

Is pornography a perversion?

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IS PORNOGRAPHY A PERVERSION?

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Abstract

In the western line of thought, there is a close relation between pornography and perversion. But are pornographic representations really perverse? And how should we understand perversion? We shall try to answer these questions using psychoanalytical tools, but without engaging in a truly Freudian approach. We shall analyze two hypotheses: first, the connection between the gaze and the superego as we observed it in pornography and secondly, we shall explore the suggestion given by Daniel Sibony, according to whom perversion is always a relational concept and not an intrinsic quality of a subject or of an act.

Keywords: pornography, perversion, male gaze, superego, psychoanalysis, fantasy, sexual representation.

Perversion is one of those terms that are so vague they become subjective. But once the label of perversion is assigned to something or someone, there are concrete, objective consequences. For example, if one is to display explicit sexual materials in public he or she will probably face legal charges. But are pornography related acts perverse? And what does perversion really mean?

Since any sexual act whose aim is not reproduction might be labeled as being perverse we'll have to analyze the problem deeper if we are to understand the perversion of pornography.

For some, talking about sex is a perversion. Since sexuality was traditionally a subject matter related to the private sphere, to intimacy and also to guilt and sin for most of the westerners, to tackle this problem was consider an indiscretion, an undermining of mores. Psychoanalysis changed all that by underlining the importance of sexuality in every individual's life and in the construction of identity. The purpose of the present article is to analyze the relation between pornography and perversion with psychoanalytical tools since they seem to be the most appropriate given the undisclosed status of the topic.

One of the most important assumptions in the psychoanalytical approach is that the subject is not a unity, that there is an internal split: "I don't know who

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I am” replaced the Cartesian cogito, sure of its boundaries and its abilities. If the psyche is not one, but three (id, ego, superego) then we can expect conflict between these “positions”. And there is conflict more often than not.¹

With this heterogeneous subject in mind, we will first analyze the hypothesis that pornography expresses a special kind of curiosity, a curiosity from the same family with voyeurism.

A distinctive trait of pornography which distinguishes it from a “normal” sexual relationship is the fact that there is always a third presence: the spectator, the watcher. By being a representation about sex and not only a concrete sexual relationship, pornography involves another level: that where the sexual act will be consumed. What is the relation between pornography, the watcher and his representative, the pornographer’s gaze? What are the role of the gaze and implicitly the role of camera in the pornographic scene? Who is really watching when the camera is rolling?

The strange eye that gazes at the sexual scene is an essential part of pornography. One can argue that gazing at something means transforming it, acting upon it. The object, once it is gazed at, enters another reality, the reality of the watcher’s desires, sensibility, interests and fantasies. The camera is a technological extension of the pornographer’s eye and in being so it does not only faithfully record the scene, but also modifies it by constructing a perspective: it’s an instrument of power.

Apparently, the goal of pornography is to exhibit a body or a sexual act. But it is more than that: the gaze seems to want to enter the woman’s body to see that there is no mystery, no secret. “What the pornographic gaze wants to see is never visible: the enigma, the difference, the secret of the feminine sexual organ...”²

The spectator seeks an intimate disclosure. The nudity is not only real, but symbolic. The actors’ nudity itself implies vulnerability, availability and a lack of defense that is not only physical, but emotional and psychological, as it happens in actual sexual relationship. But if in real life the disclosure comes along with at least a promise of care, with a veritable bond to the body and the identity of other, pornography cancels this very dimension: the context. And a relation without context is always a violent one.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud considers that “in scopophilia and exhibitionism the eye corresponds to an erotogenic zone”.³ In the same study, Freud establishes the connection between knowledge and

¹ This is probably best exemplified by individuals with multiple personalities disorder whose alters behave, think and feel totally different from one another.

² MICHELA MARZANO, *Malaise dans la sexualité. Le piège de la pornographie*, J. C. Lattes, Paris, 2006, p. 118.

³ SIGMUND FREUD, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey, Anna Freud, Hogarth Press, London, 1953-1964, p. 1494.

sexuality: “we have learnt from psycho-analysis that the instinct for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them.”⁴ These ideas apply to pornography, where it is apparent a desire to know, to unveil, to annihilate through the eye a mystery, that of the feminine sexuality. The eye and its substitute, the camera, symbolically penetrate what the male organ penetrates in reality.

The pornographic sexuality is a child-like sexuality: “a total immersion one’s own sense experience, for which one paradigm must certainly be infancy. For adults this totality, the total sexualization of everything can only be a fantasy.”⁵ We will elaborate subsequently on this notion of infantile perversion, but for now let us analyze the hypothesis that there is a connection between the gaze and the superego.

In the psychoanalytical theory, once the Oedipal complex declines, a sever superego appears and its function is to form ideals, to observe the self and to make moral judgments. The superego replaces the father: it prescribes specific actions and forbids others. The difference is that the subject commands to himself. Once the superego is formed, the individual is said to be independent and autonomous from the parental relations.

In our analysis we began by saying that the role of the camera is not only to record, to capture the sexual activity on the set. The suggestion was that the pornographer’s gaze modifies the scene and by offering a perspective, a point of view that is necessarily subjective it constructs meaning. The pornographer is taking upon himself the function of gazing and thus he is relating to the potential consumer whose desires he tries to predict when he chooses an angle, a point of view that favors some body parts more than others. This vicarious relation between the consumer and the pornographer is due to a common pleasure: scopophilia. The pornographer “knows” that his eye is an erogenous zone, as it is for the consumer and that the object of his mastery is theirs to enjoy. But beyond this vicarious relation, who is the true addressee of the pornographic representation?

The pornographic gaze is orientated towards the feminine sexual organs so that there would be no doubt that there is nothing to see and to know. And also, towards the masculine sexual organ that is there to control and to submit. But who is the authentic but unconscious witness of the whole scene?

If the superego is the father’s heir, if it assumes, it absorbs its limitative, ordering and punitive function, if it is the part of the subject that observes and evaluates, then it represents the internalized eye of the father. Thus, the gaze and its role – to judge and to subordinate – gives us reasons to say that pornography is

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1514.

⁵ ANN BARR SNITOW, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different”, in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, Sharon Thompson (eds), *Powers of Desire, The Politics of Sexuality*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983, p. 256.

there for the delight of the superego as well. The eye that tries to know and to possess the object is an attribute of the father and apparently there is a strange connection here. The superego forbids some acts, censors some fantasies and makes moral judgment calls about other. But by being a point of observation, of examination, it is related to the eye. The eye makes the gaze possible and the gaze is essential to the pornographic scene. We would think that the superego forbids the pornographic act, but instead it is there from the beginning.

The pornographic representation is thus an arena where the three folded structure of the psyche manifest itself: the unconscious manifests through the unveiled fantasies, the ego through the conscious seeking of pleasure and the superego manifests itself through the constant watching: it observes so that it could later punish. The pornographic scene refers to the psychic split and all its drama.

When two or more sexual partners welcome a stranger's eye in their intimacy, be it virtually or actually, what they want is an augmentation of their sexual experience; being watched brings them more pleasure. But this strange presence is always there, because in that moment, like in any other moment of their lives, the superego watches. And it is not a simple mirror, but a vehicle of power, an active participant to the sexual scene.

The fact that the pornographic desire is aimed at something more than the immediate gratification is betrayed by its being based on multiplication and accumulation *ad infinitum*: more bodies, more sexual positions, more explicit content. Moreover, there is no reciprocity, because the desired body is virtual and interchangeable. In fact, the pornographic desire is not a sexual desire, but a simulacrum. In the pornographic scene, there is no real encounter between two or several partners, but rather we witness a relation of consumption. The male devours the female, the pornographic gaze possesses them both so that the spectator can pleasure himself by watching. Since there is no real other to respond and establish boundaries, the pornographic desire isolates the subject in an omnipotent solipsism, where the limit and the norm, if it exists, has to come from within.

But the norm and the limit is the prerogative of the superego, as we have seen. What does this entail? One possible answer is that the entire mechanism is perverse, that the structure of the psyche is constantly undermining itself and that pornography shows us how the superego, the screening-mechanism which normally seeks to limit the pleasure-seeking drives of the *id* by imposing restrictions, is now a mocking and active presence in the whole scene. Hence the perverse character of pornography.

In the second part of this article I will try to argue that the perversion of pornography does not necessarily rely on its imagery or its outrageous sexual scenarios, but in its special relation to the Law.

If we understand perversion in a large sense, i.e. any sexual act whose aim is not reproduction, then its ubiquity brings it closer to the norm. Nevertheless, what

makes perversion a distinct manifestation that society easily identifies and judges? What does perversion really mean and what is its relation to the Law?

Since Freud, we know that normality is not that common and that there is a strong connection between perversion and general manifestations of sexuality. When he argues that the child can, under the influence of seduction, become “polymorphously perverse”,⁶ the dominant moral of his time suffers a powerful blow. But how are we to understand this predisposition and its relation with the moral laws?

Freud admits that the line between perversion and normality is a fragile and fluctuating one and that transgression has an important role in every individual’s sexual life. If he or she cannot put into effect those deviances which we call perversions, then it is the role of the fantasy to compensate for that lack.

Should we understand that every fantasy is perverse? That the unconscious driven by domination, death and pleasure is perverse? That since the unconscious is unruled and steeped in all kinds of sexual activities it is the paradigm of perversion?

Daniel Sibony thinks that there is a family resemblance between the sadist, the masochist, the drug addict and the mystic. In his book, the author constructs his argument based on a simple idea: the perversion is a relation, not the essential quality of a person or of an act.⁷ The fantasy cannot be perverse, and the same goes for the unconscious. But the relation one has with the fantasy or with the unconscious can. But how does the pervert come to be a pervert and what makes him different from other forms of deviations from the norm?

Daniel Sibony considers that the origin of perversion is a trauma and the same goes for the neurosis for example. But if the neurotic runs, represses, overshadows, the pervert takes upon himself, ascribes to himself something that isn’t really ascribable. He or she does not think about the shock, the fault, the punishment as being something exterior and hence subject to compromise, defense, but rather he or she tries to appropriate and give new value to this traumatic event. No matter who is the real source, the pervert says: “it is I who does that, it is I who is the origin of this gesture”. The trauma is no longer a burden or a threat from which the subject runs or defends himself through symptoms, but becomes Law.

The pervert is caught between two laws: the social (moral, juridical) law that he breaks and his own law, i.e. that traumatic event that he does not ignore, but lives endlessly by ritualizing it and therefore rationalizing it. This is his way

⁶ SIGMUND FREUD, *op.cit.*, p. 1510.

⁷ DANIEL SIBONY, “Perversions. Dialogues sur des folies *actuelles*”, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2000.

to master his founding moment. “Perversion is a trauma taken upon oneself” which is nothing else but a slap in the face of Other, a refusal of its alterity.⁸

In spite of the philosophical tradition that establishes a divorce between speech and reality, between victim and aggressor, between object and subject etc, the perverse arrangement targets the union of the body with the word: the symbolic order becomes flesh, it is incarnated. The pervert’s success would mean the hypostatization of the Law: it would become palpable, manageable, and operative. That’s why “the study of perversion is the genealogy of totalitarianism” (of Origin, of Truth, Of Morals). It is a desired bondage, desired because it is already there. To ascribe it means to tame it, to mitigate its arbitrary character.⁹

The fact that the pervert desires to capture the Other brings him in the proximity of the creator, the mystic, the saint, since his project too is total: realizing the Law, i.e. destroying it as symbolic order through rituals.

Perversion is trying to fixate the fantasy in the real and maybe the most important fantasy is that of an identity without fault, without split, a true identity, an authentic identity. What the pervert really wants is to secrete his own existence, to create himself and his law. He wants to be God, but a real god, where the real is fetishized. “The target of the pervert is the real of the Law, not the real of the other’s body.”¹⁰

Most people do not know their root, their foundation, but the pervert creates it, even if this costs him his life (physically or socially). But to exercise one’s will in order to assume something that is beyond assuming is a negative modality to relate to the origins. The difference between the neurotic and the pervert is that the pervert knows what he is doing, he is putting his will in the service of his ritual and in doing so he strikes below the belt the social laws. By identifying himself with the Law he makes it visible, from ineffable and invisible, the law becomes sonant and palpable, because it is inscribed in the pervert’s body. Once appropriated, the Law becomes his only concern; he cannot stop talking about it, because he can finally express it without alienating himself.

In this point, the perverse character of pornography becomes obvious. Wendy McElroy, in her book about women’s right to pornography, recounts how the people involved in the pornographic industry (actresses, actors, producers and directors) put on a condescending attitude towards common people.¹¹ We can easily understand this attitude as a defense mechanism against the social stigma they have to endure every single day. But it is more than this: they see themselves as being part of a sexual elite. Because they live something

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 117-119.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

¹¹ WENDY MCELROY, *XXX. A Woman’s Right to Pornography*, New York, St. Martin Press, 1995, pp. 14-15.

usually considered a mere fantasy, if not a taboo, they relate to pornography as if it were a religion. What for others is wantonness, for them is Law. A law even more important since it is the result of a choice: the choice to live the sexual fantasy to the end.

Pornography is not perverse because it trades fantasies, but because it transforms them in a program, in a war machine which blows anything that stands in the way of its satisfaction. One can inform the actors that the orgasm they seek is not at the reach of their hands, because the true object of desire is and will remain untouchable. But this will not change their lives because the covenant is already made and made valuable accordingly: they have vowed not to betray their pleasure, not to hide their sexuality, but to exhibit it proudly.

The shock that produces the split of the subject and that, if we are to give credit to psychoanalysis, is something common to all of us, is given a new meaning by the voluntary participants to the pornographic industry. That's why their project is perverse: because beyond the common meaning of sexuality, the people involved in pornography are making "an implant of meaning; beyond the pleasure principle, (they) implant another pleasure, their own, a pleasure that instead illuminates the genesis of the human pleasure: not only discharge, but constructing some islands of facticity where names and bodies are touching and communicating."¹²

One might say that pornography is an outlet created by the social system itself, that it is a perverse move by which its structure and configuration are maintained intact; the aim is to keep sexuality a cursed and abject trait which must be hidden from the gaze of the father. But in this loop, there are people that work, live and pleasure themselves. And they are showing off to any father figure that might try to intervene and put a stop to their debauchery.

When we mentioned the relation between pornography and fantasy we saw that there was a need for repetition and substitution and we have associated that with the absence of the authentic object of desire. Because it is irreplaceable and untouchable, the object of desire becomes an endless serial of bodies that, like any other surrogate, can only ease the desire: the satisfaction hoped for is not obtained and the entire process will restart again at the first given chance. There is a constant oscillating movement between the different structures of the subject and it shows every time he or she produces or consumes pornography.

For this internal split to appear there must have been a threat, a danger. A threat that the gaze is trying to control, since seeing is knowing and knowledge is power. Danger, fear, repression, fantasy, desire to know and desire to dominate. The consumer sends the pornographer into the land of fantasy to observe and to report back that in fact there is nothing to be afraid, since the

¹² DANIEL SIBONY, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

human body in general and the feminine body in particular hides no mystery. And even if it were a threat or a mystery, the male sexual organ is there to control and subdue.

The simple fact that pornography is a representation institutes a fissure in the sexual relation. The conscious aim – to present sexual acts to a spectator – and the unconscious aim – to know and to control one's own sexual imagery – collaborate for the effective satisfaction, but in the symbolic way, the agent will remain unsatisfied, because his identity is unclear.

Regarding the relation between perversion and norm, we saw that the pornographic pervert is not that far from other forms of deviations and this is due to the psychic mechanisms that come into play. Those involved in pornography seem to have made a convent as important as those who are its enemies. The former get their satisfaction from living the fantasy to the end, from being loyal to their own pleasure, and the latter, those who analyze it, judge it and eventually punish it get their satisfaction exactly from this judicative attitude that resembles what the superego normally does.

The relation between perversion/pathology and norm is more than tense. The history of cogito is a war machine against madness, and madness, like perversion, is often the name we give to that strange manifestation that our conscience cannot accept at a given moment. If we give trauma a general and thus generous meaning (e.g. a simple shock or punishment), then the fault associated with the founding scene is common to all individuals. And everybody is doing his best to cope with it. Most take the neurotic way, but some choose the perverse one. Thus, perversion is only a label, pathology has only a discursive role, and mental health is an ideal and not a majority rule. As for pornography, its perversion has many layers and we only began to reveal them.

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