Dwelling In the House that Porn Built: A Phenomenological Critique of Pornography In the Age of Internet Technology

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Abstract: This paper is a critique of pornography from within the framework of Heideggerian phenomenology. I contend that pornography is a pernicious form of technological discourse in which women are reduced to spectral and anonymous figures fulfilling a universal role, namely that of sexual subordination. Further, the danger of pornography is covered over in the public sphere as a result of the pervasive appeal to its status as mere fantasy. I argue that relegating the problem to the domain of fantasy is superficial and specious at best, inasmuch as fantasy itself is ultimately grounded in everyday reality. When not concealed as innocuous "fantasy," pornography has been defended under the rubric of "free speech." One of my aims is to repudiate this approach by revealing it as grounded in a highly suspect and self-contradictory phallocentric view of language. Rae Langton's (2009) recently published collection of essays on pornography attacks the problem largely in terms of "objectification" and the Austinian notion of "illocutionary disablement" from a position of authority. In this paper, I too confront the issues of language, objectification, and authority, but as articulated by means of Heidegger's critique of technology.

Introduction

This paper is a critique of pornography from within the framework of Heideggerian phenomenology and hermeneutics. I contend that pornography is a pernicious form of technological discourse in which human beings are reduced to spectral and anonymous figures fulfilling a universal role, namely—in the most extreme and problematic cases—that of sexual subordination. Further, *Internet* pornography is a unique phenomenon demanding a holistic critical approach that avoids the naïve abstraction of "content" from "form" or aesthetic "medium." The Internet is designed

as a kind of interactive *hodological* space[1]—to invoke the language of German psychologist Kurt Lewin—whose architecture is best described as hypertextual, or, better for our purposes, hypermedial. Thus, the manner in which pornographic discourse functions in the digital age requires an ontological treatment significantly different in kind from that of its analog precursors. Marshall McLuhan's observation that "all media work us over completely"[2] is considerably more relevant today than it was in 1967. This "working over" can be understood in the same sense in which myth once formed the basic milieu navigated by ancient peoples in their everyday lives. I will suggest that "global" technology, by supplanting "global" mythology as the essential meaning giving though diaphanous *mise en scène* in which we now find ourselves, has radically altered the basic way in which we understand everyday entities, to include human beings. Clearly, this claim has implications that extend far beyond the narrow scope of a critique of pornography. My chief aim in this paper, however, is to examine the implications of the claim with respect to the domain of pornography in particular. For better or worse—hopefully the former—this requires that we think outside the stodgy, abstract obscurantism for which Heidegger has understandably been criticized.

Large-scale legal and political strategies for dealing with the problem of pornography, as is well known, have failed spectacularly. The "civil rights" approach of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin collapsed, arguably, as a due corollary of the Cartesian dualism underpinning constitutional law in the United States. Worries about government-imposed constraints on the "free" speech of "free" subjects have rendered the censorship route of anti-porn feminists both unviable and unfashionable.[3] Indeed, it is precisely the suspect character of dualist and subjectivist ontologies that *cautions one against* censorship-based solutions. *Who* is to be censored and by *whom*? Exactly *what* would "we" be censoring? Products of "individual expression?" Nexuses of socio-cultural relations? One important observation I wish to defend in this paper is that modern technology (Web 2.0 applications, like Wikipedia, are especially indicative of this) is increasingly destabilizing the notion of a free and isolable subject. For this reason I talk about pornography *qua* speech in section I in the interest of providing an alternative to what I call—à la Derrida (1981)—the "phallogocentric"[4] view of language by which the legal debate over pornography has been for the most part framed.

Rae Langton's (2009) recently published collection of essays on pornography attacks the problem largely in terms of "objectification" and what she describes in Austinian language as "illocutionary disablement" from a position of authority. Although collectively published in 2009, all but three of the articles in *Sexual Solipsism* were written much earlier and in response to contributions to a field of inquiry circumscribed primarily by issues of free speech and first amendment rights. The view advanced in this paper turns the problem of objectification on its head: it is not that pornography transforms women into objects and, by dint of multi-medial

illocutionary pronouncements, discursively sustains such moral and epistemological corruption. On the contrary, pornography, as technological discourse, *reduces* objects (in this case women) to ephemeral and ultimately fungible specters, strangely "miraculated"[5] nodes of energy whose only function is to be consumed. This is, to be sure, a provocative and potentially inflammatory thesis. I urge the reader to not be too hasty, however, in pegging me as some kind of monstrous masculist or post-humanistic leveler of people into things. Human beings and coffee cups differ as phenomena in virtue of their peculiar modes of self-givenness, that is, in what they *objectively* show themselves to be. They are both objects. Furthermore, the self-givenness of objects, and this is where Heidegger is most helpful, is always coupled with a self-withdrawal; there is a sense in which every object is thoroughly indifferent to the various uses to which it can be put.

MacKinnon remarks in strikingly Heideggerian terms: "As events that have been hidden come to light, the formerly unseen appears to determine more and more of the seen. The repercussions for theory, the requisite thinking on all levels of society, have only begun to be felt."[6] This paper is an attempt at a response to those repercussions, an answer to the call for the manner of thinking required by the phenomena at hand. The period of the 1980s was a long time ago. Stag magazines, VHS tapes, and seedy bookstores quarantined to low-income neighborhoods have been replaced by slick, streamlined interfaces, private wireless connections to limitless libraries of content ranging from the seemingly innocuous to the gut-wrenchingly disturbing, and applications for portable gadgets with which the hope is that one day we'll be able to undress models simply by dragging our fingers across the screen while sitting in an airport terminal or coffee shop.[7] This is an industry of perpetual escalation and innovation for innovation's sake.[8] As such, it is unclear whether the legally circumscribed "space for questioning" opened up by the civil rights approach is any longer a fruitful option. Perhaps dealing with pornography phenomenologically as a uniquely pernicious mode of technological discourse will open up a new avenue more felicitously suited to the problem and to our particular historical moment.

I. Speech and Appropriation

As suggested above, I am not interested in approaching the problem of pornography from a legal standpoint. Nevertheless, in the history of such approaches there are moments that are quite telling, from a phenomenological perspective, about the prevalent ways in which we tend to view our relationship to speech and discourse. In *American Booksellers Ass'n. Inc. v. Hudnut*, a curious contradiction arises that seems to encapsulate a number of hidden theoretical assumptions underlying these views. In rendering his verdict, Judge Easterbrook accepts the premises of the proposed anti-pornography ordinance, namely that: "Depictions

of subordination tend to perpetuate subordination. The subordinate status of women in turn leads to affront and lower pay at work, insult and injury at home, battery and rape on the streets."[9] In the very next breath, however, he observes: "Yet, this simply demonstrates the power of pornography as speech."[10] He goes on to conclude ultimately that, in light of this demonstrative power, "pornographic speech" must be protected. Speech has the power to effect profound changes on the world. Because of this, the individual must be free to wield it as he or she sees fit.

Although one can surely imagine a court sanctioning the unfettered personal use of firearms precisely in virtue of their *power* to affect the world, it is clear that such a decision would be seriously controversial.[11] In cases of "speech," by contrast, these kinds of decisions are significantly less so. What is it about speech that makes the free disposal of it defensible at all costs, its power to harm notwithstanding? This is an interesting question even if we take the censorship route to be unfeasible or undesirable. According to Easterbrook, all of the "unhappy effects" of pornography mentioned above "depend on mental intermediation."[12] That is, pornography *qua* speech isn't actually doing anything. Speech is merely the first step in a complex cognitive process involving interpretation, deliberation, and action. Words alone do nothing. As "free" subjects, we can make with them what we wish, and act on them in wildly divergent ways. So it seems, then, that speech *per se* is quite innocuous; the *meaning* of words is malleable and arbitrary.

We have now uncovered our contradiction. On the one hand, speech—in its pornographic deployment, for example—is powerful enough to effect "battery and rape on the streets." On the other hand, such "unhappy results" depend upon a robustly free agent to act in interpretive response. Words are both powerful and powerless. If speech is intrinsically nebulous and non-actional, why is it important enough to protect *absolutely*? While this is admittedly a complex, highly nuanced issue, one thing we can say is that justifications of this sort seem to presuppose Cartesian dualism: the *value* of speech rests in its status as hallowed (though spectral) indicator of a pure, impenetrable subjectivity. One can, in short, as a free subject, *appropriate* speech, whatever it may be, in virtually limitless ways. Words are not connected to reality. Rather, they are vacuous, weightless vessels floating about, waiting to be seized upon and filled by the will of the *free* individual whose freedom is verified by the helplessness of words prior to the *seminal* act.

That this particular approach to the nature of language is violently phal-logocentric should be obvious. Formless, indeterminate, *feminine* words await the virile infusion of meaning that only positive, *masculine* freedom can bring about. It isn't that this view of language has been used to dominate the female gender in any overt political sense, although this argument can certainly be made. Rather, the view under consideration is phallogocentric because it presents meaning as something to be constructed by way of a masculine act of free insemination. Is this the best way to think about speech? Langton uses Austin's theory of "illocutionary force" to

point out that (1) some speech *is* intrinsically actional, and (2) pornography is an instance of such speech. An example of (1) is a policeman making an arrest. The words "you are under arrest" are *sufficient* to alter the world such that a person who was previously free is now detained. Pornography, according to Langton, is similarly actional in the following ways: it (1) "ranks women as sex objects" and (2) "legitimates sexual violence."[13] These two illocutionary acts function independently of any *causal* (perlocutionary) power that they may wield. Pornographic speech, in its very act of articulation, ranks women and legitimates violence against them, *regardless* of how any "free" subject takes up a response. Austin's view, as well as Langton's deployment of it, thus challenges the phallogocentric approach to language. *Some* utterances need not be heroically *filled* with seminal meaning; their meaning is *per se* actionally effective.

While compelling for the reasons just addressed, applying speech act theory to the problem of pornography comes with some serious limitations. All of Austin's own paradigmatic cases involve some institutional structure—like my police officer example above—by whose authority certain utterances become actional. Only within the wedding ritual, sustained by an entrenched and recognized legal-cultural institution, do the words, "I do" create a new state of affairs. When Austin ventures beyond these paradigmatic cases (e.g., to discuss such things as *warnings* and *apologies* as having illocutionary force) he has to rely on reference to a speaker's "knowledge of the facts" at hand, and the "purposes for which [he or she is] speaking"[14] in order to determine which utterances are performative and which utterances simply fail in this regard. This move returns us squarely to the discursive domain of a more or less robust personal agency. For her part Langton emphasizes the "verdictive" efficacy of pornographic speech, that is, its authoritative capacity to make the world so by describing it as already having been so. Pornography depicts women as inferior and thereby establishes this as veridical by shaping consumers' attitudes towards women and their utterances in such a way that the latter are often taken to serve some phatic sense belied by their merely semantic surface (e.g., "No, I don't want this" comes to mean "Give it to me, I love it"). Judith Butler takes issue with this claim, rightly pointing out that it "exploits a certain notion of liberal sovereignty to further its own aims, insisting that consent always and only constitutes the subject."[15] Langton's appropriation of Austin requires a univocity of meaning that only a sovereign guarantor of god-like reach and potency could provide. Pornographers must serve this authoritative function and, if Austin is correct, they must do so *knowingly*.

Heidegger's approach also challenges the phallogocentric view, but much more subtly: the subject does not appropriate speech; *speech appropriates the subject*. In "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (1951), Heidegger writes, "Man [*sic*] acts as though *he* [*sic*] were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man [*sic*]."[16] The active *subjectivist* view of speech as something nebulous to be seized and pinned down arbitrarily covers over its essentially disclosive power.

Speech calls entities forth and allows them to gather into the intelligible structures that we inhabit on a daily basis.

The world and the entities that occupy it, however, cannot be revealed *exhaustively* in any speech act. There is always an *excess* of meaning that withstands a given presentation, always *more* to be uncovered, made intelligible. In other words, when an entity is "named" [*heiße*], that is, "called forth," it comes to presence in such a way that other dimensions of it recede to absence.[17] Further, as Graham Harman (2002) argues, Heidegger's celebrated analysis of tools and broken tools in *Being and Time* suggests something even more remarkable: concealment is intrinsic to objects in a way that no discourse, no matter how "comprehensive," can overcome. My broken exercise bike shows that its shadowy parts of indeterminate origin couldn't care less about my desire to do some cardio *while* finally getting around to reading Proust. Objectionable anthropomorphizing aside, the broken bike at the very least shows there to be aspects of its materiality that resist both everyday coping and detached scientific analysis.[18] The problem with pornography is that it *pretends* total exposure, reducing its objects of representation and making the consumer complicit in the pretense. Levinas might say that pornography accomplishes what *love* strives after but is *ipso facto* incapable of reaching: the total exposure or "profanation" of an Other that hides itself.[19]

How the interplay of "presence" and "absence" is constituted in a given context is determined in what Heidegger calls the "event of appropriation" [*Ereignis*]. For Heidegger, speech is a "showing," and the manner and reach of each such "showing" is determined by how the linguistic deployment "appropriates."[20] In biological science, for example, an organism is revealed only within the parameters opened up by the *appropriative* strictures of the science's discourse. Certain dimensions of the "organism"[21] (e.g., the electrons and protons making up its atoms) are excluded, are left *absent* in virtue of their irrelevance to the inquiry at hand, which is determined by the moment when both the object under scrutiny *and* the subject undertaking it are "appropriated." To be "appropriated" means to be oriented to the world in accordance with a particular mode of discourse. This orientation need not be robustly conscious, which, as we've seen, is not the case for agents considered under the lens of Austin's speech act theory.

Pornography, as a form of speech, is also appropriative. It opens up a space in which entities (namely, women) *show* themselves in a particular way (namely, as objects for sex) and in which those "engaged" with the entities (namely, consumers of pornography) are bound in so doing by the rules[22] governing the discourse. Such "rules" need not be (and, in most cases, most likely are not) consciously and deliberately defined, prescribed, and promulgated by producers of pornography. That is to say, producers of pornography are as much seized upon, appropriated, and guided along by the discourse as its consumers. This feature, as I will show in the following section, is a result of pornography's now inextricable link

to technology and its developments.[23] I will show how pornographic discourse is "technological" in Heidegger's peculiar sense and why it is so insidious as a result. Further, I will argue that pornography is an especially pernicious instantiation of technological "enframing" [*Gestell*] because of a certain feature governing its manner of appropriation: like the spectral *potency* of language in general as characterized by the phallogocentric view, pornography is presented as divorced from reality, as *mere* fantasy.

II. Myth, Porn, Technology

As intimated in the introduction, Heidegger's treatment of technology is notoriously vague. His argument in *The Question Concerning Technology* [1953], as Andrew Feenberg remarks, "is developed at such a high degree of abstraction that he literally cannot discriminate between electricity and atom bombs, agricultural techniques and the Holocaust."[24] It could be argued, on the one hand, that such slippery reticence is made necessary by the very problem at issue: as the primary mode in which objects are disclosed, the reductive mechanism of global capitalist technology effectively melds all objects into one homogeneous lump in an economy of consumption. On the other hand, such a general, sweeping account is hopelessly deficient if we want to say something concrete and incisive about the world we inhabit. For this reason, we'll have to think beyond Heidegger while at the same time holding fast to his insights.

The essence of technology, for Heidegger, is its mode of disclosing entities in the world in an ontologically deflated manner, such that they appear to exist purely for one's use. Technological discourse represents things as fungible, functional stand-ins, individually anonymous and lacking particularity. Most pernicious, especially for our purposes, is that technological discourse *conceals itself as such.* Instead of showing up as one possible means of engaging objects in the world, it suppresses its contingency and purports to represent things *simply as they are.*

Thinking about the *mythic* character of technology can help us unpack these claims more concretely. Jean-Luc Nancy describes myth as "the unique speech of the many, who come thereby to recognize one another, who communicate and commune in myth."[25] As such, myth "is always the obligatory form . . . of innovation,"[26] the more or less continuous organizational frame in which we understand each other and things, and in which time and space—through stories of *progress* or *tradition*, respectively—are connected in the revelation of possibilities. The Internet, as the apotheosis of global technology, has not *leveled* spatial distance so much as it has *founded*, in a kind of mythic inauguration, a new virtual space opened up and sustained through interaction. If we can describe it in terms of a "frame," the Internet is without a vanishing point: it "involves all of us, all at once. No frame or detachment is possible."[27]

The Internet's mode of disclosure is decidedly *discontinuous*. This is one important feature that distinguishes it from past mythic vehicles. It is also a feature that distinguishes it—*qua* pornography machine—from magazines and analog videos. In virtue of its hypermedial architecture, Roberto Diodato explains, the web is "polytheist," "a pagan space wherein there are many gods, and so is a space upon which one is not afforded a single bird's eye view: no hyper-author can have a totalizing view of the Internet."[28] This, in turn, gives the consumer an unprecedented sense of freedom. One can travel—endlessly, in principle—from image to image, from movie to movie, blazing new pathways according to no determinate standard other than one's own will, the ultimate expression of subjectivity. But it is a deceptive freedom: the pathways are to a large extent predetermined by algorithms assembled to reflect what the "pagan gods" think one wants to see.

Echoing McLuhan, Jaron Lanier argues that media, far from being merely *formal*, "can change how you conceive of yourself and the world."[29] Design shapes behavior. The self-contradictory freedom of the "subject" navigating hypermedial space, passing through links as through so many waypoints, manifests itself as the perusal of an infinity of databases. On Facebook we have a database of friends, Twitter, a database of contextless assertions. Freeones.com provides a seemingly inexhaustible database of everything one can possibly find sexually titillating. The deceptive sense of freedom with which the consumer navigates this database effectively transforms the objects uncovered (women) into transitional, indeed, disposable, waypoints en route to orgasm, that mythic consummation of energies. The "free" pathways towards this consummation, however, demand for their success self-perpetuating novelty. This is what scientists call the "Coolidge Effect"[30]—an excess of stimulation, the feeling of unchecked freedom, deprives more or less familiar objects of any singular effective presence. Women in hypermedial porn are thus rendered incorporeal disposables amidst a rat race of hyperstimulative innovation.

One might object at this point that, like Heidegger, I'm overstating matters. Surely some users "value" individual porn stars for what they uniquely have to offer. I don't deny that this is true. Nor do I deny that some porn or erotica consumption can yield positive, liberating effects. The problem is that such users and situations are heterodox, are exceptions to the rule. In virtue of its basic constitution, hypermedial pornographic space appropriates one according to a violent discourse of consumption. As Michel de Certeau argues, "a body is itself defined, delimited, and articulated by what writes it."[31] The scriptural economy of hypermedial bodies is one of decorporealized *search*, a communication with nothing substantive communicated. This peculiar inscription in which the consumer is complicit is, to use Butler's terminology, "performative;" users don't "perform" as free subjects, but are themselves written into the performative discourse. Similarly, women in porn aren't "performing" *for* the individual consumer, disappearing conveniently when the *telos* is temporarily reached. *Performatively*, however, this is precisely

the case. Women play a part and this part dictates that they vanish after consummation like flickering specters.

III. Specters and Objects

At a certain point, however, we must part ways with Butler. While her performative anti-ontology is helpful for rethinking a problematic metaphysics of the subject, it is hugely dissatisfying in its deflation of objects in general. "Performativity," as Graham Harman observes, is a concept "forged to fight all notions of a hidden essence, which it replaces with a kind of nominalist essence fabricated on the outside by a series of public actions."[32] There is nothing to objects *but* shifting performative inscription. I want to defend, by contrast, a stripe of essentialism sufficiently respectful of what objects "are," without misguidedly asserting that any such "essence" can ever be exhaustively and definitively known. It is helpful, then, to think of objects hermeneutically as inexhaustible plexuses of meaning. Luigi Pareyson's notion of interpretive performance relies upon the idea of a normative structure internal to the object from which the interpreter must draw cues.[33] The object as such appropriates. The source of these cues, however, can never be revealed as a totality; it is ontologically indifferent. In what follows I will attempt to rethink the problem of "objectification" on the basis of this orientation.

Pornography, according to Langton, objectifies *morally* by reducing the subjectivity of women to mere sexual objecthood. It objectifies *epistemologically* by the projection of certain beliefs about women (an essential nature of debased sexual subordination) onto women in the effort of making those beliefs veridical. What's so wrong about engaging others as "objects?" In its most originary sense, the word "object" means *what is put before*,[34] or *what stands over and against*. To be sure, in my most intimate moments with loved ones, moments in which both their irreducible alterity and nearness are revealed in the fragile form of a distinct singularity, they, in a very real sense, *stand over and against me*. In such moments I experience a significant gravity, a meaning-ladenness heavily concentrated in the sphere of the "Other," which, the beauty of intimacy notwithstanding, can be described as an *imposition*. To engage with the Other as singular in a phenomenologically *appropriate* way, then, is to engage with the Other *qua* object.

The table at which I am writing is an object, but so are the molecules of which science tells us it is constituted. As an object, the table cannot be *reduced* to its constitutive parts: *qua* table, it places certain demands on how it should be taken up or understood. Similarly, the girl presently sitting across from me is an "object," but so is our particular relationship insofar as it presents itself to reflection in a way that isn't reducible to individual desires, actions, or histories. There are ways in which objects—be they shoelaces, mp3s, persons, or marketing campaigns—demand to be taken up, regardless of who might be there to do so. Objects always *shine in the*

dark, always present themselves precisely in their withdrawal. No object, whether a Boccioni sculpture or a basaltic cluster resting in itself on the shadowy surface of the moon, fully *gives* itself in presentation. But it is presented nevertheless. Objects, in general, thus turn out to be examples of, to invoke Amanda Boetzkes' analysis of *earth*, "a temporal or sensorial excess at the limit of representational form."[35] What is important about objects, then, is that thinking about them allows us to sustain an economy of difference whereby singular beings are non-reductively exposed in a play of self-presentation and indifferent withdrawal.

Our age of high capitalist technologism does violence to objects by separating *appearance* and *in-itself* in subtly subversive ways.[36] This problem is at once ontological and aesthetic: objects—human and otherwise—are pervasively losing their thick singularity in the direction of a ghostly, anonymizing reduction. The *objecthood* of objects is becoming more and more "spectralized," flattened out and made to fulfill anonymous, functional roles. An ontology of the specter would reveal it to be a being that is there precisely in its *not being there*. In this way it is neither present nor absent, but assembled in a confusion of the two whereby both are effectively rendered mute. Specters are neither placed nor placeless. Heidegger's critique of technology, it seems to me, is precisely this: the object, *per se*[37] neither *vorhanden* nor *zuhanden*, is reduced to the latter in a way that forgets its excessive alterity. The object loses its hard substantiality, the thickness and dimensionality from which its claims are presented. In a word, the "enframing" of modern technology reveals entities in the form of *representation* rather than *presentation*. Let us now turn to the problem of pornography to see how its mode of discourse reveals women via reductive *representation*—the total whitewashing of objective singularity.

IV. Representation and Fantasy

Expanding upon the overly-simplistic definition of pornography already given,[38] MacKinnon provides some examples: "women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities"; "women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation"; "women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped"; etc.[39] Notice that the operative discourse, the mode of representation in each of these examples, is such that *women in general* are revealed in terms of a "universal" role to the exclusion of any resistant particularity. The two important claims I wish to make by means of the following examples are: (1) women in pornography are *represented* in the form of "objectless" anonymity—any one woman is simply a faceless stand-in for a highly reduced role opened up in pornographic discourse, and (2) this assigned anonymous role is sustained by the efforts of pornography to present itself as separate from everyday life.

Zach is a twenty-three-year-old unemployed Web site developer and connoisseur of Internet porn. When asked about his engagement with pornography, he

had the following to say. "For me, the girls in porn aren't any specific girl—they're just a girlish image."[40] "The women," he further remarks, "are completely different from the women in the real world—and they have *nothing* to do with each other."[41] Zach goes on to compare women in pornography to the *anonymous* worker he meets behind the counter at McDonald's: "I realize the guy behind the counter has a whole life—that he's not just an object or a tool . . . but when I'm at McDonald's, I don't care. I just want my Big Mac."[42]

Valerie understands that her "sense of eroticism . . . has been influenced . . . by pornographic forces that men experience."[43] Many of her partners have been "educated" by the norms prescribed in pornography, which, while sometimes leading to physically satisfying sex, has a subtly disturbing consequence as well. She explains, "I don't just want to become Body A. I want men to feel like they're with *me*, Valerie, a particular woman with a particular body and my own unique personality."[44]

Consumers of pornography, like Zach, are inclined on the one hand to hold that pornography has nothing to do with reality, that it is a separate outlet for sexual fantasy. On the other hand these very consumers "in the next breath will extol its benefits to their sex lives and describe how they tailor their sex lives to pornography."[45] How cleanly can we demarcate fantasy from reality? Does the former not have its roots in the latter? If women are anonymously represented in the locus of fantasy as *secretly* desiring to be gang-raped, gagged, multiply-penetrated, how firmly does that mediating membrane of separation—representation—hold when men go out into the world and interact with women in their everyday lives? If women are *represented* as saying, "no, no, no, no—now yes,"[46] to what extent is the weight of a "no" as *presented* in real life diminished? Inscribed as incorporeal hypermedial specters to be consumed, in what ways does this performative inscription insinuate itself outside of the web's spaceless place?

Evidence suggests that the membrane of separation is thin indeed. In 1982, a series of experiments[47] was conducted on a group of "normal" college students, a certain percentage of which was exposed to massive amounts of pornography over a period of time. Participants were later asked to read a news report about the rape of a hitchhiker. The group of students exposed to pornography recommended significantly shorter sentences for the perpetrator, popular justifications for which were the apparent complicity of the victim, or the vague notion that she probably enjoyed it. It is not enough to suggest that fantasy and reality often "blur;" they are grounded in the very same world, the very same place. While this study was conducted on the basis of outdated analog media, it seems reasonable to infer that the hyperstimulative intensification characteristic of web-based applications would produce a numbing to phenomena *at least* equal to that uncovered in the early 80s.

We live in a "pornified" world, one in which pornography—and its concomitant though superficial compartmentalization of life into *reality* and *fantasy*—has

become all but entirely "normalized," assimilated into mainstream culture. The fact that pornography simultaneously presents itself as *mere* fantasy, *mere* representation makes this muting all the more pernicious.[48] It effectively opens up only enough room for the appeal to it *qua* fantasy—*ipso facto* an authority of *no* authority; how can what is not there govern *the there*?

Conclusion

Much of the testimony of regular pornography users betrays a kind of helpless thoughtlessness.[49] Men worry that they're spending too much time with porn, yet find themselves returning to it night after night. A common worry is that pornography is disruptive of *real* sex; users enamored of the sparkling perfection found in the sphere of "fantasy" are increasingly dissatisfied with the grim physicality found in the "real world." Despite their best intentions, users often experience transference—those beautiful, malleable, *spectral* figures of the fantasy compartment find a way to the other side, effecting a ghostly superimposition. Such points of discomfort notwithstanding, pornography consumers find themselves *ordered along*, enframed in a mode of discourse, which, represented as "fantasy," hides itself as such. It is not, as suggested above, that women are "objectified" in porn; rather, they are "spectralized," made unreal by a kind of thinking that valorizes the vacuous, posits the absolute defensibility of words (or fleeting images) precisely in virtue of their purported free-floating meaninglessness.

In this paper, I have argued for a phenomenological approach to the problem of pornography articulated in line with Heidegger's critique of modern technology. While Rae Langton's work on the subject is compelling and helpful in many respects, there is a clear sense in which Heidegger's repudiation of "representational thinking" is more effective and far-reaching as a theoretical resource. Pornography is a mode of discourse whose range and constitutive harms remain covered over. By positing its moment of appropriation as "mere fantasy," pornography strives to compartmentalize life in its everydayness, constructing a veritable funhouse hall of mirrors in which the real is made unreal, and the violated are made satisfied and satisfying.

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Notes

1. That is, a space of pathways.
2. McLuhan 1967, 26.

3. Cf. Eaton 2007.

4. Derrida coined the term—merging "logocentric" with "phallocentric"—in order to describe the way in which the Western cultural tradition has privileged "rational" masculinity in the "production" of meaning.

5. Deleuze and Guattari 2004. "Miraculated" beings, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are unengendered. For the average consumer, women in porn have no origin; they are simply "there," and quite naturally so. Pornographic representation is thus "miraculous" in virtue of its self-effacing productive history.

6. MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997, 17.

7. Caplan 2008.

8. Paul 2005, 86–7.

9. MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997, 472.

10. Ibid.

11. One argument, of course, is that the second amendment was put in place *because* of the power of firearms to prevent tyranny when wielded by a free citizenry.

12. MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997.

13. Langton 2009, 40. Langton is operating under MacKinnon's definition of pornography, namely, "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words." Inasmuch as there are diverse varieties of pornography and erotica, many of which cannot be said to "subordinate women," this is clearly a deficient definition. Since my critique is couched in a broader one of technological discourse in general, however, such distinctions are not terribly important for my purposes. If the reader likes, I am not opposed to identifying—with Eaton (2007)—"inegalitarian pornography" as what is *especially* problematic for reasons I will address in section IV.

14. Austin 1975, 145.

15. Butler 1997, 85.

16. Heidegger 1993, 348.

17. Think, on this point, of Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle": to determine simultaneously the position and velocity of a particle with precision is impossible. As the position is *brought to presence*, the velocity *recedes to absence*, and vice versa.

18. For instance, no one has ever directly perceived a quark, which, moreover, may or may not be divisible into some smaller unit about which we know nothing.

19. Levinas 1969, 256–66.

20. Heidegger 1971, 127.

21. I use scare quotes because the word "organism" already presupposes appropriation by biological discourse.

22. "Rules" thought in a very loose sense as simply the manner in which the field of discourse is opened up and sustained in appropriation.

23. This social dimension of computer and internet technology is of course not peculiar to pornography. Jaron Lanier, for example, explores the dangerous and depersonalizing effects of cyberspace in general in *You are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (2011).

24. Feenberg 1999, 187.

25. Nancy 2008, 50.

26. Ibid, 51.

27. McLuhan 1967, 53. It is interesting to note that global technology, like earlier mythic structures, has its heroes. Steve Jobs and, to a lesser extent, Bill Gates, are obvious examples.

28. Diodato 2005, 192.

29. Lanier 2011, 6.

30. Wilson 2011.

31. De Certeau 1988, 139.

32. G. Harman 2005, 104.

33. Pareyson 1960. For an account of the social implications of Pareyson's hermeneutics, see my article: J. Harmon 2011.

34. Spatially, not temporally.

35. Boetzkes 2010, 12.

36. For Heidegger, it is important to note, this is a problematic distinction that relies upon a prior unity. The "in-itself" and its phenomenological presentation are same, but not reductively so; there is always more to be presented and always that which resists presentation.

37. Objects, simultaneously *world* and *earth*, are both what we take them to be in practical affairs and that which withdraws from such affairs.

38. i.e., "the sexually explicit subordination of women."

39. MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997, 428.

40. Paul 2005, 79.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Paul 2005, 127

44. Ibid.

45. Paul 2005, 95.

46. MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997, 306.

47. Zillman and Bryant 1982.

48. Pornography, it is true, is not unique in this regard. The compartmentalization of everyday life is a broad, systemic problem manifested in all sorts of "escapist" media, such as video games, for example. The fact that the women in porn are *real* and are engaged in *real* acts of sexual debasement is sufficient to set in apart, however. Porn users must feel that the acts they are witnessing—despite being fantasy for themselves—are in fact real and not merely acted out. On this point see Nichols 1991.

49. Paul 2005, 102–6.

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