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*The Obscene as Postmodern value*

**SUMMARY DOCTORAL THESIS**

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## SUMMARY DOCTORAL THESIS

**KEYWORDS:** pornography, obscene, eroticism, sexuality, taboo, transgression, postmodernism, consumer culture, mass culture, ‘simulacrum’, ‘simulation’ objectification, ‘sexual solipsism’, scopophilia, value.

The importance that our research brings in philosophy, is that it deals with the problem of pornography both philosophically and in terms of interdisciplinary fields as: history, anthropology, ethics, gender studies and the arts, where we focused on both on literature and the visual arts: film and photography. Our contribution, in this paper, to this issue consists in approaching by the means of philosophical arguments a sensitive issue for both, the cultural space and society. Completing these philosophical arguments with the aforementioned interdisciplinary assumptions leads us to a methodology which is based on the argumentative and critical method to interpret postmodern culture in which pornography, according to the baudrillardian perspective becomes ubiquitous in the consumer culture of postmodernism. The novelty that we bring to this field consists in approaching pornography in terms of obscenity and demonstrating that the obscene – through pornography – is a postmodern value that gives guise through the technologization phenomenon of consumption and deconstruction of the human body by objectifying it. The objective of our research is the argument that in postmodern culture parameters, the obscene, through pornography, has a symbolic position of a subversive value in relation to Western cultural tradition. The axiological approach we exercised in the conduct of our research is based on Baudrillard’s concept of ‘exchange value’ and ‘symbolic value’, designed around the concept of ‘object’ and around the concept of ‘production’. The latter ones, we transposed in the moral and ethical theories of utilitarianism and classical liberalism. We continued our demonstration by making use of arguments belonging to gender studies and Kantian morality, based on which we have sought to demonstrate that pornography leads to the objectification of the human body on the one hand, and on the other hand the elevation of objects to the rank of subjects, aspects that we encounter in the artistic sphere and in the media. We chose this alternative methodological argumentation and philosophical criticism to better highlight the fact that postmodernism is, in the first instance, a discharge of modern moral values, and then a ‘recycling’ of these values according to the Baudrillardian argumentative position, where, for the proper functioning of the mechanism, the Foucauldian panoptic objective

is not missing. The necessity of the latter finds its logic in the value determinism that the consumer culture projects parodically on people and objects. A mechanism which requires the handling of the human consciousness in the form of invisible panoptic surveillance of the ludic, generated by the transfusion of gadgets, kitsch and cultural simulacrum in the form of publicity, advertising and performance.

The paper is divided into five chapters of which: one, three and four, are broader. These have in their structure subchapters designed to analyze each individual issue. Chapters two and five are somewhat smaller and have a more concise structure, containing an argumentative and structural summary of the covered subjects.

The first chapter of this study is an introduction to the issue of the obscene and pornography. The approach methods we used to define the two concepts of our research – obscene and pornography are anthropological, linguistic and historical. The purpose of this chapter is to show that the transition from eroticism to pornography led to the formation of a culture of obscene, aspect achieved based on the philosophical arguments belonging to Plato, Herbert Marcuse, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, etc. Sexuality was the starting point in this process. Psychoanalytic, philosophy and history studies, shows that behind these changes lays primarily the civilizing process of human nature. Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille and Herbert Marcuse said about this process that it was done through organized labor, which is responsible for our separation from animality, or according to Hegelian philosophy, through work for the Other. The inhibition of our basic instincts (the life instinct-Eros and the death instinct-Thanatos) through the ‘sexual taboo’ and the ‘death taboo’ under the reign of the ‘reality principle’, led to the birth of ‘transgression’. Transgression governed by the ‘pleasure principle’, given by Eroticism. The obscene language is brought into culture by the power of sexual discourse, which was analyzed by Michel Foucault. Along with a civilizing and repressive culture a free and obscene culture forms under the sign of pornography – prostitution represents a key element in this process. The ideological changes of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Modern and Postmodern era also changed were the obscene field of pornography. Used as a means of transgression of sexual taboos imposed by the Church, during the Renaissance, it gets to be a political weapon during Enlightenment and Modernity, and later we encounter it as a new erotic value and cultural dispute in postmodernism. However, postmodernism was the one

which, starting with the liberation policies of sexuality and sexual discourse, introduced pornography and obscenity to the culture medium of the individual. Culture, which is otherwise governed by the principle of consumption and production, is falling within the scope of the 'exchange value' and the 'symbolic value'. Considering these parameters, pornography constitutes the central element by what has been generated under the sign of 'pornotopia'. Pornotopia represents to the postmodern culture the perverse manner that the pornographic device puts into practice through the panoptic surveillance put upon the consumer. In order to argue these issues we will firstly use Foucault's theory of panopticism, to which we will attribute the concept of 'pornotopia' supported by Steven Marcus, so that, in the end, we can use Mill's liberal and utilitarian theory to debate the critical position of Ronald Dworkin concerning the censorship policies directed towards pornography. In this context we will use Mill's theory of the 'principle of evil' which contravenes Isaiah Berlin's 'negative liberties' on which pornography bases itself on its fight against censorship.

The objective of the second chapter is to highlight the functioning mechanism of postmodern culture concerning the pornographic field and if the human dignity is violated. In this direction we use Jean Baudrillard's postmodern theory according to which this postmodern culture is a mass culture, a culture that aims towards 'recycle culture' and results from the susceptibility of the individual towards the consumption phenomenon which we can find in Brian McNair's formula – 'porno-chic'. This aspect makes the mechanism of consumption and 'recycling' to constitute an implosion at the cultural level that is found in the form of a simulation and reversal of signs and traditional values model. Under these parameters, sexuality takes the form of a commodity, where the main stake is the objectification of the human body (especially the female one) and its submission to a disciplinary and continuous aestheticization process. This mechanism gives rise to 'sexual solipsism', that forces sexuality to slip towards pornography. The transition from sexuality to pornography is a consequence of the cultural-historical tradition where, according to feminist Rae Langton, the dominated-dominating power ratio between women and men, places the female gender under male domination. This equation, which actually Foucault mentions in the *History of Sexuality*, is assumed by the postmodern pornographic device, and finds its application in the consumer phenomenon, which we mentioned above. This aspect leads eventually to the establishment of a Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, in our case implemented to the customer (consumer)-pornography relationship.

We begin our argument with the theory of ‘sexual solipsism’, which we then apply to the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, from which it follows that pornography is in the master and the consumer is the slave. By presenting this new dialectic, we seek to bring arguments to emphasize that the perversity of such a Hegelian view of pornography, entails, in the postmodern culture, the creation of an armistice between the consumer and pornography. This armistice is ending when the dialectic (slave-master) disappears and the two sides come together and complement each other. This would be a viable solution that pornography, once it recognizes the consumer’s statute of a human being, could use to deconstruct the moral arguments that accuse it to be prejudicial to the human nature through by objectifying through the slavery of consumption.

In the third chapter of our study, the argumentative approach of our research is based on the feminist theories of gender studies, which we are addressing from the perspective of Foucault’s dominant-dominated philosophy and that of Kant’s categorical imperative philosophy of the – human being as a purpose and never as a means. We start by analyzing Foucault’s power concept of the dominating (male) – dominated (female) relation. This relation is in actuality the consequence of cultural-historic tradition, not of postmodernism. Postmodernism, through the means of pornography, contributes to this relation with a simulacrum, when the discussion goes towards homosexual pornography, where a double deconstruction process takes place, concerning the statute of the female gender in relations to the male phallic instance. From this point, our research is moving towards the theory of infringement of human freedoms and civil rights of the sexual minorities – the silencing argument and the argument of equality – that Catharine MacKinnon uses to reject the utilitarian principle submitted by Ronald Dworkin regarding the pornographic field. We meet these radical feminist arguments concerning the pornographic field in the theory of ‘sexual solipsism’ which states that by applying Kant’s categorical imperative the female gender is used as a ‘mean’, for sexual gratification of the male gender, and never as ‘purpose’. Our research continues with a critique of the radical feminist’s arguments. We accomplish this critique by using theories of liberal feminism and individual feminism. When analyzing the two feminist movements we will construct our argument by the means of the liberal theories of equal rights between genders. We argue these theories from the symbolic exchange of powers, between the female and male gender, perspective where, with the purpose of pleasure, power tends to take the shape of a ‘currency’ between the object-the woman, and the

subject-the man. The advantage of this symbolic exchange is that it dissolves Foucault's dominant-dominated relation, action that would lead to the simulation of power equality between women and men. This is actually applied by the postmodern culture under the form of 'pornotopia'. Once the female gender is liberated through pornography, we go back to criticize the consumption of the female body as an object or an esthetic fetish. The argument is build on the background of policies that focus to discipline, docile and aesthetise the human body, introduced by the postmodern culture under the influence technologisation, which led to its moral and material deconstruction as we can see in the case study, that focuses on the pin-up calendar realized by the Japanese radiology company Eizo. We run the applicability of this study in parallel with the aesthetic criticism of the pin-up phenomenon which, according to of our point of view, is a prelude to the pornographic field in the sense of using the female gender as a aesthetic reference code or symbol in the arts.

Chapter four of our study is dedicated to the field of the arts. In the first section of this chapter, we will analyze the surrealist movement and its influences over the postmodern culture of the pornographic field. In the second section we analyze the role of the gaze and of censorship in pornography using the psychoanalytic theory of scopophilia, the anamorphic theory, and the impact of the Hays code and of the money shots, in cinematography. Argumentation and philosophical critique – by the means of Jean Baudrillard's concepts – are used to analyze postmodern culture and surrealist art. In the first part of our research we used the surreal theories that we later joined with the postmodern movement of pop art. In these parameters, pornography uses the ingredients offered by both movements creating a cultural heterogeneousness. From here on, we try to bring arguments that would sustain the hypothesis that surrealist accents exist in pornography. We base these hypothesis on Susan Sontag's concept of 'pornographic imagination' for which we find a practical application in the genre literature. According to Theodor Adorno, pornographic texts do not fall within the parameters of literature, because they are deprived of the basic structure of a literary text which is built on: beginning-middle-and-end. We deconstruct this argument by using of Sontag's and the intertextuality theories criticism. By applying the theory of intertextuality to the surreal field, we find an alternation and change of literary and extra-literary areas. As an example, we have Robbe-Grillet's work, *La Belle Captive*, which has as starting point the paintings of René Magritte. Further on, we are using Dominique Maingueneau' theory, which finds its applicability in the delimitation mechanism between the

“pornographic device” – referring to semiotic practices: etching, drawing, photography, film, magazines, etc. – and the pornographic text, reserved for representations of text-related verbal signs. From here, we conclude that there are erotic texts (or works) with pornographic sequences and pornographic texts with erotic sequences.

After such exposures we turn to the last chapter of our work, where we shall try to analyze the phenomenon and mechanism through which pornography has invaded our intimate space, hypothesis supported by the Baudrillardian argument concerning this aspect. The omnipresence of pornography is a consequence of the communication mediums, of technologization and of the elimination of intersubjectivity, on the background of the obscene. Ruwen Ogien’s vision on pornography determines us to identify in postmodern parameters, the transition which takes place between pornography and eroticism, transition leading to the assertion according to which today’s pornography becomes tomorrow’s eroticism. The slip takes place through the kitsch and gadgets the pornographic area uses to capture the consumer. As case studies, we have chosen as examples the sexual humanoid Roxxxi, as well as the 3D pornographic film *Sex and Zen 3D: Extreme Ecstasy*. With the two examples, we aimed to demonstrate the fact that these gadgets seek to somehow restore the lost report of humans with objects. Report based on ludic and on the attraction for the uselessness and the state of void it creates and which constituted the central item in postmodernism, in a value recycling system, where the obscene represents the stakes for simulating sexuality in a simulacrum of the senses.

The need for approaching this issue of the obscene and of pornography is represented by the exposure of a phenomenon, which is within the scope of incidence of the individual, and which makes the valorization of the obscene through pornography become the landmark for mass culture, in the negotiation between the traditional elitism and the postmodern simulacrum of cultural values. Within these parameters, pornography comes to dominate cultural spaces and environments, fact which also includes it within the artistic field. At this time, pornography is no longer behind the scene, *ob-skene*, it gets on the stage of the values of “cultural recycling”, from which it inverts the relationship between eroticism and pornography, through the obscene it inserts in the process of transgression of eroticism. The result is the degradation of erotic values and the transformation of eroticism in hybrid pornography and of pornography in a satirical and parodist eroticism. In the future, such an approach of pornography could lead to an even closer

analysis, given that the areas, phenomena, activities, concepts, judgments and dialectics pornography in its manifestation touches triggers the involvement of extensive arguments and criticisms arising from a philosophical analysis.

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