

”you can’t eat the food porn”: The Obscene, the Pornographic, the Excessive, the Purposeless

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as long as sexuality remains as integrated into social life in general as say, eating, its possibilities of symbolic extension are to that degree limited —Jameson

The notorious difficulty of defining *obscenity* and *pornography* has a long history. But the term *porn* has, over the past decade or so, begun to crop up with new meanings, in new places. This post assumes that this accretion is not merely random and is subject to at least some degree of analysis and consideration and, in that spirit, tries to sort that meaning out. Be forewarned, however, this post will feature nothing that is itself prurient. Prurience is of key importance as a criterion in the legal definition of obscenity. “Pornographic” and “pornography,” unlike *obscene* and *obscenity*, do not have strict legal definitions.; indeed, the meanings of *porn* are now freed from sexual explicitness, at the exact historical moment which has seen a relatively broad acceptance of a distinct and well-defined pornography industry (a process that I take to have been greatly accelerated by, but that predates, the internet).

I was reminded of the changing uses to which the word *pornographic* has been put when I happened to hear this exchange

regarding the Jodi Arias trial a couple of weeks ago, between host of NPR's "Talk of the Nation" (requiescat in pace) Neal Conan and novelist Walter Mosley:

NEAL CONAN: ... is there a trial that you followed closely? WALTER MOSLEY: You know, I actually try my best not to follow trials because there seems to be something a little **pornographic** and a little un-American about it. I kind of feel that if somebody is, like, being tried for something, that that's - it's not exactly a private thing, but it's a thing between them and the law, and that's the reason we have law, so I don't have to make a decision about it.

(Why We Can't Look Away from True-Life Courtroom Dramas, May 13, 2013)

What does "pornographic" here mean? In his comments, Mosley appeals to a notion of privacy, as if the "pornography" of high-profile trials (like that of Jodi Arias) inheres in a violation of the intimacy of a special, private moment between the defendant and the court. I will leave entirely unremarked both the peculiar notion of privacy between an individual and *the state* and what may be *un-American* about it.

But surely Mosley does not mean to indicate a violation of privacy, in the strict sense, so much as the particular kind of spectatorship these trials invite, the transformation of the trial from into a spectacle. A trial, for such a perspective, is a sort of *means* towards an *end* (call that end, say, justice); but the trial becomes a spectacle when this means/ends logic is interrupted—when the end seems to become obscured, and one revels in the trial as an end in itself. It is a violation, not of any sort of privacy, so much as the usual solemnity and function of trial.

This mode of spectatorship that confuses means and ends is what I take Mosley to have meant when he called such trials *pornographic*.

Of course, what counts as a means and what counts as an end are hardly simple question; and this observation alone that doesn't *really* answer my broader question. Why is it that the term to name such spectacle is *pornographic*, rather than say *sensational* or *exploitative* or even the bland and polemically boring *inappropriate*?

Food Porn

Petits pains au chocolat by Laurence Vagner, on Flickr

The best evidence of the shifting meanings of *pornographic*, I think, are the tumblrs, pinterest boards, and blogs that treat the term *porn* as nearly a suffix to name *not* a particular kind of content (though there are plenty of those) but rather the particular mode of engagement that concerns Mosley when it is applied to trials. Things like “book porn,” or “library porn,” or “bookcase porn” With my examples, I fear I've given myself away.. Surely, the most common of such non-pornographic *porn* (and likely the origin of the instances I quoted and, no doubt, of many more) comes from *food porn*.

Food porn, if you're unfamiliar, has its own wikipedia entry—though that page betrays a variety (bordering on incoherent) of definitions broader than what I would associate with the term Among them, an suggestion that the *porn* of *food porn* comes from its nutritional qualities—i.e. food porn is “unhealthy” food, as in this “Right Stuff vs. Food Porn” eating advice column.. One can go to Food Porn Daily for what I take to be instances of this particular genre. And while there's plenty of variability in what gets tagged #foodporn, the instances at Food Porn Daily make the template pretty clear: pictures of food with: highly saturated color; always in close up, frequently at a low angle (a picture of cookies cooling on a baking sheet, shot from what looks like just inches above the baking sheet); at least one area of very crisp focus, often with a shallow depth of field (so that the front of these ricotta crepes with Smoked Salmon, Capers, Red Onions, and Cherry tomatoes is in sharp focus, even as the opposite end of the crepe blurs).

The food may be unplated, on a cutting board or still cooking in a pan; it may be plated and presented, *pret a manger*; occasionally one finds a fork, having already separated out a bite, lying on the plate ready to be picked up. Occasionally, one even sees a small bite already taken (as is the case, I take it, in this image of a prosciutto, strawberry, and brie panino on crusty ciabatta. **Banal Hypothesis:** An analysis of the titles of menu items (à la Franco Moretti's examination of the lengths of novel titles in "Style Inc") would reveal a marked increase in complexity of dish names over the past two decades.. But any human presence is absent (though the image of a half-eaten hamburger in this story about the "end of food porn" might complicate that claim). The photos at Food Porn Daily achieve a remarkable stylistic consistency even though they are aggregated from a variety of sources. Indeed, food photography appears to be a well established commercial specialization, and the internet does not lack helpful introductions and recommendations for creating food porn. That is, food porn has a well established set of stylistic conventions, all of which work to solicit a certain type of gaze. All the things that we might wish to enjoy in a piece of food are translated (or perhaps merely replaced) by visual analogues/correlates/substitutions/replacements. The papery texture of crisply cooked pastry dough must be captured at the right depth, with the right color, to suggest its materiality even in its absence; the doneness of an egg yolk (warm not slimy, cooked through but not solid) must inhere in the brightness of the yellow, perhaps even in the visual evidence of the yoke's flow from the egg, cut only moments before by some invisible hand.

If you wish to make these dishes, there is a Food Porn Daily cookbook; though the amazon reviews confirm what surely you already knew: these pictures, not the dishes, are themselves what is to be consumed. You might try to make these dishes yourself; but really? Expert though you may be, your dish will never look like that anyway (even if you replace milk with Elmer's glue). At one level this is no different than the rise of the Food Network, or home improve-

ment television, or other genres of “do it yourself” entertainment which cloak entertainment and aspiration in the “how to” and “do it yourself” rhetoric of self-betterment.

But food porn (and its fellow pornographic genres) certainly intensifies the divorce between means and ends. A bookshelf at bookshelfporn is unlikely to inspire one to remodel one’s home, or take up saw and mallet. Wood-grained bookshelves and wood-grilled paninis? One could rewrite this entire post focusing just on the issue of class. Look at these bookcases; look at these dishes. Whose idea of the “good life” is this? And how do adjectives and adjectival phrases (*crunchy* cibatta bread, etc) capture that aspiration? And even if so inclined, you could never build all the book shelves at bookshelfporn. Overabundance and excess are part of the spectacle—one picture of a bookshelf is not bookshelfporn; but once it’s aggregated with others, you’re on your way (perhaps a bookshelf porn guide to carpentry is in the offing). In food porn, the food itself is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the required spectacle. Such photos represent a condition that in many cases never existed—they are often postprocessed, or generated by techniques like HDR; the macro lenses and lighting, the sort of focus and angle typical of these photos creates a prosthetic, inhuman gaze.

So, here’s a definitional distinction that I’ll hazard. While Walter Mosley can invoke the adjectival *pornographic* to describe cable news coverage of a trial, the term *porn* (as a quasi-suffix to indicate a certain genre of tumblr/blog/website) is reserved for visual material, and indeed, for collections of photographic images. The photographic conventions (which, it may be worth admitting, are not unrelated to *pornography* in the most conventional sense) are easily transferable to nearly object that one could conceive a *lust* for (garden porn! bicycle porn! finch porn! banana peel porn! lino-type porn!)Please, please, please be careful about googling any of those terms.

Equally vital is the sense of an excessive superabundance of images generated by the fact of aggregation and collection (or *curation* to speak in the argot of Web 2.0). Although food porn predates sites like tumblr and pinboard, for such a definition it is through such sites that (to adapt Hegelian terms) this particular idea of “porn” fully achieves its Concept. The mode of spectatorship that is the defining fact of this genre requires *excess*. One finds that sort of excess which itself inheres in the word *obscene*:

2. Offending against moral principles, repugnant; repulsive, foul, loathsome. Now (also): *spec.* (of a price, sum of money, etc.) ridiculously or offensively high. ... 1974 Greenville (S. Carolina) News 23 Apr. 1/8 Energy officials have already predicted that first-quarter oil profits will be ‘embarrassingly high’ or ‘whoppers’. Sen. Henry Jackson, D-Wash., has said they’ll be ‘almost obscene.’

(“Obscene”)

Another reason you can’t eat the food porn: there is just too much of it.

So, a definition. **Food porn**—a genre of “content” (and here too, using the vacuous term *content*, the connection of this genre to the history of the web seems evident) that redeploys certain photographic conventions and a sense of excess in order to solicit a mode of spectacular consumption, of consumption (of visual apprehension) as an end in itself.

It is as “an end in itself” that it becomes possible, as Mosley does, to use the term *pornographic* to describe a way of watching a trial *and* to have the moral force of that statement be completely clear. He also has a not very convincing argument that contemporary food-ism emerged out of the decline in sexual promiscuity in the wake of the AIDS crisis. When, in 2001 (a comparatively early moment

in this history of the idea of food porn), Anthony Bourdain invoked this same sense of implicit morality, writing about “food porn” as a sort of vicariousness (at times, he seems to cross the vehicle and tenor of the metaphor, calling “food porn” not a substitute *for food* but a “substitute for sex”).

An obvious moral attends such a definition of imagery and the modes of attention it solicits in terms of *vicariousness*. Food porn becomes a dangerous *supplement* to real culinary enjoyment. And, indeed, D. H. Lawrence’s objections to pornography of a more conventional sort provides the template: pornography as a degraded, perverted, alienated, vicarious sexuality (just as, from that wider template of phonocentrism, writing is a sort of degraded/alienated speech). Bourdain, in 2001, expresses hope that we will soon move beyond mere food porn to actual food:

As we once only read about sex in the ’50s before indulging ourselves indiscriminately in its pleasures in the ’60s, ’70s and early ’80s, we might now also be approaching a crossroads. Instead of simply reading about small, good things and gazing at them in pictures, maybe we will begin, once again after a long, long absence, to cook it, rediscovering the best of ourselves and holding it close.

(“Food Porn”)

One must give Bourdain credit for mentions in the piece of the Olympia Press, etc, which prove an admirable familiarity with the print history of obscenity. And, from a very different corner, one finds Frederic Jameson drawing on this moral dimension of the term *porn* in his description of the pornographic in the opening lines from *Signatures of the Visible* (1990). Here though, it is not *vicariousness* (the replacement of the proper object by its mere substitute) that is the problem, so much as the rapt, uncritical, *unthinking*, fascination which marks the pornographic gaze:

The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than from the more thankless effort to discipline the viewer). Pornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body. (1)

The first sentence of that block quote won the *Philosophy and Literature*-sponsored third annual “bad writing” contest. I’m no fan of such contests, but I will grant that the demonstrative that after the semicolon (which, I think, refers to “that fascination”) is a little ungainly. I wonder as well whether *potential* mightn’t be a fairer term for *potentiation*. One can find this formulation (“the visual is essentially pornographic”) quoted with some frequency. While it introduces *Signatures of the Visible*, it is not elaborated beyond this passage and serves chiefly as a way of introducing a sort of statement of values and commitments that informs Jameson’s film criticism (of which *Signatures* is a collection; I recall liking the *Dog Day Afternoon* essay).

And while Jameson says “*The visual* is essentially pornographic” he (the thinker who offers Always historicize! as the “slogan” of “all dialectical thought” and the “moral” of *The Political Unconscious* [9] Apparently, you can get a lot from a Jameson book without ever moving past the first page.), surely would not offer this as a statement about “the visual” as such. Indeed, the thinker who insists that “the senses are themselves not natural organs but rather the results of a long process of differentiation even within human history” (*Political* 62), is making not a statement about the visual *as such*, but about the visual at our own historical moment—or rather, the place of the visual at the start of 1990s, prior to what we might imagine as our own post-cinematic moment.

Indeed, there are two histories that *The Political Unconscious* offers that help account for the suffixation of “porn” to name a genre of browsable imagery defined *not* by the content of the images, but by a mode of engagement (“rapt fascination”).

Discussing psychoanalysis, Jameson suggests that the emergence of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic depends on a larger autonomization of sexuality itself:

The psychoanalytic demonstration of the sexual dimension of overtly nonsexual conscious experience and behavior is possible only when the sexual “dispositif” or apparatus has by a process of isolation, autonomization, specialization, developed into an independent sign system or symbolic dimension in its own right; as long as sexuality remains as integrated into social life in general as say, eating, its possibilities of symbolic extension are to that degree limited, and the sexual retains its status as a banal inner-worldly event and bodily function. (*Political* 64)

Food porn, like psychoanalysis, reveals the “sexual dimension of the overtly nonsexual” as well. Not, however, the same way psychoanalysis does—through a hermeneutics of revealing, discovering a latent sexuality behind some overt, apparently nonsexual meanings. The apparatus at stake here is the pornographic gaze itself, which has itself been sufficiently autonomized to be utterly separable even from pornography.

There is a second, broader, history out of which food porn emerges: that of aesthetics itself. Inasmuch as food porn (and similar phenomena) represents the consuming of images as images, as a quasi-autonomous experience that is only tangentially connected to the culinary enjoyment Adorno refers at one point to non-aesthetic pleasure as *merely culinary*. (or whatever) that they appear to represent. Of the emergence of visual art from the autonomization of sight itself, Jameson writes:

as sight becomes a separate activity in its own right, it acquires new objects that are themselves the products of a process of abstraction and rationalization which strips the experience of the concrete of such attributes as color, spatial depth, texture, and the like, which in their turn undergo reification. The history of forms evidently reflects this process, by which the visual features of ritual, or those practices of imagery still functional in religious ceremonies, are secularized and reorganized into ends in themselves, in easel painting and new genres like landscape, then more openly in the perceptual revolution of the impressionists, with the autonomy of the visual finally triumphantly proclaimed in abstract expressionism. So Lukács is not wrong to associate the emergence of modernism with the reification which is its precondition; but he oversimplifies and deproblematizes a complicated and interesting situation by ignoring the Utopian vocation of the newly reified sense, the mission of this heightened and autonomous language of color to restore at least symbolic experience of libidinal gratification to a world drained of it, a world of extension, gray and merely quantifiable. (*Political* 63)

The engagement solicited by food porn, and indeed by *porn*, is itself not unrelated to the aesthetic gaze and its history which Jameson offers here in miniature. The aesthetic as a separate domain insists on such autonomy. In a provocative aside in her essay on “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” Eve Sedgwick connects the autonomous aesthetic of Kant to autoerotic pleasure: “the Aesthetic in Kant is both substantially indistinguishable from, and at the same time definitionally opposed against, autoerotic pleasure” (111). *Definitionally opposed* because, in the Kantian vocabulary, the pornographic would be *merely agreeable*; it is interested pleasure which gratifies some bodily need. The pleasure one takes in eating an hamburger,

for Kant, is not aesthetic because it sates a hunger. But if I take pleasure not in the hamburger, but in an image of it, my pleasure begins to look less interested, less purposeful even if it maintains a certain... purposiveness; it begins to look, maybe eerily, aesthetic.

Of course, this slippery slope which leads to the equation of *porn* with the aesthetic is one which the twentieth-century assiduously avoided, even as the substantial indistinguishability Sedgwick notes persisted. One can see it, for instance, in the similarity of the formulae *art for art's sake* and *dirt for dirt's sake*. This latter formula was invoked by Judge Woolsey in the famous 1933 *Ulysses* decision (one finds it today reprinted with the Viking edition). In finding that the work was nowhere “dirt for dirt’s sake,” Woolsey finds that the work is not obscene. And yet, that slogan itself, which offers a definition of obscenity, deliberately echoes the slogan-like assertion of aesthetic autonomy, “art for art’s sake.”

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