

PRELIMINARY NOTES

What does it mean to perform obscenity? How can the borders of obscenity be defined, given that it deals with a huge variety of topics, ranging from eroticism to violence, from transgression to the exercising of power? Starting from Foucault, in recent decades pornography has become a philosophical subject, which has been investigated in many fields. In the last thirty years, thanks to an increased interest in the body as an important topic cutting across the social sciences and the humanities, pornography had become an element which permeates contemporary culture to such an extent that one can talk of the pornification of the culture.

Pornography does not concern only the display of sexually explicit content, but as a cultural product it is closely connected to capitalistic society, and especially a certain idea of alienation or domination – that, for instance, remained at the core of the feminist battle against pornography during the 90's, until post-porn rejected this approach. Most assuredly one can say that pornography has become a much broader category and has acquired many different meanings. On the one hand, it has been investigated as a theoretical device, a filter for the analysis of social processes, a gender challenge, a social form of power and pleasure; on the other hand, by dealing with cultural visibility, it involves many different medias: from cinema to literature, from art to photography, from ancient statuary to youporn.

With the spread of cyberporn we are witnessing an evolution of the interface between corporeal body and computer screen, which leads to a complicated production and regulation of desire that is offered in a huge menu. Pornography is the best example not only of a renewed modification of technology through our own bodies, but also of a peculiar form of interaction – what Žižek, for instance, calls *interpassivity*. Moreover, one can say that because of the use and consumption which lie at its heart, por-

nography is an extreme metaphor of contemporary culture in which desire and capitalism are combined. It is not by chance, that from Baudrillard and then Jameson onward, pornography has been interpreted as a peculiar component of the postmodern age. Over the last years, in particular, it has acquired a paradigmatic role in the works of Agamben, Han, Žižek, Trawny and the vast constellation of gender studies.

This volume attempts to investigate obscenity – or better *on/scenity*, according to Williams' distinction – as a philosophical and cultural category of the present age, by taking into account three interconnected poles around which the topic revolves: an aesthetic mediology, a politics of the body and a semantics of desire.

The first of these aspects concerns the huge field of the media trough which obscenity manifests itself: not only digital production, but also theatre, photography or contemporary art will be analyzed as tools for performing obscenity. The aesthetic tension underlying the pornified object will be emphasized: such object shows what should be not shown and, furthermore, serves a purpose of truth within the limits of representability, but at the same time – as Linda Williams has argued – it strives to achieve *maximum visibility*. The second aspect concerns obscenity as a strategy of resistance against the dominant ideologies that control and shape bodies. Moreover, pornography will be analyzed in its transgressive political role, which sheds light on the limits of law, the dissolving of the distinction between public and private, and the transformation of sexual object into a transferable and exchangeable good. The third area involves the peculiar semantics of desire and its impact on society. One can argue that pornography, as a hyperbolic and allegorical realm, constitutes a rhetorical gesture and a semantic area that fulfils our imaginary desire, while dealing with display of contemporary society. That means that pornographic is not only a type of intimacy or a specific construction of pleasure, but also a linguistic, historical and social experience, because it is connected to exposition, performance, consumption and technology, which are the most important categories in our contemporary age.

In order to grasp the impact of obscenity as a serious challenge in all of its philosophical complexity, many other aspects have been highlighted in this volume: the connection between nudity and theology, the secret of prohibition, social transgression, the link with the performativity theory, the challenge of post-porn, the act of self-display, aesthetic productions, and the relationship between performance and reality.

In an attempt to shed light on a wide range of aspects – from violence on the body to the feminist appropriation of pornography, from the

notions of performance and performativity to their relevance within media studies – we have collected different essays in the hope that this volume will promote a serious debate in Italy on the role of obscenity, beyond demonization and moral hostility, not only because it constitutes an urgent topic, but also because it can offer a critic tool to interpret and better understand our present.

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