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# OBSCENITY, PORNOGRAPHY, MORALITY: MORAL POWER AS CARNAL RESONANCE

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## ABSTRACT

This commentary focuses on the cinematic and intellectual work of Miguel De, expressed through *The Kiss* and its accompanying essay. The objective here is to problematize some of the historical and technocultural connections raised by the essay, and to frame De's experimental essay film within a wider tradition of (mostly European) film-making who has as its main aim a troubling of the notion of "pornography". This troubling is often done through a double deployment of vision: the audience is shown a named something, but maybe not what they were expecting to see, and it is through the disconnect between the naming and the showing that the connections between sexuality, obscenity and carnal resonance are made apparent and contingent. However, as these acts of troubling circulate within the contemporary technological capitalist mediasphere, they quickly become a locus for a potential site of capture, normalization and redeployment of power relationships.

Keywords: Pornography; Obscenity; Post-porn; Symbolic interactionism; Art.

If there is one thing that Miguel De's work empirically and theoretically demonstrates to the utmost degree is that drawing lines is a fundamentally powerful anthropological experience. We draw lines when we write, say or think "we", we draw lines when we conceptualize "there", "wrong", "holy", "sexual" – the examples are potentially infinite, and they happen at all levels – are we that separate (*id est*, is there a line) from non-human animals (Agamben, 2004), are we able to stake out a scientific and academic field (Pereira, 2017), can we have genders (Butler, 2017), can we even have ourselves (Butler, 2005)?

All in all, this is the crux of symbolic interactionism (Becker, 1997) – that drawing lines is a continuous process in time, and that it involves a series of tensions through which power is articulated. Space does not permit me to delve into the concept of "power" itself as so clearly (and lengthily) articulated by Foucault (1994) over some 5 pages, but suffice it to say that, in his perspective, power is not something that can be had, only exerted, that it only exists in relation. These relations are the drawings (and erasings, and modifications) of those lines themselves. It is no surprise that, then, Gayle Rubin's (2007) 'Charmed Circle' consisted of the analysis of how and when and by whom were lines drawn around "good" and "bad" sexuality, and how those lines *moved*. However, it is not enough to note that those lines shift and are contingent, it is always important to note, with Derrida (1982), that the attempt at making a distinction is the marker itself of an *indistinction*, a connection where a *disconnection* is sought. As Attwood (2002) rightly argues, attempting to define pornography is what *creates* pornography, because pornography is not a characteristic of a media object or manifestation, but rather its framing in a certain context, by a certain group, through a series of moral operations – where the pornographic is situated as a subsection of the obscene.

Miguel De (2021) draws on Saunders to say that there is no clear connection between sexuality and obscenity in Ancient Greece, and that that connection is later established with Christianity, and with the reconceptualizing of divinity as "an asexual entity", where the proximity with animality, corporeity and sex is what allows for the drawing of that line that makes sex acts and obscenity in general be mostly on the same side, with the spiritual or the rational being on the other side. According to De (2021), "there is no reason to be seen or hidden" in Greco-Roman art, and so the obscene as an injunction to not-see or not-made-seen, because sex in itself was not connotated with secrecy, with animality and carnality. But the Greeks themselves would make us doubt this line that Miguel De draws: in fact, animal behaviour – and specifically what was seen as the coy, prudent, modest behaviour of *some* animals, who supposedly hid away to have sex and only had sex to procreate – was exalted as a role-model in Ancient Greece, long before Christianity, showing how much obscenity (as an order of that which should not be seen or exalted) was already very much a thing back then (Foucault, 2017). We must find Christianity's prudishness elsewhere, even in Greeks and Romans themselves (Foucault, 2019).

We must also go back a ways more than 1957 to find the Law's concern with the obscene, even if we must do so indirectly by going back to pornography: "pornography" came about as a word, in France, as a treatise on prostitution in the 18th century, by Restif de la Bretonne (pornography being *porne* [prostitute] + *graphein* [writing]) and quickly became deployed for the purpose of censorship in the 19th century by French authorities (Hunt, 1993), alongside other terms like sedition or heresy (Aberdein, 2010). This, of course, puts us back where we started – the *différance* of Derrida (1982), the chasing of the potential 'true' meaning of this term by marking its uniqueness, which continuously defers the difference, while still seemingly producing it. That pornography and obscenity are not the same but are also always connected is clear in Matthew Kieran's (2002, p. 54) exhaustive definition of "obscene":

x is appropriately judged obscene if and only if either (A) x is appropriately classified as a member of a form or class of objects whose authorized purpose is to solicit and commend to us cognitive-affective responses which are (1) internalized as morally prohibited and (2) does so in ways found to be or which are held to warrant repulsion and (3) does so in order to (a) indulge first-order desires held to be morally prohibited or (b) indulge the desire to be morally transgressive or the desire to feel repulsed or (c) afford cognitive rewards or (d) any combination thereof or (B) x successfully elicits cognitive-affective responses which conform to conditions (1)-(3).

Prohibition, morality and the responses – the carnal *resonances* (Paasonen, 2011) – that things might produce make them potentially obscene; and a subset of those is connected (in whatever which way) to sex, which then makes the obscene pornographic. Miguel De's *The Kiss* seeks to trouble these connections by precisely provoking different carnal resonances than the ones associated with porn, while using footage and sounds from porn – the resulting experience can vary, I imagine, between a certain aesthetic boredom, an overload of the way the sound is mashed together, halted, dragged along or made non-diegetic, and maybe even a touch of abjection (Kristeva, 1984) by how the time-stretching of the images becomes a time-stretching of body parts into unfamiliar (maybe *unheimlich*? (Freud, 2003)) configurations.

In this, *The Kiss* plays with visibility and invisibility, with showing some things to let the viewers assume others, in the exact same way that the *My Beautiful Agony* series does – it denies the hyper-visible regime of cinema while not denying the titillation (the carnal resonances) that attach to moral prohibition. Prozorov's (2011) analysis of that shorts' series through the framework of Agamben's work is relevant here: pornography tries to show the "real" in all its potential, and by trying to do so, fails (namely the pornographic "money shot" shows almost nothing in its attempt to show everything). So, resisting normative trappings of pornography and sexuality involves doing just what *The Kiss* does, since it is a "practice that indicates, emphasizes and exaggerates the gap between the two imperatives [of

excessive visibility and of reality], demonstrating the impossibility of their coincidence” (Prozorov, 2011, p. 83).

A whole series of media products, commonly referred to as “post-porn” (Borghi, 2013; Bourcier, 2014; Rojas, 2014), dedicate themselves to various strategies of subverting expectations around what can or cannot be considered pornography, about what is the relationship between the pornographic and the artistic, and how both the denying of visibility and the reshaping of visibility into a fourth-wall-breaking mechanism disrupt the apparent contradiction – rightly noted by Miguel De (2021) and posited by Foucault – between having access to full, on-demand, visibility and drawing power from keeping some things hidden from some people in some contexts. It is crucial to note that, often, wanting to not be seen is nothing more than an exercise in *privilege*, since for others, invisibility is forced upon them, and at times deadly – for those, being seen *and* reinventing ways of showing oneself outside of the constraints of big media companies or multinational streaming platforms is a prime political, carnal, and ethical project (Cardoso & Paasonen, 2021).

A final note, though, needs to be made. Miguel De’s montage of pornographic films takes as self-evident an “act [...] [that] is not simulated” (De, 2021). This runs the risk of leaving some lines drawn in the sand, forgotten and unseen but not ineffective – the line between sex and not-sex, the line between bodies and not-bodies. These lines, as all others, are contingent, contextual. Therefore, it is fundamental to consider how technical representations of certain acts constitute, in themselves, a set of gears in the wider *dispositif* (Agamben, 2005; Cascais, 2009), or technology, of (doing) sex (P. B. Preciado, 2011, 2017) and (being) bodies (Cardoso, 2018).

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