This is the published version:

Pont, Antonia 2013, A manifesto for obscenity, In/Stead, no. 4, Summer.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30059926

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2013, Double Dialogues
A Manifesto for Obscenity

Dr Antonia Pont

Deakin University

Ribbon | Cleavage | Cradle | Darling | Cartwheeling | Octofurcation

Ribbon
I don't know if I can offer you hard sex
but I see our meeting
like a long strong ribbon
dark and stretched
that goes on and on
not holding us tight but
undoing us
until the you and the I
are no longer there
to be undone.

Cleavage
Why is the fat that feeds us
when amassed in fabric
and forced high, perk and dry
in a thing called cleavage
going to draw my eye—
I, who know nothing
of these anatomical wilds
these topoi of sleep and gag and reeling.
To fold a body over onto itself
to bind it like a book
stitched at its spine—
if I slide unwittingly from
describing-words to nouns
if I call it something
without finding a rhyme
for mammary, rack-of-lamb, for lubricated slip-n-slide.
A crease at the hip is also fine, beneath buttocks, and in the
gather where
a nice girl wedges a clutch purse
men and lesbians and everyone else
may gaze, curdle and digress
regretting pump-expressed
regretting pump-expressed
bottle-fed,
one-night-formula times.
I wonder how its done
this polyester squish-igami.
It bespeaks tremendous structural whizz
and heaving,
bespoke
breathless-
ness.

Cradle
for JL (Lacan)

I will rock you in the cradle of my thighs—
and you will not sleep and it
will not be motherly.

Darling
your milky darling cock
such tender lolly—
my body rolling snowly
drawn all sugar glossy
—the ruby meal
we’ll take to seed
to flagrant wheeling

you’ll bead and peal
all ebony-queasy
and hyper-bletted
with skyward bends
Baroquely teeming—
licked blank with weight
all torsos razed
—our botanicals fitting
as lids yo-yo
and ribs and legs
morpho-genitaled
run glucose.

Cartwheeling
Fuck me exquisitely
till the roof of my mouth aches
from trilling and baying, till
my thighs reach more widely
than oceans sliding
off the shivery, slick edges
of their tectonic plates.

Fuck me till death retreats
(not our own death – this hardly matters)
but the deaths of others—
citrous, spongy, leaving barely any grid
to steel against
(hands lying silvered
as if smoke in a dish,
a shape that swells to fill a mouth
with its bulbous and
atrocious flower.)

Hollowed we are,
as if run aground
in a forest after fire—
nothing must be said
—all colour uncoloured
from turning thick
on itself.

But between my lips,
your voice slips like a pelt.
A getting-warmer
that doesn’t singe
and grittier than
raw honey’s onions.
sets organs cartwheeling.

Fuck me quietly and sure
so that listening to blood,
our whimpers tinkling,
we’ll mimic its exemplary
spectrums
of temperature
its pealing choruses,
and cacophonous floods
salt nips turned to buds
— briefest brilliance insisting.

**Octofurcation**

As what species
could you love me best,
hunt my pleasure
most sweet-precisely
— our want provoking
little ladder-blips,
pirouettes in the chains like full-moon mathematics?

As a smooth brown bear
lumbering near
carting heavy legs
through the funk
of the leaf-rot?
I’d curl my back
to your hot, plush belly,
breathe your fur,
and clasp your ribspan—
your heart
a far-monster,
getting nearer
and faster;
your voice
a building weather
in my willing ear.

Or— need turns feline
and you enter as cat
from the sodden garden
glittering darkly,
making dogged beeline
for my trailing legs,
turning bedroom-eyes
all snakeish upon me,

lazy — quite — and quite decided
to thrust your triangular
and perfect head
into person-hands

and person-hips,
while my fingers probe
into shoulder bones
finely mobile
under liquid pelt,
kneading that narrow
and vulnerable place
till you buckle
and flip,
and with vision a slit
we board our plateau
of sustained invitation.

Or—
you are forest, trees—
want erupting
in umpteen bursts
of precocious leaves
— little gasps
of howling colour
of howling colour
storming me
you, a rippling cloak
of carnival eyes
on my matt
and mottled nudity—
faces flurrying,
quilted, wanton,
swarming my face,
in quick, block swatches
coming in squalls
buffering surface,
swaddling my waist
all feathery pungent—
then calming to cushion,
become coy, sickle bed
of grit-smitten tumbling.
You, my whisper-city
of orange and red—
your manyness flicking me
to brightness illicit.

But—if I were
to let want even more
and wetly further,
unpicking those edges
of sly politesse,
I'd be found, soundless,
on a combed sea floor
with you on, around
and monstrously in me—
ghastly head with waveless gaze
trained on my closed
and flitting eyes,
your eight keen limbs
sleuthing my sensitive,
disc-sucker-pocked
with reach to drown me:
one tentacle thick
beneath my nape,
a pulsing yoke with
its tip in my lips
urging my tongue
to mute imitation;
another, a question mark
fast at my breast—
tail shrewdly verifying
ruby punctuations.
And slipping from statement
to swelling obscenities
(those syrupy lozenges
neither spelt nor said)
you auspiciously splice
and divide my pleasure—
between surface, envelope,
and muscular inside.
You network the folds,
displace every shell,
and, artfully deploying
my lush supine
and your invertebrate-canny,
deftly unspine me.

A Manifesto for the Obscene – An exegetical reflection

The initial impulse for assembling this cycle of poems came from ruminating on two terms, commonly
deemed synonymous, and often both negatively inflected: the obscene and the vulgar. My experiment
involved questioning their interchangeability, and testing whether they might instead be placed into
productive opposition. I sensed that, constellated in this way, they could work together as a lens to
bring out of solution certain quite distinct and nuanced, but often unarticulated, registers of encounter,
practice or atmosphere. Rather than working on either markily predictable side of the so-called
‘obscenely, explicitly, pornographically vulgar’ and the ‘erotic, loving, intimately sexual’ binary, I
suspected that there were atmospheres and aesthetics at play in obscenity that did not come to bear on what I would choose to associate with the vulgar. By mobilising the terms in this way, I sought to generate for my own writing and sexual practice a kind of sensitive ‘device’ within thinking, whereby I could refine both my curiosity and discernment with regard to particular inflections of desire and its

expression. In doing this, I am cognisant that my approach to the inflection of these terms is an artifice, and requires clarification about the nature of the line differentiating them.

The obscene, to my mind, is aptly suited to the timbre of a certain delirium – one operating in encounters (imagined or otherwise) between desiring bodies, and which involves a recognisable and nuanced state, one which can be, to some degree, cordoned off from other quotidian modes of functioning. The term ‘obscene,’ as I would to frame it, arguably offers a tonality that evades the sentimentality of certain registers of the so-called erotic, and intimates the force appropriate to those modes of intensive or frenzied engagement – where the edges of clear categories become hazy and mercurial, where hyperbolic reigns and a taste for exaggeration defies tastefulness and becomes its own aesthetic imperative. The obscene is not nice (having a subtractive relationship to moral categories), but nor is it ‘unhealthy.’ Inssofar as it does not operate within a spectrum of compulsion (or perhaps ‘bare repetition’, to borrow from Deleuze), it tends, instead, as a regime of ‘practice,’ asymptotically towards the mode of repetition-for-itself (see generally Deleuze, 1968: 90ff). In this way, unlike deadening repetition, the obscene may often be marked by an uncompromising press towards the vital, but one indifferent to the register on which appear so-called individual identities. In this way, I contend, it can be seen to bear a necessary relation to the sacred – to those modes of rapture better suited to dialogue with gods and deities, be they of a Christian, Hindu, Shinto, classical or other persuasion. Following this line of thought, one could quip that the problem with pornography is not that it is obscene, but that it mostly isn’t obscene enough.

However, what would not be lacking in pornography as it typically circulates might be displays of the vulgar. The vulgar, furthermore, as I am inflecting it, lacks a commitment to any aesthetic principle. It involves, in fact, carelessness in relation to principle per se. The obscene, by contrast, entails delirium, but it is a delirium around which (whether in the frame, or not) there is a frame.

If in pedestrian usage, the two terms might function interchangeably, my point of contention is that the ability to discern between them speaks to a capacity for conceptual nuance that is productive and important. The vulgar, if you like, can furthermore be arguably distinguished from the obscene in its inability to render boundaries and identity fluid and certainly not humorous. The vulgar is stubbornly unfunny and far too ‘sordid’ (…were we to speculate on the antonym of absurd). The vulgar, you see, tramples edges, responds to ambiguity with violence and boorish indignation. The vulgar does not track the slippages of identity; rather it dashes through them only to re-establish inadvertently their fixity. The vulgar, then, is deeply conservative – challenging nothing, and demanding within its regime that binaries of all kinds adhere to simplicistic (and stolid) relations of dominance and submission. If the obscene is naughty and often risky, the vulgar is just mediocre and safe-as-houses.

In assembling this cycle, I sought out examples from my existing body of work that could potentially enter into conversation with the contrivance of my experimental framing. Apart from the final poem, all works pre-existed this arrangement, and were composed in response to desiring encounters with sexed-female and -male humans of various gender persuasions. Without setting out to exploit ambiguity, I noted that all except one poem in the cycle do not focalise the movements of wanting and enacting around markedly sexed tropes, with the exception, of course, of ‘Darling.’ In ‘Ribbon’ a nameless second person is interpellated, denied ‘hard’ (perhaps vulgar) sex, and offered something outside its regime. In ‘Cartwheeling,’ the voice of the poem entreats a lover both in the pursuit of pleasure for pleasure’s sake, but also as antidote to the mortality of others, ‘fucking’ serving here as a defiant action, imperative. The obscene is not nice (having a subtractive relationship to moral categories), but nor is it unhealthy. Insofar as it does not operate within a spectrum of compulsion (or perhaps ‘bare repetition’), it tend as a regime of ‘practice,’ asymptotically towards the mode of repetition-for-itself (see generally Deleuze, 1968: 90ff). In this way, unlike deadening repetition, the obscene may often be marked by an uncompromising press towards the vital, but one indifferent to the register on which appear so-called individual identities. In this way, I contend, it can be seen to bear a necessary relation to the sacred – to those modes of rapture better suited to dialogue with gods and deities, be they of a Christian, Hindu, Shinto, classical or other persuasion. Following this line of thought, one could quip that the problem with pornography is not that it is obscene, but that it mostly isn’t obscene enough.

In the erotic Japanese art of Shunga (which translates as ‘spring pictures’ – see Barrama, 2013) of which Hokusai’s work is an example, the hyperbolically explicit is often coupled with the humorously absurd. This role of humour in the vitality of the obscene (we must laugh at death since we cannot conquer it…) sits in stark contrast, I feel, to the cynical earnestness of the vulgar. Like good comedy, the obscene must be aware of (or at least must not self-consciously repress) its own absurdity and fragility, since in the absence of that, in any wish for earnest reception, it will fall inevitably into ridiculousness or cloying

http://www.doubledialogues.com/in_stead/in_stead_iss04/pont.html
sentiment (see, generally, von Kleist, 1810). If any formula could be fashioned, it might be that of ‘tender obscenity,’ since in the throes of desire – like reptiles with their mouths full – we are also at our most exposed and vulnerable. This perhaps is why the obscene may also be touching, whereas the vulgar rarely is.

In this way, ‘Cleavage,’ arguably the most irreverent poem of the cycle, ponders flippantly but candidly the deliciousness of breasts, offering a number of crude and vernacular synonyms for these sites of bewilderment, before sliding into a kind of bouncy delirium that slips from fashion to nourishment to origami. The latter are all in praise of the miracle of mammary tissue and its ability to morph from that which protects and feeds us to that which arouses and fascinates. Like the line that the poem takes as its title, deep nourishment and desire may sit inevitably and understandably close to one another.

The poem ‘Cradle’ bears a dedication to JL – which refers to Jacques Lacan (see further Evans, 1996: 181, s.v. sexual relationship). Enough said.

Difficulties abound in curating or creating content that might strive to resonate with the atmosphere of the obscene rather than the vulgar. Aware of the failure threatening any claim to a truly ‘obscene’ – according to my definition – (either in selection or bespoke composition), I contemplated one of the roles of pornography, as I saw it. If artefacts of an ‘explicit’ nature (to use an imprecise, but good enough term for now) need a justification, it may be their capacity to usher us through, or to provoke us into, transition from one mode of experience to another – from the functionality and realism of our socially acceptable selves into a space of swoon and unsanctioned delirium incomprehensible and often unpalatable to those not breathing its atmosphere. The difficulty with the pornographic poem (film, image, song, scene…) then is that it has to be evocative enough to untether and pry its reader/viewer/listener away from the habits of the quotidian, to create a kind of contagion in them that itself will compromise the strictures of the ‘proper’ under whose regime they function comfortably and predictably. At the same time, if it is too ‘explicit,’ and does not inhabit this somewhat liminal space of luring, it can fail to seduce the reader with its playful absurdity, hyperbole and promiscuous conceptual couplings, and, instead, repel them. More usual is that it may do both at once. In any case, pornography would, for me, ideally act as something that provokes practices of invention, that is, operate as an enabling catalyst, rather than serve a programmatic function, dictating the atmosphere of desire via catalogues of choreographed scenarios. It is in resistance to the latter that I would call on artists to create and contribute to the body of – as I have defined it here – ‘obscene’ works. As skilled artisans of innovation, artists in various fields could insist on and realize in works the potential for an expansion of the limits of desiring practice and its modes and aesthetics, as opposed to cynical contributions that only amplify and reinforce the inertias of tired, mediocre or vulgar imaginaries. If one fails in one’s efforts – and the risk is high – it’s still quite a lot of fun trying.

References


