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PORNOGRAPHY AND MELANCHOLY

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Anton Chekhov and Lev Tolstoy, two giants of Russian literature, both had an extraordinary ability to express and evoke a sense of melancholy. Here is a passage from Chekhov's famous short story, *The Lady With the Dog*:

Yalta was hardly visible through the morning mist; white clouds stood motionless on the mountain-tops. The leaves did not stir on the trees, grasshoppers chirruped, and the monotonous hollow sound of the sea rising up from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep awaiting us. So it must have sounded when there was no Yalta, no Oreanda here; so it sounds now, and it will sound as indifferently and monotonously when we are all no more. And in this constancy, in this complete indifference to the life and death of each of us, there lies hid, perhaps, a pledge of our eternal salvation, of the unceasing movement of life upon earth, of unceasing progress towards perfection. Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, soothed and spellbound in these magical surroundings - the sea, mountains, clouds, open sky - Gurov thought how in reality everything is beautiful in this world when one reflects: everything except what we think or do ourselves when we forget our human dignity and the higher aims of our existence.¹

And this is from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*:

After dinner Natasha, at Prince Andrei's request, went to the clavichord and began to sing. Prince Andrei stood by a window, talking to the ladies, and listened to her. In the midst of a phrase he fell silent and suddenly felt choked with tears, a thing he had thought impossible for him. He looked at Natasha as she sang, and something new and joyful stirred in his soul. He had decidedly nothing to weep about, but he was ready to weep. About what? His former love? The little princess? His disappointments? ... His hopes for the future? ... Yes and no. The main thing he wanted to weep about was a sudden, vivid awareness of the terrible opposition between something infinitely great and indefinable that was in him, and something narrow and fleshly that he himself, and even she, was. This opposition tormented him and gladdened him while she sang.²

¹ Anton Chekhov, *The Lady with the Dog*, 1899

² Lev Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1869

What does the sentiment of melancholy, as it is described and expressed in these passages, have to do with pornography? Nothing much, it may seem. Indeed, it might be difficult to think of a bigger contrast: the refined prose of these authors vs. the crude visuals of porn; the wisdom that exudes from the cited passages vs. the cheap arousal offered by sites like Pornhub. And yet. In this paper, I want to investigate the connection between pornography and melancholy. My motivation for doing so is twofold. Firstly, I'm drawn to this topic because I have a longstanding interest in another unlikely pairing, namely that of pornography and art. I have argued in the past that both are not mutually exclusive and that some pornography can attain art status.³ However, possessing art status does not entail possessing great artistic value. (After all, there is a lot of bad art out there.) The possibility of the latter remains to be investigated in the case of pornography. But if it can be argued that pornography can be expressive of melancholy – one of the qualities that I, and many others, admire most in art – that will bring us a step closer to making the case that there may indeed be some pornography, and perhaps some feminist pornography in particular, with considerable artistic value.

Secondly, I have been inspired by Mari Mikkola's book. On the very first page, she writes: "someone once remarked to me: Is there really that much to say about pornography philosophically? ... someone else remarked that since the topic is so profoundly disgusting and vulgar, I cannot call my work philosophical in any genuine sense at all."⁴ Like her, I think such remarks are thoroughly misguided. There really remains much more to be said about pornography. For instance, pornography's relation to melancholy has, to my knowledge, never been investigated. Furthermore, even if a topic is considered disgusting and vulgar by some, that doesn't mean you can't think or write philosophically about it. (Indeed, disgust itself is nowadays a major topic of philosophical discussion.) Finally, and quite obviously, not all pornography is disgusting or vulgar. In fact, there may be very refined pornography out there – pornography that is able to elicit some of the more 'elevated' emotions such as melancholy. That is at least one of things I will try to establish. So, this paper is not so much critically responding to, but rather gratefully inspired by Mikkola's book.

In section 1, I propose a new philosophical account of melancholy. In section 2, I examine, and ultimately reject, the reasons why one might think that pornography and melancholy are incompatible. In section 3, I discuss some successful examples of melancholic pornography and argue that feminist pornographers are particularly well-placed to produce such material.

³ See Hans Maes, "Art or Porn: Clear division or false dilemma?" *Philosophy and literature* 35 (2011): 51-64; and Hans Maes, ed. *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁴ Mari Mikkola, *Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), ix.

1. Melancholy

What is melancholy? In answering this question my primary aim will be to give an account of the intense, profound, and bittersweet emotion as it is expressed in the passages cited above, as well as in other great works of art and literature.⁵ Before sketching my account, however, I want to make clear that I will not be engaging in what Sally Haslanger has called a “conceptual project”, whereby one tries track the ordinary usage of a term.⁶ This sort of project would be as ill-advised in the case of melancholy, as it is in the case of pornography. As Mikkola rightly points out: ‘This is because our intuitions about the concept at issue are too muddled and unclear, and our uses of the term expressing that concept too idiosyncratic.’⁷ In the course of history the term ‘melancholy’ has sometimes been reserved for a particular kind of illness, or a character trait, a mood, various sorts of psychological pathologies, and even a form of cultural decline.⁸ I am not interested in any of these uses of the term. My project should rather be considered “ameliorative” in nature, that is, my aim will be to clarify what melancholy is and ought to be in a manner that does justice to the intense and valuable experience expressed in (and afforded by) the works listed above.⁹

With that in mind, I propose to characterize melancholy as a complex and prolonged emotional process triggered by the affective appraisal of (what is perceived to be) a profound but typically harsh truth about human existence that puts the precarious value of something that you (feel you should) care about in sharp relief in such a way that you come to appreciate it more deeply. As a result, negative feelings or emotions (e.g. sadness, grief, angst) will co-occur or alternate with positive feelings or emotions (e.g. joy, gratitude, peacefulness).

Some clarifications are in order. The existential truths that give rise to melancholy can be varied in nature. They can relate to the transience of all things, the indifference of the universe to the life and death of each of us (as in Chekhov), the “terrible opposition” we find in ourselves “between something infinitely great and indefinable ... and something narrow and fleshly” (as in Tolstoy), etc. But it is key that such truths are not just theoretically acknowledged. In order for there to be a real emotion, they need to be vividly

⁵ E.g. Céline Sciamma’s film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Ozu’s *Late Spring*, the song *Bella Ciao* (as sung, for instance, by Goran Bregovic or the characters of Berlin and the Professor in *La Casa de Papel*), and Titus Simoens’ photobook *For Brigitte*.

⁶ Sally Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are they? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?” *Noûs*, 34 (2000): 31-55.

⁷ Mikkola, *Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction*, 16.

⁸ See Jacky Bowring, *Melancholy and the Landscape: locating sadness, memory and reflection in the landscape* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁹ I am paraphrasing Mikkola here. In her book she embarks on a similar kind of ameliorative project with regards to pornography.

grasped or “affectively appraised.” According to Jenefer Robinson (2005), affective appraisals “are always in terms of one’s own goals, interests, wants, or wishes. I respond emotionally when my interests or those of my group (me or mine) are perceived to be at stake.”¹⁰ One could certainly apprehend, say, the general idea of mortality in a cool and detached way. Yet it is only when you start to grasp the implications for yourself (or those close to you) that an emotional response might ensue. As Tolstoy reflects in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*:

“Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal” had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius – man in the abstract – was mortal was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from others.¹¹

Only when the main character realizes that he is in fact not different from others and that death awaits him, too, is he plunged into the emotional turmoil that is at the heart of the story.

Affective appraisals typically cause physiological responses, motor changes, action tendencies, and changes in facial and vocal expression. They may then be followed by a higher order cognitive appraisal or monitoring which kicks in to see if the initial affective appraisal is appropriate. Now, when someone really comes to grasp a harsh existential truth, their response may just be one of sadness, horror, or despair. But it can also be more complex and multifaceted. And that’s when melancholy may ensue. The harsh existential truth may come to accentuate the precarious value of something that you (feel you should) care about in such a way that you come to appreciate it more deeply. This gives rise to more positive feelings or emotions that help to offset the initial feelings of sadness or despair. Hence, the bittersweet nature of melancholy.

Melancholy, it should be noted, is not always or necessarily aesthetic in nature. But if an aesthetic experience is integrated into the complex emotional process described above, we may speak of aesthetic melancholy. An aesthetic experience occurs, we might say, “when we value our aesthetic perception of an object for its own sake and are moved in virtue of that perception.”¹² If that is so, then it seems that the characters in the passages I quoted from Tolstoy and Chekhov are indeed experiencing aesthetic melancholy. Prince Andrei appreciates the beauty of Natasha’s music and is deeply moved in virtue of it.

¹⁰ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than reason: Emotion and its role in literature, music, and art* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 109.

¹¹ Lev Tolstoy, “The death of Ivan Ilych.” In *Great short works of Leo Tolstoy*, introduction by John Bayley, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 247-302.

¹² Quoted in Hans Maes, *Conversations on Art and Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 28.

Gurov is aesthetically savoring his surroundings whilst being in the thralls of melancholy. Moreover, *readers* of Tolstoy and Chekhov may also be experiencing aesthetic melancholy in savoring these beautiful passages. When you read about the “eternal sleep awaiting all of us” or the world’s “complete indifference to the life and death of each of us” you are invited to contemplate these existential truths. And doing so may put the precarious value of beauty, and particularly the beauty and artistry of the prose you are reading, in sharp relief in such a way that you come to appreciate it more deeply.

2. Pornography vs. Melancholy

Chekhov’s *The Lady with the Dog* and Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* are highly expressive of melancholy and, in virtue of being so, will readily elicit melancholy in their audience. This is part of what makes them so valuable as works of art. It is commonly assumed that this sort of achievement and value is lacking in pornography. Granted, one can be overcome with sadness, and perhaps even melancholy, as a result of consuming pornography. Think of so-called “cranking”. Or one can imagine someone being struck by the depravity of human nature as a result of consuming pornography and consequently coming to appreciate the non-depraved aspects of, or people in, one’s life more fervently. However, in such cases the pornography itself is not expressive of melancholy (though it may inadvertently give rise to feelings of melancholy).

Pornography, it might be thought, simply cannot be expressive of melancholy due to its very nature. Various arguments could serve to support such a conclusion. First, melancholy is reflective at heart. It requires one to dwell on certain existential truths. But pornography, by virtue of what it is, seems to make reflection impossible. As St Augustine already pointed out: “The promptings of sensuality are the most strong of all, and so the most hostile to philosophy ... What man in the grip of this, the strongest of emotions, can bend his mind to thought, regain his reason, or indeed, concentrate on anything ...”¹³

Second, bending one’s mind to the harsh reality of the human condition is part and parcel of melancholy. But pornographers, because they need to gratify the viewer, rather *refashion* reality as the compliant object of said viewer’s desires. Pornography depicts the world as its consumers would want it to be: full of healthy, attractive people who seem to wish nothing more than to satisfy every possible sexual desire. Third, while the depths of the human psyche are explored in melancholy, pornography is really only “skin deep”. Its whole *raison d’être* is to show naked bodies and any psychologizing would just get in the way. Fourth, there also appears to be a fundamental difference in uptake. Whereas aesthetic melancholy is savored for its own sake, a pornographic film or

¹³ Simon Blackburn. *Lust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52.

photograph is simply used to satisfy a need or gratify a desire. The former is a matter of appreciation, the latter one of consumption.

Finally, the pleasure of pornography seems to require a certain 'narrowing of the mind'. Not just in the sense that one becomes utterly oblivious to one's surroundings when one engages with pornography. But also in the sense that a certain willful blindness seems required if one wants to enjoy this sort of material. For instance, one can't really think of all the pain and suffering in the world whilst consuming pornography because that would almost certainly serve to destroy the mood. By the same token, one may also need to ignore certain facts about the pornographic work itself, such as the exploitative working conditions of the actors, if one wants to use that material to indulge in one's fantasies. The contrast with melancholy seems clear. Here the pleasure is (at least partly) the result of a *broadening* of the mind. In the experience of melancholy we are precisely reminded of things that we normally tend to ban from our consciousness: the fact that we are mortal, that life is transitory etc. This confrontation with a tough existential truth then allows us to become more appreciative of the present moment or of something that we hold dear.

In sum, there are various reasons why one might think that pornography, due to its very nature, cannot be expressive of melancholy. However, as I will now go on to argue, none of these is ultimately compelling.

To begin with, even if we grant, following St Augustine, that the state of sexual arousal is irreconcilable with the kind of reflection that is required for melancholy (or philosophy); and even if we grant, *pace* Mikkola,¹⁴ that pornography necessarily involves the intention to produce sexual arousal; this still does not show that pornography is of necessity inimical to melancholy. Because nothing says that pornography should have sexual arousal as its only or even central intent. As Mikkola rightly argues: "producing sexually arousing materials may be a means to some other end, rather than the central purpose of pornography production per se."¹⁵ Furthermore, the "pornographic intention of soliciting sexual arousal may be constitutively intertwined with other intentions in a way that makes it impossible to separate "the" central pornographic intention from additional nonpornographic intentions."¹⁶ In light of this, pornography could very well induce reflection on certain profound existential truths by means of, or in addition to, sexually arousing its audience.

Second, it is just not true that pornographers will always seek to distort reality to comply with viewers' desires and fantasies. Some pornography aims to capture the realities of sex, including some of its not-so-pretty elements. This is

¹⁴ Mikkola, *Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction*, 177.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

particularly true of the so-called 'docu porn' branch of feminist pornography, where authenticity, realism, truthfulness are key. *BED PARTY* (2014, dir. Shine Louise Houston and Shae Voyeur) is a good example. It features Eden Alexander and Sebastian Keys and has been aptly described as "a 'Porno Vérité' documentary style look behind the private doors of porn's public performers" offering "an all access and unfiltered glimpse into the personal life of the couple".¹⁷ Third, there is no reason to assume that the explicit nature of pornography and its depiction of naked bodies are incompatible with psychological complexity. Similarly, and fourth, there is no reason to think that something cannot possess both intrinsic value and instrumental value. Consuming and appreciating often do go hand-in-hand, as in the case of a nice meal or glass of wine.

Finally, one cannot draw a strict dividing line between melancholy and pornography based on their tendencies to either broaden or narrow the mind. For one thing, it appears that melancholy often also relies on a certain narrowing of consciousness. Not just in the sense that when you're engrossed in a Tolstoy novel you become oblivious to your surroundings. But even in the sense that you may have to ignore certain uncomfortable truths in order to be able to indulge in these melancholic works of art. After all, while you are leisurely leafing through your expensive hard back copy of *War and Peace* there are people dying of starvation elsewhere (the "bourgeois predicament", as R. Jay Wallace calls it¹⁸). Conversely, the pleasure of pornography may potentially be enhanced, instead of impeded, by the sort of "broadening of the mind" that is characteristic of melancholy. For if there is any truth to the oft-reported finding that funerals and other vivid reminders of mortality are powerful enhancers of the erotic drive, then it's not hard to see how this sort of effect could, at least in principle, be put to good use in the creation of pornography.

3. Melancholic Pornography

What we've established so far is that the combination of melancholy and pornography seems at least possible in theory. What remains to be shown is whether that combination could actually work in practice. Are there *überhaupt* any existing and successful examples of melancholic pornography? The importance of asking such questions is justly emphasized in Mikkola's book: "Pornography cannot be analyzed from the philosopher's armchair a priori, and speaking authoritatively about issues relevant to pornography requires knowing something about those issues. In other words, philosophical theorizing about

¹⁷ See <https://www.pinklabel.tv/on-demand/film/bed-party/>

¹⁸ Chapter 5 in R. Jay Wallace, *The View from Here: on affirmation, attachment, and the limits of regret*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

pornography requires having knowledge about the empirical realities of pornography.”¹⁹

One film that may serve as an example is Michael Winterbottom’s *9 Songs* (2004). This sexually explicit story of a passionate love affair between an exchange student and a climate scientist is framed by the latter’s work in (and reflections on) the Antarctic. The vastness and coldness of the outside world serves to accentuate the warm intimacy found in bed, and reminiscences about the impermanence of human relationships seem to enhance the appreciation of the beautiful and ecstatic time they had together. Its pervasive melancholy is epitomized in the movie’s last line “It’s beautiful!”, immediately followed by the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club’s *Love Burns* (with the telling chorus “Now she’s gone, Love burns inside me.”).

Another example is Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie’s *Lost Girls* (2006). This “porno-graphic novel” depicts the sexually explicit adventures of three female fictional characters of the late 19th and early 20th century: Alice from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, and Wendy from J.M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy*. They meet as adults at the mountain resort Hotel Himmelgarten, on the eve of World War I, and recount and share erotic adventures. The melancholic tone is set on the very first page with a motto taken from Lewis Carroll: “We are but older children, dear, who fret to find our bedtime near.” The transience of life and the challenges of ageing are among its central themes, as is the idea that war, violence, and oppression are always lurking in the shadows, ready to destroy the freedoms that people enjoy (including the freedom to explore and express their sexual fantasies). The latter truth is expressed very poignantly on the final pages, when the hotel is abandoned, the war erupts, and a young soldier is slaughtered on the battlefield. But the overall mood of the book, it should be observed, is not one of depression or horror. These harsh truths really serve to accentuate the beauty of the (past and present) moments the characters are able to share and the precarious value of the freedoms they enjoy (and we enjoy today). That is what makes *Lost Girls* highly expressive of melancholy.

Now, given Mikkola’s understanding of feminist pornography as “materials that genuinely have been produced under ethical and fair-trade conditions and that celebrate non gender stereotypic bodies, scenarios, and desires”, it would seem that *Lost Girls* qualifies as such.²⁰ The book certainly shows and eroticizes a number of non-gender stereotypic scenarios and desires. However, that is not all it does. In certain passages, *Lost Girls* also seems to gloss over as unproblematic some of the worst sexist tropes (e.g. women desiring and enjoying incestuous and non-consensual sex). This should give one pause in labeling the work as

¹⁹ Mikkola, *Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction*, 259.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

feminist. And it indicates that Mikkola's characterization of feminist pornography needs further refinement.

That said, the claim that feminist pornographers, in order to be worthy of that label, should at the very least seek to produce work within an ethical working environment and celebrate non-gender stereotypic bodies and desires, seems entirely plausible. Furthermore, implementing these two conditions should be highly conducive for the production of melancholic pornography. Firstly, if feminist porn is produced under ethical and fair-trade conditions, there will be no need for viewers to turn a blind eye to any abuse or exploitation that went on in its production. In other words, there will be no need for a deliberate narrowing of the mind that seems required for the consumption of so much other pornography but that is typically detrimental for melancholy. Secondly, when feminist pornographers set out to celebrate non gender stereotypical bodies and desires, they will inevitably do so against the backdrop of a world and an industry that is still largely hostile towards such bodies and desires. That is a harsh truth that can be (and often is) acknowledged in the work itself in order to accentuate the beauty and value of such desires and bodies.

A case in point, and the best example of melancholic pornography that I know, is Marit Östberg's *When We Are Together, We Can Be Everywhere* (2015). The film, as the wistful voice-over makes abundantly clear, is in part a love-letter to Berlin: "a place safe from the capitalist order" where we can "unleash our fantasies on broken facades and fallen walls". Elsewhere in the film the voice states: "There's nothing we can't project on Berlin, both trauma and freedom. Queer bubbles next to far right parties all over Europe." Against this background queer desires of all varieties are unflinchingly and joyfully explored. The awareness of transience ("the Summer ended; like they all do") coupled with an appreciation of what has been, the occasional brooding of the characters, with quasi-mournful flashbacks and the unmistakable reference to Dürer's famous engraving *Melencolia I* (1514), just add to bittersweet nature of this beautifully melancholic and yet hard-core feminist porn film.

Conclusion

Melancholic pornography – pornography that elicits melancholy in virtue of expressing it – is not a contradiction in terms. It exists and there are some striking examples out there. If only there would be more of it, I'm now inclined to add. Not so much, or not only, because facing up to certain existential truths can function as a sexual tonic. But because there are so many fundamental but difficult truths relating specifically to sexuality that are just waiting to be thematised (e.g. sex as a sublime force, pleasurable and terrifying at the same

time; or the world as a hostile place for all sorts of non-gender stereotypical bodies and fantasies, etc.). Dealing with such truths, in a way that might be conducive to melancholy, is something that pornography seems eminently placed to do. For it offers the most direct and explicit representation of sexual relations whilst aiming for a bodily, visceral, emotional response – thereby facilitating the sort of affective appraisal needed for melancholy. Thus, at least as I see it, pornography and melancholy are not irreconcilable. If anything, the opposite may be true: they are made for each other. This, I admit, is a rather provocative thesis. But, in the spirit of Mikkola’s book, my hope is first and foremost “to motivate alternative ways to think about pornography and to provide an impetus for a continued philosophical examination of the topic.”²¹

²¹ Ibid., 232.