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Performing Obscenity

Bodies, Violence and Desire
in the Contemporary Debate

Inscenare l'osceno

Corpi, violenza e desiderio
nel dibattito contemporaneo

edited by • a cura di
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EDIZIONI DI STORIA E LETTERATURA

ABSTRACTS

GILLES JACINTO – MURIEL PLANA, *Queer's Body and Gestus. Political Pornography in the Contemporary Literature and Performance*

Dealing with two contemporary works considered as typical of queer artistic pornography (Diana J. Torres' postporn performances and *Parallel Stories* by Hungarian novelist Péter Nádas), this essay tackles this issue from a political and esthetical point of view in order to study it less as a commercial production than as a possibly liberating representation of bodies and sexual relations. Thus, by subverting the genre or the scenes which can be defined as pornographic, some contemporary works of art can significantly contribute to the creation of a different way of regarding sex identity, sexuality and pleasure: they may, for instance, resort to queer matters and forms or set up unusual connections between sexual scenes and philosophy. Associating Brechtian theory (*gestus*) and queer theory (performativity), this paper aims to show that pornography may often be normative but can also offer a political space for the progressist representation and conception of sexuality that deserves to be studied.

MICHAELA WÜNSCH, *The Rectum as a Grave. On Jean Genet's Cryptic Pornography*

The essay discusses the pornographic literature of Jean Genet. On the one hand, he is seen as one of the first French authors who matter-of-factly and openly dealt with homosexuality in a literature that was deemed pornographic and banned; and on the other hand, he seems to put forward a stylization of homosexuality as a closed system concealed from the rest of society. This text analyzes the rhetoric of Genet's pornographic writing as cryptoaesthetics which refuses an integration of homosexuality into normalcy.

CRISTINA BASILI, *The Body of Politics. Variations on Simone Weil's Electra*

In 1936, French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943) wrote a short essay on Sophocles' *Electra*. That was part of a broader project intended to make accessible

to the working class the masterpieces of ancient Greek literature. But the composition is not only an admirable example of divulgation; it also represents a key work where most of the Weilian intuitions on power and politics all condense around the suffering body of Electra. The aim of this paper is to show the close connection between the attention to Electra as a figure of oppression and the Weilian critical position towards the modern representation of politics.

FRANCESCA GARGALLO CELENTANI, *Women's Bodies. The Violent Repression of Liberation*

Starting from the political thought of Silvia Federici, Lorena Cabnal and Rita Laura Segato, this essay focuses on obscenity as violence against women's bodies, with particular regard for indigenous feminism in Latin America. In order to investigate the repressive politics of the state, it will be shown how the measures of the last decades have determined the crisis of feminist activism. But, despite the state's monopoly on violence, the author advocates a new strategy of liberation of the body.

LINDA HENTSCHEL, *Black-Cock. Behold and Punish*

Between 1880 and 1980, there were more than 4800 registered cases of black US citizens losing their lives in so-called 'legal lynchings'. To this number, we should add more than 1000 further instances of public torture, shooting, hanging or burning. This essay proposes to examine the visual culture of lynching, in order to demonstrate how this 'feast of torture' contributed to founding an imaginary unified white nation's freedom on a radical obsession with racist exclusion, sexualization and the annihilation of black virility. In particular, the paper will emphasise the role of photography in the sadistic relishing of maximum violation and its connection with early pornography.

ANTONIO ROMANO, *The Pornography of the State Secret*

Why does the State admit to have secrets? Why has the Law been historically hostile to pornography? What is the strategy underlying the two main accusatory theses of pornography, the moral and the ethical one? These questions converge in a common horizon where these theses are well delineated: the first one accuses pornography of being obscene, or morally reprehensible, the second one accuses pornography of being an instrument in the service of a specific biopolitical project, and therefore of being ethically reprehensible. In this paper, we will show how the power released by pornography in the public sphere is refractory to both the moral and ethical injunctions and potentially explosive, being an essentially aesthetic force whose overwhelming, revealing and liberating action breaks all explicit or

implicit normative systems, based on moral or ethical principles. When it enters society we can call this force 'Porn'.

NAIEF YEHYA, *Pornography: Invasion, Conquest and Colonization by the Imaginary of Desire*

Pornography is a schizophrenic genre, at the same time intimate and public, moral and political, anatomical and oneiric. The alternate currents that nourish pornotopia are documentarian extreme graphic realism and fantastic escapism. It has been considered forbidden knowledge because of its transgressions against religion, social order and physiology. Pornography is another name for censorship, for the capricious borders established by the authorities to limit what can and cannot be seen.

ANNE G. SABO, *Porn Transformed. Feminist Re-visions and Definitions at Play*

Abstract: This paper looks at one of the most interesting features of porn's shifting production and consumption practices; namely, the growing participation of women. Originating in the 80s, the porn by women movement has steadily grown stronger over the last decade, coinciding with a trend of more women watching porn. This article focuses specifically on women's re-visioned feminist porn, which the author carefully defines and illustrates with examples. The author concludes by responding to leading anti-porn critics and their claims about the effects of porn; specifically how the effects that they bemoan can be flipped from negative and discriminating to positive and empowering by women's re-visioned feminist porn.

ENRICO BIASIN, *How to Do Things with Bodies. Film-studies and the Cultural Industry of Audiovisual Pornography*

The present essay deals with the possibility to assume the academic field of film studies as a useful context of investigation in order to analyse contemporary audiovisual pornography. The main question is whether film studies are still a valid starting point in dealing with a digital form like pornography, which, at the same time, shows through and wipes out the traditional configuration of the cinematic apparatus. In the first part of the contribution I illustrate the theoretical construction of the cinematic *dispositif* as it was postulated during the 1970s and the early 1980s, by arguing that it is still an appropriate tool, useful to explain how digital productions like mainstream audiovisual pornography work. The second part of the article is about a case study. I read an interesting example of pornographic film – *Portrait of a Call Girl* (2011) shot by Graham Travis and produced by the studio Elegant Angel – with the specific aim of discussing the role of the cinematic *dispositif* in the experience of a text where Art Cinema, classical film language and the *gonzo* and *feature* styles find significative moments of coordination and completion.

FLAVIA MONCERI, *The 'Spanner Case': Sadomasochism, Bodies and Power*

Abstract: In this article I briefly analyze the so-called 'Spanner Case' in order to show that the trials connected to it articulates imply a reference to core issues not only for a marginal sexual community, but for each individual whose sexual practices do not comply with the norms regulating sexuality in contemporary democracies. In such cases, even fundamental legal notions such as 'consent' and 'privacy' may be overcome in the name – and for sake – of so-called 'public interest' and 'public health', for policing individual bodies, their sexualities and sexual practices with the aim of preserving the heteronormative regime. Of course, this political exercise of power in the first instance targets transgressive bodies, like those of SMers. However, my conclusion is that the body of each one of us is constantly at risk of being considered transgressive, and hence also subversive, in case we are not able, or refuse, to conform to the values and rules established by the currently prevailing groups in our societies.

CLAUDIO LIBERO PISANO, *How Art Defuses Pornography*

By analyzing the works of Abramovic, Zebrowka, Vezzoli, Vali Export and many others, this essay sheds light on the connection between obscenity and contemporary art, explaining why pornography cannot be art. Despite the explicit contents of performances and artworks, the author highlights the limit of pornography, interpreted as a radical attempt to make clear and visible what should remain invisible, in order to preserve the infinite movement of the interpretation that lies at the core of art.