

## Round table about pornography, aesthetics, ethics and feminisms

**SOFIA:** I propose we start by thinking about the meaning of the adjective *pornographic*, since it is often used to negatively qualify a work of visual art. When I define something as *pornographic*, what do I mean? I often apply this word to documentary and war photography.

**SORAYA:** Would you like to explain how?

**SOFIA:** To me, it is naturally related to excess. And aggression, too. It is ugly and unnecessary. When there is an excess in the more visible layer of the image, its opacity is lost. It offends me, mostly at an aesthetical and ethical level.

**MARTA:** I also use the word *pornography* when looking at documentary photography, as you do. However, I don't consider that the adjective *pornographic*, or *obscene*, concerns the bodily, physical, and sexual matters; instead, I use it to refer to a certain approach in the depiction of pain. I think the increasing exploitation of pain we observe in photojournalism is *pornographic*, in a detractive sense, because it is disrespectful and excessive. It seems that the only purpose is a kind of masturbatory act, made not for pleasure but for the sake of pain, to feel more pain. This becomes more pornographic and curious when photojournalism explores sacred images. Why do we still need to bring the Virgin Mary and the Pietà to speak about current events? Photojournalism exploits religious images in a very pornographic, obscene, therefore profane way, contrasting their original meaning.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** In the North American context, mostly in the 70's, the development of feminist demonstrations and theoretical production brought about a need for the definition of the word *pornography*; and I think the definition of the word, and its boundaries, is an important and useful, but very problematic, step, especially when regarding art. Are art and pornography irredeemably distinguished and dichotomously exclusive, or can they co-exist? Just as a reference, the distinction between art and pornography was established in the 70's, based on the idea that the latter's purpose was not an aesthetic experience. In other words, art's formal and conceptual concerns are very different from pornography's concerns, which primarily aims at sexual arousal. When, in the 70's, the feminist movement began to talk about pornography, the definition of the word was immediately linked to a certain notion of what is femininity more than feminine. So, that radical movement needed to pronounce against pornography, or against what existed as pornography at that time. This is obviously important in an historical sense, but in the meanwhile things got more complicated, because nowadays we have a different market logic: besides the capitalist logic of the so-called *pornographic industry*, we have a certain democratization of the media, and of the access to that industry, so people can now shoot films at home and publish them on the Internet. Although pornography's subjacent logic still is a capitalist, patriarchal, oppressive one, some different forms of expression, with different formal or aesthetics values, are gaining their share in the marketplace. For example, the so-called *feminist pornography*, created by women for women, has concerns that, at a conceptual and formal level, are very distinct from mainstream pornography. Gloria Steinem<sup>i</sup> said something that I still consider important nowadays, that is: *Whatever the gender of the participants, all pornography including male-male gay pornography is an imitation of the male-female, conqueror-victim paradigm, and almost all of it portrays or implies enslaved women and master.* I partially agree with those feminists' idea that the commodification of the feminine body is linked to a logic...

**SOFIA:** That is the capitalist logic...

**JOANA TOMÉ:** Exactly... it is the capitalist logic of slave and master and what we see is that the feminine is associated to the slave and the masculine to the master. Even in lesbian pornography (even clearer when it is done by men), what we see is a reproduction of the same logic. Although 2 women are on stage, the paradigm of dominion is always present, in its various derivations: humiliation, pain...

**SOFIA:** Each time we say the word *pornography*, we immediately think about the industry, forgetting other forms of art. That video that we're supposed to masturbate to tends to be separated from illustration, or painting, and its participation in the art market is deterred, for reasons that are mostly dependent on formal qualities and moral prejudices. Why are certain works of art, depicting images of penetration or stimulation, excluded from artistic spaces? Why is a certain way of depicting penetration still considered aesthetically harmful?

**SORAYA:** I was listening to you and, in fact, I don't use that word a lot; maybe there are several works of art that are excluded even if they are not specifically pornographic. Are you referring to a kind of art that is not pornographic, in the common sense, but is quickly considered as such and, for that reason, censored?

**MARTA:** In fact, the history of art is full of such images. Do you know Caravaggio's painting *St. John the Baptist*<sup>ii</sup>? It depicts a 12-year-old boy, naked, smiling at the spectator, with a ram on his side, which is a satanic symbol. And that smile... In the middle of the so-called classic painting, we can find lots of examples.

**SORAYA:** Of course, such as the representations of hell...

**MARTA:** The *Garden of Earthly Delights*<sup>iii</sup> is a delirium of allegedly perverted things. Or Courbet's *The Origin of the World*.<sup>iv</sup> Some time ago I read on a newspaper that, in a certain country, a book with a reproduction of Courbet's painting on the cover was banned, because it was thought to be pornographic. So, what's the difference for those who don't have an artistic education?

**JOANA TOMÉ:** In the context of classic art maybe it's easier to understand. There are lots of authors that managed to clearly distinguish what is pornography and what is art, evoking formal characteristics and the idea of an aesthetical fruition, but I think that distinction is now more difficult to make considering that in modern art and in contemporary art, those frontiers are more and more diluted.

**MATILDE:** Pornographic images appeared before classic painting. For example, the Greeks and the Romans made pornographic representations that, seen after some centuries, are considered art, even if they didn't aim at that.

**SORAYA:** We are dealing with past matters with a contemporary thinking.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** I find it very interesting that you see pornography in such a negative, *ugly*, way, because I think that is a consequence of our contemporary morality being liberal in term of sexuality - everything is accepted, because we've seen it all...

**MATILDE:** Making generalizations about pornography is like talking about comedy, or terror. There are several types of pornography, with a lot of different usages. Pornography varies, depending on its makers and consumers, so each observer can have a different experience of the same object. In fact, the same object is perceived as pornographic on different levels, depending on the observer's individuality. When I hear the word *pornography*, in my head different ideas emerge, that aren't associated to ugliness. It's not a monolith. Even through time... pornography from the beginning of the XX century is very different, and amusing.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** And perhaps we don't consider it as *pornography* because of the chronological gap.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** These days we can see a lot of things that we consider erotic and beautiful, but at the time of their creation where completely pornographic. Maybe my present attitude towards pornography is influenced by the fact that we trivialize human body and sex so much that very few things still shock us. Now, it's difficult to define what is "too much", what is excessive. And I think it is a derivation of some present attitudes, like all has been made relative and has lost its power to arouse us.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** It is the trivialization of violence and oppression...

**SOFIA:** I think it's related to a certain opacity good art must have.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** I entirely agree.

**SOFIA:** An ambiguity, a tension, a dynamic, an opacity... I mean, if the function of the object is immediately fulfilled, I can't really define that object as art, can I?

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** I use pornography as a professional tool. People come to see me for sexual related problems. For example, some of them are sex addicts and have troubles feeling satisfied when having intercourse, because they can't stop consuming pornography. This causes great suffering: people can't go to work, or they are always late, because they need to masturbate before leaving their house; they can't go out at night because they only think – *no, I haven't seen enough*. This is where I play my role: how can I use pornography as a positive tool, as something that is exciting? To me, as a woman, things I find exciting are also beautiful. There should be a sexually explicitness that is also beautiful. Sometimes, inviting a partner to consume pornography is a way of finding things that can pleasure both. But when someone has consumed too much mainstream pornography, it is very difficult, because he/she is already spiralling and watching too violent images.

**SOFIA:** Outside the field of photography and video there is a different understanding of what constitutes an excessive representation of reality. Erotica seems like a safe place between art that isn't pornography and pornography that can't be art; erotica occupies that place in between because it has an opacity. It might also derive from specific media...

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** Or from the actors. Certain directors in the pornographic industry decide to cut dialogues because they are not exually effective; they seem artificial. A good porno actor or actress can be bad at impersonating. Sometimes, the scripts are better than the final product, because directors think it is almost shameful to focus on the plot, so it is better to focus on sex.

**SORAYA:** It's interesting, because erotic literature... I don't know if *pornographic literature* is a commonly used definition...

**MARTA:** Well, you never say *pornographic literature*.

**MATILDE:** Pornographic literature exists. There is a kind of literature that describes sex explicitly. (*laughs*)

**MARTA:** Pornographic literature exists, but it is never defined with that terminology. Because it recalls other meanings...

**JOANA TOMÉ:** Marquis de Sade is an example of pornographic writing, although without images.

**SOFIA:** To me, from an aesthetic point of view, that is never pornographic, because the reader constructs its own image, without specific visual suggestions. Nothing is objectifying in that kind of literature.

**MATILDE:** Well, I disagree. Because most criticisms to *pornographic literature* point out its excessive descriptions. Like the game *Twister* - he puts his hand here, then he puts his finger there, etc. – so, excessiveness is a generic way to attack it, because art is supposed to open space for imagination, although I think that formula is questionable, because it is a highly structured notion of what art should be, and it's a historically located notion. What does that openness to imagination mean?

**MARTA:** In my opinion, in these new manifestations of pornography for women, or feminist pornography, the subjacent idea is that women don't need to see as much detail as men do, or there must be more foreplay... there is always this idea that a woman doesn't need to see very explicit things, because she has a powerful imagination.

**MATILDE:** In fact, the website *pornhub* recently introduced a new category *for women*, and I think it's really gentle, because women can't desire violent sex, isn't it? It's super cute. (*laughs*)

**SORAYA:** Do you think that is the reason? The aim is turning things softer?

**MARTA:** I think it is related with the way feminine thought is commonly understood. I found an article online claiming that when men watch pornography, some bodily functions linked to survival instincts are stimulated, while women didn't react the same way. It's an attempt to demonstrate, almost scientifically, that perception, therefore desire, is gender-separated. I think there are some distinctions, but they could never be scientifically proved.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** I don't think it is so linear, but there can be a deep distinction that derives from the empathy you can feel towards someone that is in a relationship based on subjection, submission and oppression. As in mainstream pornography, women are undoubtedly presented as submissive, it is difficult for a woman to feel empathy towards the protagonist of that movie, who is a man. Laura Mulvey<sup>4</sup>, in a seminal text on feminism and film theory, stated that, in classic Hollywood movies, there are three gazes at stake: the first one is the director's gaze, which moves the camera; the second is the leading actor's gaze, which conducts the narrative, and leads the spectator; the third one is the spectator's gaze. And her absolutely revolutionary statement is that those three gazes are essentially masculine. That statement is still true in the present days, because the film industry is still mainly ruled by men. Then, as the second gaze is usually of a male character, leading the narrative, the spectator is inclined to identify with those two masculine gazes, therefore assuming a masculine point of view. I think this statement can be applied to pornography because in order to feel pleasure with mainstream pornography, you must identify with the character who is leading the action, which is a male character, who is inflicting pain and oppression on a woman (I'm thinking about a typical scene), and to us, women, it would be very difficult to empathize with such a relationship. Maybe, a women-oriented pornography should stage a different logic...

**MATILDE:** This isn't applicable to male pornography, for example.

**SOFIA:** But the male gaze is so ingrained in women that when I watch feminine pornography I can still notice its presence. And there are female authors questioning if there is a way out. Why are we still reproducing the male narrative, the male gaze? How long will it take us? I think that feminist pornography is yet to become its own entity. It's lesbian, it's produced by women, without a single man on the team, and still, it reproduces the male gaze. It doesn't have to be violent, penetration doesn't have to be violent...

**JOANA TOMÉ:** It doesn't even need penetration. To be revolutionary... *(laughs)*

**SOFIA:** But even in lesbian pornography, you frequently see prosthesis. And even without penetration, the penis seems to be present...

**SORAYA:** It's the same dynamic of power.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** Aren't we applying the patriarchal logic to the passive vs. active dynamics? It is ingrained in our culture that being passive is bad, or worse than being active, but a passive person can be very active. Penetration, or domination, aren't necessarily bad things. Coming back to the issue that interests me the most, we should be allowed to feel aroused when watching those things. I always remember a patient I had, who was very interesting and taught me a lot. It wasn't a problematic issue in his life, but he really enjoyed having sex with transsexual prostitutes, and then when he had a heterosexual relationship, with a woman, he used to say: *I'd love to have the same kind of sex I have with transsexuals in a relationship, but women aren't able to have sex like trans, even if we're having the same penetration; women are passive in bed and I want an active woman.* I learned a lot and I started to question myself: as a woman, am I able to get out of this passive role, even when I accept being dominated?

**JOANA TOMÉ:** I completely agree. However, the connection of passivity with oppression is quite common, and that's where the problem lies. Because I firmly believe pornography is a dialogue about power relations, gender relations, gender roles, masculinity, femininity, and culture and society are permeable to this dialogue. Thus, we see a reproduction of those patterns.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** But that is bad pornography...

**MATILDE:** We should be careful, because we cannot establish a direct link between someone who watches fucked-up pornography and someone who perpetrates fucked-up actions in real life. For example, there is no direct consequence of watching rape fantasies. There is no study that states that people consuming rape fantasies will perpetrate rapes in real life.

**SOFIA:** But the consumer of rape fantasy wants to be violated or to become the violator?

**MATILDE:** Consumers don't necessarily identify with characters. I'm more informed about the manga context. In manga pornography and in cartoons women produce a lot of pornography with rape fantasies and so do men. And there are very widespread descriptions. There are men consuming pornography showing men raping children, and saying they identify with the child. Are they serious? But in fact... we can't deduce that *I am a man, I'm watching a rape fantasy, so I'm identifying with this rapist, thereafter I'm going to go out and rape a child.*

**JOANA TOMÉ:** My problem is just that pornography normalized several practices.

**MATILDE:** But the normalization didn't just happen in pornography. Women's oppression in popular culture is maybe more pernicious, and entirely accepted. When I turn on the television, I'm bombed with stereotypes. No matter which Hollywood movie, or soap opera you watch... you're bombed with stereotypes and you rarely discuss how obscene those depictions are.

**SOFIA:** I was reading a text written by a porno actress, Amarna Milner,<sup>vi</sup> and at some point she places this question: why is cultural appropriation in a sex scene more offensive than in other contexts? You can observe the same cultural appropriation in all American

movies that present Arabs; it's evident and it's obscene, however you consume war movies and you don't say nothing about the exploitation of Arab culture. However, if you see a woman with a hijab in a porno video, you'd think it's outrageous. I think sex, somehow, it's linked to sacred matters, and things are rapidly profaned, and people are quickly offended.

**SORAYA:** You are talking about pornography on the verge of transgression... unless everything that stays in between that transgressive pornography and the more common, traditional pornography, could not be included in the field of pornography. But it doesn't have to be extreme to be pornographic, or to be aesthetically uninteresting, does it?

**SOFIA:** I can't separate contemporary pornography from the idea of capitalizing on sex, even when it applies to other arts. The representation of a sex scene, for someone else's fruition, is like a profanation of something sacred. If sex is all over the internet and everybody consumes it, why would we be distressed by a penetration scene in a museum? Why it is uncomfortable?

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** The decency, the intimacy... because sex is an intimate, not a public, matter...

**MARTA:** There are cultural factors related to religious influences, and there are also cultural factors related to the country where we live in. In Portugal, the discourse on sex is completely different from Italy. Maybe in Italy some topics are easier to discuss, but the need to classify obscenity in art persists. In Christian or catholic influenced societies, the discourse on sex is generally a discourse on power. It's like a baseline... even atheists have catholic influences. The virgin got pregnant without penetration, so, that is the beginning of the discourse on power, a power ruled by absence or presence of sex.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** I'm sorry Joana, but I can't let this go. When you were talking about that patient you had, you were saying that we should be allowed to be free to feel aroused by anything, and in fact, as a principle, I agree with that. I think the problem is separating the subjective experience from its material, social, political and cultural consequences. That detachment is a very neoliberal notion. There is a very politically diluted kind of feminism, and there is also a mainstream one, that is almost a post-feminism. Some authors are using this word, *post-feminism*, as if talking about feminism was not necessary anymore. In this neoliberal logic, the notion of choice is understood from a capitalist and individualist point of view. What does that mean? That it's disconnected from any consequence or tangible material, contextual, temporal condition – *the choice is mine, so I feel empowered and that's why I'm a feminist, because it is my choice*. However, that choice might depend on a class privilege, or a race privilege, maybe on a gender privilege, and I think those issues cannot be thought out of their context. So, when we say that *I have the right to feel pleasure with whatever I want...* it's OK, but we should always consider what the material consequences of my *feeling pleasure* are.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** I don't understand your idea of consequence. Coming back to what Matilde said, we can't look at pornography as a cause-effect phenomenon, like *I consume this pornography so I'm doing this or that, I'm consequently having this behaviour*. I think pornography can feed fantasy. For example, I read accounts of people who have paedophile fantasies and to whom pornography is essential, to prevent deviating behaviours. I'm not determining what should and should not be; I'm saying that fantasy doesn't have to be a behaviour and I don't see evidences of the consequences of consuming pornography.

**SOFIA:** Pornographic actresses that describe themselves as feminists follow an individualist logic and I don't conceive feminism as an individualist movement. I really don't. Their main argument revolves around the topic of empowerment, like: *it's my choice, I like sex, I want sex to be my job*. Now, if you want to articulate your thoughts on that topic, you can't let go of the impact that topic has on the history of feminist movements. Feminism is a collective and the question of choice is important. Who can determine if I am informed enough, if I've been given the opportunities to take an informed decision about my body and my options? When is a young boy or girl able to choose?

**JOANA TOMÉ:** Exactly. And what are the material conditioning that allowed me to make that choice?

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** We can talk about pornography between adults, who can consent.

**SOFIA:** But that consent... There are people who weren't given enough tools to develop a critical thinking on that, they weren't given the opportunity to emancipate from that position of submission...

**JOANA TOMÉ:** Nor the economic opportunity...

**MATILDE:** We were talking about choice and that made me think that in the materials I work on the paedophilia topic appears frequently, because 90% of Japanese animation movies and cartoons characters are underage people, so that topic is inevitable.

**SOFIA:** How do you deal with it?

**MATILDE:** I consider myself to be a feminist, and sometimes having to deal with that sort of materials causes ethical problems. I don't have answers for that, but I keep trying to understand. In fact, there is a huge tendency to think that censoring explicit sexual materials is against freedom of expression. There's a text by Abigail Bray<sup>vii</sup> describing the long academic tradition that defends child pornography, especially between western male scholars, since Foucault; at some point, she deconstructs his claim with this statement: *I link pro-sex anticensorship arguments to broader post-Enlightenment narratives about censorship that idealize the liberatory force of pornography by equating the pleasures of sexual transgression with the expansion of democratic freedom*. We have a long tradition coming from the Enlightenment, that mostly rests on the way Marquis de Sade's texts are taken as strongholds of choice and freedom of expression, when in the end, what is at stake in Marquis de Sade's texts, is a neoliberal and capitalist rhetoric, that implies the exploitation of the weaker and power inequality.

**MARTA:** It's remarkable that the surname *Casanova* turned into an adjective.

**MATILDE:** Pro-sex arguments state that the more pornographic, the larger our freedom of expression, and I think that is wrong. Even when we talk about virtual pornography, as in animation movies or cartoons, we can't make the mistake of saying *well, this is virtual, it isn't hurting anybody, so it's OK*. I'm completely in favour of virtual pornography, but I think that is not a good argument. We all know that our media production has an enormous influence on the way we think. This *pro-sex* discourse is very easy to deconstruct.

**SOFIA:** It's very limited. There is also the argument about the reproduction of the very same moral paradigm, arguing that a woman who opposes pornography is doing exactly the same sort of moral oppression that she wants to criticize and destroy.

**MATILDE:** Feminists generally oppose the exploitation of the poor and the weak, and that is a current practice in mainstream pornography.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** But I can't see sex industry and sex work solely as a matter of women exploitation. Because I think there are lots of women that choose (and I think they should have the right to choose) that work. I don't think I have the right to judge if it is right or wrong, if that choice is conditioned by the place where she comes from... I think that is too moralist.

**MATILDE:** Exploitation is not really the only matter, but it is a big one, whether we like it or not.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** My problem with that logic is that a personal choice can't justify the exploitation of many other women. So, even if it makes me feel good, because it is my choice, it doesn't mean other women, in that very same place, aren't being oppressed. We cannot make universal statements because some women choose to be in movies or sex workers. Even if they feel good and empowered, we shouldn't ignore all the others that, being in the same position, aren't empowered and are oppressed. Maybe feminism should be more concerned with women that are living in more fragile conditions. Feminism should worry about these women and not about those who have class and gender privileges.

**MARTA:** I think the topic of choice has already changed. Maybe in the last 10 years, since the boom of social networks and smartphones, since everybody has access to an image capturing tool. Nowadays, I have many doubts on the topic of choice, because I see more and more women that clearly don't want to be sex workers or porno actresses, but spread their image framed in a traditionally pornographic way. For example, nowadays girls take a lot of pictures turning their backs to the camera, spiking their butts, and that is a typical frame of pornography, the frame that precedes penetration, the object, and they voluntarily choose that frame, probably without thinking on consequences. They are replicating acceptable paradigms that they understand as a sign of their freedom of expression.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** It worries me that girls are doing that without questioning themselves.

**MARTA:** And there is also a democratization of pornography, on websites like *pornhub* or *porntube*, where everyone can upload movies, and there are more and more occurrences of girls accepting to make a home movie (because it's easy and because it's a way to please), and finding those movies spread on the internet. The aesthetics have also changed with online pornography, because suddenly you have 1-minute-long videos. Those websites are changing pornography's aesthetics, for example by presenting videos showing a fixed frame of sexual organs in action. How can we define aesthetics in that case?

**MATILDE:** Maybe the idea of an ethical pornography is a contradiction, that's why there are no answers; and that's why each attempt to make feminist pornography is doomed from the beginning, and boycotts itself. Because the basic feature of pornography is objectification, of anyone – it might be a woman, or a child, or a man, or an animal, it might be a plant (or whatever is pleasing the spectator). But I think that the human being has this dimension, maybe a bit unethical, of objectifying other people, other living creatures. Even in our food chain, we objectify animals, that's why we eat them. I don't know if it's possible to separate the human condition from the fact that we are horrible beings, so maybe that is where the fascination for pornography comes from, because pornography allows us to enter that sphere (also discussed by Bataille<sup>viii</sup>), the basal sphere, the more primary issues that weren't socially domesticated. Socialization is a part of the human being as important as the basal one, or even more important. But we have that abject, horrible, uncontrolled component, so maybe the things we condemn in pornography are at the same time those that fascinate us. That's why the idea of an ethical pornography might be contradictory.

**SORAYA:** In Bataille, the basis is important, it's something he describes not only as low, but also as being our feet, what settles us, that's why I can't see that completely negative side, once again.

**MATILDE:** It's not negative, we need it, it's somehow engrained in human beings.

**SORAYA:** But you said *horrible*... we are horrible, for sure... For example, you were saying that we objectify animals and that's why we eat them... I cannot identify in that relationship...

**MATILDE:** But I'm using the word *horror* in Bataille's sense; it's not nasty, as in the catholic meaning. It's the dimension of horror. Life and nature have a dimension of horror. The dichotomy between life and death, the organic and the inorganic... And regarding the animals: we mainly eat things that are objectified, meaning they are deprived from life.

**SORAYA:** But I also think there is a dimension that is inherent to life, and the way it is lived, to survival, and it concerns impulses. There is an intellectualization of that issue that adds a moral and ethical dimension that...

**MATILDE:** I'm not necessarily judging, in the sense that killing and eating an animal is a cruel thing. Animals kill each other all the time. But, in my perspective, that is part of a primordial horror of existence – the idea that you can perish - and I think the pornographic, in some way, gives us access to that, to the idea that we can perish.

**MARTA:** The little death...

**MATILDE:** There is a mixture of mortification and erotization in pornography.

**MATILDE:** And even abjection. But in a context that we know is one of reproduction, of life, of eroticism, of sensory pleasure. I think that's something that adds on to the fascination we feel towards the pornographic.

**MARTA:** And also disgust. Repulsiveness... at some point we feel a kind of nausea that I think has to do with repulsiveness.

**SOFIA:** I don't know Bataille very well, but at some point, I found something interesting in his writings, that is the idea of the accumulation of energy that needs to be released: man naturally releases it when he goes to war, if not he ends up releasing it in sex, with the same violent pattern. And I think in this case violence is strictly related to the excess of energy.

**MATILDE:** But the history of man is the history of war, of violence against himself, against other men, against nature...

**MARTA:** But when sex is compared to war, as an excess of energy, it is always understood from a masculine point of view. Men go to war. Moreover, in less informed discourses, man professedly needs sex, because he physically needs to leak out... it is absurd.

**SORAYA:** Coming back to the question of what can be included in art, and what is disturbing... I feel that we are adopting that gaze, the male gaze. And the consequence of adopting that gaze is justifying the exclusion of certain works of art.

**MATILDE:** In which way are we adopting it?

**SORAYA:** This way of describing things as being *horrible*, or *objectified*, without assuming that they are simply part of our impulses. Basically, there is an underground force, where all pornography issues can be admitted, and maybe also food and war issues; but they cannot be looked from an elevated point of view, we cannot look down and say: *That is a bad thing!* Adopting an elevated point of view explains why we consider certain things disturbing. Does this make sense?

**MATILDE:** Indeed, but... I believe Freud was among the firsts to talk about death drive<sup>x</sup> – of *Eros* and *Thanatos* as central shafts of human production and psyche – and that is not bad, it is the way it is. There is no masculinization or feminization. It is a transversal issue, and I don't want to plunge back into human condition axioms. All human cultures cope with life and death issues, in some way. It's a fundamental thing that structures our existence. Then cultures appropriate and transform those things, but the *bad* connotation is not included in the first place. Coming back to the question of why we cannot look at an image of penetration exhibited in a museum... I think it is a highly cultural question, of course, but maybe it also concerns the way society started to place the child at the core of its practices. That's something that began in the end of the XVIII century, went throughout the XIX, and matured in the XX century, with the consumeristic culture. I'm talking about the child becoming the centre of familiar and social structures.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** And starting to occupy the public sphere too.

**MATILDE:** Exactly. Before the XVIII century there wasn't any notion of the social place of the child. I am relating this to the *cute studies*<sup>x</sup>. We started looking at children as beings in need of protection, with an interior purity that needs to be protected from external influences. That's why we have parental control on browsers, in order to avoid that children find pornographic images, etc. The same applies to extreme violence, because we want to preserve a certain aura of purity.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** But contemporary cartoons for children show a complete lack of liability. It is ironic how our society protects itself to such a point and then allows mainstream cartoons to show girls in hot pants and knee-high boots.

**MATILDE:** I must add that violence and sexualisation have been present in cartoons since forever. Betty Boop appeared in the 20's.

**MARTA:** Betty Boop is a dominator, she dominates men with her sexuality.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** But she is still gazed at in a fetishist way.

**SORAYA:** Could girls' identification with those characters be regarded as something *more* than just submission? Because boys feeling intimidated also mean that women are holding power. Or are we saying that power issues are *naturally* male issues, and a woman ascending to a position of power...?

**MATILDE:** Is pursuing power by the means of her sexuality.

**SOFIA:** I feel that somehow, we are going backwards.

**MARTA:** We are going backwards, but always forwards, in the sense that if the way a woman is perceived and represented is changing, male perception on her is changing too. We shouldn't forget that. I will always remember a conversation I had with a student that sat at my table and spontaneously commented that he felt scared looking at his female classmates that came to school "almost naked". He said: *I'm intimidated because when I try to approach them, they treat me like I was a pervert. But why would I be a pervert if they are semi-naked? What should I do?* So, masculinity is also changing.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** It's complicated. I think woman's sexuality could be an empowerment issue. It then becomes a problem when that quality is exploited from a commodified and capitalized point of view. And objectification, even self-objectification, follows the same logic.

**SORAYA:** And how can we exit that structure?

**JOANA TOMÉ:** I think it is important to inscribe feminine sexuality and desire, it is essential. Now, the parameters of that inscription must be taken into consideration. If we reproduce the same models, it might not be fruitful.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** I'm also frightened by that repressive side, i.e., by the idea that we should repress sexuality, as if social control should always be sexual control, it is scary.

**SORAYA:** Once more we come back to classic art... I don't have any idea how it was exhibited. For example, in a church, there is the altar, the virgin, but [the representations of] hell should also be nearby, so it was there for contemplation.

**MARTA:** In churches you don't find many representations of hell. Not inside. The scenery of what is shown in churches also changed. The representation of hell is scarcely presented in churches. It was more present in museums and books. At the time, there were many private chapels, associated to family houses. For example, one of Caravaggio's Maecenas had a chapel in Rome where the paintings, such as *St. John the Baptist*, were exposed. So, it was a more private dynamic. Nowadays, the logic of what is exposed in churches is more centralized. In other words, when there were private churches, cathedrals, basilicas, and different kinds of places of worship, the boundaries of sacred painting were more expanded, and they had an educational function, that's why hell was represented. I will say something a bit out of context, but related to Dante's *Inferno*: at some point he met a couple, Piero e Francesca, that are in hell because they were reading a book together. He was her brother-in-law, but they were close friends, as her husband didn't pay her much attention; They were reading a book together that had suggestive stories, and went to hell because they finally yielded to temptation.

**SORAYA:** The *Garden of Earthly Delights*. I remember, when I was a child my parents had a poster at home, and I spent lots of time looking at those details and they pleased me, aesthetically, maybe even in a way that was connected to a more erotic drive.

**SOFIA:** But the *Garden of Earthly Delights* has nothing to do with a picture of a penetration.

**MARTA:** The *Garden of Earthly Delights* shows more than that. It shows various penetrations.

**SOFIA:** But you've never heard of anyone questioning whether it's art. However, in the case of a picture like that of Man Ray's, that we reproduce here, this doesn't normally circulate. When confronted with those so called *pornographic images*, I think each one should try and find what your body... how it reacts, how long does the discomfort last, when does it gives way to other things?

**SORAYA:** But why should the discomfort be expelled? What is that discomfort related to?

**MATILDE:** Discomfort is part of the pornographic.

**MARTA:** Like intimacy.

**SORAYA:** And is part of the experience.

**SOFIA:** I think there are different levels of discomfort. If you are blocked by discomfort in such a deep moral way, there isn't space for anything else. It will just be what it is. Most of us don't feel like that. In pornography, there is an aim to be rapidly achieved, if your body reacts to those impulses, but it should also give way to an aesthetic experience.

**MARTA:** I agree, but I also think that is part of a moral general understanding about aesthetic and art induced pleasure. There's this idea that those kinds of pleasures don't involve the body. In my opinion, there isn't a manifestation of the intellect that doesn't involve the body. It isn't possible.

**SORAYA:** For sure, it is like an aesthetic elevation matter, as if *pure* contemplation existed, and that *pureness* is a denial of other experiences – odder, more uncomfortable, physical – that could be equally valid.

**MARTA:** It's like the Virgin, without penetration. (*laughs*)

**SOFIA:** The question is if you are blocked by that, by the discomfort or the shock...

**MATILDE:** And what should that *being blocked* imply? Refraining from looking at something?

**MARTA:** I think it's about beliefs. To me every aesthetical experience has a reflex on my body. 2 years ago, I went to Rome, and I went to a church to see a Caravaggio painting I'm fond of. The painting is shown in a kind of *peepshow* format, you must put a coin to turn the light on for 5 minutes, then it turns off; and I was there with a bunch of coins, feeling a very physical sensation. And after a while I just stayed behind other people that had more coins. But it is a physical pleasure, I can feel bodily reactions when looking at that painting.

**SOFIA:** All this research on pornography obliged me to get in touch with my limits regarding what is ugly or beautiful. I'm so imbued in male gaze rejection that I'm led to also reject a certain kind of representation of penetration, even if I'm representing it.

**MATILDE:** But at the same time, you are putting that in the traditional context of artistic experience. The question of beauty...

**MARTA:** That is connected to vision.

**SORAYA:** And to the *pure*, uncontaminated by basic things.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** I think I understand what you're saying: the first contact with the work of art prevents you from having a deeper or more continuous contact based on formal, conceptual or aesthetical analysis; so, you reject that work of art in the first place, and you stop considering it as such.

**SOPIA:** Well... If we are talking about good and bad works of art, that happens. If there is nothing more...

**SORAYA:** Well, but it doesn't have to be a representation of a sexual action. If it's bad, it loses interest. It might be a landscape.

**SOPIA:** I compare pornography to political art, I think they are very close. Yes, we are back to classical art values, because their problem – of political or pornographic imagery – might have to do with their finality. If there isn't an aesthetical, formal value... if we all find the thing represented and not a way of representing it...

**MATILDE:** But there is no representation without a way of representing it. For example, in the *henta*<sup>xi</sup> question: *Hentai* is always criticized and blamed because its way of representing pornography is engrained in *manga's* visual language, and that is why it is dramatic in his highly codified way of representation, and it is used to denigrate *henta's* value. It is almost over-represented, if possible.

**SOPIA:** I think we could never talk about illustration, or drawing or painting, in the same way we talk about photography...

**SORAYA:** It seems to me that the problem of photography, painting and illustration is being in a different dimension... in theatre and cinema, we are able to stay together and watch an "uncomfortable" work of art. There are many movies that, without being porno, have some erotic intensity, etc., and we are sitting there together watching. Indeed, we are all turned in the same direction, watching a screen, so there is a kind of isolation, but when we exit we can look at each other and say *I liked it, or I didn't*.

**SOPIA:** I don't have answers, but I think photography has a very specific problem. It's very close to reality, as the video. Without artifices, how do you take a picture of a sexual, explicit scene, that could be aesthetically...

**SORAYA:** Is it the problem being too graphic? Do you mean acceptable? Effective? Interesting?

**MATILDE:** Enjoyable?

**SOPIA:** I mean something I can contemplate besides what is represented. How can I look at it as a 'mancha' And I think it's even more difficult when we're dealing with the representation of a penis.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** The way we look at the penis is so stereotyped, isn't it? I have a feminist fanzine, *Your Mouth is a Guillotine*, and two years ago we made a book of colouring vulvas. After the introduction, where we explored woman's connection with her own body and sexuality, etc., we asked some friends, including Matilde, to draw vulvas to be coloured by readers. And the most frequent reaction was: *Ok. So, I know how to draw a penis, I always knew, but now that you asked me to draw a vulva, I understand I don't know how to draw vulvas*.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** There's a video where an artist, Sophia Wallace,<sup>xii</sup> explores the clitoris and its invisibility on female sexuality.

**SORAYA:** And that video starts exactly with that question: what's the appearance of the clitoris? Nobody knew. What I found pretty is that she ends up creating an image that is an icon. An icon of a penis is a present icon; and suddenly emerged the possibility of putting two icons side by side, a masculine and a feminine one. I find that interesting. She made a rodeo with a clitoris. Starting from its anatomical appearance, she made a rodeo "bull".

**MARTA:** It is another question, because there is no feminine icon. There isn't a defined one, like the masculine.

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** I had professional contacts with gynaecologist and there's a lot of ignorance. They don't talk about the clitoris, because while the penis has a necessary urologic function, urination, the clitoris has none, it is the only organ solely intended to give pleasure. I heard them say: *listen, I cure vaginas, vaginas! I don't care about the rest. That thing is there by accident, but doesn't get sick alone*. And it is a bit shocking.

**JOANA TOMÉ:** A friend of mine went to the gynaecologist, in a private hospital, and the doctor asked her if she had a partner and she responded she had a female partner. Then he got scared and asked her: *will I be taking your virginity?* He was a gynaecologist, and not an old man. People don't have any notion of women's anatomy. What is the hymen, how does it work, what does it do?

**JOANA ALMEIDA:** We didn't talk about pornography's potential as a mean of sexual education for adults. Men have a joke: *Well, nobody knows where the clitoris is...* They should be ashamed! If they have sex with women, they should be ashamed, because it is essential for our pleasure.

**MATILDE:** And nowadays we have a thing called Internet. *(laughs)*

**MARTA:** For example, the *Kamasutra*, in our culture, is commonly seen as a pornographic book, somehow forbidden, but I read it and in fact it's not a pornographic book. A very small part is dedicated to sex. It's a book about sexual education and behaviour, and has very important sections that could be a good basis for our sexual education, because it typifies men and women associating them to animals, and define the better and worst combinations - the elephant, the rabbit, the tiger - and there are animal associations that would never function, and specific sexual positions for each animal conjugation. For example, an elephant man with a tiger woman, could feel more pleasure with a specific range of sexual positions. It is very interesting, because we only think about its forbidden images, but the content is not really "forbidden". It has many educational parts.

**SOPIA:** At the time I started watching pornography, for me it had an educational function. But I think that in men the negative effects of watching too much pornography are evident. Most of them pay little attentions to our needs, they don't care for the place of the other...

**MARTA:** There is a subjacent idea that they need sex more than us. They really need it, and we do it for pleasure... *(laughs)*

\* See notes on page 72