Porno-Graphics and Porno-Tactics: Desire, Affect, and Representation in Pornography

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Investigator Lazanov asked me to sign a document. When I refused he called in three officers who picked up Michailov from the floor and bent him over. One of the officers squeezed the boy’s head between his legs, the other pulled down his trousers. “Michailov, you are going to tell the truth,” said Lazanov. He took a police baton from a table, went to a cupboard and opened a little door. I saw a plastic can with black shoe wax on one of the shelves. Lazanov dipped a tip of the police baton into the wax. After that he approached Michailov from behind and shoved the baton into his ass. I saw that baton going into the hole for ten centimetres. The other officer was filming, Michailov was shouting loud.

Broom handles and stool legs, cheap- champagne and Coke bottles, plastic tubes with barbed wire and police batons are all shoved in people’s anuses to produce confessions, to force them to own up to crimes that they never committed or even imagined. Those wielding the tools hope this will help get them a promotion or keep within the demands of statistics, and will also give them pleasure. In other words these are legal instruments for making of thieves, terrorists, murderers, extremists, bandits, hooligans, or any sort of delinquent required by local economies and global politics. Indeed the materiality and the names of the tools testify to this: police batons are manufactured in rubber factories in little Russian towns, and stamped with revealing abbreviations such as
PUS (palka universal’naia spetsial’naia, “special universal stick”) with clear specifications—“PUS-1 Argument,” “PUS-2 Argument B,” “PUS-3 Siurpriz,” “PUS-4 Kontakt”—language that specifies the violence inherent in these objects. Investigators’ offices, temporary detention facilities, military bases, penal colonies, torture basements in police stations… These factories-of-law-cum-pleasure-playgrounds use the acronyms (ROVD, ORB, FSB, ORC, UBOP, RUBOP, OVD) that within local vernacular are substitutable and inextricable from the history of terror extending to the KGB and its affiliates.¹ A lot has come out of these spaces: photographs, cellphone videos, journalist reports, legal documents, testimonies, interviews, stories told, retold, imagined, more signatures, confessions, trial recordings, legal protocols… Some sort of scene is built up of raped, mutilated, and objectified bodies, which seems to make violence compatible with pornography.

Probably most of it is coming through media from Russia’s peripheries, from the centers and outskirts of contemporary empires, assembling their anti-terrorist vocabularies and legal edicts to use violence far and wide. Yet this article is also a reflection on words spoken by those who have been in these cells. It is an ethnography of senses, based on time spent while thinking and seeing things in Grozny, Chechnya after war had just ended (no one is sure when wars end but politicians put this date around 2005)—when intimate violence was being used more often than bombing itself. Seeing people coming in and out of buildings that practice these principles, makes you think of the relation between violence and pornography with less distance to the body and politics in question. Nonetheless distance is as important as representation.

These dark little spaces pressing on us in fragments of texts, images, blocks of emotions, through international and local media, academic discourse, in both sensational and down-to-earth ways, give rise to even more questions. How do we deal with images of mutilated bodies, with the pain of infringement, with all

¹ KGB—Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security). The main security service institution of the Soviet Union that was serving as intelligence agency and secret police.
the suffering and historicities that come with it, with the cultures that code it? How do we reimagine these events when our imaginations is already absorbed and figured by the aesthetic field of body politics? And how is the penetration of bodily surface and the control of its movement, the injection of power into a body, figured upon the gazer, the spectator who is made to watch in order to be intimidated (although of course whether they are watching or being watched is questionable)? Or upon one who expresses agony in image and sound in order to proliferate that agony beyond the dark little spaces? Beginning from the observation that photography is an event that fits well within the temporality of politics’ immediate object-spectator dialectics,\(^2\) I want to raise a few questions: How does this recording, representation, as well as the act of representing, effect the variety of ways we come to talk, see, and represent what comes under the term of violence, and also what is understood to be pornography?; What kind of sensibilities are summoned, structured, negotiated, sensitized or anesthetized when these terms are evoked and scenes represented? What kind of historicities do they embody and enact and how are they thought and played upon racist and homophobic fields and tropes in our contemporary conditions? These questions being so big, they might as well be put into rooms where police batons are dipped in shoe wax, where images and words are recorded and disseminated.

How is it possible to register an act that is so obscene, and still adopt a critical position so as not to play the same old tunes in which pornographic enactment is understood to empty our gaze and titillate our own attachments to power? And how can we avoid adopting a moralizing discourse of anti-pornography that accepts sex (and violence) only in certain (authorized) doses, leaving intact only “acceptable” sensibilities, and considering pornography as a visual field in which to dig for moral questions—in which overly explicit, repetitive, fantastic, or different displays of sexuality are understood to be pornography? This is a space where pornography not only reflects social and gender inequalities and the

violence within them, but makes those consuming it enact them in real life. Images from Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo—from empire’s circular institutions—have consistently been framed as pornography. A naked Iraqi prisoner on a leash held by an American woman soldier or a bunch of prisoners one on top of another exposing their anuses. As Anne McClintock has persuasively elicited, it is seen, in the utterances of public opinion, as much as in writing by left-wing intellectuals, as an emulation of s/m practices, where internet porno-philes are enacting a state-possessed fantasy of global domination as torture upon the ultimate enemy. In a less self-preoccupied voice she points out that such rendition flattens pornography into a moralistic tale, disregarding the complex dynamics of sexuality, race, class, and gender embedded within these locales and turning the question of “other’s torture” into an inquiry about “our morality” thus making the “other’s pain” and the historicity of post-colonial cruelty irrelevant.

Beginning from this sober insight and proceeding to the obscenity of the news, it becomes clear that thinking of pornography and violence as inextricably linked would conflate pleasure and pain, power and sexuality, into a singular register and it is also clear that turning such a register into an organizing principle to think about the issue would lead to the same set of impasses and indistinctions as anti-pornographic discourse itself. Similarly, arguing that there is a direct relation between the police baton, as a phallic symbol of law, and an act of penetration, as a scene of domination where the perverse pleasure is power, would move into the vocabulary of psychoanalysis which engages with the structures of the modern subject itself. Yet it is this very coincidence and the conflation of pornography and violence that necessitates our inquiry, requiring these terms to be brought onto a scene where violent and pornographic, phallic and modern, congeal in their political trajectories and genealogies.

Dalaev was torturing me with pliers, squeezing my genitals, hitting my toes with the bottle. Nurgaliev was threatening that if I did not give testimony the way they needed it, he would rape me with the police baton. There was a camera that I could see, they were filming me, and also there was a machine that they used to torture me with electricity, there were men in masks with police batons. One of them was telling me that he would rape me with the baton, and they repeated this several times, each of them wanted to do it and they were asking Nurgaliev to allow them to rape me and to record it on video to spread it across the villages. When they were telling me this, I was laying on the floor. Then they picked me up and put me on the table on my belly. A few of them were holding my hands, the others were holding my legs. Nurgaliev said “let’s do it, because he does not understand us.” They brought some documents and I signed.

The image of crucifixion, for instance, a public act of torture in which so many take pleasure and delight, has been informing our sensibilities for the last couple of thousand years. Modalities of pain and pleasure, as Sade and Masoch represented (the absolute institution of force in sadism and the contractual relation in masochism) already prefigure attitudes and practices towards sexuality and body, the modality of modern power. As Talal Asad has pointed out, the secular body has been constituted, sensitized, and disciplined by religious discourses of transgression and punishment, redemption and horror, empathy and gratification. Accordingly, conceptions of pain and sexuality sedimented in our bodies consistently authorize and organize our attitudes and sensibilities, render certain kinds of sexual acts permissible, certain depictions of pain acceptable while making others transgressive and punishable.⁴

Within this genealogy are the exact instruments and technologies at stake. Handcuffs, dildos, belts, and leg spreaders devised in the nineteenth century to control deviant sexual practices often also created deviancy; they were appropriated by s/m practitioners

to produce pleasure in performative acts that, in a way, exhibited the same power relations as the society that was inventing these tools. Post-porn practitioners and theoreticians took this point further to expropriate the dildo as a de-subjectification technology to displace heteronormative regimes. The dildo not only repeats or embodies the sign of the phallic order (and in the same gesture the very concept of law as embedded in such order espoused by psychoanalysis), but at the same time also deposes the phallus as singular site of pleasure; it is the prosthesis, the machine of desire with no permanent social dynamics, sex or gender position that produces pleasures without being bound to the single subject or bodily part. Katja Diefenbach, reading Preciado through a Marxian understanding of the commodification of bodies, writes:

The dildo thereby becomes a type of fetish that is no longer a substitute, which does not conceal the abject, which is not affected by a logic of lack, which instead introduces one to the intensities of becoming an interpassive, nameless thing that fucks and is fucked. In this way the dildo not only betrays distribution into living subjects and dead things; it also betrays the socially codified exchange relation between the one who desires and the one who is desired, therefore incorporating desire.

The anus, a non-reproductive, de-sexed zone, the site of pure waste and social taboos, works alongside a dildo to shift the zone of pleasure away from the discursive thralls of vagina or penis. The black hole and the inorganic object, de-socializing the conventionalities of a sexual act, re-appropriating technology rather than opposing and structurally reinforcing it through the fantasy of natural sex or authorized pornography. Desire no longer depends on the subject that’s constantly lacking and on the discourse of truth that regiments sexuality, but multiplies and reproduces itself in the

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5 Tim Stüttgen (ed.), *Post Porn Politics* (Berlin: b_books, 2009)
inter-relational and de-subjectified zone of pleasure and pain. It is a practice that merges and fuses into representational art forms, cinematic experiments, through digital and social media, which ultimately work within forms of representation that are well aware of the limits that they have as resistance to the aesthetic regimes under which they function.

How we can bring these lessons of de-subjectification into different histories of power and the subject, into these scenes which contract body, sexuality, and power in a singular instant, is a serious question, that requires a separate pause. It is highly important to remain sensitive to the histories of particular places with their own stories of body, sex, and representation, without falling into affirmative possibilities of out of place heteronormative sexualities, finding language that would refigure post-porn critique within the subject’s body and voice. This move would bring us to the question of representation, or rather to the politics of aesthetics. And here of course, the question is how we can represent that which—in its displacement of intimacy, otherness, in-your-faceness, in its inequality of translation, destruction of trauma—is, we could say, radically unrepresentable. Could reiteration of the scene, replication of the words, the images with all their minutia, would get us in and out of an image of other as a subject without repeating the moralistic tale or affirmative liberation fantasies.

A dancing hall. Such was the picture. Our cell was like a menagerie, they would come and pick some of us. For them it was fun and for us such pain. Each was more cruel than the other, like this Tatarian who chopped Movsar’s leg with an axe so that everyone would be afraid of him. Once they put him down badly. Made him eat his own shit. Igor was the chief of detention facilities, and the other one was Sergei. They would torture people together. And there was a barbed wire. They would penetrate us with the barbed wire, I told you, they would put the barbed wire into the tube, and stick it into the ass and then would take out the tube. But the barbed wire would stay. Whatever they wanted. Then try to get this wire out.
Exposition, reiteration of the obscene, the scene overexposed, reality in all its detail, is too much, but too little at the same time. If one repeats words from these scenes (the names of the police batons, in the language of those who are retelling, in the historicity of the acronyms, in the nakedness of an open body), what comes about to the producer of the images (in voice) to the reader of the texts? I am asking: what kind of regime of representation does the repetition of banality of violence and the obscene include? Rancière has persuasively argued that until the mid-nineteenth century, pictorial arts were explicitly dependent on words to elicit invisible presences and meanings in images, and words in literature or poetry constituted images that could produce visibility by regulating the exposure and concealment of meaning according to given sensibilities. In contrast, the aesthetic regime of modernity where the visible and sayable no longer hold determinable relations is concerned with producing a reality of pure presences. These art forms and images do not simply aim to represent certain aspects of life, but also to speak (or stay silent) by themselves. Yet as Rancière explains: “Presence is not the nakedness of the pictorial thing as opposed to the significations of representation. Presence and representation are two regimes of the plaiting of words and forms.”

Such production still depends in a peculiar way on the visible and sayable (and so too the invisible and unthinkable) being enabled in the presentation. If the invisible or unsayable were once contingent upon the modalities of the representative regime itself and could be modified (artistically), either to render visible and sayable what had been absences, or to retain or make them hidden and unspoken, the modern aesthetic regime of presentation, assuming that things could “speak” for themselves and press their qualities qua pure beings, maintains that such “things” are always in excess of the means of artistic expression and thought. The regime re-constitutes such excess as the unrepresentable and puts it back into the materiality of things while persistently and dramatically speaking and visualizing the “unthinkable” and “unrepresentable”

8 Ibid., 79.
as a matter of ontological condition, rather than a modality of particular representation. If we consider this tension between radical non-representability and present visuality at work in the scenes that we have presented here, could the catatonic repetition of the obscene, and the relation between the pornographic and scenographic, be reimagined and rethought?