MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

# Representing Orgasms and Pleasure in Pornography: The Face in *Beautiful Agony*

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**Introduction:**

A woman's head appears as she lies down, directly below the camera, filling the frame with her face and shoulders. She stares into the lens as she adjusts herself, and we hear the sound of her unbuckling and unzipping her pants. We see her shoulders and upper body tense up as she begins to touch herself—but her movements are beyond the frame. As she brings herself to climax over the course of the next three minutes, we watch her move back and forth, open and close her eyes, make soft moaning sounds, and peer into the camera lens occasionally. We are given a glimpse only of her face and shoulders. Her orgasm is brief and the only evidence that we are given is in her face: she contracts, furrows her brows, and jerks back and forth, gasping. When she is finished, she gets up and leaves us with a view of her pillow. The video is sparse: there is no dialogue, no music, and no partner—there is also no nudity.

The amateur pornographic website *Beautiful Agony* contains over 2000 videos of orgasms, all showing pleasure only from the neck up. Anonymous contributors are encouraged to send video files of their faces as they masturbate, and are paid two hundred dollars (American) for each video submitted, plus one month's free subscription. *Beautiful Agony* is one of many amateur pornographic websites with an emphasis on eroticism and pleasure rather than hardcore images; straddling the line between art, project and pornography, the website is titillating despite not showing graphic images.

Online pornography has allowed for a democratization of pornographic materials: through the DIY nature of the Internet, anyone can produce and upload images and videos to share, trade or post online. With the advent of the Internet and the decreasing

cost of electronics and webcams, pornography has moved away from the cinema and into the private bedrooms of most pornography consumers. Not only has the Internet replaced magazine and film pornography, but it has created specific subgenres that utilize the interactive nature of the Internet specifically—chatting, posting to message boards and webcam porn are popular in part because they allow the viewer to interact with others and feel part of a community. Online amateur pornography is one such niche—it is relatively inexpensive to produce, and it appears to be more "authentic" than mainstream professional pornography because it features people who do not have the appearance that we associate with professional "porn stars." Most online amateur pornography features men and women who are "billed as your neighbour, your boss, your sister-in-law" (Patterson 111). In this way, consumers are led to believe that they are witnessing pleasure between real people, rather than actors onscreen or professionals. Online pornography also allows for extremely specific niches to emerge and thrive through online community building—the ability to communicate with others who share one's interests helps particular kinks and pleasures to thrive. *Beautiful Agony* is one such particular pornographic website, which meshes art and eroticism together with the interactivity of an online community to create an atmosphere that moves beyond mainstream pornography.

In this paper, I will investigate the potential for finding a counter-aesthetics within pornography. First, I will briefly describe a history of ignorance surrounding female pleasure within medicine and science. I will argue that female bodies have been subjugated, regulated and repressed in mainstream Western society, and that this subjugation has created a sense of unknoweability within many women about their bodies

and more specifically, their orgasms.[1] I will then discuss the relationship between bodies and screens, showing how interactivity and a sense of domesticity within online pornography operate to create an intimacy between the viewer and the bodies that he or she is engaging with. I will explain what is at stake when we try to find a "truth" within the bodies onscreen, drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the *scientia sexualis* and Linda Williams' "frenzy of the visible." I will then move to a description of eroticism and "moral pornography,"[2] and the ways that pornography can be productive in creating subjectivity, rather than objectifying bodies.

I will focus on the sense of "authenticity" created through the domesticity and interactivity on the *Beautiful Agony* website. By "authenticity," I mean appearing to be accurate in representation, and genuine in appearance. Amanda Bakehorn notes that authenticity has been studied in a variety of fields, including the existential search for an "authentic self" and as an ideal "set against the homogenizing, alienating forces of modern society" (55). She argues that originality and authenticity are important in the modern world, as people are "inundated with the fake" and are searching avidly for the genuine. Authentic pleasure is tied to truth; the quest for authentic or "real" pleasure is a goal for many pornographers. Finally, I will describe *Beautiful Agony* as creating an

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[1] While I argue that mainstream culture has repressed female desire through shame and ignorance, there have been changes to this regime, particularly from the 1980s on. In her chapter "The Female Phallus," Shannon Bell notes the history of female ejaculation, arguing that a paradigm shift about representations of female sexuality began in the 1980s, creating a new discourse surrounding female pleasure, including the coining of the term the "G-spot" and an emerging public lesbian queer culture (Bell, 2010).

[2] Angela Carter defines the "moral pornographer" as an artist who would utilize pornographic material to demystify the flesh, thus allowing for a realization of "the real relations of man and his kind" (19).

environment that moves beyond traditional amateur pornography; I will argue that in eroticizing faces rather than bodies, *Beautiful Agony* invites the viewer to identify with the subjects onscreen in new and interesting ways: rather than passively enjoying the bodies onscreen or experiencing pleasure from them, the viewer actively identifies with the Other, thus understanding him or herself through this Other onscreen.

A critical study of pornography must take into account the fact that pornography is mostly ignored within current academic debates due to its seemingly lowbrow status and an assumption that it in its vulgarity, it is more akin to pop culture than literary texts or cinema. Linda Williams points to the importance of studying pornography in her preface to the 1999 edition of her seminal work Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible", noting that since her initial text was published in 1989, academia is opening up to the study of pornography. Despite this change, however, discussing surrounding porn all too frequently focus on "pro" and "anti" pornography arguments, which as Peter Lehman argues in his Introduction to Pornography: Film and Culture, do not contribute to critical and analytical study. In this way, academic discourse surrounding pornography has historically focused upon censorship or repression—the "pornography wars" of the 1980s saw feminists arguing that pornography is tantamount to rape, essentializing both male and female pleasure as active and passive, respectively. In her "Introduction" to Sex Exposed, Lynn Segal notes: "Two oddly contradictory arguments began to take the lead in feminist debates from the mid to late 1970s. The first… was to deny that rape was sexually motivated, and analyse it purely in terms of violence, as the timeless and global method by which men had sought and managed to keep women subordinate… The second… was to analyse all of male sexuality in terms of

a continuum of violence: to proclaim...that the basic elements of rape are involved in all heterosexual relationships" (3). Pornography was thus vilified as a cause of men's violence towards women. Conversely, anti-censorship feminists criticized the conservative anti-pornography movement for its bias against sexuality and the illogic of their causal arguments. In Pornography and the Law, Dany Lacombe notes that anti-censorship feminists argued that a simplistic understanding of pornography as causing violence against women does not properly explore the social relations between men and women, or explore the mechanisms by which "desires, fantasies and sexual identities emerge" (57). These feminists used semiotics to understand the signifiers of sexuality and separate "pornography" from other sexist representations within media and other mainstream images in order to demonstrate that pornography itself is not the cause of oppression, but sexism is deeply rooted within culture.

These debates are largely past, and feminist theory has moved on; postmodernity has problematized the essential categories onto which many of these arguments rely, and feminist theory has undergone disciplinary changes, with universities moving from Women's Studies to Queer or Gender Studies. What is at stake in discussing pornography in a seemingly post-feminist theoretical context? What is there to discuss? Despite these apparent contradictions and problems, it is vital to read, study and consider pornography as existing on the borders of our society and rendering our desires visible. Pornography shows us both what we want to see, and what we do not want to see. In showing extremes of the body and intimacy, pornography demonstrates the private made explicitly public; Laura Kipnis argues that pornography "holds us in the thrall of its transgression," offering up a "detailed blueprint of a culture's anxieties, investments, contradictions"

(120). Because of these interesting contestations, feminist and critical theory must continue to look at pornography as a site of power, struggle and sexuality. Although the current trends in cultural theory tend towards studying advertising, fashion, and other images from popular culture and film, Visual Studies as an academic discipline must not continue to relegate pornography to the sidelines, or risk missing out on vital dialogues and sites of power and sexuality.

## Chapter 1: Finding the "truth" of the Body

> Galen's simile goes as follows. The eyes of the mole have the same structures as the eyes of other animals except that they do not allow the mole to see. They do not open, "nor do they project but are left there imperfect." So too the female genitalia "do not open" and remain an imperfect version of what they would be were they thrust out.
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> - Thomas Laqueur, "Making Sex" (1990)

> In these terms, woman's erogenous zones never amount to anything but a clitoris-sex that is not comparable to the noble phallic orgasm, or a hole-envelope that serves to sheathe and massage the penis in intercourse: a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing.
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> - Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is Not One" (1985)

Female pleasure has been denied, medicalized, repressed, controlled and ignored throughout history. Many articles and books are dedicated to the subject, and much work

has been done to understand the lack of information surrounding women's experiences of their bodies and the continuing subjugation of female pleasure to capitalist, religious, dominant, and/or male interests. In "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance," Nancy Tuana studies the practices that suppress or erase bodies of knowledge concerning women's sexual pleasure, arguing that the ignorance surrounding female pleasure is not accidental, but is constructed, maintained and disseminated. Feminist scholarship has attempted to reclaim and resituate female pleasure within academia by uncovering the hidden histories. From the routine masturbation of "hysterical" women by their doctors[3] to the lost genealogy of female ejaculation,[4] women have emerged from the hidden recesses of history to claim a space within scholarship. Feminist theory has reconstituted and reimagined female bodies throughout a variety of disciplines, reclaiming scientific discourse, literary theory, film studies, policy, political theory and philosophical tenants, to name a few.

Despite decades of feminist scholarship, female pleasure is still deemed as less significant than male pleasure in Western popular culture and society; from double standards surrounding female promiscuity[5] to a prevailing view of female desire as less

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[3] Rachel P. Maines notes in The Technology of Orgasm that this was a standard treatment beginning in the first century A.D and recorded as taking place routinely until the 1920s.

[4] Shannon Bell notes: "Despite the descriptions of it in medical, philosophical and pornographic literature throughout Western history... female ejaculation was denied by the dominant discourses defining female sexuality until the 1980s." (53)

[5] For example, Feona Attwood's "Sluts and Riot Grrrls" traces the term "slut" historically, arguing that the word has the possibility for reappropriation; however, the term is still utilized in order to punish or demonize women for acting in a sexual manner. Attwood argues that analyzing the language that is used to

"natural" or inherent than male. Our beliefs and conceptions surrounding the female body are shaped by thousands of years of shame and disgust concerning female fluids and orifices. Advertisements and popular culture in general are permeated with representations of "normal" sexuality that are predominantly androcentric, misogynistic and heteronormative; for example, Naomi Wolf's seminal work The Beauty Myth demonstrates the adverse effects of images of beauty on women, arguing that the conventions of pornography (which she defines as a "dishonest" aesthetic, lacking in an authentic representation of female desire or pleasure) are used to sell products to women through advertisements. Wolf's work points to the seemingly innocuous imagery that alters our popular perception of beauty and femininity. Similarly, Gayle Rubin also points to popular culture's adverse effect on women: "Popular sexual ideology is a noxious stew made up of ideas of sexual sin, concepts of psychological inferiority, anti-communism, mob hysteria, accusations of witchcraft, and xenophobia." Rubin argues that an ideal sexual system as represented through popular culture is heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative and non-commercial (14). These representations of female sexuality encourage the population to perceive women as passive, undesiring objects of active male pleasure.

Along with a denial of female agency within popular culture, an ignorance surrounding the female body is entrenched within education and medicine. This ignorance is firmly rooted in anatomical drawings of female bodies—as Nancy Tuana observes within recent anatomy textbooks, the male genitals are "carefully drawn and

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denigrate women is a good way to examine the ways that women engage with a culture that reduces them to their sexual value (whilst simultaneously ignoring their sexuality).

labeled" while the clitoris is represented by "the merest bit of nub" (209). The clitoris' subordination to the "superior" penis has been documented by historians and scholars as pertaining to the importance of reproduction; the androcentric definition of sexuality sees "normal" heterosexual sex as the penetration of the vagina by the penis until (male) orgasm—conveniently the method that will most likely lead to reproduction (Maines 3). The emphasis on reproduction as the driving purpose of sex places female pleasure squarely in the sidelines—if the clitoris and female orgasm do not play a role in reproduction, then they are not worth paying attention to (Tuana 210). Freud described the clitoris as a plaything for young girls, used only until a woman matured and could then experience "mature" vaginal orgasms. (Laqueur 1990, 236). Female masturbation has been similarly stigmatized: historically, women were told that masturbation was dangerous to their health, and that if they were not satisfied by heterosexual (married, missionary) penetrative sex, they were flawed or incomplete (Maines 6). "Real sex" has been consistently described and represented as consisting of a heterosexual, missionary, monogamous act that ends in male orgasm—from American marriage manuals[6] from the early twentieth century, to current Christian dogma in America.[7]

Female orgasms are also frequently represented through popular culture as difficult to attain, and more complicated and rooted in emotion than male orgasms. In

[6] "A Marriage Manual: A practical Guidebook to Sex and Marriage," one of the most widely sold marriage manuals from the 1930s to 1950s, emphasizes the link between sex and reproduction, stating that since female orgasm is not necessary for reproduction, it is of little importance (Melody 122).

[7] The current trend for young couples to give "promise rings" to one another as a vow of mutual chastity, and the current definition of "virginity" as entailing the penetration of the vagina by the penis are two examples of the prominence placed on heterosexual penetrative sex.

addition, the assumption that women have to be "comfortable" in order to ejaculate supposes that female pleasure is reliant on love rather than the body (Bell 39, 2010). The feminist argument that male pleasure is phallic, perverse and violent (which implies that female pleasure is the opposite) essentializes pleasure into two binary categories. Delineating female pleasure as passive, non-violent, and non-perverse presumes that it exists outside of power relations—clearly an impossibility, and not what feminists desire. Linda Williams asserts that this viewpoint of male sexuality as essentially violent is flawed, as it perpetuates the myth of female victimhood and does not allow for an active female sexuality (22). Thus, in trying to "rescue" female sexuality from patriarchy, some feminists have relegated it even further to the realm of passivity. In Hard Core, Williams points to anti-porn feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon as essentializing female pleasure. She argues, "This argument suggests, erroneously I believe, that if female sexuality were ever to get free of its patriarchal contaminations it would express no violence, would have no relations of power, and would produce no transgressive sexual fantasies" (20).

**The Unknowable Orgasm**

Indeed, the female orgasm is commonly represented in popular culture as unknowable, hidden, and unrepresentable. Rachel P. Maines describes accounts of women faking orgasms in order to keep their (male) partners happy: women who do not orgasm from penetrative sex are deemed defunct, and men who need to ask for instructions are lacking (117). Maines notes,

> In our own culture there have been, and remain, powerful means of negatively reinforcing women's demands for orgasmic mutuality. A woman's admitting that coitus does not by itself ring her chimes is in some quarters still a confession of defect. In addition, Western men are expected to be born knowing how to satisfy women in much the same way as women are expected to be born knowing how to cook. (117)

Since the female orgasm is less physically visible than the male, in that typically there is no outward ejaculation as proof, its occurrence is a matter of speculation or assumption rather than visible, quantifiable observation. Linda Williams notes, "while it is possible, in a certain limited and reductive way, to "represent" the physical pleasure of the male by showing erection and ejaculation, this maximum visibility proves elusive in the parallel confession of female sexual pleasure" (49). Female pleasure is perhaps more ambiguous than male; in the same way that the female genitalia is obscured from view, the female orgasm is something hidden that must be uncovered, sought out, and worked for—or, for the woman, something to feel ashamed of if she cannot do it.[8]

The hidden female orgasm and invisibility of female pleasure is nowhere more obvious than in dominant mainstream pornography.[9] Compared to the physical

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[8] The recent documentary "Orgasm Inc." describes the "epidemic" of "female sexual dysfunction," a disease that filmmaker Liz Canner argues has been invented by the medical industry in order to sell products and medicine to women. See trailer here: [http://vimeo.com/10990186]

[9] The importance of viewing the female orgasm is ever present in standard pornography; the growing trend of porn that features female ejaculation, or "squirt porn" (for example: spankwire.com, a popular pornographic website, contains over 450 videos labeled under "squirt") and the popularity of websites such

exuberance of male ejaculation (referred to within pornography as the "money shot"), the female orgasm is relatively subtle, demonstrated more frequently through vocal and facial cues than outward ejaculation. Linda Williams argues that the money shot "succeeds in extending visibility to the next stage of representation of the heterosexual sex act: to the point of seeing climax." She argues that each shot seeks "maximum visibility," and the "money shot" in particular attempts to gratify the viewer's desire to see (94). Conversely, Williams argues that the "knowledge of female wonders" remains hidden onscreen in pornography, and that pornography operates as an attempt to uncover the hidden mysteries and secrets of female pleasure (94). Williams draws on Michel Foucault's concept of a *scientia sexualis*, a hermeneutics of desire that aims at uncovering truths about human sexuality. Foucault argues that our obsession with confessing the truths of our body (and the pleasure we gain from it) has turned us into a "singularly confessing society," where our obligation to confess our hidden desires has transformed sex into discourse (60). Foucault calls this discourse "sexuality," and argues that the history of sexuality not only "speaks sex" and compels us to do so as well, but introduces a belief that sex has a "secret" to tell—and invites us to discover this truth (Foucault 69).

This "secret" becomes apparent in pornography as the secret of female pleasure, according to Williams, who argues that a cinematic "hard core" emerges from society's obsession with uncovering the "hidden truths" of sex and our construction of new forms of body knowledge (36). Citing Luce Irigaray, Williams argues that this discourse operates to uncover the hidden secrets of female desire in particular, which is deemed

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as AbbyWinters.com, which purports to show "natural amateurs," points to a desire to make female pleasure visible.

mysterious in comparison to male pleasure due to the "lack" of phallus in the female genitalia (54). She culminates her argument by stating: "[t]he woman's ability to fake the orgasm that the man can never fake (at least according to certain standards of evidence) seems to be at the root of all the genre's attempts to solicit what it can never be sure of: the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core 'frenzy of the visible'" (50). In this way, pornography attempts to show what cannot be clearly seen—the "hidden" or "mysterious" female orgasm—to the extent that it fetishizes female pleasure.

**Searching for Authenticity**

Looking for the truths of female pleasure in pornography is a difficult (and perhaps impossible) proposition. Pornography studies have traditionally focused on pro- or anti-pornography arguments, and on analyzing the content of pornography and its potential effects on its viewers—both positive and negative.[10] Only in more recent scholarship has the authenticity of pornography been analyzed: for example, a recent dissertation by Jill Amanda Bakehorn of the University of California analyses the construction of "real sex" in woman-made pornography (2010). Bakehorn interviewed women who make film and web pornography outside the mainstream industry in order to discuss the constructions of authenticity and their implications. She notes that directors, producers, and actors alike aim for realness in pornography, along with consumers who are looking for self-representation onscreen. Bakehorn describes the popular argument

[10] Anti-pornography feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon argue that pornography promotes violence against women, objectifying their bodies and exploiting them as workers. Conversely, anti-censorship feminists, such as Angela Carter, have argued that pornography allows women to act as aggressively sexual as men.

that mainstream pornography does not contain "real" bodies engaging in "real" sex. She quotes Naomi Wolf, who argues that the women in mainstream pornography have been either coerced, or surgically altered, or do not experience pleasure—and therefore, are fake. She notes, "a common theme throughout many interviews was a belief that audiences, and women in particular, want to see themselves represented, to see 'people that look like me'" (196). Bakehorn's dissertation does not search for whether or not the pleasure is actually authentic within the pornography, but why authenticity is something that we desire when looking at pornography, and how a semblance of authenticity is manufactured.

Similarly, in "Reading Porn Reparatively" (2009), Kath Albury discusses the drawbacks of relying on moral frameworks to analyze pornography, arguing that analyzing the social effects of the production, consumption and distribution of pornography is more useful than deciding whether or not pornography is "good" or "bad" based on a set of moral ethics (648). Albury draws on Foucault's ethical sensibility, noting: "liberation (sexual or otherwise) is not an end in itself, but 'paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom'" (650). Foucault's ethics teach us to ask and re-ask ourselves the questions that emerge in our daily lives, and to constantly readjust and reflect, rather than seeing one larger form of "true morality" based on an objective set of ethics that works within every situation. Albury argues that analyzing pornography must move beyond a reading of it that focuses on the "right" or "wrong," and look for new answers to questions about why it is appealing and what lessons we learn from it.

Pornography seizes us in a particular way: it confronts us with bodies that move, gasp, scream, squeal and open up both literally and metaphorically. In searching for a truth of the body within pornography, we are attempting to uncover some hidden facet of who we are and who or what we desire. As I will discuss in my next section, pornography has the potential to draw us in and engage us in particular ways when we are viewing it online—the promise of interactivity allows us an even closer glimpse at our desires and therefore, ourselves.

## Chapter 2: The Screen

> Today the scene and the mirror have given way to a screen and a network. There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication. In the image of television, the most beautiful prototypical object of this new era, the surrounding universe and our very bodies are becoming monitoring screens.
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> - Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstacy of Communication" (1988)

> Machines are social before being technical.
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> - Gilles Deleuze, "Foucault" (1988)

Looking at images is a practice that is so ripe with meaning and fraught with social and political implications that it has spawned an entire academic discipline. Visual Culture, a relatively new branch of study, was born in the 1990s out of cultural studies as

a mixture of disciplines aimed at studying the visual.[11] The history of looking is not only scientific or anatomical, relating to our eyes, but a social and cultural one: as Robert S. Nelson notes, vision and visuality are equally connected with science and technology, and the humanities and social sciences. The contexts, values, effects and intentions of visuality are socially constructed (Nelson 2). Vision and looking are especially influenced by technology; as Jonathan Crary argues in Techniques of the Observer, a history of vision depends on the tracing of shifting political and social viewpoints, as well as an understanding of optical devices as sites of knowledge and power that operate on the body (7). Crary notes, "...optical devices[12]...are points of intersection where philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic discourses overlap with mechanical techniques, institutional requirements, and socioeconomic forces" (8).

In a similar vein, theorists since Marshall McLuhan have discussed the influence of technology on our perception of the world,[13] and taken them farther; from Laura Mulvey's famous psychoanalytic feminist argument that female bodies in film are relegated to a controlling male gaze,[14] to Roland Barthes' deconstruction of photographic

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[11] In "What is Visual Studies?" Elkins defines Visual Culture as "less Marxist, further from the kinds of analysis that might be aimed at social action, more haunted by art history, and more in debt to Roland Barthes and Water Benjamin than the original English cultural studies" (2).

[12] Crary's examples consist of the camera obscura, the thaumatrope, the Faraday wheel, the phenakitiscope, the kaleidoscope, the diorama, and the stereoscope.

[13] In "Understanding Media," McLuhan famously argues, "the medium is the message"; it is not what we are reading or viewing that matters, but the form of the technology through which it is presented to us.

[14] In Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Mulvey utilized a psychoanalytic feminism standpoint to dissect the relationships between both bodies onscreen with one another, and with physical bodies watching

images through semiotics and his assertion that the photographic image is one "without a code" (Barthes 17). Regardless of one's theoretical standpoint, the viewing of images is consistently changing based on the new technologies that arise, and therefore, the ways that we look are shifting as well. Mulvey returned to her earlier arguments from "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to write a longer book, Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image, in order to confront changing technologies and their effects on the ways we look at bodies onscreen. Mulvey argues that the technology that now allows us to view videos from home, and to pause, rewind, and tamper with the narrative events of a film, have altered the pleasure we take in looking. Mulvey notes: "as the film is delayed and thus fragmented from linear narrative into favourite moments or scenes, the spectator is able to hold on to, to possess, the previously elusive image" (161). Mulvey refers to the audience member of electronic or digital viewing as the "possessive spectator": an active viewer with control and agency.

As Mulvey asserts, looking at bodies onscreen is a markedly different experience from looking at bodies in still photographs or in a movie theatre. The concept of the "screen" is a space that continues to change and evade concrete definition. Originally

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and taking pleasure from watching bodies onscreen. She argued that watching bodies onscreen provides a scopophilic pleasure—a "pleasure in looking" that is narcissistic as well as voyeuristic: the spectator identifies with the active male onscreen and gains pleasure in this identification. Additionally, female bodies onscreen are almost always passive, relegated to the gaze of both the active male actors and the male and female bodies watching from the theatre. Her work was particularly focused on the cinematic space as inherently voyeuristic, in that it separates the audience from the screen through the conditions of the theatre (space, darkness, etc.).

conceived of as a partition, barrier or frame in the late fourteenth century,[15] the term "screen" was redefined in the nineteenth century to refer to any flat surface utilized for the reception of projected images.[16] Screens have since been defined through cinema, as in the work of Andre Bazin,[17] and more recently, through technology such as televisions, LCD screens, computers, Smartphones, and so on. Screens are shifting spaces that continue to transform our experience of the world. Vivian Sobchack argues that we interact with "the objective phenomena of photographic, cinematic, televisual, and computer technologies" on a daily basis, which transform us as embodied subjects (136). Technology thus not only mediates our viewpoint, but alters and constitutes our bodies' relationship to the world and to one another. Sobchack notes, "just as the photograph did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so in the late twentieth and early twenty-first, cinematic and electronic screens differently solicit and shape our presence to the world, our representation in it, and our sensibilities and responsibilities about it" (136). In this way, screens have a particular influence over our viewing practices, and alter our bodies' corporeal relationships with what we are looking at.

Our interactions with screens activate us; we are no longer passive observers watching an image from afar, but active spectators. In "Theorizing Interactivity's Effects," S. Shyam Sundar argues that "the notion of interactivity undermines the classical assumption of a passive media audience, to the point of changing the label of

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[15] Online Etymology Dictionary [http://www.etymonline.com/]

[16] ibid.

[17] In What is Cinema? Vol 1., Bazin argues that the cinematic screen is boundless, allowing us to see "something prolonged indefinitely into the universe" (166).

communication receiver from 'audience' to 'user'" (385). Sundar adds, "by *interacting* with networked media, users do not simply dictate reception of information, they become veritable gatekeepers of it, thus transferring agency from senders to receivers" (385). Laura Mulvey argues that digital production has created a "technological curiosity" for additional access to bodies; we have become accustomed to interacting with bodies rather than watching a narrative over which we have no control. Mulvey cites the popularity of "add-ons," extra features such as background information, interviews and commentaries in DVDs. She notes, "these extra-diegetic elements have broken through the barrier that traditionally protected the diegetic world of narrative film and its linear structure" (2006; 27). Rather than engaging with films in a cinema, during which the audience remains static in their seats, home viewership allows for a multiplicity of viewing perspectives, and control over the linear flow of the film. From the ability to alter sound volume, to pause and rewind, and change one's body's relation in respect to distance from the screen, at-home viewership is markedly different than viewing films in the theatre. At-home viewership is also intensely private, if one wishes it to be: watching a DVD in the privacy of one's own home rather than in a public group setting completely alters the viewer's perspective. Mulvey argues that an interactive spectatorship brings with it pleasures similar to textual analysis, allowing the viewer or user to understand and interpret new meanings into an otherwise impenetrable narrative. The pausing of an image to appreciate its beauty or invest it with extra meaning allows for the potential for a fetishistic appreciation of the image. Vivian Sobchack notes that the ability of a user to control the flow of a film's experience have "come to increasingly dominate, appropriate, and transform the cinematic and our phenomenological experience of its perceptual and

representational modalities" (149).[18] Our control over images effects not only the narrative flow of what we are watching, but our own experience of viewing and the pleasure we take in looking.

**Pornography, Interactivity and Domesticity**

The interactive experience of watching pornographic videos online operates in a similar fashion to film, except more intensely. In "Going On-Line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era," Zabet Patterson argues that online pornography, or "cyberporn," creates a very different experience than pornographic magazines or videotapes due to its interactive nature and the new relationship between the body and the networked computer screen. Patterson notes the effects of the computer's interface on the body:

> ...these physical habits of looking—of pointing and clicking, of pushing the refresh button on Webcams, of the delays and frustrations of opening and closing windows—as well as the representational assumptions these habits entail, push the viewer into a particular kind of interaction with the Internet, one that not only reflects but reinscribes social relations. (108)

Patterson describes the habits that cyberporn consumers form, from hunting through links and images for the particular "kind" of pornography that the consumer is looking for, to the experience of delay associated with waiting for images and videos to load. Patterson notes:

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[18] Sobchack argues, however, that technological screens and electronic devices take away from our embodied experience, noting that images on screens seem to be "'just there' as we (inter)face them" (159).

> A subset of the cyberporn industry is devoted to the categorization and classification of these images and Web sites; these sites present categories of images, laid out in tables or allowing so-called key term searches. The "click here if you're gay!" button, like the "S/M" button, indicates a technology of desire both productive and regulatory. (107)

He goes on to argue that "waiting and looking and waiting" become part of the pleasure in cyberporn, creating the sense of illusory inaccessibility in a medium that seems to have an excess in content: the pleasures of the unknown allow for a sense of excitement in an otherwise overloaded system (109-110). When we interact with the screen in front of us, clicking to view different videos and choosing between sites, we are actively engaging with the choices that we are making in a very different way from viewing a DVD.

Online amateur pornography creates a sense of authenticity and intimacy through an interactive interface that allows users to connect with the bodies that they see. In the same vein as Mulvey's "add-ons," Patterson argues that amateur porn websites contain content that "invites [users] into the space of the Web site or detailing the amateur's life; on-line diaries are another way for the viewer 'to get up close and personal'" (111). Amanda Bakehorn cites popular alternative pornography websites such as Suicide Girls as examples of websites that offer up interactive community building potential. Bakehorn notes,

> [m]any of these sites provide info about models ranging from basic demographies to the books, movies, and music they listen to, whether they smoke, drink, or use drugs to their relationship status, dietary habits and

> sexual history. All of this information is supposed to provide a sense of intimacy, while at the same time establishing the authenticity of the people featured. (158)

Internet pornography, and amateur pornography in particular, appear to allow unmediated access to bodies, bodies that we are able to chat with, write messages to, learn more about, and seek out online. Domesticity also aids in creating a sense of authenticity in amateur porn; as Minette Hillyer argues in "Sex in the Suburban," home movies create a sense of "truth" or authenticity, a feeling that we as viewer are gaining access to reality. She argues that home videos and home pornographic videos, or amateur pornographic videos, both "show facsimiles of intimacy and revelation; they seem to ease access to these things most fundamental to our humanity" (50). Hillyer discusses the infamous Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee sex tape[19], noting that out of forty-four minutes, only eight show sexually explicit material—the majority of the film shows domestic scenes such as the couple relaxing on vacation, Tommy Lee fishing on his boat, and Pamela Anderson in the bath or at work on set. Hillyer argues that the peculiar mixing of "boring" domestic scenes spliced with sexually explicit scenes allows for a "viable pornographic product"; the film is clearly the "genuine article" (53).

**Looking for the "truth" of sex**

[19] The videotape "Pam and Tommy Lee: Hardcore and Uncensored" (IEG, 1997) was stolen from the home safe of Lee and Anderson, and released approximately one year later. It became instantly famous due in part to Anderson's popularity as an actress in the television program "Baywatch" and Lee's fame as the drummer of rock band "Motley Crue," and because of the media attention that followed it (Hillyer 52).

The "boring" domestic shots featured in the amateur sex tape, and the authenticity that it provides the viewer, gives an extra sense of realism, and therefore, allows for an impression of "truth." The seeking out of "truth" through pornography, as Linda Williams notes, is a desire founded on our understanding of sexuality as something that is constructed through confessional dialogue, and is thus something that we can locate and comprehend. In The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, Michel Foucault argues against the longstanding notion that the Victorians were a sexually repressed society, noting that the modes of repression at work were at the level of discourse, and that sex was transformed by language. Foucault notes that in the seventeenth century, under the rule of the Christian church, "[a]n imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse" (21). Rather than a repressive apparatus surrounding sex, there was instead a new apparatus produced to encourage the confession of sex: "not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said the, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results" (Foucault 27). From edicts forbidding schoolboy "onanism" to the creation of a new specification of individuals (including the homosexual), by the nineteenth century sexuality had been grounded in a scientific discourse that sought to speak of it through "neutral" language (Foucault 43; 53). Foucault notes, "the important thing…is not that [doctors] shut their eyes or stopped their ears, or that they were mistaken; it is rather that they constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth…" (56).

Foucault goes on to argue that there were two historical means of locating truth within sex. Either societies utilize art (an *ars erotica)* in which truth is drawn from

pleasure, or they rely on the confession (a *scientia sexualis*), in which truth is derived through the confessional speaking of sexual secrets (Foucault 58). Foucault argues that the confession has become "one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth," noting that "we have since become a singularly confessing society" (Foucault 59). Linda Williams agrees that Western culture has created a "hermeneutics of desire aimed at ever more detailed explorations of the scientific truths of sexuality" (Williams 34). She argues that the optical inventions of the nineteenth century were a manifestation of this desire to find the truth of sex within the body, creating a "cinematic hard core" (Williams 36). Eadweard Muybridge's famous photographs of horses running and bodies moving are classic and oft-cited examples of an attempt to capture and categorize bodies in specific poses. Linda Williams argues that this historical moment illustrates the first subjection of the "body's own movement to the mechanical eye of a camera that saw better than the human eye" (37). Muybridge's attempts to capture the exact movements of the body inspired him to create the zoopraxiscope in order to present lifelike movements—with this new technology, motion could be stopped, slowed, reconstituted, and endlessly repeated for analysis by the public. Access to the body was the goal that technology allowed for; Williams notes, "the same principles of mechanical reproduction that made possible industrial production had now made movement more visible" (38). Williams call this visual pleasure in seeking truth a "frenzy of the visible"—"a logical outcome of a variety of discourses of sexuality that converge in, and help further to produce, technologies of the visible" (36). Technology and vision converge in the desire to find the "truth" of the body; the cinema allowed for a normalization of fetishism and voyeurism (Williams 46). In essence, we look to cinema

to find the confessions of "truth" about the body, and pornography in particular affords us an intimate glance at bodies in uniquely intimate, voyeuristic positions. One of the main visual goals of pornography is to offer "maximum visibility" to the audience which typically consists of close-up shots of genitalia (including the "meat shot"[20]), specific sexual positions that allow the viewer extreme visual access to the body, and the always-important "money shot" of ejaculation (Williams 49).[21] Internet pornography allows for a deeper, more intimate viewing through interactive "add-ons" such as web cam sessions that include live chat, message boards that allow users to swap photos and discuss their favourite videos and images, and so on. An even greater sense of control, access and intimacy allows for a greater sense that we are accessing the real bodies and real people that we are looking at.

Internet pornography in particular allows us an overabundance of explicit images and videos of all kinds, from the mundane to the extreme, all categorized specifically for maximum choice.[22] In "No Money Shot? Commerce, Pornography and New Sex Taste

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[20] The "meat shot" is the "close-up of penetration that shows the hard-core sexual activity is taking place" (Williams 72). Williams argues that the meat shot is "quintessential": "most current feature-length pornos would not be complete without a great many meat shots in any given sex sequence" (72).

[21] This concept of "maximum visibility" and the importance of the "meat shot" in pornography is interesting in light of amateur and alternative pornography websites ("point of view" pornography in particular) which do not show angles separate from what the actual performers see. These kinds of pornography seem to offer up a more authentic experience in that they rely more on shots that reference the actual viewpoint of the people involved, this corresponding to the real experiences of the viewer.

[22] A shortlist from a popular amateur website [www.xnxx.com]: Anal Sex, Anime, Ass to Mouth, Babysitter, Big Tits, Bondage, Classic View, Cumshot, Deepthroat, Ex-Girlfriend, Exhibitionism, Fat,

Cultures," Feona Attwood argues that alternative pornography (or "altporn") websites such as SuicideGirls and Nerve constitute their subjects through a community of like-minded individuals with a particular aesthetic, in order to constitute a sophisticated image and combine commodity with consumption. She argues that participatory culture is vital to cultural production and consumption, and within online pornography, "the more you pay, the more you belong" (444). Websites are able to give us exactly what we desire—and what we do not desire—in excess, through an interactive community of like-minded individuals and a "taste culture" that we choose based on our desires. The fast-paced confrontation with image after image can be overwhelming; as Patterson argues, even when the user finds a desirable image, there might be a "better" one on the next page—pleasures that are unknown to us are more compelling, and thus, users continue to click and search (Patterson 110). Interactivity offers a closer look at the supposedly authentic pleasure of the amateur, who the user can potentially talk to or learn more about through the website's message boards or chat rooms. The interactive nature of the Internet allows for a sense of deeper viewing and deeper connection with bodies onscreen, be they real or imagined. As our looking is altered by technology, so is our looking at bodies, and our relationships with said bodies. The computer screen allows us to feel one step closer to authenticity, pleasure, and shared experience.

## Chapter 3: Pornography and Eroticism

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Female Ejaculation, Fisting, Granny, Hairy Pussy, Maid, Milf, Mom videos, Orgy, Pregnant, Shemale, etc. An even more extensive list breaks down the categories into smaller pieces, or "tags" [http://video.xnxx.com/tags/]: alcohol, gasp, furry, girlnextdoor, Halloween, horse, nips, parody, pervert, police, pierced, rubberboots, smallpenis, etc.

> Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals.
>
> - Georges Bataille, "Eroticism"

> The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.
>
> - Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic"

Through our relationship with bodies onscreen, we are able to conceive of our own pleasures in different ways. Pornography creates a certain visibility into the body, and the more we see, the more we want to see—as Baudrillard notes in The Ecstacy of Communication, "images have become our true sex object, the object of our desire" (35). Baudrillard notes that images show our material desires, not in an "order of desire," but "in the order of the frenzy of the image"—a boundless multiplicity of images that make up our desires (35). Baudrillard argues that we are accosted with an endless array of images that have become neutralized and objectified by culture; within pornography in particular, the "array of breasts, asses and genitalia has no other meaning but to express the useless objectivity of things" (43). He adds: "nudity is but a desperate attempt to emphasize the existence of something. The genitalia is but a special effect" (32). In pornography, the body is in front of us with apparently full access and exposure, "without even the faintest glimmer of a possible absence....the state of pure presence" (Baudrillard 32). Because of our distance from an endless array of bodies and our objectification of them, Baudrillard argues that pornography is a disembodied medium.

The excessive shots of (Baudrillard argues, disposable or interchangeable) bodies within pornography take away from its potential to be erotic. The rituals of transparency (for example, the strip tease) lure the viewer into feeling connected with the body that he or she is watching, however, the oscillation between visibility and invisibility of certain body parts merely creates a "rhythm of emergency and secrecy" that lulls us into a comfortable state (33). Roland Barthes discusses this sense of disconnection with pornography in Camera Lucida. He notes: "[There is] nothing more homogeneous than a pornographic photograph. It is always a naive photograph, without intention and without calculation. Like a shop window which shows only one illuminated piece of jewelry, it is completely constituted by the presentation of only one thing: sex..." (41). Barthes argues that pornographic photographs "represent the sexual organs, making them into a motionless object (a fetish)" (58).

In this way, for Barthes, pornography does not contain what he refers to as the "punctum": a piercing feeling that one gets when looking at a particular image that disturbs one for personal reasons. The punctum is "a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see" (Barthes 58). Barthes argues that pornography does not have the ability to evoke this effect within its viewer because it is mundane, and fetishizes the body rather than showing something subtle and personal. Barthes argues:

> ...for me, there is no *punctum* in the pornographic image; at most it amuses me (and even then, boredom follows quickly). The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at

> all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. (58)

Barthes compares erotic and pornography photographs explicitly, arguing that eroticism contains a power that pornography does not. Similarly, In The Sadean Woman, her feminist exploration of sexuality in the novels of the Marquis de Sade, Angela Carter argues that normative pornography exists in a vacuum in which sex is falsely universalized, and therefore, mythologized (16). She notes, "pornography reinforces the false universals of sexual archetypes because it denies, or doesn't have time for, or can't find room for, or, because of its underlying ideology, ignores, the social context in which sexual activity takes place, that modifies the very nature of that activity" (16). Carter argues that pornography thus reinforces the status quo, or else it is banned. Eroticism, however, has the potential to subvert: rather than abstracting the flesh and turning it into a fable, erotic or "moral" pornography comments on the real world and the lived social relations of men and women. She notes, "the more pornographic writing acquires the techniques of real literature, of real art, the more deeply subversive it is in that the more likely it is to affect the reader's perceptions of the world" (19). Carter defines the moral pornographer as one whom:

> ...uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual license for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work. A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent

> revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind. (19)

Shannon Bell refers to this kind of pornography as "nonrecuperable pornography"—a pornography that: involves genderfuck; disrupts and changes the actions and genders it depicts; is produced through labour that is self-determining and not exploitative; is interactive; and is made from a position of sovereignty of action and control (Bell 41). It is thus vital to separate pornography that reinforces the prevailing systems of domination from those that seek to change it. Amanda Bakehorn's dissertation on "real sex" within women-made pornography describes the many pornography filmmakers who utilize techniques to create a comfortable working environment for their actors and in the hopes of achieving "real" pleasure (Bakehorn 177). She notes also that many directors collaborate with actors in order to maximize their comfort and keep their direction at a minimum during shooting in order to achieve a sense of authenticity.

**The piercing moment**

Is it possible to find authenticity within pornography, and to demonstrate real pleasure? Can there be a "punctum" within pornography? I argue that the potential does exist within forms of "nonrecuperable" or erotic pornography. While Baudrillard and many other theorists see looking at pornographic images as a passive, disembodied experience, others point to complicated means of looking at these images. For Franklin Melendez, the relationship of looking at pornographic images is not a simple active/passive one. Since the pleasure of the video is not constant, but rather vacillates and oscillates in a similar fashion as a beat (as Baudrillard argues), the viewer is caught

up in this alternation between two different modes of viewing (Melendez 414). He notes, "visual pleasure, then, unfolds like a pulse in this interaction between embodied observer and mediated image, which entails two modes of visuality (disembodied/embodied) and two types of pleasure" (414). The viewer oscillates between active possessor of the pornographic image as an object/commodity, and the passive pleasure of being moved by the image; in this way, visual pleasure unfolds between these two poles continually, creating a fractured viewership. Melendez also notes the fractured bodily experience of watching pornography, in that that the viewer experiences pleasure through looking at the bodies whilst simultaneously being aware of his or her own body as looking at a mediated image.

In a similar vein, Peter Lehman argues that since pornography does not aim to be believable, and invests very little in the fictional world, viewers are "really" watching actors rather than characters (89). He notes that viewers are well aware of the medium that they are watching pornography through, with little investment dedicated to the fictional storyline and thus "displac[e] their star fascination entirely upon the actor or her body" (89). Lehman continues: "As the oft-noted masturbatory function of porn indicates, rather than lose themselves in identification with the fictional bodies on the screen, porn spectators direct their attention to their own bodies" (89). Lehman argues that pornography offers up a visual experience that goes beyond narrative into a exhibitionistic visual curiosity in the form of "sudden burst[s] of presence" (96). He asserts that patterns of images within pornography (such as the predictable "meat shots" and the "money shot") occur without a logical temporal relationship. He states,

> Time is connected into a past, present, and future, but it is not the enigmatic time of narrative. What lies at the center of the hard-core feature is a hybrid whereby the attraction that is still based upon the exhibitionist display of body and taboo subjects is both extended and patterned, but within a diegetic framework. (97)

Rather than focusing on the narrative itself as the main locus of pornographic enjoyment or visual pleasure, Lehman locates it squarely within the brief moments that capture the viewer's attention, similar to Barthes' concept of the punctum. He states: "much as individual porn watchers may derive erotic pleasure from the physical appearance of a star they find attractive, they may also derive pleasure from brief, fragmentary visual and aural moments such as a passing facial expression or a particular moan" (89).

Barthes' punctum, a brief moment of witnessing a particular detail that wounds and effects the viewer in a particular way, is reminiscent of the sublime: a mix of pain and pleasure that we experience when faced with something that our rational mind is unable to process. This fleeting feeling occurs in an instant. Lyotard argues that the climactic moment of the sublime occurs:

> 'indirectly' as a feeling with two conflicting moments: the 'vital forces' experience a momentary check, an inhibition; they are held back, repressed. When they are released, they 'discharge' all the more powerfully in the following moment... Contrary to taste, the sublime feeling is an emotion that alternates between an effective "no" and "yes." (Lyotard 68)

Lyotard adds that the sublime is partly negative because it involves a recoil, "as if thinking came up against what precisely attracts it" (68). This experience points to the ambiguity that occurs when we confront something indefinable. Can we locate this experience within the viewing of pornographic images? As I noted earlier, not all pornography subverts normative power relations or changes our viewpoint of gender and sexuality, but there is the potential within pornography to disrupt our readings of the world and to change us as viewers and actors within the world.

**Pornographic discourse and Power**

While not all pornography is progressive or subversive, pornography does give us access to a particular kind of discourse that might otherwise be lost. In "How to Look at Pornography," Laura Kipnis argues that pornography is a vital part of our culture, not only because of its widespread consumption and sales,[23] but because of what it reveals to us about our culture. Kipnis argues that pornography is not taken seriously in academia, politics or culture—rather, it is stereotyped as a lone, individual predilection. Rather than an understanding of pornography as an extremely widespread medium, it is positioned as the disdainful medium of "pimply teenagers, furtive perverts in raincoats, and asocial compulsively masturbating misfits" (Kipnis 118). In "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn," Constance Penley notes that class and pornography have an important history, linked to information that the ruling class would prefer to suppress, and tied to vulgar jokes and humour traditionally considered lower class (Penley 101). Pornography is more closely associated with pop culture than art, and, as Penley notes, "the more

[23] Kipnis notes that pornography is an $11 billion per year industry.

mass-cultural the genre becomes, and, it seems, the more militantly 'tasteless,' the more difficult it is to see pornography's historical continuity with avant-garde revolutionary art, populist struggles, or any kind of countercultural impulses" (101). Camp and humour are popular elements of stag films in particular, primitive pornographic films from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were often crude and typically offered little narrative (Williams 65). Stag films often featured bawdy songs, en emphasis on female agency and low-level humour, traits that are especially associated with lower class forms of entertainment: Penley cites "Mad Magazine" and World Wrestling Federation wrestling as two examples of similarly classed popular entertainment (107). Penley states, "[a]lthough porn is usually conceptualized and debated as a stigmatized 'other,' completely beyond the moral and cultural pale, its desires, concerns, and uses are not that different from those found in other popular forms throughout U.S. history" (107). Popular forms of crass humour are often regarded as without serious content, despite containing a deep political and social commentary.

Along with its links with subversive humour, Kipnis argues that pornography transgresses social boundaries and violates social structures in unique and powerful ways, locating society's taboos, prohibitions and proprieties, and systemically transgressing them (Kipnis 119). She notes,

> A culture's pornography becomes, in effect, a very precise map of that culture's borders: pornography begins at the edge of the culture's decorum. Carefully tracing that edge, like an anthropologist mapping a culture's system of taboos and myths, gives you a detailed blueprint of the culture's anxieties, investments, contradictions... (120)

In essence, pornography gives us a guidebook for the places that our society finds repulsive, shameful, dangerous and disturbing. Pornography locates these anxieties and reflects them back to us through the image, in a way that both pleases and frightens us. It is in this dual pleasure and pain that Kipnis locates the possibility for political power and transgression. She adds,

> Like the avant-garde's, pornography's transgressions are first of all aesthetic. It confronts us with bodies that repulse us—like fat ones—or defies us with genders we find noxious. It induces us to look at what's conventionally banished from view... Pornography provides a realm of transgression that is, in effect, a counter-aesthetics to dominant norms for bodies, sexualities and desire itself. (121)

As a counter-aesthetic movement, pornography shows us what we are afraid to see. She goes on, "pornography's allegories of transgression reveal, in our most visceral ways, not only our culture's edges, but how intricately our own identities are bound up in all of these quite unspoken but quite relentless, cultural dictates" (121). Pornography aims to mock our shame, our anxieties and our guilt—our desire to guiltily "confess" our sexual desires—and reminds us, forces us to recognize, that we are desiring, active beings.

The undercomplication of pornography, and its relegation to a "lower class" status is meant to undermine its importance and transgressive power. Shame and repression stop us from discussing our sexuality in a productive, political way. Pornography works in the opposite way—towards exposure: "towards making the private public and the hidden explicit" (Kipnis 124). The battle for making private public is explicitly political,

wrapped up always in sexual and reproductive politics, the rights of women and minorities, the oppressed and repressed. Because of its transgressive politics and its power in showing us the boundaries of our culture, pornography is thus able to show us some of the "truths" that Williams and Foucault point to as *scientia sexualis*—but not the "truths" that are expected. Rather than objectively, scientifically locating the truths of pleasure or of our bodies as confessing some deep desire, pornography locates the truths that we do not want to see and confronts us with them—what Kipnis describes as operating at the "borders" of our culture.

## Chapter 4: *Beautiful Agony* and the Face

> I would love for people to get off on this and hopefully I can spread eroticism and joy around the world.
>
> - Participant A1980, Beautiful Agony[24]

> I think orgasm is the great equalizer. When we come, we are helpless, vulnerable, yet completely empowered. On B[eautiful] A[gony], we have the privilege of watching people share this ecstatic moment with us. It is erotic, yes, but more important, it is profoundly human and aesthetically beautiful. Rich or poor, old or young, beautiful or ugly, we are all equal when we come.
>
> - "DocDarkside," Beautiful Agony message board contributor

I will now move to a discussion of the pornographic website *Beautiful Agony,*[25] a paid subscription amateur website consisting of self-made videos of people's faces as

[24] Quotes taken from the Beautiful Agony Twitter feed: [http://twitter.com/#!/beautiful_agony]

they masturbate or are otherwise brought to orgasm. For the purposes of this paper, I subscribed to *Beautiful Agony* for three months, during which time I watched a wide variety of videos and confessions (See Appendix Table 1). Rather than crafting a quantitative research methodology and sampling a certain percentage of the films posted, I chose which videos to watch based on my own personal preferences.[26] I decided to pick and choose videos that I personally wanted to watch in order to remain connected to the typical pornography consumer's experience—one that consists of searching and clicking from one image to the next based on which images one finds appealing. I did not want to be separated from this experience because I felt that choosing videos in a quantitative manner would take away from my own experience of viewing and connecting with the images. The process of searching for images that are compelling to one personally, the delay of waiting for images to load, and the scanning of images for something of interest are a vital part of consuming online pornography. In choosing videos based on my own personal preferences, I remained focused on what Zabet Patterson refers to as the "physical habits of looking" at cyberporn: the "pointing and clicking, of pushing the refresh button...the delays and frustrations of opening and closing windows" and the

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[25] Located at [http://www.beautifulagony.com]

[26] My own personal viewing habits primarily consisted of videos of women. I prefer these videos for two reasons: for one, the majority of the videos on *Beautiful Agony* consist of women, and thus, they were the most common; and secondly, I found women to be the most aurally expressive and interesting to watch. The process of clicking and finding videos of women that I found to be attractive is vital to the experience of watching pornography—the habits of looking influence one's relationship to the image in the same way that viewing a film in a theatre is different from watching one at home, as Laura Mulvey argues. In Marshall McLuhan's words, "the medium and (the experience of the medium) is the message."

material habits that come into play when one interacts with the Internet in this way (108). I also decided not to analyze specific videos through semiotics or other theoreoretical frameworks, and rather, I focus on the overall experience gained from watching the videos, the phenomenological experience of watching faces in particular. I will argue that in eroticizing faces rather than bodies, *Beautiful Agony* invites the viewer to identify with the subjects onscreen in new and interesting ways—rather than passively enjoying the bodies onscreen or experiencing pleasure from them, the viewer actively identifies with the bodies that he or she is engaging with.

*Beautiful Agony* (see Appendix: Fig. 1 for screen shot) is a pornographic website that hosts videos of men's and women's faces while they are masturbating or being brought to orgasm by a (usually hidden) partner. Filmed "confessions" accompany each video, allowing the viewer an intimate peek into the secrets of the contributors, and a forum allows viewers and contributors a place to discuss the videos, list their favourite videos and stars, and communicate with the contributors. The website's description reads: "*Beautiful Agony* is dedicated to the beauty of human orgasm. This may be the most erotic thing you have ever seen, yet the only nudity it contains is from the neck up. That's where people are truly naked."[27] Unlike traditional or normative pornography, which focuses on close up shots of the body, typically contains a narrative, and is assumed to contain some level of performance,[28] *Beautiful Agony* consists of fairly banal videos that

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[27] "About" *Beautiful Agony*. [http://beautifulagony.com/public/main.php?page=about]

[28] Linda Williams defines pornography as: "the visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers" (30). She goes on to add: "what distinguishes film and video pornography from written pornography…is

feature a solo performance of masturbation and pleasure that focuses on the face (see Appendix for screen shots: Fig. 2-4).

Submitting a film to *Beautiful Agony* is straightforward: the participant frames the shot (the website asks for: "full face, no nudity, preferably from a point of view above the nose"), moves in front the camera and shoots the film, and then submits an unedited version of his or her film, to be edited down in size by *Beautiful Agony* (the website's submission guidelines[29] ask for "RAW footage"). The aesthetic is very specific: the videos are meant to appear "natural," unedited, and untampered with. The guidelines state: "capture the warm up, and the cool down. Let us see all of your idiosyncrasies and rituals, but we're only interested in reality, not performances, impressions, or exaggerations." The emphasis on "reality" rather than "performance" is telling, and comes through in the next step of the submission process: the confession. The guidelines state: "After you've done your Agony, we need your Confessions. If you haven't been able to view this part of the site, it's just how it sounds - you spill all your sexy secrets on camera."

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the element of performance contained in the term *sexual act.* She notes Annette Kuhn and Beverly Brown's definitions of pornography as a medium that produces meanings "pivoting on gender difference" and a revelation of "current regimes of sexual relationships as 'a coincidence of sexual phantasy, genre and culture in an erotic organization of visibility'" (30). In this way, pornography does not only represent bodies acting in sexually explicit ways, but replicates gendered expectations and eroticizes aspects of our culture in a commodified, visible medium.

[29] Located at: [http://www.beautifulagony.com/public/main.php?page=submit]

The use of the codeword "Agony" for "orgasm" gives the project a sense of eroticism and a certain coyness: rather than using the words "performer" or "star" throughout the website, or referring to the videos as pornographic, the website uses its own coded language that adds a level of playfulness to the discussions. This distancing of the participants in *Beautiful Agony* from "porn stars" is reflected through the naming of the performers in a numerical system—rather than the viewers watching "actors rather than characters," as Peter Pehman argues pornography typically encourages viewers to do, *Beautiful Agony* characterizes their participants through an anonymous yet still traceable numerical system. Each participant has a specific number that he or she posts under, and therefore can be searched for easily on the website (See Fig 1.). Many users post on the message boards asking for recommendations for videos to watch based on the participants' style, look, or some other signifier, or commenting on their favourite participants: a few typical message board posts contain titles such as "Ms 2083. Oh my." "Ms 2068 – WOW" and "01762, the beautiful lightness of being."[30] The use of numbers, rather than names, to identify the participants with is interesting in light of common perceptions of objectification. Coding a human being with a number would normally be considered an extreme form of objectification, in that the person is no longer named, and therefore stripped of his or her identity; however, the use of numbers rather than stage names or "porn star" names creates a sense of anonymity and a strange intimacy. In being able to locate the performers by their numbers (and save the videos as "favourites"), users are able to communicate with them while the performers retain their anonymity. This lends a sense of "realness" or authenticity to the performers as it reinforces the fact that

[30] The forum is located at: [http://www.beautifulagony.com/forum/viewforum.php?id=3]

they are "real people" with "real lives" outside the amateur pornographic world. Unlike a "porn star" whose main identity is wrapped up in his or her pornographic career, the performers on *Beautiful Agony* are represented as "anyone"—your neighbour, your co-worker, your best friend.

This personalization of the participants in *Beautiful Agony* persists throughout the message boards. Users are encouraged to engage with one another and the participants in discussing the videos, their own pleasure, and any other topics they find interesting. In a message board post titled "Miss 1408 asking for your feedback (and just wanting a chat)," participant 1408 wrote: "Hi All, □□New to the forums here, but just had my agony posted up quite recently. Any feedback on my orgasm? □□Oh and a question for you all, what's your favourite agony from the clips on this site? □□Looking forward to chatting..." The posts in response engaged with her questions thoughtfully, with one responder commenting: "The main thing I thought of when watching your agony was: what a beautiful face!□□...You seem to be like me -- you do a few runups, catching your breath in between, before finally going over the edge.□□ One thing I've noticed myself doing when I masturbate (not when I make love) is I count the contractions. Did you do that? How many did you have? □□I also enjoyed the half-embarrassed laugh at the end..." The back and forth dialogue between performer and viewer speaks to the intimacy that is created through the message board space, creating an active space for the consumer to interact with the bodies onscreen that he or she is consuming. As Laura Mulvey points out, the interaction between embodied viewer and the seemingly disembodied bodies onscreen is complicated by the "add-ons" such as message boards and participant feedback—interactivity creates a particular space in which the viewer

becomes a more active user in the consumption of pornography. The active "possessive spectator" that Mulvey describes (and that Sundar, Patterson and others discuss) is implicit within *Beautiful Agony*'s structure as online pornography that is tangible, easily searchable, and downloadable.

**The Confession**

Patterson's description of amateur online pornography that "invites" the user into the space of the amateur's private life comes to full fruition in the *Beautiful Agony* Confessions. As I noted earlier, each participant submits an unedited video of him or herself masturbating, followed up by a (clothed) video Confession, in which he or she must "tell us your most intimate secrets about orgasm, masturbation, sex..."[31] The participant is given a series of questions that he or she is encouraged to respond to, including: "Is Agony sexy? How do you hope your Agony affects the viewer?," "What is the most unusual place you've ever had an orgasm? (alone or with a partner, we don't mind)," and "Now tell us some secrets. Something you've never told anyone before. Change the names to protect the guilty, but leave nothing out. And when you've finished - tell us your friends' secrets!"

Where *Beautiful Agony*'s videos are meant to be pornographic, or erotic, in a sense that they show the body engaged in sexual pleasure, the Confessions are meant to engage the viewer in a more complicated, ambiguous way. In a post titled "What about this site attracts such clever, articulate women?" a member with the name gora4852

[31] Submission guidelines can be found here:

[http://www.beautifulagony.com/public/images/AgonyConfessions.pdf]

posted: "I've been totally captivated by several confessions. The ladies around here seem almost universally witty, well spoken, and charming. Is it something about the format of this site that attracts such an engaging crowd…?" The Confession demonstrates that the participant is a "real" person, with "real" anxieties and pleasures—and authenticates the orgasms that they experience (offscreen) in the Agony videos. Questions such as "What sort of reaction do you hope to get from people who watch your Agony?" and "What were you thinking about during the experience?" show a desire to present the orgasm as an authentic, embodied experience. *Beautiful Agony* wants to set up the original videos as authentic, containing "real" pleasure by "real" people.

As Bakehorn notes, authenticity is extremely important in amateur pornography. This desire to see the "real" within pornography is echoed by "elfman11" in the message boards: "Another thing I found dissatisfying in all of my experiences with conventional porn was the artificiality. It was obvious that I was watching a performance, which rendered them un-erotic and made me feel uncomfortable watching them. They made me feel dirty." In response, many members notes similar expressions of joy at finding a pornographic website that represents "real" orgasms and pleasure. The domesticity of the Confessional scene (see Appendix Fig 5-6) speaks to the "realism" of the participants as "normal people" as well as bolstering their ethos and personality. We are given a glimpse into their living rooms, front porches, backyards, etc.; with such an intimate locale accompanying the intimate stories of their pleasures and pasts, the viewer is given a glimpse into the lives of the participants, and thus, is able to make connections with them. In a similar fashion as the domestic scenes in the Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee sex tape, the "boring" domestic scene creates a genuine experience for the viewer.

Along with creating a sense of authenticity and connection with the viewer, the Confessional videos serve a second important function: they demonstrate our desire to confess the body and to discover a truth of the body through sexual discourse. As Foucault notes, "we have become a singularly confessing society" with a vested interest in speaking sex as truth production (58). Linda Williams' argument that this confession persists through pornography and a "frenzy of the visible"—our desire to see as much as we possibly can, a visual hard-core knowledge production—is fascinating within a medium like *Beautiful Agony* which promises to give us (relatively) unmediated access to the "real" pleasure of "real" people while not showing the body at all. The face, thus, becomes the locus of this truth.

**The Face**

If we are looking for a truth of sex within images and videos of the body, then how can we understand our search for truth if we only have access to faces? The face and the eyes have been historically and philosophically conceived of as the location of "truth," of the "soul," and of our identities.[32] If we do indeed look to pornography to determine some kind of *scientia sexualis* or truth about female pleasure, as Williams argues, this "truth" could only be located within the relationship of the viewing body to

[32] The conception of the eyes as linked to the soul can be dated back to the Bible, from Matthew 6:22,23: "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness." Sight and the eyes have deeply influenced notions of self and otherness throughout Western history: Robert L. Nelson argues that vision is "an ethical, a moral, theological, and even political issue" (2).

the body onscreen, and not within the close-up shots that focus in on the genitals, but on the face, the epox of our personal and erotic identification.

Baudrillard's discussion of pornography in the previous chapter focused on his viewpoint that images within pornography disembody, fragment and objectify the body, thus rendering it innocuous. He extends his reading of pornography to not only body parts, but faces as well:

> The close-up of a face is as obscene as a sexual organ seen from up close. It *is* a sexual organ. The promiscuity of the detail, the zoom-in, takes on a sexual value. The exorbitance of the details attracts us, in addition to the ramification, the serial multiplication of each detail. The extreme opposite of seduction is the extreme promiscuity of pornography, which decomposes bodies into their slightest detail, gestures into their minutest movements. (43)

Investing the face with an equal amount of sexual energy as a close-up shot of the genitals speaks to the importance of faces as sites of representation and identification. Although Baudrillard dismisses faces as equally objectifiable as close-up shots of the body, I argue that faces have the potential to disrupt the objectifying qualities of pornography and transform the user's experience.

In "The Trace of the Other," Emmanuel Levinas argues that the face allows us to experience the Other in an encounter that is strongly felt, a revelation or epiphany. He argues that the Other makes him or herself visible to us not strictly through cultural context or speech, but through the face initially: "the manifestation of a face is the first

discourse. To speak is before all this way of coming from behind one's appearance, behind one's form—an opening in the openness" (352). This "visitation of a face" is abstract, or naked, in comparison to the concreteness of the world; the face is "denuded of its own image": Levinas notes, "through the nudity of the face nudity in itself is first possible in the world" (352). In this way, the face of the other puts our own consciousness and identity into question: "the presence of a face thus signifies an irrecusable order, a command, which calls a half to the availability of consciousness. Consciousness is put into question by a face" (352). The face is "imposed upon us" in a way that is almost violent; Levinas notes, "a face is imposed upon me without my being able to be deaf to its appeal nor to forget it, that is, without my being able to cease to be held responsible for its wretchedness" (352). Levinas argues that this identification that occurs when one is confronted with the face is a kind of responsibility—"its presence is a summation to respond" (352). The face forces us to respond in this moment; "no one can answer in my place" (353).

What is this response that the face evokes in us? For Levinas, the face makes us responsible towards the Other: "the I before another is infinitely responsible" (353). Responsibility towards the Other occurs through the face-to-face encounter because human relations with others remind us of our own embodied selves in the world. We respond to the other with language, but first and foremost is the face. Responding to others is the first condition for human subjectivity; Levinasian ethics do not begin with the world, or with God, but with the concrete Other who confronts us, and our responsibilities towards other people. In confronting the face, we are confronting an abstract force—something that pierces us and returns us to our conditions and reminds us

of who we are. The face is a powerful force in creating subjectivity and allowing us to identify with others.

Shannon Bell utilizes Levinas' ethics of the Other in her essay "Levinas and Alterity Politics," noting that in witnessing the Other, we have a responsibility towards that other before ourselves. We are "obliged" to this other: "proximity is responsibility for the other; substitution is responsibility for the other by putting oneself in the place of the other" (111). Bell notes that Levinas' Other is not a politicized Other; "perhaps this non-politicization functions as a political gesture of openness to the world" (112). While Bell extends the metaphor as the Other to encompass the gender deviants that interest her, I extend it to the face of the Other that we confront within *Beautiful Agony*, a pornography that vividly confronts us with faces alone. While Levinas notes that the face has a power to halt us, and force us to re-think our relationship with others, and Bell asks us to imagine the Other as perverse, I argue that we substitute ourselves for the faces that we consume in the *Beautiful Agony* videos. Rather than passively watching bodies and fragments, or gazing upon them[33] within a power structure that dominates the bodies on display, our confrontation with faces disrupt our consumption of them and forces us to stop and confront the Other; we are invited to identify with the Other intimately. Bell

[33] Gaze theory, as Laura Mulvey utilizes it in her famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", points out the psychoanalytic and gendered relations implicit in looking, particularly at bodies in cinema. Mulvey argues that men are active lookers and owners of the gaze, while female bodies are passive and exist "to be looked at." John Berger famously claimed that in visual representations of bodies such as art, "men act, and women appear."

notes that the face of the other calls to us—Levinasian ethics compels us to consider the other before ourselves, what Bell refers to as a "performative 'Here I am'" (119).

The faces in *Beautiful Agony* operate in a similar way as Levinas' concept of the face of the other; rather than watching them passively, we engage with them actively, looking at them and reflecting on our own selves. The split between watching another's face as she or he brings her or himself to climax, whilst (assumedly) looking down at oneself masturbating is a connecting force; both the faces onscreen and our own face are experiencing similar pleasures, and we are aware of ourselves within that moment. The "agony" on the face of the other forces us to stop and reflect on our own pleasure and pain. Rather than passively consuming the body parts of the performers, we are invited to engage with them, respond to them, and think of ourselves in relation to them. This occurs both through the visual footage in front of us, in the form of pornographic videos, and within the interactive add-ons that permeate the website: the confessions, the message boards, and so on. We are invited to identify with the performers and experience their "agonies" as our own—as Baudrillard notes: "the promiscuity of the detail, the zoom-in, takes on a sexual value. The exorbitance of the details attracts us…"—we are hailed by the details of the face, which instead of distancing us from the performer's humanity or personality, invites us in. A pimple, a mole, tussled hair, a self-conscious giggle—none of the markers of personality are edited out. Domesticity and authenticity are self-consciously created through the face and the intimacy in the viewpoint that we are offered, like a partner looking into the eyes of our lover.

This piercing face of the other that stops us in our tracks is similar to Barthes' concept of the "punctum" from Camera Lucida. The punctum is a force that wounds, that

stops us in our tracks and forces us to consider the image in front of us in a new way. The punctum does not exist equally for every viewer, but changes depending on who is looking; it is also dependent on seemingly insignificant details that affect one personally, rather than objects placed there intentionally by the photographer for effect. In this way, a melodramatic film does not contain the punctum, but an image of a child skipping might (if the viewer identifies with an aspect of the image—the skipping rope, a shadow, the expression on a child's face). For Barthes, the pornographic image does not contain the punctum, as pornography is "naïve," "without intention and without calculation," and yet, if the punctum can refer to an emotion felt upon connecting with an image, then the videos in *Beautiful Agony* certainly have the potential to wound, as they are videos of faces, which in Levinasian terms, are the main force that creates identification between people. As I stated earlier, Barthes notes:

> The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. The *punctum,* then, is a kind of subtle beyond—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward "the rest" of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a *praxis,* but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together. (59)

Barthes' concept of the punctum as a "subtle beyond" resonates deeply with the off-screen action in the *Beautiful Agony* videos. Since we as viewer are only given visual access to the faces of the performers as they masturbate, we are focused on the face while

being keenly aware that the "action" is occurring offscreen, where we cannot see. The image permits us to see the shoulders, neck and face of the performer—an occasional hand creeps up, or arm. We cannot help but wonder what the images that we cannot see look like—the genitals, the movements, the potentially hidden partner below. The eroticism of the on/offscreen action is reminiscent of Zabet Patterson's argument about the tropes of cyberporn and the effects of the computer's interface on the body; the "physical habits of looking" that influence the way we engage with pornography online (108). While cyberporn can be passive—in that we engage with the screen in a passive process, watching and looking—it can also be immensely active: clicking, scrolling and hunting for what we desire, changing our minds if we are not pleased with what we see. The hidden body offscreen and our own body below us create an interesting sense of connection and disjuncture, which creates a complicated relationship between our own body and the face that we are watching and enjoying.

Barthes argues that "the pornographic body shows itself, it does not give itself, there is no generosity in it," and yet the bodies in Beautiful Agony are all generosity, all giving and very little "showing" (59). The concept of trying to "show" the body in its completeness, or allow us absolute access to it, is a pornographic attempt to find a truth of the body and deliver it to our eyes. What does "real" pleasure look like? Can it be represented? Why is the female orgasm in particular so important to pornography? As John Ellis notes in "On Pornography:"

> Films currently produced within the pornographic sector gain their impulsion from the repetition of instances of female sexual pleasure, and male pleasure is perfunctory in most cases. The films (and photographs)

> are concerned with the mise-en-scène of the female orgasm, they constantly circle around it, trying to find it, to abolish the spectator's separation from it. (42)

Ellis argues that the female orgasm takes on the status of a fetish, an object with socially constructed powers and imbued with a special status. He notes that female orgasms are typically constructed in this way in order to appeal to an audience that is conceived of as predominantly male. He argues that the male in the audience is made to feel that he is missing: "the phallus for the woman in the representation is provided by the male in the audience: it is a 'gift' from a man or men that produces women's orgasm" (43). The female orgasm is thus typically represented as important (or vital) to attain, view, and catalogue; and yet is unrepresentable and unquantifiable. Linda Williams agrees that women's bodies are fetishized within visual representation and in particular their orgasms. She argues that the "maximum visibility" that represents the male ejaculation "provides elusive in the parallel confession of female sexual pleasure" (49). Is it then possible to represent pleasure in any form, fetishized or not? What would a non-fetishized version of (female) pleasure look like?

If it is indeed possible to represent pleasure in a "non-recuperable" or "moral" way, in the same vein that Angela Carter argues, it can not, or perhaps should not, focus on split images of body parts, as they distort the body and reduce it to small, fragmented parts. Meat shots and money shots recall the commodification of bodies, rather than bringing us closer to identifying with them in an embodied way. Franklin Melendez argues that pornographic viewership has provided the model for a new, historically specific construction of images that is purely visual and given over to consumption of

images (401). Melendez points to the sense of disembodiment felt when passively observing standard heteronormative pornography, pornography which allows us to be passive observers taking pleasure in the mediation of the images in front of us. In order to disrupt this passive relationship, we require a re-embodying experience, something that brings us back to the body and our relations (and responsibilities) to the other.

The face, rather than shots of the body, allows us to identify with the body and create a moment of halting or a calling out. In looking into another's eyes and watching him or her experience "authentic" pleasure, we are invited to identify with him or her on a personal level, recalling our own experiences and responding in a personal way. It is deeply challenging to try and separate a face from a person—personality, selfhood and identity resonate from the face in a way that is difficult to ignore. The faces in *Beautiful Agony* create a space for eroticizing this reaction; we are not only invited to identify with the faces but to find them sexually appealing, to enjoy their pleasure and identify with it. The use of the face creates an eroticized space for pleasure, one that speaks to the truths that we desire to seek: the truths of pleasure, humanity and pain. The agonies that we watch are as "real" as any other connection we could make with another, and bring us closer to understanding our own pleasure and ourselves. A unique intimacy is created through watching the face during orgasm.

**Conclusion:**

The "hidden orgasm" and our desire to root it out visually has its origins in the repression of female desire and pleasure through history, particularly within the sciences. As discourse surrounding sexuality came to represent it through a more and more

"confessional" regime, speaking sex became increasingly invested in finding out the hidden truths of sex, which has permeated into contemporary conceptions of pleasure particularly within pornography. Investing pornography with a sense of authenticity and intimacy is important to many pornography directors and producers; online pornography in particular attempts to breech the great divide between viewer and performer.

The desire to create pornography that presents "real" bodies engaging in "real" sexual acts and experiencing "real" pleasure speaks to our desire to witness the truths of the body rather than conscious, performative acts. Suspension of disbelief operates to a certain extent in all cinema and pornography, yet pornography in particular operates on the assumption that the pleasure (and the orgasms) are real—the money shot is an especially important trope within pornography that gives us the proof of pleasure, so to speak. The lack of a consistent female version of the money shot creates a sense of mystery surrounding the female orgasm. In order to surpass this visual discrepancy, pornography needs to create new tropes of authenticity and pleasure, including trying to create new ways of identifying with the bodies onscreen and connecting with the pleasure that the bodies are experiencing. If the viewer can believe that the pleasure is "real," it creates a better and more satisfying viewing experience.

Although it might appear that pornography fragments bodies and objectifies them universally, I argue that *Beautiful Agony* creates a space where the viewer is invited to identify with the performers and experience pleasure through them. The domesticity of the backdrops, the personal information offered up in the Confessional videos, the interactivity offered up by the message boards, and the exclusive filming of faces within the videos lends extra authenticity and "realness" to the amateur pornographic videos on

*Beautiful Agony*. *Beautiful Agony* moves beyond traditional amateur or alternative pornography in that it focuses on faces exclusively, which invites viewers to identify with the performers on a personal level. The Other commands us to consider not only him or herself as a person, but ourselves as well.

## Appendix:

Table 1: List of videos watched from *Beautiful Agony.*
Vidoes beginning with "A" are Agonies. Videos beginning with "C" are Confessions.

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *A1621H* | *A1426H* | *A0375H* | *A0362H* | *A1408H* | *A1210H* | *A1202H* | *A1211H* |
| *A1089H* | *A1096H* | *A1090H* | *A0974H* | *A0943H* | *A0797H* | *A0560H* | *A1677H* |
| *A1669H* | *A1674H* | *A1679H* | *A1893H* | *A1845H* | *A1847H* | *A1854H* | *A1861H* |
| *A1871H* | *A1876H* | *A1905H* | *A1907H* | *A1941H* | *A1930H* | *A1956H* | *A1949H* |
| *A1986H* | *A2000H* | *A1993H* | *A1988H* | *A1997H* | *A1929H* | *A1340H* | *A1898H* |
| *A1959H* | *A1960H* | *A1908* | *A1969H* | *A0378H* | *C1679M* | *C1907M* | *C1929M* |
| *C1930M* | *C1949M* | *C1956M* | *C1977M* | *C1408M* | | | |

Fig 1: Main Website

Fig 2: Agony # A0362H:


Fig 3: Agony # A18161H

Fig 4: Agony # A1956H

Fig 5: Confession # C1949

Fig 6: Confession # C1930

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