

Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 [paperback reissue]. Pp. xvi+242; ISBN 9780521100953

Flip through Allison Pease's first book, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity*, and you will find images that rival those of soft-core adult magazines. Even the jacket cover illustration by Aubrey Beardsley could very well arouse the interest of the same readers; they would certainly be amply rewarded by reading this book. An Associate Professor at John Jay College who has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century British literature and aesthetic theory, Pease traces the dynamic relationship between aesthetics and pornography, leaving no topic of sexuality untouched as she spans eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century British culture. Orgasm, sodomy, flagellation, and bestiality – all once largely limited to the realm of the outer margins – are now highlighted. Pease follows their evolution, posing questions such as: At what point did artists begin to integrate “pornographic” elements into their work? What provoked this change? How did explicit representations of sexuality come to be viewed as art, and by whom? The five chapters of *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* pursue these questions in a chronological trajectory, marking the historical rapport between aesthetics and pornography.

Pease summarizes her overriding argument as follows: “Pornography is a limited genre but it has much to tell us about the modern period, during which it has simultaneously been transformed from a tool of political propaganda in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to a private sexual practice in the nineteenth and twentieth, and from a limited circulation amongst elite circles to ever more widely distributed forms of magazines, photographs, and Internet web sites. What this book will make clear is that, whether or not an individual has ever looked at or read a pornographic text, he or she has felt its impact in untold ways” (xv). Throughout, she uses Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to negotiate the overlap between aesthetic and corporeal experience in the modern period, justifying her choice of focal text on the grounds that “no text has dominated modern Western aesthetic thought as Kant's has” (20). She continues, “Kant's third *Critique* concretized many of the ideas British theories of taste in the tradition of Shaftesbury had sought to establish, and generated the modern conception of art and aesthetic experience that dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Because of the dominance of aesthetics in the tradition of Shaftesbury and Kant in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the emergence of explicit sexual representations in the twentieth century and the modernist critical embrace of sense in aesthetic apprehension must be seen as an important break with that tradition” (20).

Her stated objectives are met with candor, and the kinds of ambitions she sets forth are elaborated through reference to both philosophy and primary source examples. She devotes the first chapter to an overview of Kant's aesthetics, both in his writings and in the applications thereof during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She also examines the theories of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hegel as evidence that early aesthetic theory allows little (if any) space for the body. Pointing specifically to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as those philosophers who initiated both the accommodation and the validation of the “body as the basis for a positive social order” (29-30), she underscores Freud's counter to Kant's claims of a self-producing aesthetic, insisting instead that the aesthetic is a product of sexual feeling.

From the start, Pease defines the aesthetic and the pornographic as mutually exclusive, with the aesthetic creating “an experience of disembodiment, a movement away from sense toward rational or intellectual pleasure” (1) and the pornographic creating within the reader/viewer an acute awareness of the body. Drawing from a range of sources, she then develops a connection between pornography and modern aesthetics, a connection deemed “the aesthetics of obscenity.” Careful not to confuse pornography and the aesthetics of the obscene, she describes the former as seeking “sexual arousal as its main purpose” (34) while remaining outside dominant cultural order, whereas the latter is a mode of sexual representation that “seeks to be accepted into the cultural mainstream” (35). Arguing that because class hierarchies rested upon the aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century, pornography – “by exposing common experience in bodily sensation” (xii) – became a very real threat to the dominance of the high class; she cites eminent historian Lynn Hunt to emphasize this role of pornography in the democratizing movement of modern European culture (54). “One of nineteenth-century England’s most overlooked mass-cultural products, [pornography] played a significant role in bringing lower-class bodies to the written page and exposing them to the discursive control of writers of all classes” (71). She draws the reader’s attention to Swinburne as the transitional figure who both wrote in the aristocratic tradition and enjoyed the body, thereby blazing “the path for modernist critics and writers who relied on seeing aesthetic beauty as a purely formal quality in order to avoid the moral conundrums of ethically questionable and sensational subject matter” (70).

The discussion of theory and transitional figures leads to a climax in the middle chapter, complemented by a provocative array of period art and pornography. Despite the rather esoteric discussion of theory, this central chapter is anything but dry. Rather than just writing about theory, Pease finds a way to apply theory with reference to twenty-four images and numerous textual excerpts. Specifically, she develops the adaptation of pornographic tropes found in “higher art,” such as the works of Joyce and Beardsley. She contends that “Beardsley and Joyce successfully incorporated the explicitly sexual tropes and images of pornography into their works even while cultivating reputations for these works as high art precisely because of their formal mastery over the material introduced” (73). She also describes certain pornographic tropes (the voyeur, the corrupted reader, masturbation, sado-masochism, gender-bending and homoerotics, animals, and the exotic other) that appear in *Ulysses* and Beardsley’s drawings, and excerpts and examples of each artist’s works are artfully juxtaposed with period pornographic pictures. The similarities to the pornography and the expert control of form provoke Pease to name Joyce and Beardsley as “masters of the aesthetic of the obscene in that they were foremost masters of the distancing techniques of a formal aesthetic” (134). Each author de-emphasizes the body so that the act of representing becomes more important than what is represented; and because the forms employed conform to a gentlemanly code of aestheticism, the content is elevated above the pornographic. Pease writes of this approach and its effect: “The deployment of the pornographic in Beardsley and Joyce is almost always accompanied by an ironic distancing that focuses not on the sexual representation itself, but on how that representation is mediated and received. This technique serves to set the text itself apart from the representations of the pornographic in order to signal a critical distance from them by repeating and reproducing them in a sociologically incongruent context. This has the effect of rendering the pornographic representations incongruous or even absurd,

simply by making them perceptible as arbitrary conventions. Once recognized as a system of tropes, pornographic images lose their performative effect" (81).

Also incorporating pornographic tropes is D.H. Lawrence, whom Pease introduces in her penultimate chapter. Because Lawrence viewed the body as disinterested, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* challenges "aesthetics in the tradition of Shaftesbury and Kant, which relies on an objectification of the body and senses in order to realize them within, or transfer them to, the cognitive faculties" (136). Pease argues that in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence attempts "to correct the idealized sensation of pornographic discourse" (138), which he could accomplish only by appropriating pornographic forms: "The pornographic impulse has first to be destroyed in order for Lawrence to demonstrate what he wants to sanctify in sexuality and its literary representations. The irony is that he reinscribes literary sexuality with many of the same tropes of the pornography he wants to eschew" (157).

The final chapter describes the opinion and the response of modernist critics I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, and T.S. Eliot to mass culture and its practices. Pease explains that "the modernist criticism of Richards, Leavis, and Eliot advocated an aesthetic practice that made way for the representation of sensual bodies in art, in addition to a mode of aesthetic reception that included the sensual body as integral to forming aesthetic judgments. While making room for the body, modernist critics continue to promote the effort of the aesthetic in the tradition of Shaftesbury and Kant to objectify, rationalize, and make intelligible the body and its irrational sensuousness. Ironically, they did so by appropriating the very consumptive strategies that they accuse mass culture of fostering" (166). In order to counteract resistance to high culture, these critics incorporated elements of mass culture, like pornography, in order to shock or revitalize the consumer. In addition to making "a place for the bodily reader of cultural works in its notion of sensibility" (167), modernist criticism "made a place for the very kind of aesthetic reception that had previously been attributed to readers of sensational thrillers or pornography. Sensation and feeling, once the province of mass culture, became its antidote" (167). Modernist critics continued the practice of espousing pornographic elements for purposes other than sexual arousal.

A seemingly obvious intersection of aesthetics and pornography occurs within the courts, as works by James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence instigated obscenity trials. In these trials, aesthetics provided the defense against obscenity, as Pease remarks in her unique allusion to obscenity laws: "By the 1950s and 1960s, the education of aesthetic reception was so widespread that the medical and legal regulation of obscenity that dominated the century from the 1850s to the 1950s began to be dismantled in favor of trusting a reader's own personal ability to judge and handle an explicit sexual representation. The Obscene Publications Act of 1959 revised English obscenity law to say that 'publication of the article in question is justified as being for the public good on the ground that it is in the interests of science, literature, art or learning, or of other objects of general concern.' The admissibility of literary merit as part of the criteria for obscenity marked a revolutionary shift in the boundaries between pornography and art in the United Kingdom, a shift quickly mirrored in the United States" (190-1). Granted, a study on the court's interpretation of obscenity is not Pease's purpose with this work; nonetheless, the obscenity trials greatly influenced the general reception and production of aesthetically obscene works during this period. A more substantial discussion (or at least an explanation of the omission) of

censorship and obscenity trials surrounding works like *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* would be welcome.

To conclude, Pease relates her work to the present day by proposing that current reading strategies are a result of this dynamic relationship between the aesthetic and pornography. Bodily reactions, like feeling a text resonate within one's body or experiencing a sharp sensation, are generally expected – if not welcomed – by a work's audience. This book serves to remind modern-day readers that this “natural” reaction once was quite unnatural; it is actually the result of theorists, writers, artists, and critics who represent the slow transition from a disinterested reading to a holistic, interested manner of reading, through which one's whole body reads a text.

Fields of interest most relevant to this book are those listed in the title: modernism, mass culture, aesthetics, and obscenity. Also, students and scholars of art and art history will benefit from this book, for its greatest treasure is the detailed analysis of Beardsley's art, making this book a necessary source for those who seek guidance in interpreting nineteenth-century illustrations of the obscene. Those whose primary interest is obscenity law would be better served by the bibliography, which includes works such as Edward De Grazia's *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* (1992) and Geoffrey Robertson's *Obscenity: An Account of Censorship Laws and their Enforcement in England and Wales* (1979). *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* serves as a crucial review for those less familiar with applications of Kantian aesthetic theory, as Pease ensures that it remains present throughout the text, even in its continuously varying interpretations by British artists and critics. The interested reader need only – like the legs of *Figure 9* (105) – spread wide the pages of this book and explore.

Jamie Kathryn Gandy, Department of French  
Vanderbilt University  
[jamie.k.gandy@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:jamie.k.gandy@vanderbilt.edu)