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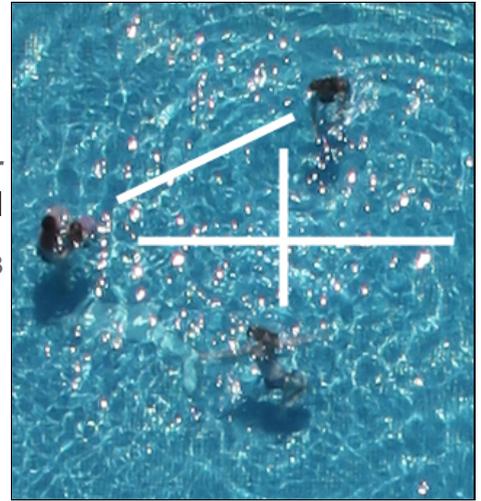
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A Manifesto for Obscenity

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
 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 slowly
 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—
 citreous, 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 grains

law nobody's games,
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

following colour
 storming me
 on every side—
 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
 buffeting surface,
 swaddling my waist
 all feathery pungent—
 then calming to cushion,
 become coy, fickle 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 murkily 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 hyperbole 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.' Insofar 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 'surd' (... 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 bashes 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 simplistic (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, ineffectual in essence, but nevertheless an aesthetic stance, at least temporarily, against resignation and the very unvital and far too definitive 'dissolution' implicit in death. The final poem, 'Octofurcation,' composed specifically for the purposes of this cycle, is an ekphrastic response – with bastard children

stanzas – to the renowned Hokusai 1814 wood-block print, 'Dream of the Fisherman's Wife.' My attempt here was to explore the potential within an obscene register not only for intra-human fluidities, but also for a delirium that transgresses the often fiercely protected delineations between human and so-called 'animal.' Furthermore, the fourth stanza moves into the realm of the more broadly organic – 'forest, trees' – exploring desire as dissipated swarm, its force dispersed through a community of life that is untotaled, that is, not gathered in a single body deemed discrete and entire, but still motivated. 'Darling,' arguably the most 'explicit' of the poems, narrating in its chains of fragmentary descriptors, the trajectory towards a certain climax, complicates the tropes of food, ripening, the olfactory (potentially risky since clichéd preoccupations for poetry) and a decentring of pleasure into more various parts of the human body. Orgasm, as intimated at the end, would seem to occur as a taste, and one flooding the 'ribs' and 'legs,' that in their function of foci of intensity are said to morph into 'genitalia.'

In the erotic Japanese art of Shunga (which translates as 'spring pictures' – see Baruma, 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

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.

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