

Pornography as a Logical and Psychoanalytic Issue

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Abstract

The topic of pornography raises many philosophical, political, moral, legal, and psychoanalytic questions. The latter addresses the issues of sex, pleasure, and domination, and consequently the real of the body. Pleasure and jouissance, valued by Lacanian psychoanalysis, have, in the word, in the structure and in the movement of the four discourses (of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst), plus the discourse of the capitalist, as well as in the mathemes of sexuation, a possibility of circumventing the void left by the jouissance (as evidenced in pornography). It is through language that a possibility arises for the theme to be read and the subjects 'listened to', following the psychoanalytic norm of floating attention, in the analysis of social and sexual relationships.

Keywords: pornography, psychoanalytical listening, Lacan, pleasure and *jouissance*

1. Introduction

This article aims to develop a discussion about pornography, having *jouissance* (or enjoyment) and psychoanalytic listening as the main elements of discussion. Both are essential elements for building a conversation about pornography as a privileged locus of exploration, of *jouissance* and the body, and of perversions, constituents of everyone. To this end, we propose a theorization of pornography as an element of surplus-*jouissance*, or rather, surplus value, within a system of

incitement to recurring enjoyment. A characteristically parasitic system, the capitalist one.

This project has become a reality in recent years, thanks to three epistolary moments: the first was the encounter with an article written by Polly Barton, British author and translator. The article, entitled *My Year of talking about porn*, was in *The New York Times International Edition* on March 14, 2023, as a preparation for the release of her work *Porn: An Oral History* (2023).

Barton's work brings together, in nineteen conversations, accounts from friends and acquaintances about their experiences with pornography – the initial encounter with this object, the relationship built with it after this initial point, and the effects that this discovery of sex, through its spectacularization, left on its interlocutors.

The second moment of enlightenment was a scene. A scene that occurred during the COVID pandemic, in 2020, while participating in a meeting of the *Thumos Seminair* research group, from UNIGE (via *Zoom*): hackers invaded the meeting room showing a scene of pedophilia between two men and three girls, aged about 10. This scene, unexpected, in a moment of fragility like the pandemic, destabilized everyone.

The third moment is recurring, brought up by my students, who often ask me to give a real example. However, the real, as we know from Aristotelian logic, is located at the point of the impossible, determining what cannot be. We do not discover the real, we come across it.

How to access this real, how to bring it to light, if not through psychoanalysis, by talking about it? In this endeavor, we propose to talk about it, about the real, by conceptualizing four specific elements: sex, pornography, *jouissance*, and pleasure.

In parallel, we also point out the work carried out in the Lacanian study group FILPSI, since 2016. The main objective is to study the

Lacanian work with a view to the social, thinking about society through philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Finally, we can locate pornography in its markedly manifest presence, in all fields of life in society, moving between relationships and, at the same time, shaping them. Jacques-Alain Miller, in 2016, presented at the *X Congresso da Associação Mundial de Psicanálise*, in Rio de Janeiro, the text *The Unconscious and the Speaking Body*. There, the psychoanalyst draws attention to pornography as the object to think about the paradigm of the body, as one that gives itself (to the spectacle) and that closes in on itself, in repulsion to the other. He details:

How can we not have, for example, the idea of a fissure when Freud invented psychoanalysis, if we can say so, under the aegis of Queen Victoria, the paradigm of the repression of sexuality, while the 21st century sees the massive diffusion of what is called *porn*, that is, coitus displayed, turned into a spectacle, a *concert* accessible to everyone on the internet through a simple mouse click? From Victoria to porn, we not only went from prohibition to permission but to incitement, to intrusion, to provocation, to forcing. What is porn if not a fantasy filmed with its own variety to satisfy perverse appetites in their diversity? Nothing better than the imaginary profusion of bodies giving in to 'doing it' and 'making out' to show the absence of sexual relations in reality (Miller 2016, our translation).

We cannot escape this movement, except through speaking and listening, made possible by psychoanalysis.

2. Pornography as an issue

Some questions came up: after all, what would pornography be or what is it? What are the limits of pornography? As an answer to the last, we can say that its limits are moral, political, and religious.

For the research we carry out here, Alenka Zupančič's book *What is Sex?* (2023) was of capital importance after we approached other authors, such as Michel Foucault with *Lectures on The Will to Know* (1976), J. D. Násio with the text *Why do we keep making the Same Mistakes?* (2013), Serge André with *La signification de la pédophilie*¹ (1999). In addition to these authors, other anchor points for this research were the already solidified works of Sigmund Freud and his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* ([1905] 2016), with the addition of the issue of drive, evidently, and also Jacques Lacan with the seminar *A Lógica do Fantasma* (2023) with the question of the body (chapters XVIII and XIX).

Currently, Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek, from the Slovenian school (Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts), have an important contribution in the field of social theory and psychoanalysis, for which sex is not reducible to biological normativity nor to symbolic constructivisms of society. Sex is a deviation or error from a norm that does not exist, in a clear reference to Alain Badiou. It is a failure between the ontological and the epistemological, an ontological inconsistency of being.

Subverting ontology, Zupančič situates sex as a privileged entrance to contradictions and antagonisms that force us to reflect when we engage with this signifier. This is not a deconstruction, but a dis-identity in relation to ontological thinking that rehabilitates the body, pushing everything outside of itself.

¹ '*La signification de la pédophilie*' was a conference given by Serge André in 1999 in Lausanne.

3. *Jouissance* as a response

Jacques Lacan proposes a way out of *jouissance* that goes beyond utilitarianism, even when well founded, as in the thought of Bentham (1748-1832) (in *Theory of Fictions*, compiled of his texts published in 2007, organized by C. K. Ogden) and his utilitarian theory. This is apparent, for example, when he points out that the 'use value' of a good does not necessarily coincide with its '*Jouissance* value', since for Bentham the idea of general happiness, or the interest of the community in general, is related to the result of a hedonistic calculation, that is, the sum of citizens' pleasures and pains. The principle of utility, therefore, has the objective of providing 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people' (Bentham 1979), to achieve it in the best possible way.

Jacques-Alain Miller (1996) adds that what gives foundation to utilitarianism is the conviction that nothing is without effect; everything serves, or not, the other. Utility would therefore be what founds existence. When commenting on Bentham's theory, the psychoanalyst states that nature, for utilitarians, says nothing, establishes no norms, and imposes no limits. Its unique function is to make pleasure and pain available to masters so that they can guide men.

Lacan, like Marx, introduces the notion of '*surplus jouissance*' related to the '*surplus value*' that governs the capitalist approach. *Jouissance* does not cease to have use value for the subject; this use value can be demonstrated by the fact that the subject does not stop making use of *jouissance*, even if this use puts him at risk. Lacan stuck to the notion of use around the aspect of the *surplus jouissance* of desire. The Lacanian theory is essentially based on the object of the drive: inseparable from *jouissance* as the satisfaction of the drive.

The use value of an object is particular, that is, it interrupts the connection with the Other. The response of *jouissance* can be

understood as a *jouissance* that progressively becomes more solitary and that seeks solely the enjoyment of one's own body, being able to extract different satisfactions from the same object.

In this way, it is possible to think that *jouissance* has value for the subject since he puts it to use, but there is something else besides its use value, there is its use of *jouissance* (Lacan 1997).

We find, however, structural, political, and sexual impasses in the society where social oppressions cause repression whose response is the 'use of *jouissance*' (without going into issues relating to phallic *jouissance*)². In this analysis, Jacques Lacan starts with logic and topology so that we can respond to such impasses. Lacan used letters instead of words, the mathemes, in his four discourses. These letters have a code to be deciphered: S1= master signifier; S2= knowledge; \$= barred subject; a= small a, the surplus-*jouissance*. The four discourses circulate through the spaces and fixed positions of the agent → other, truth/production.

At this point in the Lacanian construction, it will be the acts related to the letters that will give the specificity of the discourses: with the discourse of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst. We will add to them a fifth discourse, the capitalist's or the contemporary master's discourse. Between the contemporary master and the ancient one, there is a change in the place of knowledge. Its main difference compared to others is that it prioritizes breaking social

² It is important to clarify that Lacan formalizes *the phallic function* based on the Freudian category of the *phallus*, in which knowledge about castration prevails. Although the term *phallus* was not used frequently by Freud, being often used to refer to the penis, the *phallic* adjective occupies a large place in the Freudian theory of libido, of sexual difference, especially concerning the Oedipus complex (Laplanche & Pontalis 1992). *Phallic jouissance*, according to Lacan, is, therefore, that which is located outside the body and includes fantasy, based on the subject's belief in the Other of castration. The constitution of the subject is guided by its accommodation to the phallic *jouissance*, and this involves the marriage (carried out under the most varied circumstances) that the subject must make between phallic *jouissance* and its body (Miller 2005).

ties, as we can see in Lacan's *Seminar 17* (1992).

According to Antônio Quinet (2012), this discourse, the capitalist one, promotes induced autism and a push towards onanism, saving the desire for the Other and stimulating the illusion of completeness with a connectable partner.

The capitalist discourse is a *jouissance* machine, far from being desirous, as it is always within reach. Under capitalism, we will hardly have a chance of becoming subjects of history. We will hardly have a choice, when the ideology of the free market, which is imposed on us, allows sexual exploitation, whether through images, advertisements, nude pictures, fake news, etc., where problems with sex are the result of social regulations guided by the dominant and savage capitalist ideology.

One of the proposed solutions that we know of, '*tout court*', is neutrality, which is a position of the ruling class. We have an example at hand, with the war recently started in the Gaza Strip, a good position enhanced by our gentle nature is that we are neither anti-Semitic nor Islamophobic (because we are neither one nor the other). We are in an aseptic relationship, without antagonisms that would force us to take a position; it would be easier not to get involved and relax, and, '*en passant*', a good porn session could even be the solution governed by the utilitarian formula, by establishing a direct relationship with the *jouissance* – the only instance of legislation, in addition to necessity or suitability.

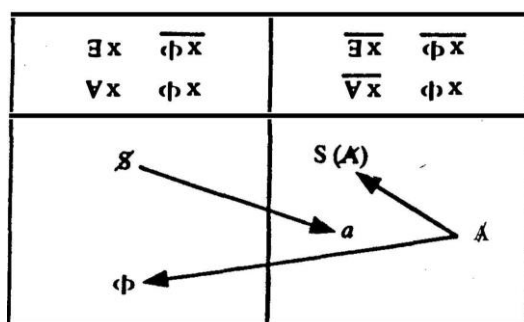
However, the spell turns against the sorcerer, whether sex is repressed, hidden, alienated, or condemned, it will always be a threat to the pleasure that generates more pleasure. Psychoanalysis is committed to desire and our choices, even if only with our own neuroses and, also, with these structural impasses of society and sexuality.

We ask ourselves, then, what is the place of this narrative in a

society where talking about sex is, in itself, a revolutionary and sexual act?

In this analysis, from the point of view of common sense and driven by the biological reality, we have women on one side and men on the other. Bodies with penises and without penises. Lacan, however, unlike this model, demonstrated through structural and linguistic analysis that woman and man are just signifiers that occupy a position, according to the sexualization graph, as we can see below:

Image 1: sexualization picture



Source: Lacan (1985).

The graph was presented in *Seminar 20* ([1972-1973] 1985), leading Jacques Lacan to scandalize when he said that 'woman does not exist' (Lacan 1985: 14)³, which, according to the logic: man 'speak about x', woman (its negative) 'do not speak about x'. But, that is what it is all about, that is the key point, there is an erasure of 'woman' in the logic and also in the social field. Ontology had, and still has, a prominent role with its essences, leaving the body and its differences in the background.

Modern and enlightened culture and science reiterated this

³ This is what the analytical discourse demonstrates, for one of these beings as sexual, for the man as provided with the so-called phallic organ – I said 'so-called' –, the corporal sex, the sex of the woman – I said 'of the woman', although precisely there is no woman, the woman is not entire – the sex of the woman says nothing, except through the *jouissance* of the body (Lacan 1985).

desexualization and the physical body, but Lacan replaces it, with all the consequences generated in this proposal by the word, but not just any word, seeking its essence in the foundation of the word, in the '*lalangue*', in babbling, in the root of the language – the real of the language.

Lacan left us the legacy of the word, appropriating the linguistic model taken from Ferdinand de Saussure, with the entire range of signifiers, meanings, nouns, and adjectives – and from Roman Jakobson, the functions of language and communication, with information about emitters, receivers, intentions, subliminal structures, and their relationship with the arbitrary, different from the rationalist discourse, substance, and reason.

This entire journey of Lacan, through words, is symbolic and also real, because it is through words that we can know about the real of the body, as scientific knowledge teaches us, even when it excludes the subject and *jouissance*, concealing what Lacan will call a lack.

The demand for enlightened knowledge produces objects capable of *jouissance* that come to suture and make a knot. A knowledge that presents itself to the subject and that emerges to cover its lack, its loss. There we have the problem and also the solution. We are, from birth, induced to speak, the word is excitement, oral pleasure, which offers protection for this operation of knowing nothing, appearing as a veiled protection.

Surpluses and deviations, such as perversions, appear as pathological elements of protection against castration.

4. In the end, pornography

Porn is a protection, the '*condom*', which covers the object of pleasure for the perverse. Perversion, Lacan tells us, is defined exactly by the way in which the subject places himself there, incarnating the missing object that would be the target of the drive. Hence the fixity of

perversion, its repetitive and endless scripts, where the pervert has no freedom, he is a slave to the *jouissance* of the Other, as we see in Sade. The perverse, in his actions, is commanded by the categorical imperative of *jouissance*: *Jouis!* As Lacan says in the text *Kant with Sade* (1963). The subject lives for enjoyment, to take possession of it, organize it, and extend it. It is present as a hard and inflexible response, in the form of a desire for enjoyment. In fact, there are no subjects, but those who are subjected. The subject assumes that he can cover up the lack, deny it, and does everything to unveil it. And how would that be possible? How would it be possible to 'see the lack'? Placing an imaginary object in its place, an object that replaces the lack.

The imaginary dimension appears to be prevalent in the perverse organization, where the subject imagines himself as the object that his mother lacks, a slave to her whims, or even, when he acts in function of a substitute for her, the fetish. In both cases, in both situations, it is always towards a partial object that the drive is directed.

Porn, in turn, is a carnal exposure to *jouissance*, a direct line of perversion, which causes suffering and death for the Other.

Polly Barton's statement, *My Year of Talking about porn* (published in *The New York Times* on March 10, 2023), prior to the release of her book *Porn: An Oral History* (2023), is perhaps a good start to show exactly the meaning of pornography. The author tells us:

We should, most of us, be talking about porn more than we are. However intensely private it might seem, for better or worse, porn is not something we interact with solely as individuals. It enters our relationships; it molds us. We can meet that passively with silence, or we can just start talking — really talking — and see where we end up (Bartonon 2023).

Also that,

Growing up in Britain, I received wildly different messages about it: Porn served a fundamental human need; porn glorified and glamorized sexual violence toward women; porn encouraged sexual experimentation and creativity; porn was tacky; porn was racist, ableist and misogynist. I'd never succeeded in squaring these views. I knew that there was, ostensibly, good porn and bad porn, but I wasn't really sure where the difference between the two lay, and I'd never really had a proper, frank conversation about any of it. With anyone (Barton 2023).

5. Psychoanalytic listening

Why is psychoanalytic listening fundamental in this context? Because it is a way of accessing the subject through speech, as the enjoyment of the body escapes through speech. This knowledge is located there and, through fluctuating attention, the technique of psychoanalysis, where the analyst supports the patient's associations, bypasses the lack of knowledge.

In *Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis* (1912), Freud claims that floating attention is a therapeutic ambition, but, more than that, it is the opportunity to reintroduce the subject divided between his saying and his said, utterance and enunciation, between knowledge and truth.

Porn and its practices rely on holes in knowledge, their logic is that of a 'denial' (*Verleugnung*), as the desire to enjoy belies castration (I affirm 'this is my mother' and deny 'this is not my mother'). However, listening to a perverse practice, as in the case we presented in our introduction, pedophilia, can end up arousing in the agent, in the analyst, or in ourselves, a correlative of horror (as the hacking scene

in the pandemic caused in me). This effect is the one sought by the perverse, whose sole function is to place the other's pain and pleasure in a direct relationship with enjoyment.

Would it be appropriate, then, to use such a resource (floating listening)? Listening to a perverse practice, devoid of judgment and censorship, as expected from an analyst, can run the risk of being equated with consent, almost bordering on complicity. This often seems to be the justified reason for a refusal on the part of analysts to see these cases. However, listening without passion or judgment must be ethical and the consequence, as an act, can give rise to the subject.

The only substitute for life and death is language, both listening and speaking, because, between life and death, we have enjoyment, which is deadly. The discourse about the sexual marks the difference between the confirmation of sex and the talk of sex. We can say that it is a deliberate transgression, a bet on words, knowledge, and psychoanalysis.

'We should, most of us, be talking more about porn than we are', as Polly Barton suggests, without forgetting what Lacan teaches: 'there is no knowledge about sexual enjoyment or about the enjoyment of each sex as such because the proportion with the Other of sex is lost for everyone who has entered the universe of language and words' (Lacan 1998: 839, our translation). All we can do is insist, because there is no harm in trying to talk about it.

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