

Theology and the Pornographic Imagination

Metaphysics, Modernity, and the Miseducation of Desire

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Abstract

A large portion of the criticism of pornographic production is often polarised towards the ethical dimensions of such critique. While not negating this approach, this essay aims to delineate some ontological tendencies of the pornographic imagination, offering both a critique and therapy from the vantage of a theological metaphysic. Beginning with a critical examination of an influential essay, namely Susan Sontag's *The Pornographic Imagination* I suggest that the aesthetic vision of pornography is predicated on a denial of difference and anticipates no gratuitous reciprocity, but rather a return of the same, and that the ultimate drift of pornographic excessiveness is towards a deadening solipsism. Within this totalized imagination, the consumption of pornography fabricates an affective relation to material bodies within a radical narrowing of vision and sensory possibility. This is manifested at several levels, in both its form and content, from its very medium to its deployment of language. I further contend that this is not necessarily a unique phenomenon, but a by-product of certain tendencies within modern technology and capitalist production. I argue that it is difficult to understand the advent of pornography without a simultaneous description of the modernist cartography of being and its regime of representation. This concerns the way bodies are spatialised and mechanised into a manageable plane of immanence susceptible to modernist ideals of panoptic observation and technological "standing reserve." At the end of the essay, an alternative metaphysic of desire and the image is put forward, with the assistance of Rowan Williams; it is argued that a broadly Augustinian and patristic vision of Trinitarian desire and



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liturgical incorporation provides an affective and ontological restoration of selfhood; it suggests a sacramental mediation of the real, in contrast to the simulation of pornography.

I

Public debate regarding the pornographic imaginary, and its purported social implications, has continued since the censorship and obscenity trials of the twentieth century.¹ From that time, up to the present day, philosophical and moral critique have largely not thwarted its proliferation and digital omnipresence. In this essay, I hope to reflect on something not often discussed in the debate regarding pornography, namely its implicit metaphysical vision. I hope to expand upon the claim that pornography, in its most disseminated and popularised forms, participates in a distorted and self-deceitful spiritual vision.² For this reason, as I will argue, it is insufficient to analyse pornography *only* from the perspective of moral deontology. I suggest that a critique of the pornographic should not be approached through its ethical reverberations alone, but should relate something of its latent vision, a meta-perspective regarding the ways it represents and projects reality itself, even when this is not articulated theoretically or thematically through its medium. In other words, it should render lucid its implicit life-orientation – its ‘metaphysics,’ to put it plainly. For pornography does affect us; it relates to and touches upon those often-subconscious processes of desire and meaning-making. It fabricates a sensorium and simulation of reality and achieves this through a specific technology and desiring propensity, and thus produces ways of being-in-the-world.

Therefore, moral denunciation will not be sufficient without a holistic taxis: *a metaphysics of desire*. Without addressing the conversion of self and its yearnings, this approach remains fundamentally limited. Moreover, apart from holistic virtue, ‘moralisms’ become imaginatively restrictive and life-denying, often mirroring the vice they wish to surmount,³ exhibiting, to quote Geoffrey Hill, a “rectitude that mimics its own fall / reeling with sensual abstinence and woe”.⁴ Such “rectitude” inhibits our induction into a more expansive construct of human agency, because it insufficiently

¹ I am thinking here of the legal wranglings associated with modernist literature, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, as well as the cultural aftermath of court cases such as *Miller v. California* (1973).

² On the relation between pornography and self-deception, see Charles O. Nussbaum, *Understanding Pornographic Fiction: Sex, Violence and Self-Deceit* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

³ This is especially apparent in the present day, when even sophisticated feminists (e.g. Catherine MacKinnon) have been subtly influenced by pornography’s own frames of reference, especially regarding gender. For an enlightening critique of MacKinnon, see Wendy Brown, ‘The Mirror of Pornography,’ in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 77-95. It also helpful to remember that pornography thrived in Puritan England, as it did in other ‘Catholic’ states on the continent; see Nussbaum, *Understanding Pornographic Fiction*, 54-101.

⁴ Geoffrey Hill, ‘Tenebrae,’ in Kenneth Haynes, ed., *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 139.

addresses “the ethical importance of desire”.⁵ Taken theologically, it intimates ethical vision apart from divine enticement, which may gravitate towards voluntarist approaches that separate nature and grace.⁶ These accounts tend to disassociate the goodness of eros from the ethical sphere, and reduce divine commands to arbitrary whims opposing our real interests – as if God ultimately had agendas incompatible with creaturely beatitude.⁷

It is the aim of this essay to try to resist at least some of these limitations, and it hopes to address the wider metaphysical questions that may inform both a therapeutic adequacy and an affective repair of human desire.⁸ To do this, I will begin through an engagement with a text by Susan Sontag who manages, through her typical critical penetration, to touch upon many of the stakes involved in the contemporary proliferation of the pornographic. Moreover, the claim, at the margins of her text, that the pornographic imagination is linked to certain strains of modernity, is developed in the section that follows thereafter. Throughout, I argue that the pornographic is a metaphysics, a regime of representation, that is implicitly linked to a modern imaginary, and that a Christian metaphysics and therapy of desire may provide some solvency for those forms of damaged selfhood that continue to be produced by it.

II

*Whoever does not love abides in death*⁹

The tensions with which I am concerned are evidenced within a seminal text by the Susan Sontag, entitled *The Pornographic Imagination* (1967).¹⁰ Sontag’s essay displays a particular obliqueness since her argument is largely focused on pornographic writing, rather the visual media— a surprising occurrence since she has been deeply engaged with these questions elsewhere.¹¹ Despite this

⁵ Donald MacKinnon, ‘Revelation and Social Justice [1941],’ in John C. McDowell, (ed.), *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 141. Also Rowan Williams, ‘On Making Moral Decisions.’ *Anglican Theological Review* 81, no. 2 (1999): 295-305.

⁶ As famously argued by Henri de Lubac.

⁷ Cf. Rowan Williams, ‘On Being Creatures,’ in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 63-78.

One may think here of the manualist school of ethics among Catholics and post-Kantian trajectories among deontological ethics, more generally; cf. Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 1-44.

⁸ For this reason, I have deep sympathies with the approach of Matthew Tan, who has also sought to approach the question of pornography from the site of metaphysics, arguing that pornography continues the prioritisation of the virtual over the actual and performs a pseudo-messianism that parodies Christology and eschatology; Matthew J. P. Tan, ‘Pornography and Christology,’ *Australasian Catholic Record* 97, no. 3 (2020): 312-319.

⁹ 1 John 3.14 (NRSV).

¹⁰ Susan Sontag ‘The Pornographic Imagination,’ in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1982), 205-233.

¹¹ Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux and Rossetta Books, 2005); *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

elision, her text has a general pertinence because Sontag is explicitly concerned with pornographic aesthesis, its “form of consciousness”.¹² Sontag quite rightly critiques overly simplistic denunciations of pornographic literature as being reliant on special pleading – for many presumed exceptionalities of this genre are intrinsic to other literary productions. Amongst these presumed unique characteristics, she mentions its focus on titillation, the fantastical lack of realism, and the reduction of characters to “ideal” types. All these traits, she argues, can be found in other more widely accepted literary artefacts, and do not belong to the pornographic especially. But Sontag takes this critique further; there is “no *aesthetic* principle” by which one can, aprioristically, exclude “the extreme forms of consciousness that transcend social personality or psychological individuality”,¹³ traits which, in her estimation, exemplify the pornographic imagination.

For Sontag, art is “the nearest thing to sacramental human activity acknowledged by secular society”,¹⁴ even as the exact of nature of this sacramentality remains opaque, or even chaotic at its antipodes – which is why “[t]he exemplary modern artist is a broker in madness”.¹⁵ Leaving aside the questionable assumption of art’s “independence” and its assumed “secularity,” one needs to unfurl the “aesthetic principles” to which Sontag appears to subscribe. She says:

What makes a work of pornography part of the history of art rather than of trash is not distance, the superimposition of a consciousness more comfortable to that of ordinary reality upon the “deranged consciousness” of the erotically obsessed. Rather, it is the originality, thoroughness, authenticity, and power of the deranged consciousness itself, as incarnated in a work.¹⁶

In a provocative analogy, Sontag goes as far as to say that “[p]ornography that is serious literature aims to “excite” in the same way that books which render an extreme form of religious experience aim to “convert”.¹⁷ For Sontag, pornography aims to appeal to the same register of psychology that religious consciousness reaches toward, namely, the unruly and opaque depths of human longing. That is, they both concern *desire*. Sontag goes on to say, that “[e]xperiences aren’t pornographic; only images and representations – structures of the imagination – are”.¹⁸ For her, pornographic literature, such as Pauline Freage’s *L’Histoire d’O*, does not so much connect the consumer to real, “unmediated” sex, but rather to formal traits of the pornographic. By this, she means that the regime of pornographic representation, the way that individual works of porn play upon recognisable patterns and rhythms, suggests that the primary reference of pornographic material is not to everyday experiences, but to other pornographic works; that is, a particular imaginative structure, rather than simply any representation of ordinary, non-simulated sex. Such explains why consumers of pornography are drawn towards its specific modality, rather than just

¹² Sontag, ‘The Pornographic Imagination,’ 212.

¹³ Sontag, 212.

¹⁴ Sontag, 212.

¹⁵ Sontag, 213.

¹⁶ Sontag, 214.

¹⁷ Sontag, 214.

¹⁸ Sontag, 216.

any sexual representation. On face value, this reading does tell us something significant about the mechanism of pornography, even as one may question whether there is anything like “unmediated” experience, sexual or otherwise. For is it not the case that our perceptions are always imbued with “structures of the imagination,” insofar as we always perceive something *as* something; there can be no dualism between ‘facts’ and imaginative integration.¹⁹ Furthermore, such affects are not purely spontaneous, but formed and cultivated so that any “pure” or “unmediated” experience remains questionable.²⁰ Beyond phenomenological disquiet, a more strenuous problem concerns how certain kinds of images become “naturalized” to the extent that they alter our ways of seeing, our modes of desiring. Can one maintain that there are no “experiences” that display a pornographic texture?²¹

The pervasiveness of pornography is not only due to its rather simplistic mechanism of catharsis, a form of “release” that is dependable and repeatable without interpersonal encumbrance, but is also due to it being a form of “the total imagination”,²² which like the “revivals or translations of the religious imagination”²³ are a type of “psychic absolutism”.²⁴ Adding some theological nuance, while pornography’s “religious imagination” or “transcendence of personality” betokens something like a religious and sexual absorption into “totality” (echoing Georges Bataille²⁵), this movement does not really suggest a beneficent metaphysic. By contrast, it is a totality that imaginatively restricts, as Sontag implies; it constitutes a diminished vision and sensual scripting, rather than opening things to transcendent and sacramental affinity. To use the traditional feminist quip, it implies reduction, an “objectification”²⁶ in which bodies are reduced to an exchangeable symbol, a

¹⁹ See Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013) for a discussion on the relation between belief and perception.

²⁰ Cf. Thomas Fuchs and Sabine Koch, ‘Embodied Affectivity: On Moving and Being Moved.’ *Frontiers in Psychology* 5.508 (2014): 1-12.

²¹ For instance, does the popular portrayal of women (for example, in some advertising campaigns and photography, analysed by the likes of John Berger a generation ago) not show that unreflective patterns of the imagination continue to inform experience – never mind the way sexual behaviour itself mimics eroticized representations, most disturbingly shown in the way that real acts of violence and criminality themselves can exemplify these ‘structures of the imagination’; see John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Great Britain: BBC & Penguin, 1972), 7-64. Berger says later that ‘Capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible. This was once achieved by extensive deprivation. Today in developed countries it is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable’ (p. 154). Also see Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (London: The Women's Press, 1981); Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

²² Sontag, ‘The Pornographic Imagination,’ 230.

²³ Sontag, 231.

²⁴ Sontag, 232.

²⁵ See George Bataille, “The Object of Desire and the Totality of the Real,” in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (eds.), *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 264–270.

²⁶ Sontag, 220. Also see Rae Langton, ‘Sexual Solipsism.’ *Philosophical Topics* 23, no. 2 (1995): 149-187; Martha C. Nussbaum, ‘Objectification.’ *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (1995): 249-291.

commodity, an empty sign to be filled with the desirous projection of the observer.²⁷ The woman, in *L'Histoire d'O*, moves “simultaneously toward her own extinction as a human being and her fulfilment as a sexual being”.²⁸ Within the pornographic universe, sexuality is “demonic”,²⁹ “incorrectly designed,” an “appetite which can drive [us] mad”,³⁰ and “as something beyond good and evil, beyond love, beyond sanity”,³¹ echoing the aesthetics of the postmodern sublime.³² As such, pornography resists final causality, and drives “a wedge between one’s existence as a full human being and one’s existence as a sexual being”.³³ Hereby, there is no postulated coherence between human desire and transcendent perfection, but a tendency towards indifference; the annihilation of subjectivity. As Bataille in *L'Histoire de l'Oeil* understood well, “what pornography is really about ultimately, isn’t sex but death”.³⁴ In place of a genuine traversal, there is the bad infinity of death drive, a reduction of bodies to mechanical and post-human iteration.³⁵ Furthermore,

²⁷ “[T]he pornographic imagination inhabits a universe that is, however repetitive the incidents occurring within it, incomparably economical. The strictest possible criterion of relevance applies: everything must bear upon the erotic situation. The universe proposed by the pornographic imagination is a total universe. It has the power to ingest and metamorphose and translate all concerns that are fed into it, reducing everything into one negotiable currency or the erotic imperative. All action is conceived of as a set of sexual exchanges” (‘The Pornographic Imagination,’ 229).

²⁸ Sontag, ‘The Pornographic Imagination,’ 222.

²⁹ Sontag, 221.

³⁰ Sontag, 222.

³¹ Sontag, 222.

³² See for instance Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey (Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Cf. John Milbank, ‘Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent,’ in Regina Schwartz (ed.), *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 211-234.

³³ Sontag, ‘The Pornographic Imagination,’ 223.

³⁴ Sontag, 224. Though one might add that in Bataille, sex and death are mutually implicated: the fear of death animates the desire for life, and within sexual ecstasy there is the intimation of self-annihilation (*la petite mort*). The following description from *L'Histoire de l'Oeil* gives some sense of this: “The wind had died down somewhat, and part of the starry sky was visible. And it struck me [male protagonist] that death was the sole outcome of my erection, and if Simone [female protagonist] and I were killed, then the universe of our unbearable personal vision was certain to be replaced by the pure stars, fully unrelated to any external gazes and realizing in a cold state, without human delays or detours, something that strikes me as the goal of my sexual licentiousness: a geometric incandescence (among other things, the coinciding point of life and death, being and nothingness), perfectly fulgurating”; Georges Bataille, *The Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 1982), 30. This also cinematically realised to lurid effect in the dénouement of Nagisa Oshima’s controversial *In the Realm of Senses* (1976).

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 230-231. Also see the excellent comments of Douglas Stewart who traces the linkage between sex and machination to the beginnings of capitalist industry; Douglas J. Stewart, ‘Pornography, Obscenity, and Capitalism,’ *The Antioch Review* 35.4 (1977): 389-398. The reduction of bodies to machinery and the mirroring play of simulation (without archetype) is further anticipated in the anti-moralist and post-humanist writings of the Marquis de Sade; cf. Dalia Judovitz, *The Culture of the Body: Genealogies of Modernity* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 147-167, and Michela Marzano, *La philosophie du corps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires

according to Sontag, Bataille's narrative supposes that human beings "live only through excess" and through "giving oneself to a state of "open being," open to death as well as joy".³⁶

Regarding *L'Histoire de l'Oeil*, but also pornography more generally, Sontag says that "[t]here can be no revelation or surprises in the story, no new "knowledge," only further intensifications of what is already known. [The] seemingly unrelated elements really are related; indeed, all versions of the same thing".³⁷ Pornographic vitalism does not usher real novelty, but rather an excess without otherness and exchangeability within a closed loop. We are given (to echo Michela Marzano) "reified" objects rather than "incarnated" ones.³⁸ Today, the circulation of the pornographic imaginary imitates the logic of modern economy: pornography's "reproducibility,"³⁹ its creation and dispersal of "images"⁴⁰ and "simulacra,"⁴¹ repeats the free-flowing movement of commodities⁴² within late capitalist technologies of "standing-reserve" and panoptic discipline.⁴³ Additionally, pornographic imagination seems to provoke, and in some sense does mimic, the patterns of alienation found within capitalist societies, and aims to "release" from these dispersed feelings of social disintegration. But rather than providing an eminent solution, pornography only

de France, 2013), 97-106. It is no coincidence then that the rise of sex dolls and 'sexbots' have an intimate connection to the interior logic of pornography. The modelling of non-human sexual 'companions' is often predicated upon the ideal body-type and 'behaviour' of porn stars. Cf. Jenny Kleeman, 'The Race to Build the World's First Sex Robot'. *The Guardian*, 27 April 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/27/race-to-build-world-first-sex-robot>.

³⁶ Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination,' 225.

³⁷ Sontag, 227; cf. Roland Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye,' in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 239-247.

³⁸ Marzano makes a helpful distinction between the 'reified' object and the 'incarnated' object as way of discerning instrumentalising and non-instrumentalising types of relations; cf. Michela Marzano, *La philosophie du corps*, 111-113.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version),' in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 251-283.

⁴⁰ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: The University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 48-49: 'Never has the human body – above all the female body – been so massively manipulated as today and, so to speak, imagined from top to bottom by the techniques of advertising and commodity production'. But he goes on to say that 'What was technologized was not the body, but its image. Thus the glorious body of advertising has become the mask behind which the fragile, slight human body continues its precarious existence'.

⁴¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 1992), 6-25; Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman et al (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

⁴² Franklin Melendez, 'Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure and the Return of the Sublime,' in Linda Williams, (ed.), *Porn Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 401-427.

⁴³ Dominic Pettman, *Love and Other Technologies: Retrofitting Eros for the Information Age* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 108-128; also cf. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans Michael Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), 3-35.

continues to drive this “dialectic” of alienation deeper.⁴⁴ Sontag, to her credit, is fully aware of this dynamic:

Most pornography ... points to something more general than even sexual damage. I mean the traumatic failure of capitalist society to provide authentic outlets for the perennial human flair for high-temperature visionary obsessions, to satisfy the appetite for exalted self-transcending modes of concentration and seriousness. The need of human beings to transcend “the personal” is no less profound than the need to be a person, an individual. But this society serves that need poorly. It provides mainly demonic vocabularies in which to situate that need and from which to initiate action and construct rites of behavior. One is offered a choice among vocabularies of thought and action which are not merely self-transcending but self-destructive.⁴⁵

Capitalist societies have a difficulty in creating non-destructive patterns of *jouissance* because the trajectory of the market system is towards the disembodiment of human beings from social relations. This is achieved through a rupture of the “symbolic” link between things and their inherent value and neo-liberalism’s reduction of community to atomist individuation. The desirability of something in this picture is not due to intrinsic worth but is predicated on market fluctuation and algorithmic reinforcement. Such commodification, seen especially today in speculative modes of investment and stock trading,⁴⁶ moves the world of things farther away from inherent worth and meaning towards a voluntaristic evaluation. Hereby, eros becomes aligned with the superficial and the fashionable, rather than the transcendental and the inherently desirable. This in turn may be linked to capitalism’s broader prioritization of the virtual over the actual, which is one characteristic of metaphysical modernity.⁴⁷ If this and the previous characterizations are correct, the commodification of reality has an intimate link with its pornographication. Furthermore, any comprehensive attempt to grapple with the problem of its continued production and usage will have to deal with the capitalist production of desire⁴⁸ and with certain trends of modernism itself, as Sontag already intimated.

⁴⁴ See Jörg Metelmann, ‘Dialectic of Pornographic Enlightenment.’ *Theology & Sexuality* 15, no. 3 (2009): 269-281.

⁴⁵ Sontag, ‘The Pornographic Imagination,’ 231.

⁴⁶ Especially seen in the dominance of algorithmic derivatives, disconnected from genuine value, craft or rarity – a leading cause in the subprime mortgage crisis post-2008.

⁴⁷ John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 93-127; Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); 34-41; 108-112; on the priority of the virtual within the proliferation of pornography, cf. Tan, ‘Pornography and Christology.’

⁴⁸ Ronald K. L. Collins and David M. Skover, ‘The Pornographic State.’ *Harvard Law Review* 107, no. 6 (1994), 1374-1399.

III

*The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.*⁴⁹

The speculative gist of this essay can now be clarified; I am trying to lay out the imaginative dimension implied by pornographic production. The reading of Sontag's seminal text brought some understanding and clarification to some of the questions at stake. However, I would like to go further than her. Here, I hope to offer a theological critique of pornographic substance and not merely an aesthetic or literary-critical one. By observing the repetitive patterns of pornography's imaginative structures, the aim has been to articulate the dynamic of its reoccurring structures – its “metaphysic,” to reference Susan Griffin.⁵⁰ Taking this metaphysical cue from Griffin, one could say that the “pornographic” is a form of totalization that absorbs relational difference and haptic possibility into a discipline of sameness, a modality of stasis rather than gratuitous reciprocity. Its “psychic absolutism” suggests an escape from interpersonal engagement, collapsing the sensorium of embodied subjectivity into a narrow and one-dimensional vision. The mode of desire that is enticed and educated by this imaginary is not aimed towards its beneficent completion, or its imaginative expansion, but rather towards a malign repetitiveness without difference (unlike that described by Kierkegaard⁵¹). It suggests a final slide towards non-being, a death drive that leads not to beatific joy but the abyss and boredom of spiritual acedia.⁵² Pornographic metaphysics gestures towards an enclosed solipsism, one that denies true reciprocity and relational otherness, both at the level of form and content. Such a tendency is not merely incidental but, one might argue, is intrinsic to its logic since its imaginative structure denies a genuine openness to what-is-other. It is a reductive totality and therefore appears in the domain of human action as the will-to-power, the *libido dominandi*.⁵³ In sum, the ultimate drift of pornographic excessiveness is towards deadening solipsism. Moreover, within this totalized imagination, the

⁴⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 7. Also cf. Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 70: ‘For the iconophile, the idol, not having an ontologically based model, can only show fallaciously what does not exist or what is only the inanimate sign of death within the world’.

⁵⁰ Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, 14.

⁵¹ As in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*; see Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*. Kierkegaard's Writings VI, edited and translated by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); cf. John Milbank, ‘The Sublime in Kierkegaard,’ in Philip Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), 68-81; Catherine Pickstock, *Repetition and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013).

⁵² Cf. David Bentley Hart, ‘The Pornography Culture.’ *The New Atlantis: Journal of Technology & Society* (Summer 2004): 82-89; Reinhard Hütter, ‘Pornography and Acedia.’ *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, 10, no. 4 (2012): 901–907. Also cf. Vasile Chira, ‘The Metaphysics of Addiction.’ *European Journal of Science and Theology* 9, Supplement 1 (2013): 17-27.

⁵³ See Michela Marzano, ‘La nouvelle pornographie et l'escalade des pratiques: corps, violence at réalité.’ *Cités* 3.15 (2003): 17-29. This is of course a reference to Augustine's *de civitate dei*.

consumption of pornography fabricates a certain affective relation to material bodies that implies a radical narrowing of vision and sensory possibility.

These tendencies, however, are not unique to pornographic culture only, since they are linked to pornography's *modernism*, as already indicated by Sontag. In this section, I argue that it is difficult to understand the advent of pornography without a simultaneous description of the modernist cartography of being and its regime of representation. This concerns the way bodies are spatialised and mechanised into a manageable plane of immanence susceptible to modernist ideals of panoptic observation and technological 'standing reserve'. Indeed, as Walker Percy says:

Pornography is not an aberration of a few sexually frustrated middle-aged men [*sic*] in gray raincoats; it is rather a salient and prime property of modern consciousness, of three hundred years of technology and the industrial revolution, and is symptomatic of a radical disorder in the relation of the self to other selves which generally manifests itself in the abstracted state of one self (male) and the degradation of another self (female) to an abstract object of satisfaction.⁵⁴

It is of course the case that visual and literary representations of sexuality pre-date the modern period – the Greeks and Romans were already prolific in this regard, as is well-known – but it is widely accepted by scholars that pornography is a peculiarly modern invention. While initially focused on documenting prostitution from an educational vantage point, pornography has been seen as having a special linkage to the advent of print culture and photographic technology.⁵⁵ These are prime exemplars of representation, both being concerned with the facility of an identical and reliable mode of replication, and with the modern subject's desire to order reality within an easy-to-grasp geometry. They are not only that, of course, but such trajectories are part of this legacy. Moreover, the printing press as a catalyst of standardisation – combined with the influence of Ramist method and Cartesian *mathesis* of abstractly-ordered magnitudes – “accelerated the drive towards spatialization because its multiplication of identical images and containment of data in abstract and apparently timeless formulations gave encouragement to the notion of the “availability” of a quantified and objectified knowledge,” to quote Catherine Pickstock.⁵⁶ Such spatialisation has an intimate connection with modern accounts of individualism and the panoptic state which, in a mirroring fashion, claim to absorb reality into a manageable and surveyable

⁵⁴ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Open Road, 1983), 10.

⁵⁵ Lynn Hunt, 'Introduction,' in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 9-45.

⁵⁶ Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 50. Also see Walter J. Ong, 'Ramus and the Commercial Mind,' in *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971), 165-189; David R. Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989); Dalia Judovitz, 'Vision, Representation, and Technology in Descartes,' in David Kleinberg-Levin, (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1993), 63-86. On the printing press, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe, Volumes I-II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3-159.

cartography.⁵⁷ This was in turn congenial, especially in the case of pornographic literature, to the atomist and materialist metaphysics of early modernity (e.g., Descartes, Newton, Hobbes, Spinoza, La Mettrie), exemplified in novels like *Thérèse Philosophe* (1748).⁵⁸ This produced an anthropological model of “machine-men” and “organs-without-bodies” that was particularly conducive to capitalist modes of production (as in John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill*).⁵⁹

Photography was likewise concerned with exact reproduction and, through its subtle modes of synthesis and encoding,⁶⁰ has played an intrinsic role in changing modes of perception.⁶¹ The connection of photography to pornography is almost immediate; from the time images could be so reproduced, there have also been “dirty pictures”.⁶² Historically, this was linked to the libertine drive to stretch the limits of “decency,” but one could say that the notion of identical reproduction seems to be inextricably tied to a kind of objectification, since we cannot “see” ourselves as a photograph captures us⁶³ (even ‘selfies’ imply some form of self-objectification that transcends the first-person perspective). Photography as a form of representation already then implies a de-subjectivising process that is not immune to certain moral ambiguities. This detail alerts us to one of the central paradoxes of all image-making, namely that it renders presence through absence, and that such dialectic is open to the perennial risk of collapsing the one into the other, especially via the identification of the archetype with the image itself.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ See the chapter ‘Spatialization: The Middle of Modernity,’ in *After Writing*, 47-100. On different meanings of spatialization, see Gérard Genette, ‘Espace et langage,’ in *Figures I* (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 1966), 101-108.

⁵⁸ Margaret J. Jacobs, ‘The Materialist World of Pornography,’ in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography*, 157-202.

⁵⁹ Cf. Stewart, ‘Pornography, Obscenity, and Capitalism,’ 397-398 where he says, apropos *Fanny Hill*, that ‘Pornography – the viewing of people as performers, or as mere organs – was, I would argue, not even ideologically possible before the rise of capitalism, and it flourishes only because capitalism flourishes, for it is the logical extension to the capitalistic ideals of rationalized production, efficiency, and maximized profit... Sex, one is ruefully forced to say from the lessons of pornography, seems rather more controlled by our economic system than the other way round, and our problem is not that we market sex more efficiently than ever before-sex has always been marketed, probably wisely, as Auden once observed-but that we have tried to make sex itself *efficient*, to the conditions of marketing, and that, to this observer is the essence of pornography: sex turned into a time-and-motion study, sex as industrial production.’

⁶⁰ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000); Bernard Stiegler, ‘The Discrete Image,’ in Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 145-163.

⁶¹ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility,’ 255-256.

⁶² Kelly Dennis, *The Face of God: Representation as the Pornography of Modernity* (PhD diss., Ann Arbor: UMI, 1994), 12-22.

⁶³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 10.

⁶⁴ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 19-21. To quote the American poet Linda Gregerson, ‘We thought at first a camera / would be just the thing, the thing itself in real / time caught for anyone / to

But this potential for objectivization and abstraction, with all its potential moral ambiguity, does not merely lie in the particular use of visual media, such as photography and film, but is congenial to the modernist mode of representation *itself*.⁶⁵ Representation in this sense is “objectivist,” being traceable to Scotist forms of realism in which the “intellectual object” became privileged over the “sensible object,” with the former being understood as an *a priori*, universalising and abstractive operation of spiritual intuition. Here, the object becomes identified with the re-presented and re-produced image imprinted in the soul, rather than with the “relative” and “sensible” object itself.⁶⁶ These tendencies, along with the modern geometries of space and the subject, have passed into the present and are significantly amplified today with the development of digital media, in which the play of simulation becomes even more sophisticated. While it is true that these media, in distinction from still photography, give more space to the reality of movement and transition (even though a certain immobility remains for the observer⁶⁷), they also open us to the displacement of “the real by the simulacra”,⁶⁸ and within globalised technology make the visual and pornographic commodification of bodies easily dispersible. Greater accessibility and affordability of screen technology has of course also made the privatised consumption of these images widespread and has assisted (like the modern novel) in creating “new forms of generalised narcissism”.⁶⁹ Following a model of commodity exchange that repeats the ever-increasing “virtualism” of late capitalism, human bodies are presented as sheerly replaceable “products” and are only deemed beneficial to the extent that they enact the desired effect for the consumer. Hereby, perception itself becomes entangled with capitalist production,⁷⁰ subjected to an “economization”⁷¹ and “attentional biopower”,⁷² whereby our very phenomenological interaction with the world becomes enraptured

stop / and start, but that / was to ignore how much the camera / misses, how what we call seeing / in an ever-changing depth / of field’; Linda Gregerson, ‘Elegant,’ in *Magnetic North: Poems* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 63.

⁶⁵ Dennis, *The Face of God*, 184ff.

⁶⁶ Olivier Boulnois, *Être et représentation: Une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l’époque de Duns Scot (XIII^e -XIV^e siècle)*. Épipiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 55-105.

⁶⁷ The argument could be made that the very notion of ‘the screen’ is still tied to a certain kind of immobility since it remains predicated, after Alberti, on a linear perspective that privileges a static and reified position on behalf of the observer; cf. Lev Manovich, ‘Eine Archäologie des Computerbildschirms.’ *Kunstforum* 132 (1996): 124–135. For a theological and genealogical critique that shows linear perspective is by-no-means a necessary or unsurpassable development, see Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2013).

⁶⁸ Melendez, ‘Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime,’ 401 and *passim*.

⁶⁹ Melendez, 424n.17. The link between the invention of pornography and the modern novel has also been commented upon, though the causal factors seem to be a bit more tenuous; cf. Lynn Hunt, ‘Introduction,’ 32-33.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 3

⁷¹ Beller, *The Cinematic Mode*, 6.

⁷² Beller, 4.

in “semi-automatization” – enacted today by digital algorithms.⁷³ This development was in turn predicated on tendencies within “visual modernism” that grew out of “*an already reconfigured field of techniques and discourses about visuality and an observing subject*”,⁷⁴ creating a “spectacular culture” where we are “isolated, separated, and *inhabit time as disempowered*”.⁷⁵ Individualisation and atomisation become even more deeply entrenched.

This closing-down of difference, of real otherness, does not merely impact the visual representation of porn, but is clearly present within its styles of writing as well (as already suggested by Sontag). Within pornography, there is isomorphism between form and content, exemplifying what Susanne Kappeler has called “monologuization”.⁷⁶ We have already mentioned how pornography expresses a “totalized imagination” in which all human interactions are reduced to the sexual encounter, or how it abstracts copulation and biology from humanising culture.⁷⁷ In fact, as Slavoj Žižek notices, there is a zero-sum game between the presentation of the sexual act and the quality of narrative within the pornographic genre.⁷⁸ Since the only goal of pornography is titillation, any nuance or subtlety is deemed to detract from this intention. Pornographic writing thus repeats the already-mentioned tendency towards a certain monism of expression; a collapsing of erotic nuance and subtlety into the instrumentalising tropes of orgasm.⁷⁹ This is clearly visible in its overly reductive and trivialised forms of sexual communication, found both in its literary and cinematic instances. The large sway of consumed pornography, especially “gonzo”,⁸⁰ tends towards heavily monotonous and philistine modes of linguistic interaction. And even at the level of more developed literary taste (e.g., Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, John Updike), the permeation of

⁷³ Beller, 8.

⁷⁴ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1999), 6.

⁷⁵ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 3.

⁷⁶ Sontag, *The Pornography of Representation*, 189.

⁷⁷ Cf. Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, ‘Truth and the Obscene Word in Eighteenth Century French Pornography,’ in Linda Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography*, 202-221. Mazur argues (pp. 213ff.) that pornographic language repeats the ‘dualism’ between body and soul since it presupposes an equation of obscene rhetoric with the ‘truth,’ one that is in turn predicated on a bifurcation between the facts of sexual description and the valuations of culture, especially in regards to the feelings of love (p. 213). Indeed, as Bruno Latour argues, it is precisely the unworkable separation of nature from culture which one of the founding constitutions of modernity; see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). This is comparable to Griffin’s description of “the metaphysics of pornography,” insofar as maleness is associated with the operations of mind/spirit and femininity with materiality/nature; *Pornography and Silence*, 13-14.

⁷⁸ Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 226.

⁷⁹ For a philosophical critique of orgasm-centred accounts of sexuality, see Ann Van Sevenant, *Sexual Outercourse: A Philosophy of Lovemaking* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005).

⁸⁰ Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010); Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 55-87.

pornographic styles of communication has contributed towards forms of sexual description that are often virtually indistinguishable from the constrained lexicons of porn.⁸¹

In this section, my main concern has been to trace, in a cursory fashion, a genealogy of pornographic consciousness as a form that modernity has taken, thereby contesting “the underlying assumptions which make the pornographic practice of representation “natural”.”⁸² But this approach would be theologically limited if it was not cognizant of a deeper alienation; the problem of disordered desire. Christian theology reads this miseducation of desire as a product of the Fall, and that while modern technology and representation may have some role to play, sin is the more perennial impetus for all this, including the pornographic imagination and the often-inhumane politics that develop in its wake. This is a deeper aporia, and so without the continuing therapy of desire, our misplacement and miseducation of longing will only continue. This is concern of the final section of this essay.

IV

A waking, as in images we awake,

Within the very object that we seek,

*Participants of its being*⁸³

What alternative is there to the regime of the image thus far described? How might we counteract its miseducation of desire? Clearly, the problems are complex and cannot be tackled from only one vantage point. But in what follows, I would like to sketch an alternative metaphysics of desire and the image, a Christian metaphysics that is capaciously patristic and Augustinian in scope. Since it would be overly-ambitious and unfeasible to deal with the whole tradition surrounding this question, I have narrowed by focus on Rowan Williams, who has provided cogent and intelligent expositions of this tradition. I have done this, for, in addition to being a gifted and voluminous theological thinker, Williams is also a noted patristic scholar – particularly of Origen, the Arian Controversy, and the Augustinian corpus. His work on Augustine has been widely influential, as seen in its reception among scholars of Augustine.⁸⁴ Moreover, my choice is motivated by my familiarity with this work, and his attempts to relate this tradition to questions of human desiring and sexuality. Explicit treatments of the theme of pornography as such are rare in his publications, but there is enough in his discussions of selfhood and desire to suggest a theological path that

⁸¹ George Steiner, ‘Eros and Idiom,’ in *Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 95-136.

⁸² Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*, 220.

⁸³ Wallace Stevens, ‘Study of Images I,’ in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1984), 404.

⁸⁴ The body of writings on Augustine can be found, along with responses to the critical responses to his work in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

might be taken. Echoing the patristic analysis of the passions,⁸⁵ and Augustine's theory of desire, Williams puts forward a spiritually purgative account of desire that brings out the specifically relational and non-egotistic trajectory of this tradition. It emphasises the way in which the spiritual cultivation of desire, grounded in a Christological and Trinitarian vision, ultimately de-centres any conceit of self-grounding or self-referential personhood, apart from the irreducible relationality of the self.⁸⁶ It is also an embodied and incarnational account, situated in a broader soteriological narrative; as he says, "what Christ delivers us from is not bodily circumstance, contingency, or instability ... but from the habits of mind and heart that that make of this environment only a theatre for our private obsessions to be staged and our lust for control to be exercised".⁸⁷ The implications for this sexuality and pornography are probably already clear.

The Augustinian theory of desire is linked to the Platonic ascent of the soul towards the Good and the Beautiful, even as Augustine thoroughly transformed this tradition via Christian, Neoplatonic, and Stoic proclivities.⁸⁸ Plato is often criticised for his spiritual denigration of the physical, but scholarship has now shown (to some extent) that this is a caricature of Plato and can longer be accepted *tout court*. Contemporary research has made clear that sensibility remains irreducibly important for the Platonic intuition of the *eidē* (ideas) and furthermore that any radical separation of the Forms from their physical appearance remains unsustainable within the Platonic corpus.⁸⁹ We come to know the Beautiful and the Good precisely through their tangible exemplars, and it is through these physical triggers and sensations that we experience an *anamnesis* (recollection) of the Forms. This process of recollection is not a static or simplistic reproduction

⁸⁵ As famously done in the *Praktikos* of Evagrius Ponticus; see Rowan Williams, "The Embodied Logos: Reason, Knowledge, and Relation", in *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 59-92.

⁸⁶ Khegan M. Delport, 'Interior *intimo meo*: Rowan Williams on the Self.' *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4 (2018): 471–504; Delport, 'The Self in Fragments: Rowan Williams's Tragicomic Augustinianism.' *Journal of Anglican Studies* 19, no. 1 (2021): 98–115.

⁸⁷ Rowan Williams, "'Tempted as we are': Christology and the Analysis of the Passions," in *Studia Patristica* 54, eds. J. Baun, A. Cameron, M. Edward and M. Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 400–401.

⁸⁸ Cf. Sarah Catherine Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). However, one should give notice to the critical reception of Byers's reading of Augustinian thought, insofar as it appears to make Augustine too much of a rationalist and gives insufficient place to the role that grace and love plays in Augustine's account of knowledge and the transformation of the self; see Carol Harrison, 'Doxology and Loving Knowledge in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* Book 1.' *Journal of Religion & Society*, Supplement 15 (2018): 138-156.

⁸⁹ See C. J. De Vogel, *Rethinking Plato and Platonism* (Leiden: Brill, 1986); Eric D. Perl, 'The Living Image: Form and the Erotic Intellect in Plato.' *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 69 (1995): 191-204; Perl, *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 19-71. Also cf. Charles H. Kahn, 'Plato's Theory of Desire.' *The Review of Metaphysics* 41, no. 1 (1987): 77-103; Catherine Osbourne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 86-116; Seth Benardete, *Socrates and Plato: The Dialectic of Eros* (München: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2002).

of “the same” but rather an eschatological remembering-forward (as Chrétien suggested).⁹⁰ Augustine is similarly disparaged, within a post-Kantian ambit, for his enjoyment-use distinction (*frui* and *uti*), which he also connects in *De doctrina christiana* to the thing-sign distinction (*res* and *signum*), as he lays out early in Book I.⁹¹ For Augustine, God as Trinity is the transcendent and infinite *res* (entity) towards which all things are related, and so every created entity is to be “used,” rather than “enjoyed” or treated as a kind of finality unto itself. Only God can be “enjoyed” for his own sake. For as he says, “[e]njoyment, after all, consists in clinging to something lovingly for its own sake, while use consists in referring what has come your way to what your love aims at obtaining, provided, that is, it deserves to be loved”.⁹² In the end, for him, only God is worthy of such enjoyment. But indeed, this can be easily misconstrued as implying a neglect of the visible in favour of the invisible – a position that is fraught with dangers. Augustine’s theology of desire, however, has the opposite conclusion, according to Williams. Precisely because created beings should not be treated as the end of our intending, our direction is finally aimed towards that *res* that gives being to all things. The visible world is not to be denigrated, but to be read through the corporal signs of the sacraments and Holy Scripture.⁹³

But this means that to restrict the *telos* of desire within the immanent, that is, to treat created beings as ends unto themselves, would imply a denial of the *summum bonum* that elicits our true delight, the only worth pursuing. For to comprehend any object without its deferral and relation to the divine implies an enclosure of desire within finitude, and a disavowal of connection to God. “Enjoyment” that considers any finite other as an end, without theological dimension, means that desire can only be referred ultimately to finite ends. But since desire cannot come to its own end and satisfaction within any finite aim, because for desire to be at *an end* would literally be *the end* of desire, then persons cannot practically be treated as ends in themselves, but always-already as a “means” to some other end. For desire, it seems, is without end. This may take more benign or pathological forms, but since there is no ordering of desire here to a transcendent, unchanging goodness, then the ground for the judgement of the desirable can only be within the terrain of history and the negotiation of desires. But on this picture, the reason as to why persons should be treated as ends in themselves – with dignity, or *jus* – or why desire should be rightly ordered is rendered contingent at best and arbitrary at worst. The question as to why I should finally not

⁹⁰ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 1-39.

⁹¹ For what follows, see Rowan Williams, ‘Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De Doctrina*,’ *Literature and Theology* 3.2 (July 1989): 138-150.

⁹² *De doctrina christiana* I.4. Translation taken from *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City Press, 2014).

⁹³ It should be added that Harrison has pointed how Augustine’s own account of love complicates the whole *res-signum* and *uti-frui* distinction; see ‘Doxology and Loving Knowledge.’

treat the other as a means towards delusory and destructive ends has no basis beyond the contingent arrangement and networking of desires, so Williams seems to imply.⁹⁴

For Augustine, any restriction of the desired subject to the limits and particularities of *my own* aspirations would be exactly to deny *their own* unique directedness towards divinity, their naturally equality, their own *jus*, their status as *imago dei*, which for Augustine is always-already the *imago trinitatis*. The *imago dei*, and its tripartite structure of *memoria-intellectus-voluntas*, is tied to our ability to know, to love, and to be moved towards God, and is not thereby limited to an individuated ego.⁹⁵ That we reflect the image of God is intrinsic to our createdness as finite beings, and our reflection of the Trinity is revealed when all the faculties of the soul (memory, understanding, will) have God as their true object. This is understood to be a deifying and unending progress on the part of human beings in their journey towards the beatific vision, but this is predicated on the timeless movement of God towards God through God in the *perichoresis* of Father as Paternal and Unbegotten Source, the Son as Word and Image, and the Spirit as Gift and Love. These subsistent relations between the Triune persons can be understood (as Rowan Williams suggests after John of the Cross⁹⁶) as an infinite play of “desire” in which the Father and Son direct their love and being towards the other. But this desiring between the Lover and the Beloved is not enclosed within only a binary identity, in which the Father comes to end in the Father’s own Word and Image, but also opens itself to *the other of the other* – its desiring love, namely the Spirit. The never-ending deflection and deferral within the Trinitarian life means that the personhood of the divine is ecstatically constituted through a pouring and emptying of God into God, which then is eternally received back as gift.⁹⁷ This dynamic relation “flows” out as a kind of exuberant excess within the *creatio ex nihilo*. To the extent that we come to a deeper awareness of this relationality, we find that God can never be an “object” or “being” amongst others, a God who is the product of wish-fulfilment. Rather, all human attempts at imaging the divine are

⁹⁴ “A social practice which impedes human beings from offering themselves to God in fact denies that central impulse in human nature which Augustine defined as the unquenchable desire for God and his truth. It provides *ersatz* gratifications, finite substitutes for the infinite. As such it diminishes humanity itself, in that it takes the one principle that can rightly order our wills and affections...Where there is no *jus* towards God, there is no common sense of what is due to human beings, no *juris consensus*”; Williams, *Politics and the Soul: A Reading of The City of God*. *Milltown Studies* 19-20 (1987): 59.

⁹⁵ Rowan Williams, ‘Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on *De Trinitate*,’ in Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigts and J. van Houtem, eds., *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T J van Bavel*, vol. 1 (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 317-332; Williams, ‘The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge in the *De trinitate*,’ in J. T. Lienhard, E. C. Muller and R. J. Teske, eds., *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 121-134. Also cf. Olivier Boulnois, ‘L’image intelligible Augustin et l’origine des doctrines médiévales de l’image.’ *Archives de Philosophie* 72.2 (2009), 271-292.

⁹⁶ Williams, ‘The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure,’ in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-135.

⁹⁷ Cf. Williams, ‘Balthasar and the Trinity,’ in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37-50.

bracketed, overturned, or sanctified to the extent that we ourselves are transformed, every so gradually, into that divine image.

One way the trinitarian rhythm of deflective being is imaged within human life is when we refuse to capture other subjects within our privatised fantasies, but rather give space to the desire and personhood of the other, to the extent that we love them without “passion,” that is, in their own created difference and relation to God. As Williams says to truly love the other is “to love the ‘excess’ of their being”.⁹⁸ The ego that is displaced by love and kenosis, that renounces “the myth of protected self-sufficiency”,⁹⁹ does not however imply the annihilation of self (as in Bataille’s description). Moreover, it does *not* necessitate a “Levinasian sense of abjection before the other because this is rooted in an ontology for which there is no being-for-the-other abstracted from the pattern of *mutual* life-giving”.¹⁰⁰ This is due to the fact that humanity as “the uniquely *conscious* bearer of *eros*” is that created being which “models what is in fact going on at every level of the universe’s life” in which “the conscious and intelligent agent... moves in the mode for which it was created, moves in alignment with the purpose of God, habitually echoing in finite form the infinite desire of God for God, of love for love”.¹⁰¹

But how is this desire formed into human subjects? Again, Augustine writes: “since we are meant to enjoy that which is unchangeably alive, and since it is in its light that God the Trinity, author and maker of the universe, provides for all the things he has made, our minds have to be purified, to enable them to perceive that light, and to cling to it once perceived.”¹⁰² The Christian tradition has taught that this purification is achieved through divine pedagogy: through the incarnation, the church, scripture, the sacramental mysteries, and the common liturgy of worship and discipleship. It is hereby that we enter renewed habits of thought and action, insofar as these are sanctified within the repeated patterns of ritualised liturgy and through which we are inducted into the incarnational mysteries. To invoke patristic language again, liturgy implies that the givenness of

⁹⁸ Williams, ‘Nature, Passion and Desire: Maximus’ Ontology of Excess,’ in Markus Vincent, ed., *Studia Patristica* 58 (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 269. See the following as well: ‘Proper Christian love thus ‘dispossesses’ itself of its object in more than one sense. Not only does it seek to see and know the object without passion (without self-referential desire), it recognizes that the true being of the object is always in relation to something other than the beholder prior to the seeing or registering of this particular other by the beholder. Thus there is always some dimension of what is encountered that is in no way accessible to or at the mercy of this particular beholder. It is in acknowledging this relatedness to a third that a relation of love involving two finite subjects becomes authentic and potentially open to the universal. What is in relation to the ‘third’ is precisely what exists in and by the action of that ‘third,’ which is the nature of the subject in question, the project defined by infinite act which is now working through by its own particular mode of *eros* towards its ultimate purpose’ (Williams, 270).

⁹⁹ Williams, ‘Nature, Passion and Desire.’ 267.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, 269. The reference here is of course to Emmanuel Levinas, and his ethical vision in which the question of our moral directedness towards *the Other* should be given priority over questions of metaphysics and ontology.

¹⁰¹ Williams, 267.

¹⁰² *De doctrina christiana* I.10.

nature (*logos*) is open to transformative habits of spiritual culture (*tropos*);¹⁰³ and it is primarily through the regularity of worship and devotion that our perception of the world is constructed.¹⁰⁴ Simply put: we become what we worship. As Christoph Schneider says, “[i]t is the beauty of the liturgy which evokes our desire to appropriate the salvific divine will as expressed in the life of Christ”.¹⁰⁵ It is through the process of the appropriation of the divine symbols, as expressed primarily through the Eucharist, that we are anagogically drawn into the mysteries of salvation. Our habitual immersion within the cycles and physical movements of worship, and the ritual awakening and deepening of the senses through material practices (such as baptism, the Eucharist, the physical actions of prayer, the adoration of icons, processions, etc.), transforms our interaction with the world itself. As in the transubstantiation of the bread and wine, the material world *itself* is shown to be a sign and image of the eternal act of self-donation. In fact, the usual distinction between image and reality is complicated here because, like art that is able to reveal the “truth” of its object, the excessive *more* that is contained within the object itself,¹⁰⁶ we could say (under the circumstances of liturgical enactment) that the image comes to be more “real” than the “original”.¹⁰⁷ That we are the image of God *is* the truth about ourselves; the Body and Blood of Christ *is* the truth of the bread and wine. Reality itself, like a Neoplatonist theory of vision,¹⁰⁸ is an image that reflects, in ever-deepening levels of metaphysical simplicity, the divine mystery in which the entire cosmos lives, moves, and has its being (Acts 17.28). Liturgy spills out into our daily modes of living, slowly converting our emotions and affects, teaching us to read divine symbols, and educating us into the synaesthesia of divine beauty.¹⁰⁹ This is shown, for example, in the rituals of daily prayer, especially of the contemplative variety, in which silence and the interruption of the normal “flow” of thought succession open us to the “renewing” of mental capacities and the

¹⁰³ Christoph Schneider, 'The Transformation of Eros: Reflections on Desire in Jacques Lacan,' in Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider, (eds.), *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy. Transfiguring the World Through the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 271-289.

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Pickstock, 'The Ritual Birth of Sense,' *Telos* 162 (Spring 2013): 29–55.

¹⁰⁵ Schneider, 'The Transformation of Eros,' 282.

¹⁰⁶ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Catherine Pickstock, 'Sense and Sacrament,' in Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 657-674.

¹⁰⁸ E. H. Gombrich, 'Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought.' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 11 (1948): 163-192. Also cf. Douglas Hedley, *The Iconic Imagination* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 119-148.

¹⁰⁹ Graham Ward, 'Affect: Towards a Theology of Experience,' *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 1, no. 1-2 (2012): 55-80; Ward, 'Salvation: The Pedagogy of Affect,' *Nederduits Gereformeerde Tydskrif* Supplement 1 (2014): 999-1013. Also cf. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

affective sensorium (Romans 12.2), aligning them, gradually and painstakingly, with the will and desire of the triune God within us.¹¹⁰

As of yet I have not much focused on the implications of this broadly Augustinian account for sexuality and the pornographic. Throughout, I have been suggesting that the sacred pedagogy of the erotic is connected to the broader metaphysical question of pornography, because desire is central to the moral reformation of the subject.¹¹¹ A Christian account of sexual desire will therefore have to include it within its soteriological compass. As Rowan Williams argued in his justly famous essay “The Body’s Grace”,¹¹² sexual desire is entwined with a certain way of *seeing* and *being-seen*. It is a reflection within the interpersonal of what is primarily a metaphysical act of grace, in which human beings (in their very limited and created materiality) are viewed as a source of joy. But since we are finite and dependent beings, our relational interactions can only occur within the “intercourse” of culture and language; and this is the only place where self-communication (sexual and otherwise) can have any meaning. But this implies that our intentions and desires are shared within the reciprocal interactions of linguistic and embodied agents, with all the enticements and risks this entails. It implies making my meanings *vulnerable* and subject to the claims and perceptions of the desired other, making my joy *dependent* upon their own enjoyment. In fact, these movements become so interlocked that “To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire”.¹¹³ Furthermore, the unfolding discovery of “the desire of the other” cannot be a punctiliar, even though individual occurrences can arouse us to such a quest. Instead, it involves time-taking,¹¹⁴ an openness to the continuous and “spontaneous exposures” that the sexual encounter brings with it.¹¹⁵ To refuse the otherness of the beloved’s desire is refuse such an exposure and is intimately implicated with the pressure to keep the “other distant and controlled”.¹¹⁶ It is this pressure that manifests itself within the field of the pornographic.

The earlier discussion of Sontag argued that the pornographic imaginary is manifest in recognisable structures and styles that enclose the nuance of sexual engagement within a specific regime of representation: a “total imagination.” As I have argued, pornography seeks to control, contain, and

¹¹⁰ Cf. Sarah Coakley, ‘Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality,’ *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (1998): 223-232. Also cf. Williams, ‘The Deflections of Desire’ on John of the Cross.

¹¹¹ Ethical theories, within trajectories of manual Thomism and post-Kantianism have often elided this factor. I have been implicitly claiming, along with others, that Kantian deontology, without eudaemonistic allure, is insufficient on its own. Moreover, Kantian ethics had already been deconstructed and appropriated by the likes of Sade, as famously pointed out by Lacan. This suggests an instability in this tradition, which at the very least will require supplementation to be morally sufficient; cf. Jacques Lacan “Kant with Sade,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink et al (New York: Norton, 2006), 645–668.

¹¹² Williams, ‘The Body’s Grace’ [1989], in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., ed., *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309-321.

¹¹³ Williams, ‘The Body’s Grace,’ 313.

¹¹⁴ Williams, 315.

¹¹⁵ Williams, 314.

¹¹⁶ Williams, 316.

restrict the other. In its distorted framing however, it is still reaching for something it desires to be real, some good which may provide satisfaction. Echoing Bataille, it desires “the concrete totality of the real”.¹¹⁷ It thus proposes that through its imaginary, we encounter something real and true. This is a basic conceit: that through graphic depictions and realistic representation of sexual encounters, we engage what one might call *the fantasy of the real*. It claims to reveal the truth of the human, as Foucault noted regarding the modern regime of sex and knowledge.¹¹⁸ Following the language of Roger Scruton, the pornographic imagination indeed aims for “a perfect simulacrum,” to represent something of the world as it *is*. This is one of its allures, to form an idealised substitute for the absent but real object. However, in a strange inversion, this attempt to leave “nothing to the imagination” is what makes pornography profoundly unrealistic.¹¹⁹ It aims for the realisation of fantasy but ends in a deadening simulation; it fastidiously depicts the interactions of bodies, but simultaneously labours in abstraction, reification, and mechanisation; it reaches for the actual but prioritizes the virtual. It advertises novelty and transgression, but results in boredom and homogeneity. It is motivated by desire for connection, but often tragically ends in isolation. The vitality of the erotic is transformed into the necrophilia of the pornographic. This is characteristic of its pathology and self-deceit; and all these trajectories and strange reversals hint that there is a distorted metaphysics at work, a tragic one, which negatively attests, I argue, to *the truth of sacramental*. For our attempts to latch onto an unmediated reality always end in a parody of the real. Pornography is a parasitic simulation of the real, a perversion of sacrament. The sacramental or iconic imagination, however, intimates that nothing can be approached immediately, but only obliquely through the mediation of image, word, and sacrament, of bread and wine, and that it is only through these that we approach the “hyperreality” of the Body and Blood of Christ: the resurrection under the signature of the cross. The sacraments ground the virtual within the actual and the entanglement of meaning with materiality. In contrast to the digital consumption of bodies through pornography, it is through sacramental dispersal that we are incorporated into the mystic body, and we become what we consume.

The trajectory of the pornographic is partially traceable to the imbalances and aporias of modernity, being connected to the secularisation of late capitalist societies and regimes of representation, as argued above. If this analysis is correct, namely that they are linked, then a Christian resistance to pornography cannot simply bring action upon a diseased symptom but must reach towards larger questions of collective desiring and social imaginaries. As hopefully has become clear, these issues are deeply connected to the miseducation of desire and affect that continues within the domain of digital capitalism and attention economies. An alternative, theological vision will therefore have to be holistic, and not mimic the reductionism of the pornographic. I wager that it will require an expansive vision of divine pedagogy, a Christological

¹¹⁷ Bataille, ““The Object of Desire and the Totality of the Real,” 268.

¹¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998).

¹¹⁹ Roger Scruton, ‘Fantasy, Imagination, and the Screen.’ *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 19, no. 1 (1983): 35-46.

and sacramental therapy that corresponds, in words of Geoffrey Hill, to a “density of being; of otherness” of “Eros alone, rightly understood,” a vision in which Christ’s “blood / Realigns with ours; his casual largess / Practically acquired; of us apart / And part of us; as philosophical / Logic for the utterly naked soul; / Disorder’s foil to some well-measured art”.¹²⁰

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¹²⁰ Geoffrey Hill, 'Al Tempo de' Tremuoti,' in *Broken Hierarchies*, 930.

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