

PORNOGRAPHY, ART, AND THE ORIGINS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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(photograph: M. C. Valada)

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Guy de Maupassant remarked that he composed his stories with one hand while maintaining an erection with the other. Did the writing hand contribute to the project of the stroking hand? was there a contribution the other way round, *vice versa*? Since the answer to both questions seems to be yes, since both hands seem mutually supportive, both contributing manually, though by different routes, to his state of sexual arousal, certain questions naturally arise. Because successful prose fiction and related forms of depiction are likely to, even ought to, recreate in the audience the author's compositional intentions and emotions, much the same questions arise, *mutatis mutandis*, for the audience. Is the activity of either of Maupassant's hands inartistic, immoral, or harmful to society, women particularly, through degradation, objectification, and incitement to physical abuse of women by men? Similarly, are Maupassant's sympathetic auditors inartistic, immoral, or harmful to society, women particularly, through imaginatively enjoying women's degradation and objectification, priming themselves for actual physical abuse if they, like Maupassant, experience sexual arousal or enhance it through manipulations of their own genitalia?

Someone might add, "Of course it's pornography, of course, pornographic violence, and of course the answer to all these questions is yes." While I agree with the first *of course*, I want to convince you that the rest of the *of course* doesn't follow a priori, nor, perhaps, *a posteriori*.

Yes, Maupassant's ironic and heart-rending stories are often about prostitutes, particularly if we also include related "unrespectable" women: entertainers, bar maids, dancers. In other words, Maupassant writes about whores, which is what "pornography" literally, or at least etymologically, means. But, equally, Maupassant's short stories are superb works of art. Frank O'Connor finds that a leitmotif of his work is the celebration of a "submerged population," which O'Connor compares to Turgenyev's serfs and Chekhov's clerks, teachers, and country doctors.¹ In my early teens, when I read Maupassant's "*Boule de Suif*" (ball of fat), I received my first vivid realization that men, occasionally with shrill subordinate support from "respectable" women, could be horribly cruel, and hypocritically unfair, to women. (As a boy of the 1950s U.S., I was in a position to observe a pervasive pattern of male cruelty and hypocrisy toward women. But it took Maupassant to begin to get me to see what was going on.) I say "women" because, at the time, I did not recognize the category of prostitute but that of a woman who did not have a male owner and protector, who could not submit herself to an official position in a brutishly dom-

making male order. I recall myself in worshipful tumescence to the cheerful, healthy, male-compliant beauty of Esther Williams and Debbie Reynolds: though I felt a frisson of dangerous sexuality flowing around the poor boule de suiff, I felt more her puzzled decency and good will, her subjectivity against the backdrop of organized male manipulation and contempt. Perhaps it is pornography, but not a clear enough case. When Wallace Stegner says that "over and over again . . . Maupassant persuades us to accept his illusion that cunning, ferocity, greed, and coarseness are more common among men than we hope they are," by *men* he clearly means *males*.²

Might "hard-core porn movies" provide the clear-cut case? Here, it is often assumed, we find the essence of male fantasies of violent exploitation and objectification of women, the really bad stuff of which the surrounding male-dominated softcore and network TV culture is a partly softened reflection. *Here*, one might suggest, is *the real out and out dirt*, unrelieved by claims of artistry, realism, androgyny, or any other sort of redeeming value; this stuff is indefensible except for bare First Amendment claims that we defend, if at all, with our noses clamped, like the ACLU defending the American Nazi demonstration march through Skokie. So let's take a look at typical, professional (as opposed to amateur) hard-core porn movies.

Not a single person gets killed in 99% of hard-core pornographic movies. Unlike virtually all TV and movie forms, natural death is more common in pornography, perhaps approaching point four percent, though the death usually occurs before and premises the movie: memoirs of the legendary sex goddess, the comic conflicts of the claimants to the deceased's will. Nor is the percentage any better so far as threatened or active employment of guns, knives, axes, or poisons go; bloodless, perfunctory fist fights or threats of such might reach a half a percent level; rape or even the hint of physical compulsion is possibly even more rare. That hard-core porn is terribly unAmerican is further suggested by the field's own term for the tiny number of pornographic movies that do have mild physical violence; these attempts to season pornographic movies with elements of the ubiquitous violence of the other popular art forms of our culture are called "crossovers." In contrast to virtually all TV and movie genres, from cop to real crime shows, from news to soap operas, kid shows to mainstream movies, hard-core porn's level of violence is comparable only to that of cooking shows, aerobic exercise shows, and dance presentations like ballet's *pas de deux* and its ice skating equivalent. (If gymnastics produced such an art form, it might even more closely resemble hard-core porn movies.)

For most of us, certainly for me, the pornographic movie (along with exercise, dance, and skating shows) is like real life, as against other genres, in the following respects. I have never killed anyone, nor seen anyone killed in my presence. I have never attacked, or been attacked, with a gun, knife, axe, or more exotic weapon, though I once saw someone threatened with a knife. I did have a few fist fights in the intermediate grades and high school, but I have not had a physical fight as an adult, though I was on the peripheries of a few. I have had the good luck never to have been raped (a man nearly managed it when I was six). Most women I know well enough to know that they have been

raped once or twice or close to it see these atrocious assaults as isolated intolerable catastrophes, not everyday sexist irritants.

On the other hand, over the past 40 years I have had sexual intercourse thousands of times, often violating Aquinas' missionary-position-only rule, masturbated in like numbers, and looked at my own and my spouse's naked body on a daily basis. You might argue that while pornographic movies are more realistic than other genres about violence in our daily, middle-class U.S. lives over the past few decades, nonetheless such movies exaggerate the frequency, variety, and ecstasy of sex by comparison with our actual lives. If we are to trust Kinsey and his work, we have to conclude that pornographic movies are not far from the normal with respect to frequency and variety, though few of us have the strength or grace to carry off the ballet-like lifts and related gymnastics, which in any case do not approach the exotic, apparatus-ridden fancies of the *Kama Sutra*. There is one notable exception to the realism of pornography: Kinsey's interviews suggest that something more than half of U.S. males have, as adults, experienced climax with a male partner; you would not get this impression from straight pornographic movies, which leave this human possibility out as rigorously as physical violence.³ Regarding frequency, the similarity to ordinary life might in part reflect a convention of realism that is nearly mandatory in the genre: the man must be seen to ejaculate, in proof positive closeup, at the end of every act of intercourse, and he is not shown recommencing after a few minutes, though in fact this is well within the range of male variability.

In the accounts given in their pornographic sex manuals, perhaps the primary form of literature of ancient Islam, India, and China, we find the male of an evening having several ejaculations or practicing withdrawal so as to satisfy several or even scores of partners before depositing his supposedly enriched seed in his primary wife. Do not bridle at the word "satisfy," for these manuals also emphasize the great importance of female orgasm, suggesting that lack of female satisfaction brings well-deserved disasters on the family or the community, causing infertility, discord, worms, illness, and vengeful demons and goddesses. In traditional Hinduism, it was commonly assumed that if a woman should have an intact hymen when she marries, she will do her husband serious damage.⁴ After a nineteenth century in which the male physicians of our civilization maintained that no normal, unperverted female could experience or enjoy sex in any way, Masters and Johnson had but to conduct the first actual laboratory study of sexual technology to discover that human females, given half a chance, can often be multiply orgasmic and more easily, and physiologically more intensely so, with dildos or vibrators.⁵

Masters and Johnson could well have suspected this after reading the ancient manuals, in which such claims are commonplace (note *mien-ling* balls as a kind of vibrator). Our pornography is the reappearance of the ancient sex manuals, erotic art, and technology. Maybe the most archetypical plot of our hard-core movies is this: wife and husband are frustrated. Husband desires physical variations that Aquinas interdicted. He is unable to present his desires well or attractively. He is inept at foreplay, doesn't realize this, and doesn't pick up on his shy wife's attempt to explain. Neither can communicate with the

other. (Masters and Johnson confirmed this about married couples who volunteered to perform before them and who thought, mistakenly on the male's part, that they communicated well.)⁶ The husband storms off to have affair in which he learns emotional understanding and technique. The wife discovers the affair and storms off to have her own, from which she, too, learns. The couple are reunited and become satisfied together sexually. The End. The plot is not unlike some of the ancient sex manuals; both sincerely aim at simple satisfactions. The banality and simplicity of the plot reminds me of ballet, where one equally needs a pretextual structure within which to display the taut beauty of the human body in decorous, yet inescapably sexual, postures. The greater portion of hard-core movies have no plot at all, simply picturing athletic and stunningly beautiful partners in a series of *pas de deux*, a moving and technically enhanced version of those delightful ancient Greek vases.

In short, our civilization, not the pornographic movie, is out of step with reality and ecstasy. We have made a religion of violence in which sex is only allowed as violence's handmaiden and object, explicitly left out or pervertedly let in. Aphrodite, and the larger Goddesses that proceeded her, are not to be mocked. They have taken and will take their toll, as Ares, shamed, beaten, and mocked in the *Iliad*, came to know full well.

I expect you can see my deconstructionist project already. (1) Along with weapons and agriculture, humanity's first technologies were erotic. Artificial male and female organs, erotic foods, drugs, art, narratives and practices, erotic training and educational programs for male and female, and the use of professional initiators, are ubiquitous in early civilizations. As with preliterate societies, the less of these practices, the more violence will abound and be praised. Ancient Greek art celebrated the human body, finding it, as did Plato, the essential exemplification of the beautiful. Open acceptance of lovers, of sexual variation, and public nudity in athletics, dance, and even on the street (Pausanias suggests in Plato's *Symposium*), is the mark of civilization, opposed by despots and barbarians alike. This Greek civilization disdained even the most abstract simulation of violence on stage. Jocasta hangs, and Oedipus pokes his eyes out, offstage.

(2) Given that the alphabet is the first information-processing technology, we must realize that its first widespread use over the Indian subcontinent and throughout southeast Asia is as erotica, as combination manuals and stimulants, decorated with religious flourishes that suggest that religion itself was largely erotic. Sei Shonagon, writing *Pillow Talk* in eleventh-century Heian Japan, gives us a witty, helpful, and stimulating guide to good conduct in a lover. Murasaki Shikibu, who authored the world's first romantic novel, *Tale of Genji*, Japan's equivalent of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Dante's *Inferno*, was Sei's younger and more romantic, though more reserved, critic in the Heian court. Both unquestionably shared the view that sexual love (and writing and reading about it) is the most fulfilling and exciting of all life's possibilities. Only males were allowed to write in the Chinese ideograms, so Sei and Murasaki were the first to write, significantly and foundationally, in the Japanese syllabary, hirigana. Indeed, Julian Jaynes suggests a relatively recent and analogous origin in general for human consciousness, our ability to maintain, savor, and often

direct an inner, subjective life (and hence to fantasize or at leisure recall possible actions).⁷ He supposes this acquisition of a full, conscious, subjective life first came to classical Greece around the ninth century B.C., roughly between the oldest oralist passages of the *Iliad*, in which no inner subjectivity is supposed, and the later, more sophisticated *Odyssey*. Similarly, E. H. Gombrich proposes that the interacting development of Homeric point-of-view narrative and Greek perspectival visual art made possible, for the first time, the representation of a subjective inner life, of the world *as it looks and feels* to the individual eye and mind.⁸ Also at this time, we find the chaste and wooden images of Mycenaean pre-Homeric art giving way to the erotically-charged vase painting and ubiquitous phallic statuary of the first millennium B.C. After noting "the modest, innocent murals from [preconscious] Thera," Julian Jaynes continues:

With the coming of consciousness, particularly in Greece, where the evidence is most clear, the remains of these early Greek societies are anything but chaste. Beginning with seventh-century B.C. vase paintings, with depictions of ithyphallic satyrs, new, semidivine beings, sex indeed seems a prominent concern. . . . When human beings can be conscious about their mating behavior, can reminisce about it in the past and imagine it in the future, we are in a very different world, . . . one that seems more familiar to us. Try to imagine what your "sexual life" would be if you could not fantasize about sex.⁹

Pornography is more the fount from which art and literature arise than a modern decadent departure from it.

(3) Though cultures lay interpretive filigrees over it, the ideally-healthy and athletic, fresh and flawless human form is naturally beautiful and, as Plato explicitly suggests in *Phaedrus*, a form that naturally produces literal sexual swelling and lubrication. (It would be fair to say that Plato took the swelling—which Plato analogizes to sprouting and development—as properly a form of perception or knowledge, though one that may grow false and strange if reason and the spirited elements are wrenched aside and dissolved in exploitive, delusive rut, discordantly twisted with violence, like Ares in the net with Aphrodite.) If I swell or lubricate when I see my beloved without veils, have I debased or abused him? If I do so looking at my spouse's photograph or a video tape we playfully made, have I debased or abused her? Or she, me, *mutatis mutandis*, if she is doing the looking? What of the lawyer, recently reported in the *New York Times*, who enjoys making amateur pornographic videos of herself to share with others similarly inclined and has lately gotten some chinkles and spare change from allowing porn distributors to carry her stuff?¹⁰ Did the woman I once knew who lubricated while watching Baryshnikov dance debase and abuse him? And what of the one who had the same psychophysiological perception of ice skating pairs?

Someone might say, "I won't for the moment dispute that lawyer's right to distribute pictures of herself for free, but the real evil is in the commercial distribution, by a large number of predatory, profit-seeking males, who exploit the women they compel and sell." Now, I reply, we are at the perverse nub

of the matter, shades of *boule de suif*. Hard-core movie acting is perhaps the single occupation in which women make substantial money and more money, considerably more money, than do men. And because pornography is legal, the women, with some exceptions, control and choose their working conditions, and they keep and control the considerable money they can make. In sharp contrast to nonpornographic movies and television, a substantial portion of hard-core porn is directed and produced by women. When porn was illegal, all this was reversed and if we made it illegal again men (as they did prior to legalization) would coerce women and cash in.

Here one sees a quite general deconstructionist point hove into view. Our paternal, chauvinist culture makes all the valuable occupations that women alone can perform illegal, so women have to do them for free or expect, if paid, to be victim to the pimp, the serial killer, or the police. The most obvious examples of this are prostitution and marriage (traditionally, and mostly still in fact, adultery is a wife's crime, and marriage is ownership and restraint on a woman). But one also notes that some well paid male lawyers make their money arranging, prior to birth, adoptions for which highly paid, invariably male, obstetricians also receive their fees: the one person who cannot, legally, make any money out of the transaction is the mother, the woman.

In *Too Many Women?*, Marcia Guttenag and Paul Secord chart the effect of ratios between marriageable males and females on the value ascribed to marriage and the relative bargaining value of prospective brides and grooms.¹¹ Simply put, if there are less marriageable females than males, brides will be valued more highly as, for example, in a bridal price and (given Guttenag and Secord's reasonable, albeit depressing, claim that all human cultures have been male dominated) marriage itself will be regarded as highly desirable. Conversely, if (as has been true the last two decades in the United States) there are "100 many women," then there might be a dowry or the like required, and marriage will not be as highly prized a state. Guttenag and Secord also point out, however, that when the ratio shifts to several, or tens, of men to every woman, the women become so valuable that they are taken over by pimps, who sell them to the other men, taking the profit for themselves. Guttenag and Secord note one exception to their generalizations, a community in which women, individually, earned much more money and controlled much more wealth than did men. This was an African community, under British colonial rule, in which there was one woman for every four or five men; the women were highly valued and often both married and carried on prostitution as well. (The colonial administration maintained laws that did not allow the men to take the women's money and power away from them, as they undoubtedly would have otherwise.)

(4) I cannot here say much more about that much vexed and often ferociously obscure topic of objectification. But imagine *boule de suif* transmogrified and transmigrated into Madonna. I quote Judith Williamson:

Giles Smith of the *Independent* is certain that Madonna "intended to titillate"—but tells us precisely how she didn't titillate him. In other words, she failed to turn him on. But the show I saw—along with the cheering

crowd—was about female desire. That, boys, isn't about whether you find Madonna sexy, it's about whether she/we find you sexy, geddit? Poor John Sweeney of the *Observer* felt that in Madonna's masturbatory act to Like a Virgin "she was dearly enjoying herself but it seemed something was missing. . . . "You, Big Boy? . . . Letting what you want show, for women, has always been taboo. In the last decade, men have increasingly—in popular imagery—become objects of desire, but this hasn't been matched by women—or gay men for that matter—becoming more accessible as subjects of desire, i.e., the ones doing the desiring."¹²

Hard-core porn is illegal in Britain, so Ms Williamson may be pardoned for not mentioning that, in hard-core gay movies in the United States, there is plenty of presentation of gay men as subjects of desire. More importantly, perhaps, nongay hard-core movies frequently present both men, in all their naked vulnerability, as objects of desire and women, often gracefully in command, as subjects desiring them.

Notes

1. Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 18.
2. Wallace Stegner, "Guy de Maupassant," in Louis Kronenberger, ed., *Brief Lives* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 509-11, at 511.
3. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948), 650ff.
4. Vern L. Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (New York: John Wiley, 1976), 261.
5. William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), 133.
6. William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Homosexuality in Perspective* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 67-8, 84-6.
7. Julian Jaynes, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1982).
8. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 131ff.
9. Jaynes, *The Origins of Consciousness*, 466.
10. Michael deCourcey Hinds, "Starting in Tonight's Video: The Couple Down the Street," *New York Times*, 22 March 1991, A14.
11. Marcia Guttenag and Paul Secord, *Too Many Women? The Sex-Ratio Question* (Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage, 1983).
12. Judith Williamson, "What Men Miss About Madonna," *Guardian*, 2 August 1990.