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Can we Forget Foucault? Obscenity and the Politics of Seduction

¿Podemos olvidar a Foucault? La obscenidad y la política de la seducción

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Abstract

Life is pornographic, everything is obscene and there is nothing secret anymore. These were some of Jean Baudrillard's daring ideas in his latest work, which dealt with the final stage of hyperreality and simulation that we had entered. Despite the ridicule that Baudrillard's work has drawn, his ideas were much more nuanced than just extravagant metaphysical claims designed to baffle and surprise. Our current situation, sexually saturated, permanently connected to the internet and full of existential abandonment, seems to suggest that his diagnosis was correct. This essay will explore how the notion of seduction, as conceived by Baudrillard, offers us a way of understanding the production of reality and a retreat from the obscenity of the world.

Key words: seduction, politics, obscenity, pornography, reality.

Resumen

La vida es pornográfica, todo es obsceno y ya no queda nada en secreto. Estas fueron algunas de las audaces ideas de Jean Baudrillard en su último trabajo sobre la etapa final de hiperrealidad y simulación en la que habíamos entrado. A pesar del ridículo que ha atraído el trabajo de Baudrillard, sus ideas eran mucho más matizadas que simples proclamas metafísicas extravagantes diseñadas para desconcertar y sorprender. Nuestra situación actual, sexualmente saturada, permanentemente en línea y desprovista existencialmente, parece sugerir que su diagnóstico fue correcto. En este ensayo exploraré cómo la noción de seducción, tal como la concibe Baudrillard, nos ofrece una forma de entender la producción de la realidad y un alejamiento de la obscenidad del mundo.

Palabras clave: seducción, política, obscenidad, pornografía, realidad.

Modern life gives us everywhere the opportunity to enjoy and simultaneously to witness the suffering of others. Baudrillard (1995) exposed this grimly in his much-quoted text *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, in which he makes the claim that this war was the first conflict to be fought in hyperreality itself. Not that he was denying the many thousands of lives lost, but rather that the reality of the events was pre-emptively and recursively determined by the media coverage which the soldiers were having to refer to in order to know what was happening on the ground. Meanwhile, the spectators at home could watch the events unfold with all the latest dramatic editorial effects designed to make the experience more entertaining and coherent as they ate dinner or enjoyed a drink. Today the ongoing war in Ukraine has an even more hyperreal quality, simultaneously being created, and curated

by social media and delivering a variety of truth effects to divided audiences across the globe. The function of the war as “pornographic” entertainment, as horrific as it may seem, can no longer be ignored.

Perhaps we may try to understand the structural relation between reality and pornography via the HBO series *Euphoria*. *Euphoria*’s main character Rue, a teenage girl struggling with drug addiction and depression tells us in the opening sequence of the pilot that as a child, for no particular reason she suffered from panic attacks and hyperventilation, one day leading to her hospitalization and then dependence on prescription and ultimately recreational drugs. She remarks to her concerned drug dealer friend, that her first taste of *valium* gave her this sublime moment of quiet and repose from the world that ever since she had been trying to replicate.

Alongside Rue, the other characters variously struggle with the horror, ambivalence, and oblivion of sexuality. Sex for these young people is experienced by turns as pornographic, violent, abusive, and pedophilic. Jules, a trans girl, enters into abusive sexual encounters with an older man, who himself turns out to be the father of the bullyish hypermasculine Nate, who threatens to rape her at a house party shortly after her encounter with his dad. We soon learn (via Rue’s omniscient narration) that Nate had discovered his father’s highly organized collection of pedophilic and violent porn as a child and began avidly watching it, growing up to become sexually aggressive, misogynistic and generally sadistic.

Although *Euphoria* is set in the present day it is a depiction of nostalgia for 90’s pre-social media relationships. A Mark Fisherian hauntological soundtrack adds a melancholic feel of an anticipated future that never arrived. Through its explicitness, brutality, and banality, any remnant of teen romance is shown to be on its way towards disappearance into the hypersexual universe of nihilistic, permanently online, no future Gen Z’ers. Whilst the show may not explicitly articulate this as an absence of sex, the overriding feeling one gets from the heightened sexuality and pornographic elements is of utter disaffection and alienation, an extinguishing of “romantic desire” experienced by each of the characters as their own unique and insufferable jouissance.

This inexistence of sex is, as we know, the foundational concept of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Each subject only ever experiencing sexuality as mediated through a fantasy structure in which they may take up any position in relation to the object. The tripartite formula of sexual fantasy follows the grammatical form used by Lacan in his conceptualization of the drive in *Seminar XI* (2004). Lacan’s move here was to conceive of the drive as something which escaped the active/passive opposition. In the case of the scopic drive for example, he makes the simple reversal of the seeing/being seen dichotomy into the formulation “making oneself seen”. This may apply to all configurations of fantasy in terms of the grammatical form of jouissance obtained through one’s place in the structure of the drive circuit.

But where, according to Baudrillard (2007, 2017) for psychoanalysis there remains the possibility of a “non-relation”, giving rise to various forms of jouissance, even the power of this failed sexual rapport is diminishing along with the progressive abstraction of sexual exchange value, a complete dissolution of desire and eroticism replaced by something more akin to compulsion and automatic mimesis. It sounds hyperbolic and reactionary perhaps, but what Baudrillard recognizes is the fact that sex is itself a simulation, an attempt to replicate an originary lost jouissance that was never really there in the first place. However, he takes the idea of sexuality and its relation to the discourse of the enlightenment further into the realms of hyperreality and ontology. Baudrillard admittedly borrows much of his conception of sexuality from Lacan; the abstraction of masculinity



and femininity into onto-epistemological categories and modalities of jouissance - phallic and feminine or Other enjoyment (see Lacan, 1998, and Chiesa, 2016) far removed from mere questions of gender performativity, yet he does something quite intriguing in terms of the use to which he puts the abstract notions of male and female “thought”.

In his early period, he develops his critique of capitalism from a neo-Marxist perspective but ultimately concludes that Marxism cannot think the pre-modern outside of the paradigm of production, ultimately socialism is only a slightly fairer version of something inherently alienating, the process of labour and consumption. Hence, he moves towards a theorization of symbolic exchange for which he engages with the work of George Bataille (1991), Marcel Mauss (1990) and Alfred Jarry (1991). In these authors, he saw respectively the concept of expenditure (the model of the sun as endless expenditure with no reward in Bataille’s general economy), Mauss’s ideas on non-reciprocal gift giving and the potlatch, and Jarry’s theatre of the absurd and pataphysics which all offered a different model for conceiving of society. This culminated in an aristocratic critique of slave morality in the tradition of Nietzsche. Following this period, he breaks again and moves into the phase of the Triumph of the Object, in which he theorizes technology as the dominant factor shaping social relations and culture in general. At this point, his work becomes more speculative and transitions from social theory to philosophy proper.

In his last period, Baudrillard was interested in the specific relationship between the production of sexed subjectivity and its relation to the paradigm of simulation. He was attempting to identify a problematic moment in technologically advanced, so-called post-modern societies at which consciousness is no longer able to distinguish between reality and simulation when the simulation into which we are plunged becomes more real than reality; what Baudrillard (1994) termed hyperreality, a space in which the real and the fictive are seamlessly blended. For Baudrillard, the reality is always mediated by a differential system of signs which gain value by their relationship to each other and in that sense are infinitely malleable. In the digitally mediated world, it is very rare that we experience events firsthand. But even when we do for Baudrillard this does not constitute reality *per se*.

Baudrillard (1994) famously uses Disney World as an example of a place that functions to make the outside world appear more real and to dissimulate the fact that the whole of America was itself a simulation. But this logic according to Baudrillard can be applied to all forms of social interaction and political action. Situations of fantasy are created precisely in order to cover over that what we perceive as reality is always already ideologically prefabricated. This immersion into hyperreality would happen undoubtedly with the interspersing of physical and virtual realms and with the entanglement of human intelligence and AI, but for Baudrillard had already started to happen simply as a constitutive part of the process in the abstraction of symbolic systems. But what Baudrillard was particularly concerned with and found problematic within the paradigm of hyperreality, and simulation was the question of obscenity.

Obscenity refers here not merely to the realm of the sexual, but to the whole of the visual field and indeed to the transparency of knowledge and the transmission of information. Obscenity had replaced seduction. Seduction is nevertheless a concept that goes far beyond sex for Baudrillard (1991). Pornography was not merely a question of total access to the sexual body, but also more generally the obscenity and transparency of knowledge and information. Controversially, he ties this closely to the feminist movement and to psychoanalysis which he accuses each in their own ways of stripping seduction of its power as a metaphysical veil. However, his thrust here is often misunderstood. Seduction is not just a question of “femininity” traditionally understood but a game of ritual and simulation that governs politics, social life, culture, sex, and even death.

In a sense, Baudrillard was continuously making the claim that there is a direct and inverse relationship between the obscenity of everyday life and the disappearance of the world. This obscenity was ultimately brought about by the discourses of the Enlightenment, be they scientific, political, cultural, or aesthetic, and the surgical, microscopic, and anatomical precision with which everything is on display, categorized, and made operational. To put it in the simplest and crudest imagery: the Enlightenment search for complete knowledge goes hand in hand with the pornographic drive towards extreme close-ups of bodily penetration. We could say that the fascination with finding the last remaining hidden spot on the human body, and the endless thirst for ever more graphic and explicit forms of sexual imagery, is a mirror of the scientific formalization of the universe. It is for this reason that Baudrillard takes Michel Foucault to task on his part in what Baudrillard sees as making *too explicit* the sexual realm.

In *Forget Foucault*, Baudrillard (2007) questions the foundations of Foucault's entire oeuvre but the book he particularly has in mind is *History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge* (1976). He states: "Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the powers he describes. Its strength and its seductions lie there, and not in its 'truth' index" (p. 30). He goes on to say:

But what if Foucault spoke to us so well of sexuality (at last an analytical discourse on sex- or a discourse freed from the pathos of sex – that has the textual clarity of discourses which precede the discovery of the unconscious and which do not need the "blackmail of the deep" to say what they have to say) what if he spoke so well of sexuality... only because its form like that of power, is disappearing? (p. 32)

His contention was that sex, in the way that Foucault was describing it, was only becoming so clear as a concept because there has never truly been sexuality. Foucault himself was in the process of retroactively creating it. Baudrillard (2007) opens the essay by stating that Foucault's writing is perfect. By this, he meant that in its ability to infiltrate and saturate every microscopic space of meaning and explicate everything without excess acts, not just as a mirror of the very forms of discursive power he was attempting to describe, but as a kind of obituary. That is to say, a text seeking to give meaning to something already dead.

The essay forwards the provocative claim that the possibility of Foucault's method is *always* retroactive, paradoxically speaking of a discursive system that by definition can no longer exist *as a discourse*. This is because the idea of perfection for Baudrillard is inherently oppressive; total operativity, functionality, and self-sameness signal an extinguishing of subjective freedom. And this is something which he discerns not just in the ideas of Foucault in relation to the concept of power, but similarly in Gilles Deleuze's (1983) notions of desire and Jean-François Lyotard's (2015) libidinal economy. In Deleuze's substitution of the Lacanian notion of desire as lack with the productive immanent form of desire, for example, Baudrillard saw nothing more than an exchange of one idea for its mirror image: an all too perfect covering over of an incomplete reality.

Foucault's corrective to the Freudian repressive hypothesis, the injunction to produce sexuality via forms of speech is understood by Baudrillard (2007) therefore to be equally problematic. He sees Foucault's substitution of repression with an injunction against talking about sex, coupled with a compulsion to confess desire, as structurally producing the same effect. He says of the book's essential idea that:

[I]t substitutes a negative, reactive, and transcendental conception of power which is founded on interdiction and law for a positive active and immanent conception, and this is in fact essential. One can only be struck by the coincidence between this new version of power and the new version of desire proposed by Deleuze and Lyotard. (pp. 34-35)



Baudrillard in contrast sees the existence of sex as only comprehensible after the fact of its extinction. Foucault's (1976) expertise in describing it, therefore, marks its complete disappearance from reality. The proof of this disappearance according to Baudrillard can be found in the explosive proliferation of pornography. The arrival on the scene of the most explicit obscenities signals strangely enough that sex is really nowhere to be found. As if the demand to witness everything, to catalogue every possible human desire and see it (impossibly) fulfilled marks the end of a project, a dossier of failure. In fact, what better way to understand the principle of hyperreality than in the operation of the pornographic image. On the one hand, it professes to give the viewer the ultimate access to the sexual act, devoid of filters, screens, and prohibitions, yet in its very nature can only ever be simulacra, a copy of a copy. In other words, the enactment of a fantasy that itself has no original.

Baudrillard's main contention with Foucault in relation to sexuality (although many would argue it was a mischaracterization of his position) was that Foucault seems to be setting apart a notion of sexuality that could exist prior to its subsumption into discourse as if there were some better, more liberated version of the body and its pleasures, which is where Foucault (1976) ends up at the end of *The History of Sexuality*. But for Baudrillard, there is no such thing as sex outside of its production through progressively dispersed forms of power/knowledge formations. And if we follow Foucault's argument to its logical culmination, eventually sexuality, once it has been fully exhausted by such discursive and dispersive networks, in the form of the pornographic society, will just disappear, and according to Baudrillard has already done so. It is this gesture that Baudrillard is really calling attention to. Not because he rejects Foucault's method but because he sees how powerful it is in its analysis of the ultimately simulated nature of sexuality. He writes:

Ours is a culture of premature ejaculation. More and more, all seduction, all manner of seduction (which is itself a highly ritualized process) disappears behind the naturalized sexual imperative calling for the immediate realization of a desire. Our center of gravity has in fact shifted towards an unconscious and libidinal economy which only leaves room for the total naturalization of a desire bound either to fateful drives or to pure a simple mechanical operation, but above all to the imaginary order of repression and liberation. (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 39)

Essentially his criticism is aimed at Foucault's followers rather than Foucault himself. As he acknowledges that Foucault is well aware of the true effects that his discourse can produce for those who take his text as occupying a transcendental position. This disappearance of reality that Baudrillard is attempting to put his finger on has been misunderstood by many readers and indeed its relation to the sexual realm has not yet fully been appreciated.

For Baudrillard (2007), the obscenity into which we had entered through the full operationality and transparency of knowledge was the height of (to coin a phrase) instrumental masculinity – a tendency which must be resisted at all costs. The phallic desire to make everything visible, understandable, and “demystified” should not be, in his view, the aim of theory. In fact, in doing so this process always only ever becomes a simplification of the world. Rather, theory and philosophy should try to make the world more complex, to deepen, enrich and create further questions, paradoxes, and mysteries. This for Baudrillard is the feminine thought – the art of seduction. In this way, Baudrillard by his own definition is a feminine thinker. Seduction conceived thus is the process by which a distance is inserted between the object of desire and the objectifying gaze of the subject. This can be thought of literally, as in the difference between the pornographic and the erotic image, but more conceptually as acknowledging an occulted side of an object that can never be fully apprehended, as is the case with the whole of the visual field. One can never see something from all angles at once as this contradicts both the

logic of the gaze, as the blind spot in vision from where subjectivity emanates, and the materiality of the eye as the organ of vision.

I turn now to Lyotard's essay *Can Thought go on Without a Body?* which draws attention to the necessary partiality of vision in his critique of the philosophers and scientists whom he envisages as attempting to model Artificial Thought on an erroneous analogy with human intelligence. According to Lyotard, the gesture of building a simulation of vision via an abstracted view from nowhere loses the dimension of embodiment inherent to human vision. Lyotard's point in this essay, which forms the opening chapter of *The Inhuman* (1991), is to put forward the provocative proposition that given that it is an inevitability that the sun will die in 4.5 billion years, we must attempt to imagine the possibility of thought going on after the death of our bodies. But this is not like any normal death we can imagine, since even our own death still would occur within the backdrop of the existence of the species. Thinking would go on whether our subjectivity was there to know it. This type of image of death in contrast is one which must be thought by philosophy itself. And philosophy cannot carry on without any bodies left to think for it. He concludes therefore that the task of the various disciplines of neurophysiology, genetics, physics, astrophysics, particle physics, information science, tissue synthesis, etc., must be to make the condition for thought and the material support for it possible after the solar annihilation. All other concerns such as "health, war, production, communication" (p. 12), being merely diversions on the way to this ultimate goal. It is this realization that forces us to think about the relationship between the hardware of the human body and the software of thought. How is the simulation of this possible? He writes:

[H]ow to make thought without a body possible. A thought that continues to exist after the death of the human body. This is the price to be paid if the explosion is to be conceivable, if the death of the sun is to be a death like other deaths we know about. Thought without a body is the prerequisite for thinking of the death of all bodies, solar or terrestrial, and of the death of thoughts that are inseparable from those bodies. But "without a body" in this exact sense, without the complex terrestrial organism known as the human body. Not without hardware obviously. (Lyotard, 1991, p. 13-14)

Lyotard, directing his argument to those philosophers of AI who would be responsible for thinking of such a form of thought that could go on without a human body, points out that this hardware is not simply one which can take any form whatsoever. In that part of the problem, as pointed out by Hubert Dreyfus, (1992) is that human thought does not function in binary mode. Nor with units of information, rather it draws on intuitive and hypothetical configurations. And as Husserl (cited in Lyotard, 1992) has shown "thought becomes aware of a 'horizon', aims at a noema, a kind of object, a sort of non-conceptual monogram that provides it with intuitive configurations" (p. 15). (Lest we forget Lyotard's first book was a commentary on the phenomenological movement).

This orientation within thought, Lyotard (1992) likens to the function of vision "a field of thought exists in the same way that there's a field of vision (or hearing)" (p. 15). Crucially though, he says, we should not think of this analogy as merely extrinsic, but rather intrinsic, in the sense that thought must necessarily proceed analogically to the body and not logically (as with binary code). Therefore, according to Lyotard, the body must be taken as the model of thought if we are not to limit AI to the ability to reason rationally. As this would be a very poor and partial attempt to imitate human thought. It follows then that what makes the body and thought inseparable is not just that the latter cannot exist without the former, but that each of them is analogous to the other. Hence Lyotard introduces the dimensions of embodiment, gender, suffering, and enjoyment into the purview of artificial intelligence. In fact, it is striking that the essay is divided into



two parts: *HE* and *SHE*. It seems that Lyotard is beginning to factor in the possibility of the ontological structure of sexuation as a vital component for the conceptualization of AI (see Millar, 2021).

It is the second part of the essay, *SHE*, where Lyotard begins to discuss what we could call the ontological notion of seduction that Baudrillard is getting at. As he puts it: “Perceptual recognition never satisfies the logical demand for the complete description” (p. 17). Just as a visual object always only presents one side to the eye, there is always the part occulted and beckoning to be observed but never can all parts be seen at once. The movement of vision involves the calling to the mind of what was just seen and the anticipation of what will be seen in order for the possibility of an identification of an object. It is this continuous seduction of the subject of vision by the object which is definitive of human thought. And here Lyotard says something quite remarkable in terms of the question of seduction: “But another question bothers me. Is it really another question? Thinking and suffering overlap” (p. 18). Here he has in mind writers, musicians, and artists as all engaging in modes of thought that derive from a form of bodily ascesis, from a denial of gratification, a self-disciplining, and a withdrawal from the world: “Maybe it’s just the mode according to which what doesn’t yet exist, a word, a phrase, a colour, will emerge. So that the suffering of thinking is the suffering of time” (p. 19).

The type of cognitive operation that he believes is being simulated by the selecting and tabulating of data, the “overweening and identificatory” processes of computing machines can never reproduce such an emergence of thought. Bereft as it is of the dimension of, in Baudrillard’s terms, seduction: “The body and the mind have to be free of burdens for grace to touch us. That doesn’t happen without suffering. An enjoyment of what we possessed is now lost... to sum up, will your thinking – your representing machines suffer?” (p. 19).

Lyotard posits that ultimately it is sexual difference, not as a question of anatomy, but rather as an incompleteness in thought itself that will have to be simulated for thinking to occur after the human body as we know it is gone.

So the intelligence your preparing to survive the solar explosion will have to carry that force within it on its interstellar voyage. Your thinking machines will have to be nourished on the irredeemable differend of gender. (p. 22)

It is a politics of seduction, one which retreats from the pornographic insistence of total knowledge and perfect visibility, therefore, that both Baudrillard and Lyotard propose as the refuge from the obscenity of the world. If the kids of *Euphoria* represent the “pornographic age”, Rue, as the all-seeing eye and benevolent presence of the show, paradoxically stands in for the empty position of the post-porn subject; a disposition towards disappearance, negativity, seduction as opposed to production. Her love affair with trans girl Jules certainly could be read as an undermining of instrumental masculinity and the logic of phallic domination so prevalent with the other characters sex lives.

“I was born three days after 9/11,” Rue tells us as flashbacks appear of planes crashing into the twin towers on a TV screen in the hospital delivery room. “I know it all seems sad, but guess what? I didn’t build this system, nor did I fuck it up.” This statement of nihilistic resignation perhaps serves to underline the liberal tone of the show. On the one hand, *Euphoria* shows us the full glamorous spectrum of debauchery, decadence, and drug abuse of Gen Z with apparently no censorious tone, but on the other hand, serves as perfect fodder for conservative viewers to condemn the delinquency of the progressives. In the end, we must ask whether Rue’s retreat into depression and addiction has any redemptive value as a politics of seduction?

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