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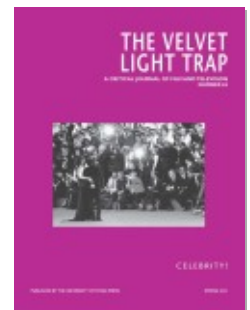
Underexposed Overexposure: *One Night in Paris*

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Underexposed Overexposure: *One Night in Paris*

Of, as Fredric Jameson has claimed, “the visual is *essentially* pornographic . . . its end in rapt, mindless fascination” (1), Paris Hilton is the potentiation of this idea made flesh. More, and more successfully than other celebrities who sing, or act, or in some way *do*, Paris Hilton’s brand rides on her license to simply *be* in the public eye, to be in her body, to be visible. She is, then, essentially visual. In a media environment populated by images of celebrities taken in their natural habitats and made available to us on our desktops, Paris’s lack of discernible productive activity is a boon. Unsullied by the unreasonable inference that we too might sing, or act, or in some way *do*, we are freed to examine Paris as she feeds the meter on Wiltshire this afternoon, dines in West Hollywood tonight, arrives at the party afterward. Her efforts to sing or act, while generously eclectic (*Wikipedia* describes her debut album, *Paris* [2006], as “a mix of pop/rock and dance music songs with hip hop and reggae elements”), tend to act as a distraction from her core business of displaying the minutiae of a public life. Paris (. . . *not France*, to borrow the title of her recent documentary) builds her own and the family brand by offering the individual as tourist sight. In the passage quoted above Jameson goes on to claim that pornographic films are “the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as if it were a naked body” (1). Images of Paris may more reasonably ask that we devote at least some of our attention to her clothes. Nonetheless, as she makes the scene (to borrow a phrase from the prehistory of this particular media environment), images of Paris seem to advance the idea that the world around her would be less fascinating, more fully clothed, less emphatically visual without her in it.

In this image, however, Paris’s body is naked. The image is taken from her first work of pornography, the home video made with her then boyfriend, Rick Salomon, and

released in 2004 as *One Night in Paris*. It marks the moment from the middle of the tape in which Paris, having apparently come during penetrative sex, adjusts her position prior to giving a blowjob. Her boyfriend’s penis is out of frame; the image, as she looks toward the camera to obtain the best shot, is for the moment all Paris. This section and the larger part of the tape were shot using the camera’s night-vision function, which casts the two in a pallid, greenish light and slightly deforms the image, as if we were looking through a fishbowl. While we know,

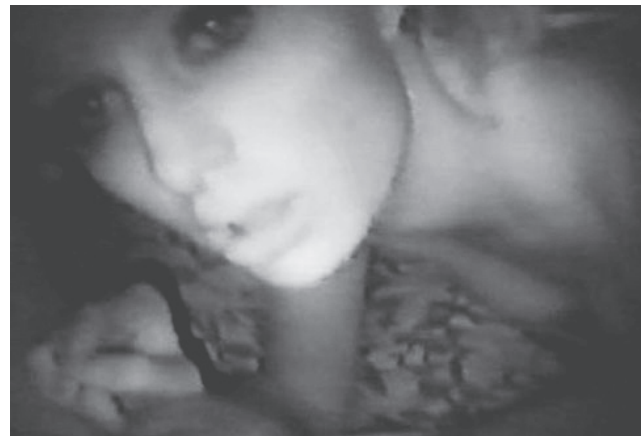


Figure 1. A still image from Paris Hilton's porn debut (*One Night in Paris*, 2004).

from preceding footage, that they are in a fairly cheery hotel room, they seem to exist in a truncated, underwater world. Pornography, and amateur porn in particular, owes it to its viewers to stay close to the action. However, the effect of the technology used here is to strip the action from its enabling scene. Perhaps in this case the technology *is* the scene.

It is appropriate, then, that *this* image circulates in public, primarily on the Internet, in metonymic relation

to the tape. Although the tape is prefaced with very clear images of Paris's naked face and torso shot in full light as she holds and performs for the camera, among the material shot using night vision this is her close-up. However, the image, as it circulates detached from the tape, acts both as a substitute for the action and as an impediment to it. *You Tube* searches yield fake tapes in which whole minutes of this or closely related still images from the tape stand in for the satisfaction of encountering the whole object. They are Trojan horses made by a latter-day Paris. Some, as might be expected, adopt a punitive tone, motivated either by the material or by the act of seeking it there, out of place. Others simply present the image in time. It is possible to see in these interventions some version of the participatory media culture that Henry Jenkins and others propose, and a sense that *You Tube*, for one, really is "our" space. By the same token, in making the tape, Salomon and Hilton (whose actions in holding the camera, adjusting her pose, and directing her gaze suggest active participation) engaged with media culture as amateurs, regardless of their other professional roles and affiliations. In 2006, midway between the then of the tape and the now of my writing about it, *Time* proclaimed that the "Person of the Year" was "You" for our use of technology: "for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game" (Grossman). In this light the image is reflective of the contemporary media environment as it celebrates the idea of the putatively unalienated labor involved in the productive use of technology at home (or on holiday) and after hours in all its amateurish obscurity.

On the other hand, the prominence given this image and, in particular, its defining technology in discussions of the larger object of the tape indicate a tension about Paris's "amateur" status. Lacking an apparent environmental motive for using night vision, it appears logical that the couple may have used the night vision for identifiably "amateurish" reasons (a fascination with the technology, a sense of play, a retreat to the familiar terrain of sex with the lights off). In my experience, however, popular discussions swirling about the tape both privilege the quality of obscurity it generates at the expense of acknowledging other less obscure footage and delight in the potential

scandal the use of night vision suggests. Any scandal must result, at least in part, from the tensions generated by Paris's overexposed persona and the grainy, underexposed footage that her first *actually* pornographic product yields. That is, it is out of keeping with her brand. The camera evidently featured some kind of spotlight, here illuminating Paris's lips and chin, and the effect at times is that of a small creature proverbially caught in the headlights; a kohled and bespangled Tinkerbell (in homage to Paris's lapdog) in our sights. The violence that this suggests is supported by her reported response to the tape, in which she casts herself as a victim both of her boyfriend and of "media culture," like those other famous blondes, Princess Diana and Marilyn Monroe (Olsen). The greater scandal, I would suggest, is that we expect her to do it not in the dark but on the public stage.

The other striking quality of this image is that, as evidenced by the *You Tube* mashups, it endures. It punctuates an unremarkable career made up of forgettable movies, cheap "fragrances," and musical samplers by taking on the quality of being historical. In terms both of celebrity pornography and Paris's mediated career, this image and the tape from which it emanates are geriatric. However, it has its present uses, not least of which is the ability to provide the Paris brand with a back-story of violation and overexposure tailor-made for the "contemporary media environment."

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