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## **The Aesthetics of Transgressive Pornography**

Michael Newall

(Forthcoming in, in Jerrold Levinson and Hans Maes (ed.), *Aesthetics and Pornography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (in press).)

### **Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with pornography that achieves what I shall consider its primary effect, sexual arousal, in part by representing a certain kind of norm-breaking: the violation of social or moral norms about sexual behaviour. I call this kind of pornography transgressive pornography. This breaking of norms is a feature in much pornography, both popular and literary - which will be my particular focus here. Such pornography includes scenarios featuring couplings deemed by society inappropriate to various degrees: sex between strangers, sex in public places, sex that transgresses professional ethics, sex between members of different social classes, between members of different age groups, incest, sexual violence, bestiality and so on. Such scenarios (especially the milder ones) will sometimes function as little more than an “interesting” way of framing otherwise standard sex scenes, but they can also add to sexual arousal, and are sometimes clearly designed to do so.

I am inspired by an analysis made by Noël Carroll (2001), to show that the breaking of norms in transgressive pornography can also provide a basis for other affective states.<sup>1</sup> Such affects can arise adventitiously in popular pornography, but in literary pornography they are exploited for artistic purposes. Section 1 draws attention to three such “pornographic” affects, aside from sexual arousal, that are elicited in literary examples of transgressive pornography: disgust, humour and awe. Section 2 shows how each of these affects has a basis in the norm-breaking of transgressive pornography. Section 3 investigates the artistic value that can accrue to these affects by examining Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, and the roles that disgust, humour and awe play in it. I conclude by suggesting that this constellation of affects goes some way to mapping a distinctive aesthetic of literary examples of transgressive pornography.

Three points to note before beginning. First, in speaking of a pornographic aesthetic, or the aesthetics of pornography, I do not mean to imply that pornography is aesthetic in the sense of beauty, but rather in the sense of offering feeling or affect. That is to say, this is a study of affects that arise from transgressive pornography, their basis and their artistic use. Second, I tend to use “transgression” and “norm-breaking” interchangeably. That is, transgressions need not be breaches of significant social and moral norms, they may also be breaches of minor norms. Third, it will be objected by some that pornography cannot be art (e.g. Levinson (1998)). To my mind such concerns are dealt with well by others (e.g. Kieran (2001)), so I will not treat them

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll shows that norm-breaking (“the transgression of a category, a concept, a norm, or a commonplace expectation” (Carroll (2001): 249)) underlies the perception of horror (an affect that bears some relation to disgust) and humour in the “horror-comedy” subgenre of film.

here. Still, if my analysis of the artistic character of some pornography convinces, it can only bolster the case for the existence of pornographic art.

## **1. The Pornographic affects**

### **1.1 Disgust**

First, disgust. The presence of disgust in pornography, especially popular pornography, may be unintentional on the part of the pornographer – for whatever reason the audience fails to be aroused and is instead disgusted. But disgust can also be intentionally courted by the pornographer. Sade's *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* (Sade (2005)) is perhaps the outstanding example of this. The 600 "passions" it describes have something of the quality of an exhaustive catalogue of transgressive possibilities. Sade begins with the least transgressive of these, 150 "simple passions" involving non-penetrative sexual activity, progressing through 150 "complex passions", 150 "criminal passions", and concluding with 150 "murderous passions". Part way through the simple passions, Sade gives up the narrative structure to simply list brief descriptions of most of the passions. To convey the sense of these I give an example of each in turn:

146. A man goes to great lengths to have women – married and unmarried – seduced. He provides men for them and lets them use his bedroom. Meanwhile, he goes into the next room and, unknown to them, watches through a peephole. (Sade (2005): vol. 2, 230)

72. A man cuts up a Host with a knife and shoves the crumbs up his ass. (Sade (2005): vol. 2, 241)

145. A man chains one of a girl's hands to a wall and leaves her without food. Two days later he gives her a large knife and places just out of her reach a heaping array of delicacies. If she wishes to eat, she must cut off her forearm; otherwise she will die of starvation. Her torturer watches her through a window. (Sade (2005): vol. 2, 270)

78. A man inserts a funnel into a woman's mouth and pours molten lead down her throat. (Sade (2005): vol. 2, 283)

Sade acknowledges that at some point in his book – presumably for most readers somewhere between the most anodyne of transgressions, and those involving murder – sexual arousal will fail, to be replaced by other feelings – prominent among which we may take to be disgust:

Many of the extravagances which you are about to witness will no doubt displease you, but there are a few among them which will warm you ... We do not fancy ourselves mindreaders; we cannot guess what suits you best: it is up to you to take what pleases you and to leave the rest alone; another reader will do likewise, and another reader still, and so forth until everyone is satisfied. (Sade (2005): vol. 2, 187)

Sade thus claims to cater to differences in his readers' tastes, but the extreme content of many of the passions, together with other remarks he makes, suggest he may be disingenuous. He says at one point, "[t]he idea of crime is always able to ignite the senses and lead us to lubricity" (84), and at another "there is no libertine ... who is not aware of the great sway murder exerts over the senses". (13) He elsewhere praises his libertines extensively, recommending their outlook and lifestyle; and he supports transgressive sexual practices, up to and including murder, with his "philosophical" arguments (See, for example, dialogue 5 from *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, Sade (2005): vol. 1). For Sade then, disgust may just be evidence of differences of taste, and so inescapably limit his work for every reader. Or it may be something that his readers are intended to confront and overcome, so they may explore, if only in imagination, the full spectrum of transgressive sexual possibilities including violence and murder. In either case disgust is a part of the Sadean aesthetic that is impossible to miss.

## 1.2 Humour

Disgust is not the only response that may occur when sexual arousal fails. Sex, and especially the ornately implausible sex described in transgressive pornography – can simply strike us as ridiculous. As with disgust, pornographers may make their audience laugh unintentionally, but this may also be a calculated effect on the part of the writer. For instance, Raymond Queneau's comic pornographic novel *We Always Treat Women Too Well* capitalises on the tendency of transgressive sex to humour.<sup>2</sup> Set in Dublin during the Easter Rising of 1916, Gertie Girdle, an English woman working in a small post office by the Liffey, finds herself locked in a toilet while the building is occupied by a group of Irish republican rebels who expel or kill the other employees. Later, Gertie is discovered, and the rebels, surrounded by an overwhelming force of British troops (including her fiancée, Commodore Cartwright, who is bombarding the post office from his gun boat on the Liffey), find themselves drawn from their pledge to conduct themselves "correctly" in her presence. Queneau finds ample scope for comedy in the pornographic form. For instance, one coupling, with the rebel Caffrey (Queneau names his characters after those in Joyce's *Ulysses*), is interrupted when he is decapitated by a shell:

The body continued its rhythmic movement for a few more seconds ... the kind of disembodied mannikin still surmounting her finally lost its momentum, stopped jerking, and collapsed. Great spurts of blood came gushing out of it. Whereupon Gertie, screaming, wrenched herself free, and what remained of Caffrey fell inelegantly on to the floor ... she retreated to the window, her thoughts in some disarray, trembling, covered all over with blood, and moist with a posthumous tribute. (Queneau (1981): 122)

This is an example of humour where amusement stems from an incongruity: the idea that a corpse can engage actively in sex is absurd. Another kind of humour, focused

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<sup>2</sup> Despite its sexual content, it is not agreed that *We Always Treat Women Too Well* is pornography. Some instead deny that it has any pornographic potential, understanding it as simply a critical send-up of pornography. (See for example Valerie Caton's remarks in her foreword to *We Always Treat Women Too Well*. (Queneau (1981): 2–5)

on most famously by Freud (1960), appears to have a basis in the release of repressed tensions. Here humour seems to arise from a release of tensions that accumulate in the course of everyday life, where we must abide by norms that mean many of our desires must go unrealized. Consider the humour that can come from seeing an authority figure one resents subjected to some practical joke or other indignity. The amusement will typically be more intense than that coming from the same joke or indignity levelled at, say, a random passerby. This kind of humour is also found in pornography. For example, in Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, a young woman, Eugénie, is corrupted by a band of libertines. Her mother, Madame de Mistival, is a figure of strict and conventional morality, and when she appears she is singled out for an especially horrible attack, which Sade clearly intends to be an occasion for humour of this kind – though we may well have trouble finding humour in it ourselves. The episode draws to a finish once Madame de Mistival has been raped by a syphilitic valet. One of the libertines, Madame de Saint-Ange, then declares:

I believe it is now of the highest importance to provide against the escape of the poison circulating in Madame's veins; consequently Eugénie must very carefully sew your cunt and ass so that the virulent humour, more concentrated, less subject to evaporation and not at all to leakage, will more promptly cinder your bones. (Sade (2005): 316)

The description of the elaborately botched sewing that follows appears intended, by turns, to arouse the reader with explicit descriptions and provide occasion for laughter at the sexual humiliation of the prude.

### 1.3 Awe

I see awe and the sublime as closely related. Phenomenologically I do not see any pressing reason to make a distinction between them here, and accordingly my discussion of awe slips at points into talk of the sublime. I speak of awe rather than sublimity primarily to avoid the positive value judgement generally associated with the term sublimity – awe is more readily understood as a neutral description. This approach will also allow me to draw on some interesting psychological literature on awe later.

That we can find the representation of norm-breaking sexual activity disgusting or laughable will hardly come as news. The arousal of awe will require more explanation. Partly this is because the examples of awe I discuss are not an immediate response to pornographic passages, as are disgust and humour. Rather, they occur on reflection, and the examples I consider give space over to such reflection, and encourage it in the reader. Partly, too this is because transgressive pornography tends to hold in contempt objects that might ordinarily be subject to awed respect: authority figures, moral law, religion – all are undermined by the power of sexuality. But under such circumstances one thing can still be seen as a subject of awe – sexuality itself. Consider the assessment made of transgressive sexuality by the protagonist of Bataille's *Story of the Eye*:

I did not care for what is known as "pleasures of the flesh" because they really are insipid; I cared only for what is classified as "dirty". On the other hand, I was not even satisfied with the usual debauchery, because

the only thing it dirties is debauchery itself, while, in some way or other, anything sublime and perfectly pure is left intact by it. My kind of debauchery soils not only my body and my thoughts, but also anything I may conceive in its course, that is to say, the vast starry universe, which merely serves as a backdrop. (Bataille (1982): 42)

“Two things”, so Kant said, “fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” (Kant, (1956): 161–62). For Bataille’s protagonist these Kantian occasions for sublime experience are trumped by transgressive sexuality.)<sup>3</sup>

Sade’s attitude is different, but not a world away from those described by Bataille and Queneau. For Sade, transgressive sexuality is a feature of nature. Like other forces of nature it deserves respect and admiration. But it is also an integral part of us, and if we are to truly realize our potential, it is something we should not only respect, we should give ourselves over to it. In the dedication to *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, he writes: “[y]our passions, which the cold and dreary moralists tell you to fear, are nothing more than the means by which nature exhorts you to do Her work. ... [S]purn the precepts of your idiotic parents; yield instead to the laws of Nature”. (Sade (2005): vol. 1, 208)

## **2. Norm-breaking and the pornographic affects**

I now show how each of these affects can be understood as a response to the norm-breaking of transgressive pornography. The idea that norm-breaking plays a role in these particular affects is not novel – it finds support in diverse sources in psychology and philosophy. In the introduction I touched on the role of norm-breaking in sexual arousal, so I will now give accounts of its role in disgust, humour and awe. Note that my claim is not that norm-breaking alone is a sufficient condition for these affects. In each case further conditions will be required – a detailed examination of these is beyond the scope of my project here, but in each case I will make some remarks about what causes a reader to respond with one of these affects rather than another. Let me also add here an observation on the relation of these affects in our experience. In general, I consider that these affects follow one another in the experience of reading

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<sup>3</sup> It is not clear whether Bataille is taking a passing shot at Kant here. Queneau, though, certainly does. As their soon to be exploded sense of “moral law within” starts to be challenged, “[t]he rough rebels began to realize that correctness was constituted of a certain reserve (meaning that there are certain-things-you-Kant-do), or, at the very least, of a certain mastery of one’s primitive reflexes.” (Queneau (1981): 59–60) Bataille’s and Queneau’s observations are hardly a refutation of the Kantian sublime. But they do suggest that it is possible to find sublimity in transgressive sexuality. This is not in itself a problem for a Kantian approach, which can argue that such an unorthodox object can appear sublime to us on account of “a certain subreption”, whereby there occurs a “the respect for the object is substituted for respect for the idea of humanity within our[selves as] subject[s]”. (Kant (1987): 114) Still, it would leave the Kantian in an awkward position so far as it allows that transgressive sexuality, which can break violently with morality, can be apprehended as sublime.

the texts I have mentioned – e.g. sexual arousal may be replaced by disgust, then humour, or awe before return to sexual arousal, and so on. But I do not rule out the possibility that some of these affects might be experienced simultaneously. Sexual arousal tinged with disgust might be such a combination, though other combinations seem (at least on the face of it) incompatible: say, sexual arousal and humour, and sexual arousal and awe.

## **2.1 Disgust**

Psychologist Paul Rozin and his colleagues understand disgust as falling into four categories. They hold that the capacity to feel the first of these, “core” disgust, evolved in order to protect us from disease and infection. It includes the revulsion we feel at spoiled food, excrement and bodily fluids. Out of core disgust, they propose, the other forms of disgust developed. “Animal-nature” disgust is elicited by death, hygiene violations, violations of the “body-envelope” – and sex. “Interpersonal” disgust includes disgust at contact with strangers and “undesirables”, and “moral” disgust is revulsion at moral offences. (Rozin et al. (2000): 639–645) Each of these involves the perception of a threat to the subject – whether that be a physical threat, or a social or moral threat – that arises from the breaking of some physical, social or moral norm. Core disgust maintains a physical boundary – a physical norm – between our bodies and substances that could physically contaminate them. Animal-nature disgust emerges from an existential desire to disown our ‘animal’ or ‘natural’ state. This involves the maintenance, again, of physical boundaries that the elicitors of animal-nature disgust – poor hygiene, “violations of the body envelope” and the presence of death – threaten. Interpersonal disgust is a response to people who do not satisfy our norms of appearance or social behaviour. Moral disgust is a response to transgression of certain (usually serious) moral norms. The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) makes a comparable analysis, arguing that disgust in general is a response to upsetting categories of various kinds.

Rozin et al. classify sex as eliciting animal-nature disgust, which seems appropriate so far as sex can remind us of our ‘lower’ animal nature. But it will also be clear that transgressive sex, depending on precisely what it involves, can fit any or all of the four categories: that is to say its transgressive character can involve it in the breaking of a range of the physical, social and moral norms that can lead to disgust. Of course particular examples of transgressive sex will not be apt to cause disgust in every individual. But linking disgust to norm-breaking suggests a measure by which we might determine whether an individual will feel disgust. Norm-breaking is likely to cause disgust in us when that norm is important to us in some way – perhaps, explicitly or implicitly, we have some personal investment in the maintenance of those norms. But if we do not hold those norms in high regard, we will not feel disgust at seeing them broken. So for those of us without moral concerns regarding a pornographic description of a non-transgressive sex act, the description may prompt “animal-nature” disgust, but for an individual with moral reservations about what is described, it may also prompt moral disgust.

## **2.2 Humour**

One kind of theory of humour is explicitly based on the idea that humour arises from norm-breaking: incongruity theories. Schopenhauer gives a well-known version:

In every case, laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. (Schopenhauer (1966): vol. 1, 59)

For Schopenhauer, the incongruity at work in humour is a breaking of a rule of language or logic – the incorrect application of a concept to a particular case. Modern versions extend Schopenhauer’s idea to include almost any form of category-breaking. Take Carroll’s formulation:

for a percipient to be in a mental state of comic amusement, that mental state must be directed at a particular object – a joke, a clown, a caricature – that meets certain formal criterion, namely, that it be apparently incongruous (i.e., that it appear to the percipient to involve the transgression of some concept or some category or some norm or some commonplace expectation). (Carroll (2001): 249)

What makes an incongruity a source of humour rather than disgust? Drawing on Carroll’s ideas, to be perceived as humorous, an incongruity must be seen as harmless. (Carroll (2001): 251)) Disgust however, as I have said, always involves a norm-breaking – and thus a kind of incongruity – that brings with it a sense of threat to the percipient. An incongruity theory would seem to explain the humour in Queneau’s description of Caffrey’s completion of the sexual act in spite of his decapitation, since the fantastic quality of this episode makes it unlikely to threaten a broad-minded reader’s sense of social or moral propriety. But it is less obviously successful in explaining the kind of humour that Sade hopes to draw from his description of the attack on Madame de Mistival. Another kind of theory, “release” theories (also called the “relief” theories) are more clearly able to explain this. (e.g. Freud (1960)) Release theories endorse the idea, already mentioned, that humour, or certain kinds of humour, arise from a release of repressed tensions that build up in observing the various prohibitions of everyday life. However, the point I want to draw here is that this kind of humour also involves norm-breaking, for it involves the breaking of norms with which society requires us to accord. In order to tell a joke against an individual or institution that has authority over us, we break the rules it imposes, if only in a minor way, or symbolic way – through representing, for example, a situation in which the authority is stripped of its power in some respect. This is what occurs on the case of Madame de Mistival (and Freud’s theory seems especially suited here, for he thinks that humour in particular dissipates violent and sexual tensions). The humour Sade hopes to draw from the libertines’ attack on her comes at the expense of the pain, humiliation and powerlessness of this representative of the prevailing morality of Sade’s time.

### **2.3 Awe**

Psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt propose that awe is a response to the failure of our perceptual or conceptual categories to accommodate an object:

[A]we involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience ... Such experiences can be



disorienting and even frightening ... since they make the self feel small, powerless and confused. They also involve feelings of enlightenment an even rebirth, when mental structures expand to accommodate truths never before known. The success of one's attempts at accommodation may partially explain why awe can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds). (Keltner and Haidt (2003): 304)

The object of awe must therefore, at least at first, be one that exceeds perceptual or conceptual categories, especially in terms of size or power.<sup>4</sup> Keltner and Haidt go on to suggest that awe has a "primordial" counterpart, like core disgust, and that this is an evolved tendency to find the leader of one's group an object of awe. Some of the behaviour that we associate with awe – fearfulness, submissiveness, would thus have evolved to strengthen social groups in prehistoric times. (Keltner and Haidt (2003): 307–8) Awe then developed different aspects as it came to be applied to different objects: such as the supernatural, highly skilled or moral individuals, and aspects of the natural world.

Stripped of Keltner and Haidt's evolutionary analysis, philosophers will recognize their proposal as a restatement of an old idea about the sublime: Kant held that the experience of the mathematical sublime stems from the imagination being frustrated in its inability to adequately present an object to the mind: "the feeling of the sublime is a feeling of displeasure that arises from the imagination's inadequacy". (Kant (1987): 114) Keltner and Haidt's account of accommodation also echoes Kant's claim that the feeling of the sublime "is at the same time also a pleasure, aroused by the fact that this very judgment ... is in harmony with rational ideas".<sup>5</sup> (Kant (1987): 115)

If transgressive sexuality can be seen as having the power to challenge and negate social and moral norms, as I outlined in the previous section, then it will satisfy the criterion Keltner and Haidt set for awe. Note that it is a challenge to conceptual rather than perceptual categories or norms. Unlike, say, the power of a violent storm or a volcanic eruption, the force embodied in sexuality (aside perhaps from one's own) is not directly perceptible. It is instead something we infer, principally from observing its effects and extrapolating accordingly. This fact helps us understand why sexuality only seems awesome on reflection. It is only once we have conceptualised the force of sexuality as able to overwhelm social and moral rules in general – that is once we have come to consider it as norm-breaking – that it can seem to us an object of awe.

### **3. Pornographic art: Story of the Eye**

We have seen that transgressive pornography, in addition to sexual arousal can be capable of occasioning disgust, humour, and in instances of literary pornography, awe, and that all these affects develop out of the norm-breaking of the genre. I have touched on the uses disgust, humour and awe can have in the context of literary pornography: Sade's use of disgust, Bataille's and Sade's presentation of sexuality as

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<sup>4</sup> Carroll also makes a similar link: "[c]ertain types of religious awe are also located in the vicinity of incongruity." (Carroll (2001): 423, n. 31)

<sup>5</sup> Keltner and Haidt do not mention Kant (although they discuss Burke).

an object of awe, Queneau's and Sade's efforts to make the reader laugh. This section aims to give an account of how this constellation of effects can be brought together to a broader artistic purpose; that is, to show how these affects can play a central role in establishing and conveying artistic meaning. To this end this section sketches an account of the role of disgust, humour and sexual arousal play in Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (I have already spoken of awe, with reference to *Story of the Eye*, but will say a little more about it at the end of the section). I choose *Story of the Eye* on account of its pre-eminent place in the genre of transgressive pornography, and because Bataille's extensive theoretical writings make it relatively easy to discuss his intentions.

From Bataille's theoretical writings it is apparent that he saw transgressive sexuality, disgust and laughter as different manifestations of what he sometimes calls simply "being". Being is for him primal and animal, but becomes focussed and intensified in the act of breaking with social, religious or moral norms: "'Being' increases in the tumultuous agitation of a life that knows no limits". (Bataille (1985): 172)) Disgust, laughter and the sexual arousal associated with transgressive sex, all involve a physically felt awareness, a "revelation" of being in this sense. (e.g. Bataille (1985): 132, 176) The term revelation is important. For Bataille, being is what is most valuable in our identity, and what we should strive to discover and realise most fully in our lives.

Transgressive sexuality yields this awareness for Bataille in a most obvious way, through the mental and physical intensity of the sexual experience it affords. It should be added that Bataille shares much with Sade in his appreciation of the pleasures the pain and death of others can afford transgressive sexuality. But he departs from (or perhaps extends) Sade in the existential importance he gives transgressive sexuality. Paul Hegarty gives an account this aspect of Bataille's thought (Bataille's use of the term "eroticism" correlates fairly well with what I call "transgressive sexuality"):

Bataille opens up the erotic as both deadly and where life is actually at its height. Eroticism is "assenting to life up to the point of death" and "in essence the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation" (Bataille (1986): 23, 16). In order, then, to 'live life to the full', death (in the form of loss of the self) must be encountered (but not overcome or mastered). The individual must be threatened with their own dissolution, and this is what is meant by eroticism being about violation. (Hegarty (2000): 106)

In the case of disgust, the perceived threat to the individual occasions a visceral self-awareness. To be disgusted is to feel one's body and mind repulsed by the object of disgust. For Bataille, disgust (and also laughter and sexual arousal) has a link with death – death "guarantees the totality of disgust" – that is, it is in the presence of death that we can feel disgust (and these other affects) most intensely. (Bataille (1985): 132) And it is this strongest form of disgust that yields an intense awareness of being: "the pure avidity to be me". (Bataille (1985): 132)

For Bataille, laughter brings with it a pleasurable awareness of the self in revolt from those norms that restrict it (a view that suggests the release theory). But like disgust this mental aspect is accompanied by a bodily aspect: the physical act of laughing. For

Bataille this is significant because it involuntarily disables and reduces to a kind of animal state what he takes to be, at least at a symbolic level, the primary vehicle of the expression of reason: the mouth. (Bataille (1985): 59–60) As with disgust, humour is most intense – “[a] kind of incandescent joy – the explosive and sudden revelation of the presence of being” – when it takes as its subject death in some form – when it “casts a glance ... into the void of being”. (Bataille (1985): 176)

As I have said, Bataille recognizes that these affects in their strongest forms are allied with transgression or norm-breaking. In *Story of the Eye*, the norm” under attack are predominately social and moral norms (including religious rules), and Bataille, in order to ensure the most comprehensive realisation of being, assaults these in a systematic manner, leaving no norm unsullied (although without achieving the phantasmagoria of transgression of Sade). Bataille tells of an incident that seems to hold the features of this programme in embryo. In the essay ‘Coincidences’, written to accompany *Story of the Eye*, he describes how his blind, syphilitic father was struck suddenly with dementia. After examining Bataille’s father,

[t]he doctor had withdrawn to the next room with my mother and I had remained with the blind lunatic, when he shrieked in a stentorian voice: “Doctor, let me know when you’re done fucking my wife!” For me, that utterance, which in a split second annihilated the demoralizing effects of a strict upbringing, left me with something like a steady obligation, unconscious and unwilling: the necessity of finding an equivalent to that sentence in any situation I happen to be in; and this largely explains *Story of the Eye*. (Bataille (1982): 73)

Let me now turn to the final episode from *Story of the Eye*, containing the most extreme transgressions in Bataille’s narrative. My intent is to show how it is through sexual arousal, disgust and humour arising from a programmatic series of transgressions of ascending severity, that Bataille hopes to evince from his readers the revelatory awareness of an increase in being that he believes is available in these affects.

In the final three chapters of *Story of the Eye*, the nameless (male) protagonist, Simone and Sir Edmund enter a Catholic church in Seville, where Simone seduces a young, handsome priest, and the group then subject him to elaborate sexual torture and humiliation ending in his murder. The series of transgressions develops as follows. First, the priest’s code of moral sense is overcome as he willingly gives himself over to his and the protagonists’ sexuality. After allowing Simone to perform oral sex on him in the confessional, the group carry him to the vestry: ““Señores’, the wretch snivelled, ‘you must think I’m a hypocrite”” (Bataille (1982): 61) The priest is presented as both disgusting and laughable; he is induced to urinate into the church’s chalice and drink the contents before ejaculating into the ciborium:

“The paralyzed wretch drank with well-nigh filthy ecstasy at one long gluttonous draft ... with a demented gesture, he bashed the sacred chamber-pot against a wall. Four robust arms lifted him up and, with open thighs, his body erect, and yelling like a pig being slaughtered, he spurted his come on the host in the ciborium ... .” (Bataille (1982): 62)

Sir Edmund then announces to the priest, ““You know that men who are hanged or garrotted have such stiff cocks the instant their respiration is cut off, that they ejaculate. You are going to have the pleasure of being martyred while fucking this girl.”” (Bataille (1982): 64) The cues for laughter dry up here (though they need not necessarily, cp. Queneau). Disgusted horror, and, perhaps, Bataille hopes, sexual arousal come to the fore after this as the party begin the more earnest, almost sacrificial business of asphyxiating their hapless victim during sex.

We will be unlikely to share with Bataille the beliefs that underlie his narrative – and it might be wondered whether this will preclude our appreciation of it. Bataille’s notion of being and the value he attaches to it, the value of transgression, and the place Bataille gives death in his thinking (not to speak of his apparent endorsement of murder) will all be contentious.<sup>6</sup> But while this could well make it difficult for us to appreciate *Story of the Eye* as a work of art, it does not necessarily prevent us doing so. Many literary classics, from Homer onwards, are developed around worldviews and value systems we do not share, and would find objectionable if we were to encounter them in contemporary life outside fiction. In that sense *Story of the Eye* is no different from many works we rank as having high artistic quality. Like other such works, we can find it worthwhile engaging with its fictions both at the level of narrative and affect, and at the level of the worldview and value system that organise the narrative. Bear in mind too that disgust, despite involving a (sometimes deeply) unpleasant feeling, is a crucial part of a ‘correct’ response to Bataille’s novella. However, this disgust should not preclude appreciation of other elements. Rather, it should be the occasion for the kinds of reflections on self that I have described (if not the full-blown revelation Bataille hopes to provoke).

I finish this analysis of *Story of the Eye* by returning to awe. It will be apparent that what I have said in section 1.3 about Bataille’s presentation of transgressive sexuality as an object of awe complements my account here, in that transgressive sexuality is an aspect of Bataille’s sense of being, and so it is appropriately held in awe on Bataille’s worldview. But it can also be observed that awe is not obviously a Bataillean affect as are disgust and humour. First, Bataille does not discuss awe in his theoretical writings. Second, awe is more often associated with conventional religious values, respect for authority, and so on; all of which Bataille rejects. I do not think these objections are deeply concerning: Bataille’s lack of discussion of awe does not on its own rule out my proposal, and the awe I have described is hardly of a conventional kind. Still I am happy to allow that awe exists on the periphery of Bataille’s aesthetic – it is not as crucial to him as disgust and humour.

#### **4. Conclusion: The aesthetics of pornography**

The constellation of affects I have examined – arousal associated with sexual transgression, disgust, humour and awe – articulates a distinctive pornographic aesthetic: a cluster of feelings that are ever-present possibilities for a writer describing

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<sup>6</sup> Bataille’s thinking in life followed his thinking in art so closely that in the 1930s he came to found a secret society that, it seems, seriously contemplated human sacrifice: “A consenting victim was sought; apparently one was found. A sacrificer was sought, but apparently in vain.” (Surya (2002): 250)

transgressive sexual acts. One might think that transgressive pornography is a small subgenre of pornography generally. But while the severe transgressions seen in the examples I have discussed may suggest this, we can now identify evidence that suggests transgression is much more widespread in pornography. Most, perhaps all, pornography, literary and visual, when it fails to arouse can seem disgusting or laughable. This suggests that norm-breaking, if only of a relatively minor sort, is widespread in pornography, and perhaps a generic feature of it. The simple fact that pornography involves the presentation of something usually expected to be private – sexual activity – in the public sphere is perhaps enough to render every example of pornography in Western culture an act of transgression, albeit usually minor.

That said, the use of the pornographic aesthetic to artistic ends is a rarity. Of course, making space for other kinds of feeling and content apart from sexual arousal counters to some degree the primary purpose of pornography, so it is unsurprising it does not compete with what we may call commercial pornography. From an artistic viewpoint it is bound by certain constraints too. First, the pornographic aesthetic seems best to suit the durational media of literature and film. Photography, painting and sculpture provide ample scope for the representation of sexual transgression, but they do not so readily support or control the experience of alternating between the pornographic affects. A second limitation lies in pornography's curtailed emotional repertoire compared to literature or film taken generally. My discussion of *Story of the Eye* shows that the pornographic aesthetic can still be artistically rich, in the right hands, but this does not change the fact that the writer is using a limited range of affects. The examples I have used, Sade, Queneau and Bataille, point to a final constraint, this time thematic: all their works have, to put it in the most general terms, sexual transgression and its significance as central themes. This will not be surprising. The pornographic affects are all responses to such transgressions, and involve an awareness of these transgressions – so it is to be expected that they form a basis for meditations on sexual transgression.

To point out the constraints of a genre is not to point out its failures. All genres have characteristics and limitations of their own. One of the purposes of genre is that it allows the artistic development of approaches and themes that would otherwise not be fully treated in literature and art – and its constraints are properly understood as part of this focus. This seems to me especially the case here. The transgressive affects and themes of this genre would irretrievably mar most literary fiction, but are worthwhile of exploration in themselves.

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