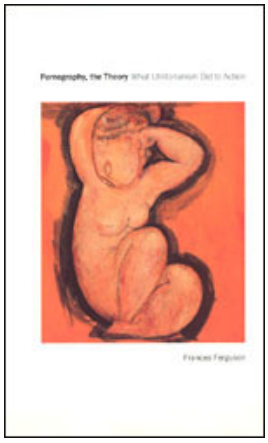

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Pornography without Sex?

Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action. Frances Ferguson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xvii +181 pp.

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<1> *Pornography: the Theory* is a difficult, original, consistently rewarding book. As its title implies, it takes as one point of departure Robin Morgan's classic formulation, "pornography the theory, rape the practice," but anyone expecting a version of the conventional pro/con debate will be not so much disappointed as astonished. While Ferguson does survey studies addressing a possible link between pornography and sexual violence against women, her overall aim is very different: to explore the links between pornography and utilitarianism. Resurrected in the eighteenth century, pornography took the imprint of Bentham's philosophy in its deployment of actions, bodies, and attributions of value, absorbing and re-presenting, in figurative form, the utilitarian structures that have come to saturate modern life.

<2> Ferguson associates Bentham not so much with omnipotent Big Brother surveillance as with the creation of task-specific contexts in which individuals compete publicly against each other, displaying their skill for judgment and reward. The spelling bee rather than the Panopticon is the operative example. Repeatedly qualifying Foucault's discipline and punish interpretation, she sees instead an impulse to value individuals according to visible performances evaluated by consistent criteria – that is, to create hierarchies based on ability rather than birth or wealth. Seen in this way, utilitarian structures are democratic, replacing unearned privilege with objective evaluation. Ideally, Bentham imagined, society can diversify these structures so that everyone can find a spelling-bee-like context in which to excel. In place of metaphysics – virtue, beliefs, even character, which becomes suspect as the imagined projection of an invisible interior – utilitarianism makes action the crucial focus of social judgment.

<3> Pornography, Ferguson argues, is one instance of utilitarianism: her book might accurately be titled "Utilitarianism the theory, pornography the practice." Like more familiar Benthamite configurations, pornography provides "an overarching microworld within which everyone may be evaluated hierarchically and in which there is no appeal" (27). Characters compete for dominance, status, and allure by engaging in sex, just as students vie for college admission by taking standardized tests. Further, in making sexual behavior subject to evaluation, pornographic novels participate in "the development of the objectification of sex – and modern life" (28). It is not surprising, says Ferguson, that the novel became the pornographic vehicle of choice: as a "genre of social evaluation," it developed narrative structures that, like utilitarian ones, "produce the sense of outcomes" by which to judge characters (30, 31).

<4> Even this brief summary should demonstrate how far Ferguson travels from standard arguments. Although visibility is a key term, the familiar erotic gazes are absent, along with analyses of gendered forms of power. At times it seems almost incidental that the content of pornography is sex – and indeed, Ferguson insists that pornography shares its key features with other, irreproachable social structures. The utterly counterintuitive yet persuasive analogy between spelling bees and pornography suggests not only the boldness of her claims but what I take to be her tacit desire to undo the exceptionalism of sex, to dethrone it from its position as a uniquely powerful, *sui generis* zone of human experience. The bedroom, the schoolroom, and the workplace share a close family resemblance. Ferguson does not focus her analysis on the explicitness or brutality of the novels' sexual acts. Rather, she is concerned with the novels as self-contained systems that treat sex as an act to be evaluated and that distribute their characters' fates according to their satisfaction or disappointment, success or failure. While the novels she discusses have all run afoul of the law, this seems to be less a defining feature than a helpful heuristic device for selecting examples.

<5> *Pornography, the Theory* opens with an introduction laying out the connections between utilitarianism and pornography and proceeds to an assessment of Catharine MacKinnon's arguments against pornography. From there it considers five novels: Sade's *Justine* and *Eugénie*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and Brent Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. Although they are treated in chronological order, the argument is not exactly historical in the sense of tracking the evolution of a trend, though the novels are often tied to an aspect of historical context – tort law in *Justine*, the rise of the French Republic in *Eugénie*, the hyperactive consumer culture of the late 1980s in *American Psycho*. The book's structure is prismatic rather than developmental, each chapter highlighting a crucial aspect of the utilitarian paradigm. The most consistent thread is pornography's commitment to action rather than intention, to what can be seen publicly and evaluated rather than the invisible, interior feelings and motivations of individuals, with other dimensions of the argument stepping forward or receding according to the particular work of each text. At times this movement can be dislocating, leaving the reader grasping for a through line (I must confess to being lost at the end of the Lawrence chapter), but the richness of ideas more than compensates. The book resists easy assimilation because its argument is abstract and original, providing few points of reference that might orient the reader in this new terrain. Uncluttered by jargon and often enlivened by wonderfully clear, everyday analogies – Ferguson compares ultilitarianism's proliferating contexts to the Olympics, which regularly adds new sports so that new players and skills can be recognized – the book provides genuine intellectual pleasure.

<6> Ferguson's treatment of MacKinnon is careful and evenhanded, sifting through studies and claims to arrive at a limited statement of pornography's demonstrable harm, but it is the least provocative part of the book. While the other chapters are intended to provide a geneaology of contemporary critiques of pornography, this chapter is not closely integrated into the interpretations of the novels except through the general theme of objectification. The book really begins with the chapters on Sade, father of modern pornography, who appears as an enthusiastic Benthamite. In *Justine*'s picaresque adventures, which enact what Ferguson calls a "geographical relativism," Sade stages a series of disconnected contexts in which Justine is repeatedly judged (61). Relentlessly brushing aside her intentions to focus on acts, the novel invalidates her protestations of innocence with coerced debaucheries and crimes she inadvertently commits against others. There is no ultimate justice that would recognize Justine's inner purity, just the hierarchy implied by sadomasochism, in which only outcomes matter – what Ferguson calls the "consequentialism" of modern society (72). Similarly, *Eugénie* insists that domination is inherent in sexual pleasure, justifying incest by repudiating intergenerational obligation and sacrifice. For Sade, replacing the metaphysics of morality with acts and outcomes opens new possibilities for seizing power through sex.

<7> This intricate, sometimes slippery analysis is followed by a brilliant chapter on *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert shares Sade's vision of a world in which inner selves are irrelevant compared to public acknowledgment, though he is far less sanguine about the prospects of finding happiness under such conditions. In a pithy phrase, Ferguson describes Emma's central fantasy, her desire to rise above the mundane and be recognized as extraordinary: "no human creation ought to go without a market, a reception that will give it back to itself as good, as validated" (111). This is why adultery is essential to her fantasy: unlike the shapeless daily-ness of marriage, affairs are defined by a series of orgasms, outcomes that can be measured against each other. Constantly assessing her erotic satisfaction, Emma is constantly disappointed, impelled to search for a new partner, a new context in which her experience might finally live up to what Ferguson calls "the happiness standard" (117). It is easy to imagine Emma in the culture of reality television, jumping from show to show in the hopes of finding one whose particular criteria will certify her value.

<8> In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Ferguson sees the history of utilitarian writ small. In Clifford, we see an anachronistic belief in the power of birth to confer value, so that what aristocrats do – or don't do, or can't do – is immaterial (hence Clifford imagines having "a child of my own" in spite of his impotence, since he believes that his status will automatically erase the child's biological origins). But Clifford's class-based power is trumped the sexual relationship between Constance and Mellors, which unfolds in a series of discrete acts like Emma's orgasms. With little interest in the question of whether Lawrence's depictions of sex are sexist, Ferguson focuses instead the liberatory possibilities that he, like Sade, sees in sexual pleasure, with its capacity to level entrenched forms of power and identity.

<9> Ferguson ends with a chapter on Brent Ellis's *American Psycho*, a bleak descendent of *Madame Bovary* in which the objectification of action, which can only take on value through its

public recognition, extends to identity itself. Interiority and its metaphysical attributes – intention, desire, belief – is no longer merely irrelevant but ceases to exist. People become extensions of brand names, action and evaluation devolve into random violence that claims to weed out losers. *American Psycho* is the end of the line, the ultimate dystopic destination of utilitarianism. Originally intended to provide tightly-bound local arenas for rule-governed competition, it has diffused itself to every corner of experience. While the nihilism of *American Psycho* is not exactly news, Ferguson's analysis of its specific dimensions, including its debt to the literary history she has traced, grant it a new complexity and importance.

<10> Readers seeking ammunition for the pornography debate should look elsewhere, for *Pornography the Theory* is not really concerned with the effects of reading about graphic or violent sex, or with the ethics of sexual relations. Although the odd-man-out chapter on MacKinnon gestures toward feminist criticism and public policy, Ferguson is really writing intellectual history, examining a tradition of political philosophy rather than a sexual discourse. Advancing a theory of persons and actions, pornography emerges as a "representational strategy" that seeks to articulate pervasive conditions of modern life (151).