Challenging Pornography, Challenged by Pornography: From Monstrous Tactics to Enactments of Poiēsis

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1. Beginnings

The point of departure of this edited volume was experimental, and so too is its result. The idea for this collection initially sprung from a need, not to mention desire, to open up, relate to and test the limits of certain avenues of thought and their material implications. These were part of our intellectual horizons and everyday experiences when we were living in the UK, but were also shaped by our moving in and out of the country, and through friends, or friends of friends, families of all kinds, comrades, books, objects, concepts etc. from all over the world. The idea came from a need to experiment with (familiar or unfamiliar) others, so as to create a platform of engagement while “sweating” with certain concepts, as Sarah Ahmed so beautifully put it.1 But such need to experiment derived from the fact that we had already found ourselves “sweating” with desire in our everyday lives, in relationships that

were confronting us with our own failed attempts to transcend limits, in feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and anger with imposed structures, in repeating what we had promised ourselves never to do again, in blushing with guilt for something we never for a moment thought we would do, but at the same time feeling the liberation of doing it, in not admitting to ourselves and others that queer might not be the word to define all of our unreleased fantasies, or in asking what the limits of queer might be… – the list of our meanderings in the realms of desire and sexuality could go on endlessly.

Indeed, as Sarah Ahmed writes,² concepts emerge out of bodies and they return to those bodies. Put differently, concepts are worked through “in the flesh” to make sense of our lived experiences and different realities, of our censored pleasures and closeted desires. Thinking through pornography, then, entails re-engaging with the question of desire – as this redefines identity claims, embodied acts, and intersubjective encounters, but also as it encircles our different affective responses to practices and politics in everyday life. When this project was first conceived, we thought it necessary to experiment with the ways in which we think of, write, imagine, and perform our sexualities in attempts to traverse, or even subvert, normative inscriptions, while knowing that this is no simple job.

Re-appropriating pornography, or at least questioning the possibility of doing so and thinking through it, becomes a way, then, to re-articulate aporias of desire, intimacy, touch, and seduction. These are related, but not restricted, to claims of visibility, visions of emancipation and its failure, as well as to the politics of violence that we are exposed to through circulating images and affects, augmenting or confining us. In other words, expressing such aporias represents an attempt to exceed the limits set by and for ourselves in relation to how we connect to our own bodies, to the bodies of our lovers and to the bodies of the theories we live with, sleep with, and dream about – in short, to all that we get attached to.

² Ibid.
Hence, the very subject of these embodied reflections makes them so eminently intimate, personal but never individual – and this is true not just of our own engagement, but of that of the many contributors to this collection. Reflexivity as a political stance is a common thread running through several chapters in this book, a lesson learned from feminism and remodulated through contemporary struggles over boundaries and their excesses, refusals, and overcomings. Indeed, many of the texts in this volume emerge from personal experiences and experiments, and in this sense they reflect the complex processes of elaborating and enacting the theory that one embraces, i.e., the processes of feelings and sensations, performative actions and discursive positions, past experiences and future expectations, social norms and political identifications transmitted to and affected by the need for “releasing desire.”

Judith Butler asks how we can conceive of an erotic togetherness “released from” a hegemonic heteronormativity, and concludes: “It seems to me that sexuality is always returning to the binds from which it seeks to release, and so perhaps follows a different kind of rhythm and temporality than most emancipatory schemes would suggest.” How can we follow this rhythm and let ourselves be deranged by it? These contributions attempt to answer this question by challenging boundaries, and by failing to abide by any straightforward distinction between analysis and performance, or between art, politics, and academia. They refuse to be restricted to any particular domain.

Moreover, it is important to consider points of departure as they both reveal our own rootedness as well as the routes one takes to reach certain destinations. Following feminist activist gatherings, participating in queer groups and at the same time having endless discussions about the constraints of gender, the limits of sexuality, and the performative potential of being and doing “it” otherwise, in the context of a renewed interest in pornography and its re-appropriation by queer performers, activists, and intel-

4 Ibid., 54.
lectuals, we were constantly stumbling over the same question: is pornography as a concept and practice something worth thinking through again, sweating with again, getting excited about again, sleeping with again? Questions that sparked off our fragmented discussions were as simple as: Do you watch porn? What makes you feel aroused in sex? What do the images that circulate do to us and to our desires? How have desire and sexuality been oppressed, and why do they continue to feel oppressive? How do you claim liberation? Or how can one reclaim images of sexual desire if through our feminist lenses we cannot help but scrutinize, mock, and even feel disgusted by the repetitive representations of a male, heteronormative, and white gaze and the market economy of pleasure that sustains it and is sustained by it?

These questions led to what has now emerged as a deliberately heterogeneous, non-canonic collection of short essays. Our positive answer to whether pornography, as a concept or practice, is worth reconsidering echoed both feminist criticism, which always helps us to be alert to whatever might be mirrored in or through the embodied fantasies of a male-driven hegemony of pleasure, as well as the need to feel the difference in what queer theorists have been trying to transmit to us by locating and dislocating the object–subject of desire, lust, and pleasure through images, bodies, objects, and performances that exceed certain established limits of representation, perception, and intelligibility.

2. From Monstrous Tactics to Enactments of Poiēsis

Of course, since the 1970s, pornography’s inscriptions have troubled feminist writers, who have been critically addressing issues related to the representation of the female body. Porn, it was contended, is for the most part a heterosexist (and often racist) genre, and its market circulation serves male arousal alone, fixing the position of pleasure for both wo/men and abiding by patriarchal norms. A strand of feminism, headed by Catharine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin, called for the banning of pornography, arguing that it harmed women by objectifying (and thus de-subjec-
tifying) them.5 Others, like Judith Butler,6 Lauren Berlant,7 and Drucilla Cornell,8 have argued that the depiction of sex can be empowering to women, and others still, like Carl Stychin,9 have made analogous comments about gay pornography. Yet, equally “sex positive” critics have also employed the term in a critical way, understanding it metonymically as “a system of representation that reinforces the profit-making logic of the capitalist market economy.”10 According to this perspective, the serial repetition of scenes typical of pornography as of other genres and forms of representation (most notably advertising), by titillating desire and at the same time frustrating its fulfillment, creates that generalized form of addiction which characterizes consumer society. Braidotti depicts pornography as the production of “images without imagination” based on a “logistics of representation” centered on the subject-object dichotomy, in turn predicated on a power relation.11

These thinkers conceive of pornography as a gaze upon different others, in which race, religion, and class come to the forefront alongside gender and sexuality. From Braidotti who addresses issues of racism in Islamophobic representations such as the documentary Fitna, or the “medical pornography” of fetal images detached from the mother’s body for the purpose of anti-abortion campaigns, to the many commentators who relate pornography

11 Ibid.
to acts of torture, most notably in Abu Ghraib, pornography becomes a “concept metaphor” used to denounce different processes of violent subjectification. Likewise, horror-like depictions of what has come to be known as “sex trafficking” have been denounced for their voyeuristic tendency to prey on aprioristically assumed and defined forms of suffering, that supposedly arouse humanitarian affective responses. A twisted, prudish morality comes full circle in both decrying and feeding off suffering and sexual exploitation.

On the other hand, many newly emerging artworks, documentaries, and porn productions attempt to escribe from porn its initial, normatively repressive qualities, and re-inscribe a feminist or queer perception of enjoyment and pleasure while pushing the limits of normative and normalizing representations further. In such “tactics,” pornography seeks to reclaim the language (and more broadly the representation, or the enactment and transmission) of desire and pleasure so as to enable ways of questioning normative transgression, as well as to facilitate the exploration of unclaimed desires, unintelligible acts, and censored affects.

Yet, how such reclaiming might work remains an open question, given the centrality of pornography in contemporary political-economic configurations, and the fact that the commercial aspect of pornography is deeply embedded in its genealogy (literally, the term means “writing about prostitutes”, where the Greek term for prostitute, pornos, means “purchased”). In the current era, which Beatriz (now Paul) Preciado baptized as “farmacopornographic,” the governmental and industrial management of sexuality and the body dominate (at least in some corners of the planet). The cri-

tique of pornography is thus brought to a new level, which considers it not only as a system of representation (like those works we previously evoked) but as a form of production and control of bodies, affects, and desires. Preciado perceptively observes that capital puts to work the potential for sexual excitation, or “orgasmic force,” through cycles of pharmacological, pornographic, or sexual-service production and consumption. This kind of extraction exceeds heteronormative boundaries, subject–object distinctions, forms of racialization, applying instead to “the living pansexual body”, which thereby becomes “the bioport” of orgasmic force and is thus located at the juncture of production and culture, which “belongs to technoscience.”

If, Preciado observes, “[t]echnobodies are either not-yet-alive or already-dead”; if “we are half fetuses, half zombies,” then “every politics of resistance is a monster politics.” Elsewhere, they had referred to monstrosity as unrepresentable difference, arguing that it is from this position, that of the “abnormals,” that a creative reappropriation of and through bodies, spaces, and sexual politics becomes possible. In many ways, their advocacy of monstrosity builds on earlier reflections on the theme, most notably by Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti.

Indeed, we can read terato-political tendencies in many contributions to this volume. From the trans movies that Eliza Steinbock analyzes to the (more problematic but nonetheless provocative) pornographic magazines for the visually impaired scrutinized by Elia Charidi, we are challenged to think of new, monstrous

16 Ibid., 41–50.
17 Ibid., 43.
18 Ibid., 44.
configurations of bodies and desires that (partly) challenge the control of orgasmic force and its channeling along specific lines that define gender, sexuality, ability etc. In many of the essays, inappropriate/d, monstrous, abnormal characters defy identity and stable body configurations.

In this vein, instead of returning to the location of the body and its identity as a point of departure for reflection and politics (as woman, lesbian, black person, worker, subaltern, or the inhabitant of an “impaired” body), many proponents of post-pornographic performance have drawn our attention to what is enabled by desire, as an affect that escapes signification and has the potential to reshuffle established ideas, morals, norms, and stereotypes. Put differently, while using the lenses of desire reminds us how human bodies have become materialized and de-materialized through histories of oppression, violence, slavery, colonization, commodification, gender, and sexual normativity, as well as through secular theology and securitarian governmentality, it also helps us to depart from any strict and stationary origin. As Elspeth Probyn argues:

Freeing desire from its location, its epistemological stake, in the individual necessitates rethinking the role of images, images and motion. For the queer image does indeed express something. From this intuition, it then becomes a question of how to express the singularity of queer desire, of how to queer the movement of images in a singular way.\footnote{Elspeth Probyn, “Queer Belongings: The Politics of Departure,” in E. Grosz & E. Probyn (eds), \textit{Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism} (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 1–18, at 9.}

Dislocating the body from a fixed subject position and opening it up to its intersubjective encounters might also be seen as a moment of \textit{poiēsis}. As Athanasiou and Butler remind us,\footnote{Athanasiou and Butler, \textit{Dispossession.}} moments of (self-)\textit{poiēsis} carry the potential to de-institute the classifications through which identities are institutionalized and naturalized and
hence resist the reiteration of images and e-motions defined and constrained by liberal imaginaries and heterosexual normativity. Such are the moments that one can find in the work of performers and artists who try to resist established norms and structures. Pornography’s promise, then, appears negotiated in and through this double bind, one that is mirrored in the texts (and the artworks they refer to) put together for this experimental book.

3. Challenging Pornography’s Challenges

A number of female/queer pornographers are experimenting with whether and how we can re-appropriate pornography in attempts to initiate different worlds of sensation, cultures of pleasure, bodily intimacies, and scenes of seduction. In many contributions to this collection that deal with alternative forms of pornographic representation, dreams and the imagination are central elements. The work of director Emilie Jouvet, interviewed for this collection by Adele Tulli and the editors, is a prominent example of such orientation. In her work, the camera captures encounters that are moments of creative experimentation, indeed of self-poiēsis: there are no scripts, and collaboration between director and performers is essential. Here, orgasmic force is released outside commercial channels and prescribed roles.

What is more, the monsters produced and embodied by post-pornographic performance also challenge one of the core axes on which mainstream pornography founds its normative power: that of vision, of the “scopic drive” that, many analysts have pointed out, serves as a form of domination. Indeed, in the essays by Eliza Steinbock, Namita Aavriti, and Sinan Goknur, in particular, the synesthetic link between the tactile and the visual is emphasized, thus moving representation beyond the visual to reflect on the circulation of affect and the power of touch, but also on the power of hiding, on what is withheld or cannot be seen. The porno-tactical, then, is also porno-tactile.

On the other hand, the promise of the politics of performativity – which we can read when a term is reclaimed so as to re-produce it in difference – always defines the premise of possible misfire. Similarly, desire conceived as a liberating and transcendental “line of flight” might get stuck in our own rootedness, which could hold us back and make us feel immobilized when trying to evade, let alone defy, the norms and structures of everyday life. In this volume, Kathryn Fisher, an actress in queer porn and a sexually explicit performer, argues that there is nothing inherently empowering about making porn because empowerment is a process and not an end. Being part of a queer, feminist, low-budget, DIY porn movement doesn’t necessarily pay your bills, and you cannot always avoid social prejudices regarding your practices and intentions. This alerts us to the pervasiveness of different modes of exploitation even in the face of attempts to resist them. Nevertheless, as Kathryn argues:

what is really queer, really revolutionary, and really powerful, is working at relationships with each other, receiving each other with love, understanding each other, trying to find out about each other, making assumptions for the best, and supporting each other on good and bad days.

With these words, she reminds us that when empowerment becomes a process which entails breaking taboos and stereotypes that we hold about each other, and when we are able to communicate without imposing our politics and morality on others, this holds a promise of something new that might emerge from within those processes and ways of relating.

Even if most of the articles in this volume ally with Kathryn’s questioning of easy accounts of emancipation, at the same time most also contain an attempt to make us think about the potentialities carried in and through the re-articulation of sexual explicitness. This also resonates, for example, with what Sinan Goknur

calls *vital seduction*, that he defines as a process, or rather a play, *between* sex and desire, and not as something rooted in either sex or desire alone. Following Baudrillard’s criticism of the explicitness of sexuality in the sex industry\(^\text{25}\) as something that demystifies desire and strips sex of its seductive aura by turning it into a banal reality, Sinan’s self-reflective analysis, as a transgender person and an active advocate of sex-positive queer and feminist politics, touches upon possible misfires connected to feminist/queer visions of pleasure and to activist claims to visibility.

Considering the ways that biopolitics and governmentality get intertwined, Namita Aavriti’s paper examines the effects of the insertion of amateur video porn into everyday life and the market economy in India, as well as the role of the state and the law in defining and controlling the parameters of this industry. More importantly, Namita argues that although amateur pornography enables the emergence of different affects in relation to conventional big-screen porn production, at the same time it is also part and parcel of a biopolitical process through which bodies (especially female bodies) become more readily accessible to the fantasy of touching them. Amateur pornography blurs the boundaries of what might be considered as real or fictional by making bodies available to be “touched” through gaze.

Indeed, how can we think of the process of releasing desire as a way to communicate different realities, political visions, and visual signifiers through which we can touch and be touched by each other? Or, how can one “feel desire’s shimmering activity through the synesthetic modalities of touch intertwining with vision”? Eliza Steinbock asks such question in her piece, following Susan Stryker’s analysis of the *spectrum of desire* to interpret it as *poiēsis* of the trans body.\(^\text{26}\) Eliza’s argument emphasizes the troubling but promising relationship between visibility and touch in trans people’s embodiments, sexualities, and erosicism.


that have been defined by the conflicting relationship between visibility and concealment. As she argues, “Trans pornography may cite the identity politics of visibility, but it also offers a rich opportunity for investigating the force, shape and experience of trans-eroticism through touch.” However, if attempts to look into trans sexualities pass through the production of images that aim to assemble empirical knowledge about the reality of sex acts, relying on and reproducing what Eliza calls a “visual essentialism,” identities of desire are once again fixed. Like Sinan and Kathryn, Eliza also questions the liberating effects of an identity politics based on visibility and argues that what is politically at stake in trans porn is that it sets in motion a process, not of reflecting, but of engendering “real” bodies, desires, and experiences both on and off the screen.

The troubling politics of touch that are analyzed in Eliza’s paper are also the locus of attention in Elia Charidi’s chapter on the pornography of blind people. In different but similar ways, both authors criticize the ways that bodies that do not conform to established norms and desires are either de-eroticized or hyper-eroticized. At the same time, Elia’s paper implicitly challenges the limits of intersectionality – which, as Sinan argues, is nevertheless an important lens to employ in order to consider different systems and mechanisms of sexual desire and oppression together. What kinds of fantasies does the porn industry attribute to bodies that do not fit into established categories? And what would inclusion entail here? One way to provide a critical answer to these questions is to examine how sexuality and impairment come together in attempts to move away from current stereotypes of bodily beauty and the aesthetics of pleasure. Elia claims that Lisa Murphy’s 2010 pornographic magazine for blind and visually impaired people, Tactile Minds, is such an attempt. However, Elia points out that even this fails to completely escape normative dualisms that underscore presumptions and fantasies about lack of vision, such as darkness–light, body–mind, flesh–spirit, subconsciousness–consciousness. Moreover, it is difficult to forget that being blind, as well as being sighted, is an identity built up on several stereotypes and embodied fantasies. As Nina Lykke argued long ago:
Questions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, age, and other socio- and biocultural differences and power differentials are constantly intersecting. This heterogeneity enhances the need not only for multi- and transdisciplinary approaches but also for a superimposition of different lenses of inquiry – feminist, multicultural, ecological, and so on – which can make the different elements of the heterogeneous networks become visible.²⁷

If touch gives people with severe visual impairment access to a visual world of sexual representation that they had previously been deprived of, and if this is a way of seeking to emancipate and include those who had been excluded from the technology of sexual pleasure, this will only work if we keep in mind, and so challenge, the deeply embedded norms that historically haunt the impaired body. Elia points out that from Ernesto Sabado to Lisa Murphy, blindness has repeatedly been perceived as attached to the obscene and to sexual fantasies of monstrosity. As Rosi Braidotti convincingly explains:

> The monstrous body, more than an object, is a shifter, a vehicle that constructs a web of interconnected and yet potentially contradictory discourses about his or her embodied self. Gender and race are primary operators in this process.²⁸

Last but not least, Mantas Kvedaravicius’s paper focuses on the production of a political economy of pornographic images of rape and torture, which is difficult to access and so also difficult to analyze. Following Anne McClintock, Mantas asks how to think of, or not think of, pornography and violence together, when pleasure and pain, power and sexuality (which often seem to form a single register, for example in the cases of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, or Chechnya) continue to haunt everyday life. He also raises ques-

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tions about our ability to provide adequate responses to this relationship. Is it possible not to think of images of penetration as the reification of coercive power, absolute domination, and moral humiliation? How not to consider the complex dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality that the pornographic gaze is immersed in and hence institutionalized by? How can we not think of the religious connotations embedded in the secular bodies of modernity that reproduce voyeuristic images of penetrating the other’s wounds? Such explicit violence also contains something that is rendered radically unrepresentable for Mantas, whose writings try to inscribe and at the same time erase such effects. Thinking self-reflectively about the (im)possibility of writing or speaking about the explicitness of violent sexualized acts, Mantas asks whether we can, through our writings, transmit an image of the other without repeating moralistic claims, and most of all without naively affirming liberation, especially when the techniques and technologies that we use to seek emancipation are embedded in their own violent histories of domination. As he asks, “What kind of regime of representation does the repetition of banality of violence and the obscene include?”

The authors in this collection reflect on pornography from the point of view both of the “politics of representation,” which it may apply, subvert, reproduce, and perform, and also of its “affective and libidinal” dimensions. Without claiming the euphoric potentiality of pornography as necessarily subversive and emancipatory, the papers open up possibilities for re-writing (in textual, contextual, intertextual, but also affective and embodied forms) about pornography through different graphic and tactical/tactile inscriptions.

Therefore, on the one hand the contributors reflect on definitions and practices of pornography as a genre adopting specific codes and canons, whether narrowly conceived as those concerned with sex acts and the porn industry or more broadly with other predominant forms of representation, fantasies and imaginaries. They ask: Can “pornography” be used in an untroubled way, or without questioning its initial inscription as a normative vision of representation per se and other forms of (embodied, inter/subjec-
tive) desire? How easy is it to reclaim it as a term? What would this entail? To what extent are discursive forms efficacious in shaping subjectivities, and how might we understand their failures and excesses? What might pornographic representations conceal?

These questions intersect with the second aspect of pornography as experience, in its affective, libidinal, inter/subjective dimensions. How does the affective intersect with the symbolic? Where, if anywhere, lies the potential for pornographic experience and representation to subvert existing mechanisms of subjection? And what kind of economic, (bio)political deployments do representations and affects intersect with?

The papers published in this volume tackle these questions from different standpoints in more or less direct ways. We hope they will foster further reflections on issues of representation, affect, sex and sexuality, desire and pleasure, art, academia, and engagement.