. To put the implied question baldly: if film can “lay bare the realities” what realities exactly does it lay bare? For Bazin – and for us – is the way something looks, the way it *really* looks, the truth about that thing that only film can show us? To what extent is the purely visual, however accurately recreated, what we really want and need to know about a thing? What exactly about some particular thing does its appearance testify to? As it happens a vivid example of this problem is already widely recognized in porn studies. What is ostensibly the prime – and perhaps biologically determined – sexual pleasure for the heterosexual male, ejaculating inside a woman’s vagina, is never shown. In the “Pornotopia” chapter of his *The Other Victorians*, Steven Marcus finds it useful to characterize the inside of the vagina in these terms: “The whole place is dark yet visible. This is the center of the earth and the home of man.” (pp. 274-75) Instead we are given the notorious come shot. But if the come shot is, by definition, not visual evidence of successful fucking, what then does it signify? How are we to understand the process by which physical desire and sensation gets transubstantiated into what Gertrude Koch calls “psychic codification of sexuality”? This is a question I will return to.

The distinction between the index – the compelling evidence *that* something happened – and the icon – a visual representation of what it looked like or, for convenience, *how* it happened – may matter less in conventional fiction films where we willingly submit ourselves to the fiction and the documentary quality is typically but a somewhat engaging subtext. In watching a contemporary action film we want to see the explosion, see the car flying apart and pieces of it landing yards away, see the blood and gore. But even as we eagerly feast on the visual details we know that it is faked, that our favorite action actor is not really bleeding. In porn, on the other hand, this overlap between the indexical “that” and the iconic “how” is absolutely crucial. To the extent that “pornographicity” depends on the recognition that those actors – not characters – actually did those things, and did them publicly, *wanted* to do them,

the documentary dimension of the visual record is what matters most. In short, porn is – at least in some dimensions – categorically different from other forms of representation.

This is, let me admit up front, not the whole story, and I'll return to some of the other issues. But it is so essential a part of the story that to ignore it leads to a profoundly distorted view of porn, even when that view is proffered by friends of porn who write in its defense. Defenders of porn – and of porn studies – frequently try to distance it “from the sensation and shame that have long surrounded and obscured it,” to quote the back cover of Peter Lehman's 2006 anthology, *Pornography: Film and Culture*, and they do this by finding common ground between porn and more “legitimate” or “aesthetic” representational texts. One such is the, frankly, very silly essay that Lehman chose to conclude his book, “What Men See When They Watch,” by Marty Klein. In it Klein defends porn against critics who attack it because, in his view, they deeply misunderstand it, and “take pornography literally instead of decoding it” (247), their error being that they fail to recognize what Klein calls porn's subtext. When he gets to explain what he means by the subtext it turns out to be not much different from the old and familiar suspension of disbelief. “Viewers of other movie forms use [a] decoding process when watching unrealistic scenes” (248), and just as viewers of action films recognize the conventionality of the representations of violence, so, in Klein's view, viewers of porn are fully aware of its conventions.

Now it might be true that when watching porn we have some awareness of its conventions – I suspect that the way the mind moves slips from disbelief, to suspension of disbelief, to something like hypothetical belief is enormously complicated and will vary with each individual and each genre. Still, I think we can agree that for the hard core fan the idea that the actors he sees on screen are actually fucking is essential – something he's most unlikely to want in an action film – and this immediately makes the viewer's relationship to the images radically different. The relationship of the viewer to the image – thus the phenomenology of the pornographic image itself – is so radically different from what we find in other genres that to defend porn by trying to assimilate it to more “respectable” kinds of film is to misconstrue the pornographic transaction entirely.

## Part 2: Thinking Mulvey & Burke – Porn's Images and Porn's Rhetoric

My argument to this point has been concerned with foregrounding the documentary force of the moving pornographic image, the way in which porn proposes convincingly to raise and to answer the question, “Oh wow, did she really do *that*?”

But there are at least three gaps in my account: first, it ignores the specific character of the “that” that she really did, and as I suggested the character of the action depicted is not as irrelevant to the porn transaction as I had thought; second, it sidesteps the question of whether certain visible acts – e.g., ejaculation – are themselves what we want to see, or are they signs of something other than themselves – and if so, of what; and finally in insisting on the documentary force of cinematic pornography it completely disregards all other kinds of porn, the only kinds of porn that were available until the advent of mechanical reproduction.

For my present purposes I want to bracket that last question almost completely. I will venture only that it is related to the larger question of who counts as the narrator in narrative film; if we can find a narrator in a porn film – and the narrator may be conceived as on screen, as an off-screen voice, or as the camera/holder – then we might find analogies in verbal or animated porn.

The other two questions are, I think, related, perhaps even reciprocal – and have to do with the way different perceptual and conceptual factors interact in the process of “reading” representations – which is to say, they have to do with what we mean by “reading.”

Let me approach these issues somewhat circuitously. Peter Lehman begins the introduction to *Pornography: Film and Culture*, by arguing for the validity of caring about both

pornography and porn studies. His apologie for pornographie – as it were; cf. Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apologie for Poetrie*, 1595 – is anchored in a strategy similar to that used by Marty Klein and discussed above, specifically that pornography is a real artistic genre and that porn studies are a legitimate intellectual pursuit (pp. 1-2).

Lehman's argument is an argument by analogy, never actually articulated but merely implied by a series of comparisons. Lehman starts by addressing the subject matter of different films. He notes that there's no need to defend "researching and defending how war has been represented in film" and that's because, "War, unlike something as apparently trivial as sex, is something we should obviously study and care about" (p. 1). Lehman goes on to compare the situation of porn/porn studies a generation ago with the situation of the study of more conventional or "respectable" genres a generation before that, when John Cawelti had to fight very hard to establish the legitimacy and value of studying those genres, when Cawelti defended, in Lehman's words, "the then preposterous idea that Westerns could be studied in the same manner as canonical literature." And today, Lehman adds, the academy is adjusting "to the equally preposterous idea that pornography should be studied in exactly the same way" (p.2). This argument is, it seems to me, so wrong headed in so many ways – including a radical misconception of the nature of contemporary critical discourse in the humanities – that it deserves its own full length critical reply. For the moment let me flag only those aspects of it that are immediately relevant.

Note first that his comparison of war films and porn takes it for granted that just as war films are defined by their subject matter – films about war – so porn films are simply films about sex. The further implication here is that the rhetorical relationship of the genre to its subject matter is the same in both instances. It takes but a moment's reflection to recognize that many non pornographic films are about sex – including many mainstream narrative films, to say nothing of sexual instruction films and films, including but not limited to explicitly anti-porn documentaries, that depict sex in a way designed to generate not desire but disgust. As Linda Williams points out about *Blue Velvet*, a film can easily show us more than we want to see, (*Screening Sex*, 223-226, passim) and porn is almost by definition designed to show us exactly that which we want to see.

More preposterous, to use Lehman's word, is the idea advanced through a series of rhetorical substitutions – porn is like musicals, musicals are like westerns, and westerns can "attain the level of artistry, sophistication, structure, and complexity of a Shakespeare play" (p. 2) – that porn can be art. Why porn is not art, why in fact it cannot be art, is obviously a complex question, but one critical dimension of a potential answer is, I think, not too hard to find: My smarmy allusion to Sidney's 1595 tract was not entirely gratuitous. Among its many pleasures – Sidney turns out to have been a pretty smart guy – is the assertion that "the poet he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth." The poet – by which Sidney means the creator of fictions – makes no claim to be telling anything like literal truth, and the particular kind of pleasure we can get from "poesie" – from the aesthetic of fictional narrative – hinges on its being fictional. But if, as seems to me the case, the difference between soft core and hard core is precisely that in the former the characters fuck and in the latter the actors themselves fuck, then the truth claims of porn are part of its ontology. It's hard to imagine Arnheim – or anyone else – writing "Porn as Art."

Peter Lehman implies that we watch war films because war is "something we should care about," and that by implication we should watch porn because sex too is something we should care about. But in fact we do not watch war films because war is important; if we did the importance of the war a film is about would determine the importance of the film and, presumably, we would have no interest in a film that dealt with a subject as "trivial" as those of almost any Ginger Rogers/Fred Astaire vehicle. Surely the reason we value some films on

any given topic and not others is largely a function of the way the topic is treated, not because of the topic itself.

Given that porn's mode of operation is not that of art, we might be tempted to see it as an instance of what Kracauer calls "phenomena overwhelming consciousness," resulting in Jameson's "rapt, mindless fascination." (This may also be connected to Ullén's argument about the way the pornographic text is consumed rather than read, but I'm less clear about this, and will return to it later.) Here obviously we need to recall Laura Mulvey's famous invocation of "visual pleasure" as something self-sufficient, existing independently of any framing narrative. Whether or not we accept her theorization of the structure of that pleasure – all the castration anxiety and disavowal stuff that has become so familiar – it's hard to deny that something like visual pleasure exists, and that one of its dominant iterations is the pleasure that men derive from sexualized images of women. Yet Mulvey's account, focused on male desire to look at fetishistic constructions, hardly explains the prominence of female genitals in so much contemporary porn. As important, but in a very different register, it doesn't explain why the female face is so central to porn.<sup>2</sup> And of course it doesn't explain the come shot. But this ubiquitous marker of contemporary porn just might provide the – or a – key to the question, for unlike the female image, whose significance may conceivably be understood as entirely free of narrative framing, the come shot is essentially and paradigmatically narrativized.

It's by now a commonplace that the use of the word "climax" to designate both a narrative event and a sexual event is hardly coincidental. It would seem to follow that, using Mulvey's binary, coming is not a visual thing but a narrative thing. Thus while it is often complained that porn films regularly interrupt the plot for the spectacle of sex, structurally the sexual representations – at least this very major part of them – have to count not as spectacle, providers of visual pleasure, but as mini plots, following all too precisely the arc of rising action, climax, and falling action. Brendan Gill's famous witticism about porn, that "Simply as theatre, cunnilingus isn't a patch on fellatio, and it is difficult to see what even the most ardent Women's Lib maker of blue movies can do about it" turns out to mean not only that the latter is more graphic than the former, but also that fellatio has a clear, almost perfectly structured plot. Theater, we need to recall is – unlike cinema – a largely symbolic and not visual medium in which the shape of the action takes precedence over the appearance of the performers.

So here is the paradox of the come shot: though it is explosively visual, it functions not as spectacle, at least in Mulvey's sense, but as part of a narrative. It is not the object of Jameson's rapt mindless fascination, of a kind of pre-hermeneutic response, but one element in a strategically shaped story. The story itself, insofar as it is anchored in a specific subject matter, and not in the formal shaping of that subject matter, it is not art, yet it depends on rhetorical strategies.

I think that leaves us with some compelling questions. First, if we can agree that porn is not art, that its representations do not undergo the kind of transubstantiations that convert subject matter into form, what kind of thing is it? And what is its source in the economy of human – or male – consciousness? And if, as argued earlier, the come shot is, by definition, not visual evidence of successful fucking, what then does it signify?

In asking these perhaps silly questions I have in mind a distinction proposed by the great American philosopher Kenneth Burke. Burke distinguished between what he called the psychology of information and the psychology of form. For him some materials were useful for the information they provided, others for the experience they provided. In this he was of

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2 One might add, parenthetically, that the chief rhetorical problem faced by pornographers is how to show both the face and the vagina in close up simultaneously and without cutting, which would call into question the illusion of immediacy and authenticity.

course on the same page as the new critics and their heirs who, in an argument called “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” – the title of a chapter in Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well Wrought Urn* – insisted that a work of literary art could not be paraphrased without losing its “literariness,” that the art in a work of literary art was a function of formal and rhetorical qualities. Burke’s argument, reduced to its core, is that we do not read – or see or hear – art for its paraphrasable content, that is, for the information it provides. The paradox of porn, seen in these terms, is precisely that it provides neither art nor information. Foucault notwithstanding porn typically tells us nothing we don’t already know. Of course a pornographic text – like anything else – might be used as a source for some interesting information; typically though the user will want to see an almost ritual variation on a well known theme.

So what does it provide? Here revisiting Brendan Gill’s observation might prove useful. Gill, a male and an avowed aficionado of porn, sees sex as theater, sees it as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Insofar as porn has historically been a male enterprise, we might want to wonder more specifically about what is at stake in the male imagination’s conflation of sex and drama. Perhaps – and here I am, admittedly, engaged in speculation – it’s the fact that narratives do end that’s the key. When plays – or books, or movies – end, the pleasure they provide, the pleasure of the text, is over. In watching a play or reading a book that is satisfying, that is pleasurable, we may well be torn between wanting it to go on, and wanting to see how it turns out, that is, in wanting it to end. The end of the book not only satisfies the various desires that are enacted in reading it, it also eliminates those desires – and indeed it’s hard to imagine how to conceive of the difference between satisfying a desire and eliminating it. When the desire itself is pleasurable we may have complicated and even contradictory responses to the ending. And when that desire is as powerful, and has hard wired, as sexual desire, those contradictions may be extraordinarily powerful. Is it reasonable to propose that the male orgasm may be seen as not, or not only, satisfying desire but as eliminating it – and if sexual desire is itself pleasurable, as the taste for porn seems to prove beyond much doubt, then orgasm is itself a paradoxical thing, and it’s not hard to imagine why men would want a mythology – for porn is a mythology after all – that symbolically represents both the satisfaction of desire and its eternal renewal.

I take it that for both men and women sexual pleasure is not merely a physiological or anatomical thing, but is always already symbolized. If sexual pleasure were itself anatomical and not inherently symbolic the question of the come shot, and of porn more generally, would be more difficult. As it is the male imagination wants to hold on to that pleasure, make it a function of mind as well as body, find a way – irrespective of cinema – of symbolizing it. Here Pierce’s discriminations are particularly helpful. The icon of that desire is the phallus, the index the come shot. If we see these two as working in a dialectical relationship to each other – orgasm is the deflation of the phallus and the termination of textual/sexual pleasure – we might be closer to the ontology of porn.

### Part 3: Thinking Ullén – Porn and Prohibition

At the heart of Ullén’s argument, as I understand it, is the idea that certain texts lend themselves to so direct a transaction with their audience that they are more consumed than read, that this consumption is so immediate that it precludes interpretation, and that pornography is exemplary of this kind of text. I’m not sure whether the totally unmediated text, the text that in Barthes’ terms is perfectly “readerly,” exists at all; but I am sure that even if such texts exist, pornographic texts are not at all like that. If sexual activity, and sexual satisfaction, were mainly a matter of physical sensation, and if porn allowed for an unmediated replication of that sensation, then perhaps such a case might be made. In fact,



though, the sex act is itself always already interpreted, always already a marker for something else, something that itself cannot be represented at all.<sup>3</sup> It's only the interpretation that can be represented – and the come shot is then the trope, that itself marks the impossibility of representing sexual satisfaction, at least that “normative” kind of specifically male sexual satisfaction that porn takes as its territory.

But for the moment I want to flag just one most curious aspect of Ullén's essay: it may be the only recent essay on porn in which the word “fuck” doesn't appear at all. This is not merely a linguistic quirk or, so far as I can tell, a function of authorial delicacy. For the essay, despite being explicitly a theory of masturbation has almost nothing to do with sex. The challenge of the essay – to see porn as one iteration of a kind of textuality which is self-consuming or self-realizing – is one that has to be taken very seriously, and I'm inclined to say that Ullén reconceptualizes and problematizes the idea of the simulacrum very usefully. Still, however much porn may be seen as one example of a kind of textuality that Ullén wants to call masturbatory, even when it has nothing to do specifically with sex, sex itself can hardly be epiphenomenal to a discussion of porn. Indeed, though I share many premises with Ullén – most particularly that what he calls the “pornographicity” of porn must be understood in formalist or neo-formalist terms rather than as simply a matter of content – my own starting point was almost diametrically opposite his in that I wanted to place the specific sexuality of porn at center stage.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the reasons for insisting that sexuality has to be central to any analysis of porn will seem self-evident. Yet one aspect of this centrality will, I think, repay careful attention, both because it identifies one of the pivotal characteristics of porn, and because it clearly distinguishes porn from the other sorts of cultural processes that Ullén talks about. This is specifically the quality of transgression. In “On Pornographic Cinema,” Gertrud Koch reminds us that “. . . pornographic subculture still maintains an aura of the secret and forbidden, the sensational and the never-before-seen . . . the shocking, the frightful . . .” (27). This will seem self-evident to most of us, hardly worth noting. But it is very much worth noting that this quality is taken as a given even in the earliest texts of our shared cultural history. My epigraph from Genesis, perhaps the earliest source of that shared history, tells us that Adam and Eve, though naked, felt no shame. Although not explicitly about sex – Adam and Eve don't get to “know” each other until the next chapter – in pointing out their lack of shame the text clearly presupposes that, at least outside of Eden, shame is the “natural”

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3 I suspect that this is especially true for men, which would account for the fact that porn has traditionally been a largely male preserve. But this is an issue for another day.

4 It's worth noting, and perhaps not incidental, that the impulse to move sexuality out of the center of “pornographicity” is hardly peculiar to Ullén's work. In one of the essays he most admires in the *Porn Studies* collection, Franklin Melendez discusses a sequence in a porn film in which a man watches a porn video on TV, and the image we see alternates between shots of the man watching with the screen in the distance, close up shots of the TV, with the frame included, and unmediated images from the video being watched. Melendez argues that “these shifting textures reveal . . . the eroticization of mediation, a process that is part and parcel of the act of making visible the sexual spectacle . . .” In making this argument – one that focuses on what might be called the hardware of the process, the video tape playing on the TV screen, and on what might be called the software of the process, the sequence's self-referentiality about watching porn – Melendez ignores the significance of the human agents involved in this transaction. It's seems safe to say that in presenting the sequence in this way the video maker allows us to participate simultaneously in the sexuality of two different agents, the character on the TV screen, and the one who's watching; and further, that the multiplication of agents is a thoroughly conventional trope in porn, witness the popularity of orgy and party scenes of various kinds. One final word in this context: I choose the word “agents” as a way of referring to the human figures represented in porn video. Since a critical question is whether we are watching actors or characters, or some unstable amalgam of the two, the word “agent” allows this question to be deferred, at least temporarily.

condition of the naked human. Interestingly Ullén recognizes this function, citing the use of porn as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century for purposes of outrage, with porn mobilized as an instrument of sedition. But the outrage has to depend on some quality in the textual body that is already so offensive that it can be used in that way, and this is the quality that Ullén's analysis overlooks.

Still, I believe that I share with Ullén the idea that an inquiry that means to sort out some of the complexities of pornography has to avoid the biggest elephant in the room, the question of what causes sexual excitement – or, more specifically, of what particular sexual activities cause any individual to become aroused. Though questions of sexual excitement are hardly irrelevant, one hardly needs to credit Freud's polymorphous perverse to notice that people are turned on by an immense variety of things, all of which can be represented in pornography. Given the likelihood that different individuals may be turned on by very different sets of activities – straight or gay, loving or impersonal, mutual or violent, “normal” or kinky – the critical question for our inquiry has to do specifically with the representations of these acts, by the question of how the process of “graphing” them inflects the response. There are many reasons for this. Procedurally, sorting out the sources of sexual turn on is clearly beyond the ken of a student of literature. More substantively, the term/concept “pornography” refers to writing about sex or, more broadly, sexual representations. Though it may lead – may be designed to lead – to “real” sexual activity, it is itself, Catharine MacKinnon notwithstanding, a textual thing. Presumably, then, what needs to be examined is what happens when sexual element X gets represented, with the specific character of sexual element X remaining, at best, a catalyst. It would seem then that what we need to think about is specifically the way sexual activity and sexual desire get inflected through the process of representing them.

But what happens when it's precisely the act of representation that constitutes the sexual turn on?

This I take to be an absolutely critical question, and one that generates my second admission, that makes it necessary for me to step somewhat outside of the lines of academic disinterest and admit to one important feature of my own most prurient interests – and that is specifically the fact that the people I see on the screen are in fact not only enjoying sex but are performing sex and, further, are – or seem to be – enjoying performing sex. It is one of the clichés of pornographic imagery, and one of the starting points of this essay, that the actors – at least the women actors – address the camera, and the viewer, in ways that would violate the communicative norms of most visual story-telling. It follows that the mode in which porn operates is not that of eaves-dropping – of voyeurism – but of, ostensibly, being addressed by the performers.

Late in the process of developing this essay it became clear that, at least for me, the appeal of what I might call sexual display cannot remain on the sidelines of this inquiry, unlike the other categories of sexual preference listed above. To see if my own personal proclivities were in any way representative, I undertook an informal and no doubt inadequate and unrepresentative survey but perhaps suggestive survey. Choosing respondents who admit to responding to porn, I asked the following question: if you were to come upon people engaging in some sexual act – say in a secluded area of a park, or the bedroom of a home you were visiting, or in a dorm room if you came back when your roommate didn't expect you – would you find it a turn on and would you be inclined to stay and watch? The answer invariably was no. Those I asked found it hard to articulate their reasons, but a reasonable guess might be as follows: a) since the sex act is being done privately between two consenting adults, there is nothing obscene or transgressive about it about it – so it's not exciting; and b) the people involved were not performing sex for others to watch. In short, what's at the core of cinematic porn as a set of representational conventions is not simply the sexual activity being depicted

but the transgressive character of flaunting that sexuality, of publicly defying the shame that comes with the sexual territory.

In sum, what we want is visual evidence of the will of others – or at least of certain others – to be sexually transgressive, to engage in acts that signify sex as transgression.

One last observation on the pornographic hermeneutic – merely as a way of arguing that it IS a hermeneutic. Many commentators have pointed out that in contemporary mainstream porn the one remaining taboo is explicit violence. While pederasty and bestiality and incest, sex with the very old or the very fat or the transgendered, all have their acolytes, it's very hard to find real – convincingly real, representations of violence. In fact in a genre that works so hard to reassure us that what we see is “real,” it's noteworthy that when violence is represented the cinematic rhetoric goes out of its way to make sure we know that it is not real, that it is play acting. Considering the amount of sexual violence there is in the real world – almost always imposed on women by men – this is remarkable. It's also not an inherent characteristic of the genre, as the name de Sade immediately attests.

Given these speculations I venture a few very tentative conclusions:

1. The appeal of porn depends on a combination of two antithetical factors working simultaneously: first, sexual desire (which can be objectless desire, so sexual excitement may be the better term); and, at the same time, guilt, some sense – natural or cultural – that the thing you want is prohibited. While obscenity and pornography are radically different concepts, pornography presupposes and requires that either what is represented, or the act of representing it, or both fall into the category of the obscene in both the conventional sense and in Linda Williams' sense of being excluded, off/scene.
2. Pleasure cannot be represented iconically – but it can be represented indexically. But pleasure is never the name of the game, in movies or in life. Sex always comes to us already as a representation, already as a psychic rather than bodily fact. It is this psychic fact that porn wants to represent, and not only represent but reproduce. Because iconic representation is impossible, porn can never work purely on the level of mindless fascination; but because its rhetorical strategies aim toward reproducing – rather than merely representing – pleasure it typically and generically lacks the distance – idiomatically, aesthetic distance – that art requires.  
One might reasonably ask why we need to represent sex at all, and whether the impulse to do so is any way gender specific. At any rate men seem to crave simultaneously both icons of the visual objects of desire and indexes of their own responses to it.
3. Though visibility is a powerful force and may be anchored in the mindless, in the immediacy of vision itself, visual texts are always mediated. Looking may be rapt but it is never mindless. The way porn gets inflected from generation to generation demonstrates that there is always a hermeneutic dimension, a lens through which we filter our desires, and that this lens is itself very culturally specific.
4. Finally, for all of the above, the foundational claim of porn is the guarantee of authenticity – and in this it is the polar opposite of art. While the poet's work depends on the absence of affirmation, affirming something about our sexuality, our vitality, our very selves, is the one and only purpose of pornography.

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