

# The Obscene Device: Pornographies Between Cinema, Art, and Virtual Reality

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Since its most recent technological re-emergence (2014-15) (Evans 2018), virtual reality (VR) has brought forth new possibilities for the porn industry. Most pornographic products conceived for VR to date are based on a form of virtual augmentation of the POV (point-of-view) subgenre: even though they limit themselves to 180° or 360° videos rather than actual interactive environments, they integrate the strong agency of the first person shot with the visceral capacities of the body transfer process (Slater et al. 2010).

The success of virtual forms of pornography raises urgent issues regarding the aesthetic consequences that such images have on visibility and bodily self-perception: on the one hand, VR redefines the composition qualities and directing strategies of the pornographic image; on the other, it constructs new horizons of social and political agency. VR porn may therefore constitute complex biocultural dynamics concerning the politics of bodies and the gendered perceptions of the self. Following a somatechnical (Sullivan and Murray 2014) perspective— stressing the co-constitution between bodies, technologies, and images —VR pornography seems to “excite” with particular effectiveness the primary potentialities and problematics of environmental images (Pinotti 2021), especially in relation to gendered proprioception. Starting from the specific

characteristics of contemporary pornographic virtual reality, this doctoral thesis aims to outline, through a historical, genealogical, and media archaeological approach, the main connotations of immersion in the erotic image and its influence on the processes of construction and expression of gender identity.

The first chapter of this thesis addresses three “obscenity devices”— following a double meaning as material hardware and, from a Foucauldian perspective (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988) as technologies of the self: the pornographic stereoscope, the adult movie theatre, and the erotic video art installation. These are three forms of visual devices that, in light of their multisensory nature, outline different degrees of immersion in an erotically active environment and, at the same time, challenge the nature of the framed image. In the first case, echoing Jonathan Crary’s (1990) perspective, the stereoscope is understood as the earliest “obscene” device, in the sense that it primarily has the capacity to redefine the scenic qualities of Albertian perspective vision in favor of the proximity and apparent immediacy of the three-dimensional image. Considering the haptic nature of the stereographic image, this device was particularly suitable for the then emerging Victorian erotic proto-industry, expressing an unprecedented spectatorial form of the

pornographic image with strong implications for the perceptual system of its observers. The second device, the cinema theatre, takes into account the phenomenology of pornographic film with particular reference to the so-called “golden age” (Paasonen and Saarenmaa 2007) of American pornography, and invokes the social and erotic forms produced by the interaction between the bodies of the audience present in the theatre, the ones portrayed in the scenes, and the symbolic body of the film. The third device considers the “anarchic space” (Barba 2021) of installation art, with particular attention to video art and its ability to configure precise perceptual atmospheres (Bruno 2022). The focus in this part of the thesis is on those artistic practices that, between the 1970s and 1990s, centered their research on sexuality and pornography, defining a specific form of erotic atmosphere through the deconstruction of the cinematic image, its expansion in the form of the installation and its interweaving with the bodies and identities portrayed in the image.

The second chapter of the thesis — *The Virtual Pornographic* — examines the dawn of cyber-culture, a relevant moment for the technological emergence of virtual reality as we know it today. This historical period, located in the decades between the 1980s and the early 2000s, was immediately associated with political and artistic drives of a feminist and queer nature (Seu 2023). This chapter analyses the main utopian perspectives of early cyberspace, understood as an environment that is theoretically predisposed to overcoming critical categories such as sexuality, gender and race. The chapter will then come to the delineation of contemporary online pornography and its interactions with the latest technologies of the virtual.

The third chapter — *Identity Performance and Technological Systems* — concludes the proposed theoretical path by discussing the agency of the virtual pornographic image in relation to the construction and expression of gender identity. VR pornography could

potentially constitute an unprecedented stage for those playful practices of sexual and bodily experimentation that are at the basis of the constitution of the physical, gendered and sexual self and, simultaneously, organize strategies for resisting the normative “contortion” of non-conforming subjects. In the context of queer phenomenology, Sara Ahmed (2006) has introduced the concept of the “contorted body” to describe those cultural corporealities beyond the “straight line”, forced into the compulsory enclosures of the heterosexual matrix. Following the postural metaphor introduced by Ahmed, this part of the thesis focuses on queering strategies through which the fruition of VR pornography can make our headset a “disorientation device” (Ahmed 2006, 171) that allows forms of genital experimentation along with a new form of virtual gendered performativity. Referring back to the long-standing debate on the possible agency of porn to shape and influence sexualities and politics, this thesis finally questions whether VR technologies as well as the characteristics of environmental images define new perspectives for contemporary pornographies: are they part of a broader system of control and capitalization of bodies and identities or rather media forms with a strong expressive power and the capacity to queer the gendered proprioception?

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## Notes

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