

Scenes of the Obscene

The Non-Representable in Art and
Visual Culture, Middle Ages to Today

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Visual Culture, Middle Ages to Today

Edited by Kassandra Nakas and Jessica Ullrich

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Preface

Kassandra Nakas, Jessica Ullrich

“The ‘aesthetic’ is a slippery term, with a complicated history in Western philosophy.”¹ This recent claim by Frances Mascia-Lees, expressed in regards to the anthropological underpinnings of aesthetic discourse since its very beginnings in the 18th century, may rightly, and even more so, be made when it comes to the “other of the aesthetic”², the Obscene. The “obscure origin”³ of the word already hints at the fact that at all times, the Obscene has been an unstable and challenged category in Western culture. It remains open to dispute whether the word derived from the Latin “ob+caenum”, i.e. relating to dirt, mud and filth, or, harking back further to Greek origin, from “ob+scaena” (or “ob+skene”), thus indicating the space “against”, or behind, the scene, or stage.⁴ Accordingly, while the general meaning of “obscene” is defined by words like offensive, indecent or disgusting,⁵ the latter etymological thread clearly connects the idea of the Obscene with the realm of representation, for which the (theater) stage is the most obvious embodiment.

The book at hand presents a collection of essays that cast a light on some “Scenes of the Obscene” from the Middle Ages to today, thus taking into account the malleable nature of socio-cultural assumptions and theoretical reflections of obscenity. The contributions focus on historically distinct artistic acts and social sites where established cultural categories and legal norms are violated, with artists and publishers deliberately testing moral taboos and offending the public taste. By examining those, often historical, moments of representing of the “Non-Representable”, or the Obscene, the authors address the question of which, and how, “indecent, offensive or disgusting” issues are negotiated in the respective context, and ask how society and its guardians of public morals and aesthetic sensibility reacted to these transgressions.

The structure of the book follows, in a sense, the ‘representational’ interpretation of the Obscene, with its three sections reflecting the spheres of life (and death) that were meant to be kept out of the public view in classical Greek theater: coprophilic / urophilic acts, sexual acts and any scenes of murder. “Section 1: *Bodies of Transgression*” thus presents three contributions that ponder the defecating, abject or wounded body, the transgressive body that exposes waste and bodily fluids. With obscene imagery of the Middle Ages becoming an increasingly considered topic of art historical study, Anja Grebe’s contribution, “Inside Out. Scatology in Medieval Art”, focuses on the (still neglected) role and function of scatological motifs in medieval culture. She shows how medieval scatology was linked to social norms and hierarchy, thus becoming an artistic strategy and productive power in its own right: “Just as feces are used as fertilizer in agriculture, artists took them as a fecund starting point for artistic creation by overtly displaying obscene material.” A similarly ‘subversive’ character has long been attributed to the manifold depictions of corporeal violence in the art of William Hogarth. Bernd Krysmanski, an acknowledged expert on the work of the 18th century British artist, thinks about common interpretations of Hogarth’s art as didactic “Warnings of Morality”, raising the question if these ambivalent, often sensational everyday scenes of horror and brutal entertainment in the streets of London should not rather been seen as “Downright Twisted Pleasure”. The Abject as an aspect of the Obscene is discussed in Patricia Bass’ essay, where she explores the (covert) role of “The Post-edible in Art”, i.e. of digested or decomposed food especially in the controversial 1993 exhibition at the Whitney Museum, *Abject Art*. Tracing the migration of the term from French theory (Kristeva, Bataille) to American art critical discourse, Bass argues that the latter’s “priorities of embodiment and symbolism” ran counter to the concept’s transgressive potential, annulling its cultural impact.

“Section 2: *Visual Pleasures and Sexual Acts*” brings together essays that reflect pornographic content in early modern Europe, German *fin de siècle* and international contemporary visual culture. Thomas Martin outlines different concepts of the “silent sin” – bestiality – in Western European culture from Antiquity to today, pointing out that the apparently ‘realistic’ depictions of human-animal sexual intercourse

in Enlightenment book illustrations, which replaced the mythologically embellished interpretations of such tabooed subjects, were nonetheless and primarily interpretations of elitist male phantasies, informed by a tellingly clear gender dichotomy. Rococo illustrations of human sexuality offered role models for highbrow pornography in German *fin de siècle*, as Cassandra Nakas demonstrates with some art historically marginalized examples. Rather than offending public taste, these illustrations and publications aimed at “taming” their delicate subjects through aesthetic refinement, thus countering emerging female emancipation movements and expanding photographic pornography alike. Coming back to the topic of human-animal sexual relationships, Massimo Perinelli pleads, from a queer and animal studies perspective, for a “queering” of bestiality, in the sense of not only presenting the Non-representable (in animal porn), but of transgressing even this taboo by thinking the Un-thinkable: “the potentiality of a polymorphous desire that slips the intrinsic logic of animal porn, and yet is its very foundation”.

The final “Section III: *Violence and Death*” meditates upon depictions, and enactments, of (self-)violating and killing acts. Barbara Baert develops a thorough account of the iconography of the severed head in the motif of the *Johannesschüssel*, linking it to an equally exhaustive etymological reading of the very word “obscene”. She reads the culturally powerful phenomenon of the *Johannesschüssel* as an intricate embodiment of the concept of obscenity, averting and attracting the beholder at the same time. In her essay “Cocking the Trigger”, Karen Gonzalez Rice sheds light on a rarely discussed aspect of 1970s performance art: the sexually explicit, self-destructive and highly controversial work by artists Wolfgang Stoerchle, John Duncan, and Paul McCarthy. As Gonzalez Rice argues, the latter’s strategies of displacement and distance helped him establishing a commercial career, whereas the other two artists’ radical exhibition of male sexuality, aggression, and vulnerability resulted in their artistic isolation, infamy and art historical oblivion. The excessive visibility, and thus “reality”, of animal death in contemporary art is at the center of Jessica Ullrich’s contribution. She discusses the artistic and rhetoric strategies of displaying the killing of animals in the work of Hermann Nitsch, Katarzyna Kozyra and Kim Jones, questioning the quasi-ethical, sometimes hypocritical artistic approach by arguing that “a

fragile inevitability of socio-cultural circumstances is transferred into the allegedly just as obligatory logic of an artwork”.

The diachronic focus on three central aspects of obscenity – abjection, sexuality and violence/death – shall help to trace the historical and semantic shifts in conceptions of the Obscene. As the essays in this book demonstrate, artists have always been challenging moral assumptions and value judgments; their socio-ethical interests and aesthetic approaches, however, must be conceived of as just as versatile and shifting as moral concepts are evolving through the ages. Together, they shape the cultural physiognomy of their respective time and society. In a time of full-blown visibility, when the Un-representable (and Un-thinkable) is only a mouse click away, their study can provide some food for thought; after all, it is the eye which functions, beyond the pleasures of the Visual, as a primary means of knowledge.

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