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

Eirini Avramopoulou, Irene Peano

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While most critiques of – as well as support for – explicit sexuality are framed in terms of morality, exploitation, and misogyny vs. empowerment, agency and sexual liberation, Baudrillard’s polemical twist invites us to reconsider the matter from a different angle. In his article “Dust Breeding,” he frames explicit sexuality (e.g., live sex events, porn, etc.) as yet another manifestation of our collective urge to demystify life into a banal reality. He disregards the possibility of liberation through acts that hasten sexuality into integral reality, when the very essence of power lies in ascribing to reality everything that was in the order of dreams. By integral reality, Baudrillard refers to the procedure, which is accelerated by modernity, whereby everything becomes real, visible, transparent, “liberated,” and legible to cultural and political regimes and whereby there is no longer anything on which there is nothing to say. He argues that sexuality is at best a hypothesis, and that as a hypothesis it does not make sense to striving for a systematic “liberation” through affirming the act. Rather, he contends that explicitness merely causes sexuality to lose its authority and its aura, the essential qualities that it once took on through repression.

If Baudrillard is right, in our efforts to liberate sexuality from the grip of morality we face the danger of turning our desires and imagination into explicit and assimilable bits and pieces. But his attribution of sexuality’s appeal to repression – hence the implied romanticization of that which we have only known in patriarchal terms – seems narrow-mindedly heterosexual and male-centric. If the issue is the loss of sexuality’s enigma, why should we endorse repression, which ascribes sexuality to the hegemonic moral order and as such depletes its liveliness that exceeds the procedures of meaning making? After all, a regime of control frames its object of repression. Under patriarchal repression, the sexuality that Baudrillard romanticizes is made to come down from the order of dreams and land in the terrain of heterosexist imagination and male-centric desire. If graphic sexuality is banal because it conforms to the regime of visuality, then repressed sexuality is not any less banal, for it conforms to yet another hegemonic order: the regime of patriarchy.

On the other hand, when Baudrillard’s patriarchal nostalgia is left aside, his argument opens up a stimulating question: If sexuality cannot be proven by means of sex and if merely affirming the act becomes trivializing after a while, what kinds of hypotheses on sexuality may cultivate its subversive edge? But before I go further, here is a self-disclosure that will clarify my personal investment in this somewhat pedantic quest for the meaning of sexuality and its implications for sexuality politics: I am a transgender person and sexuality has been an enigmatic lifesaver for me. Through queer sexuality, I got to experience multi-layered, sensual, sensorial, physical, spiritual, and imaginative bodily connections with other human beings, and these connections allowed me to comprehend my body with all of its conflicting complexities and dreaminess that are denied by the integral reality and its social and scientific categorizations. I think sexuality is revolutionary because it has the capacity to defy established claims and assumptions made about human physicality, drives, and desires. It is a realm in which bodies can weave in and out of social, sensorial, surreal, corporeal, and metaphysical fields that are usually not traversed in one go. If I had to think of something akin to my adult experience of sexuality, I
would probably cite a quality from early childhood, the so-called inability to distinguish where physical reality stops and dreams begin – or the ability to weave these together, depending on how you look at it. A kindred domain would be art.

When I first started getting involved in queer and feminist sexuality politics in my early 20s, although I did find the enigma of sexuality vital to its emancipatory capacity, I thought of enigma as counterproductive to politics and an obstacle in the way of de-mystification and breaking of taboos. The political discourses that I became familiar with mostly saw sexuality as both a victim of power and an opposition to it. So queer and feminist sexuality for me meant resistance and transgression. But as such, rebellious and revolutionary visions of sexuality became contingent on its main oppressor, namely patriarchy. We advocated for visibility because patriarchal morality repressed and shamed sexuality; we wanted sexuality to be in the open because we thought its taboo status enabled easier patriarchal manipulation; we reclaimed sexual pleasure because it was largely denied to women and queer people. These issues are still valid and will maintain their urgency as long as patriarchal monopoly rules over sexuality and its twisted morality continues to choke it. On the other hand, in the past decade or so, some things changed, and I started to wonder about other directions we could take.

As recently as a decade ago, queer porn was not really available, and among the feminist groups I participated in, the notion of sexuality was mostly discussed within the context of sexual violence and trauma. But since then, the tides have turned, queer and feminist colleagues organize porn screenings and workshops, sexuality and sexual pleasure is more commonly embraced as a form of empowerment, and queer porn has become prolific and more accessible. It is starting to become an industry (hopefully without exploitative practices common in heterosexual porn industry). At the same time, our generation witnessed the bitter-sweet transformation of queer cultural productions from going unrecognized and being rejected toward being appropriated and commodified. The appropriation happened particularly to things produced within hegemonic paradigms, even when their queered
contents initially presented a challenge. For instance in pornography, even though queer porn challenges the central position of heterosexual male desire, it still follows similar pornographic formats that prioritize the visual for the translation of sexual experience and as such remains susceptible to Baudrillard’s critique. So I ask myself, in our efforts to rebel against the patriarchal and heterosexist sexual order, are we still conforming to its forms and as such contributing to its processes of trivialization of an undeniably seductive and subversive force in life?

My position is not to let go of the efforts for visibility of queer and feminist sexual practices by any means, because they still disrupt patriarchal control over sexuality, and so are necessary. Rather, I am intrigued by the political possibilities that may open up when we consider the angle of trivialization and delve into the concept of sexuality, which is about as elusive as a concept can get. Intersectionality is already an important part of that inquiry for it calls for an interrelated understanding of systems of oppression and for the examination of sexuality in relation to other social, biological, and cultural categories. Does Baudrillard’s microscopic push – which contrasts with the telescopic inquiry of intersectionality – add any value to this discussion? I think so. The booming regime of vision and visibility, not only in the military–security domain but also in the domains of health and daily life via things like sensor data driven biomedical technology and personal gadgets, is infringing on aspects of our bodies that we never considered to be visible before. If we understand sexuality under these circumstances as the vehicle and effect of power, we also need to contend with power’s subsumption (and our ascription) of all phenomena of life into integral reality, in which they become readily available as targets to destroy, as capabilities to exploit, as commodities from which to make profit, etc.

In the face of all this, what can we do? Perhaps Baudrillard would recommend disappearance. But I am not such a nihilist. I think the more useful concept that he offers us is seduction, which he defines as something not placed in sex or desire but in the play between sex and desire. Perhaps the notion of seduction can help us stay grounded in an enigmatic sense of sexuality while navigat-
ing our way in the maze of patriarchal oppression and control. In the end, even if the path to emancipation entails demystification, blowing off the smoke does not necessarily lead us out of the mirrors. So perhaps we can continue dreaming of a sense of sexuality that exceeds all that can be uttered about it, something inclusive of but not limited to sex, something that connects us back to the basics, these strangely shaped lumps of matter, full of senses, intact yet transient, our bodies as the rhythm keepers of all passions, our passions wild like the sea, along with the intuition that says, even under the sinister grip of control and integral reality, sexuality connects us to our vital seduction.