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## THE PORNOGRAPHIZATION OF IMAGINATION SOME COMMENTS ON PORN STUDIES IN LITERARY RESEARCH

### KEY WORDS

porn studies; erotic literature; pornography; contemporary Polish literature

The slowly decreasing debate on the relationship between the latest works of literature (especially by writers born in the 1970s<sup>1</sup>) and various other areas of artistic activity, and, in particular, audiovisual and digital media supports the claim that there is a link between that literature and the strategies used in the media (see e.g.: Bodzioch-Bryła 2006; Lachman 2007; Hopfinger 2010; Bodzioch-Bryła, Pietruszewska-Kobiela, Regiewicz 2015; Bodzioch-Bryła, Dorak-Wojakowska, Kaczmarczyk, Regiewicz 2015). And it is not only related to the activity of the writers in the mass media (as in the case of Wojciech Kuczok, Dorota Masłowska or Krzysztof Siwczyk), but also to the shift of context in which a literary text exists and which is used to create a literary reality.<sup>2</sup> However, the process of literary texts becoming increasingly permeated with audiovisual elements does not only involve thematization, i.e. the creation of a fictional world on the basis

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<sup>1</sup> The generation of writers born in the 1970s features prominently in the first edition of the anthology and dictionary of “new Polish literature” (Marecki, Stokfiszewski, Witkowski 2002).

<sup>2</sup> As Krzysztof Uniłowski argues, “[i]n terms of social background, what will serve as a good context for analyzing Dorota Masłowska’s writing is neither the sociolinguistic prose of the 1970s nor the contemporary *new literature*. Such a context will rather be provided by Magda Molek, Matylda Damięcka or Ewelina Flinta, or, at best, TV or newspaper reports about hoodies, drugs, and juvenile delinquents” (Uniłowski 2008: 214–215).

of motifs taken from the media, and the introduction of particular TV programs and fragments of film scripts or web productions to literary texts. It also involves constructing literary works with the use of audiovisual patterns and techniques, incorporating the audiovisual code into literary texts, modeling the literary language in such a way that it resembles audiovisual language, and creating literary genres and styles that are related to audiovisuality.<sup>3</sup> The process of text reception has been changing accordingly. It is becoming similar to the mechanisms of reception that are typical of audiovisual content. The same concerns literary criticism. Trying to keep up with these changes, it has incorporated tools that are commonly used in analyses of media poetics (see e.g.: Szczęśna 2007; Regiewicz 2014, etc.) into literary studies.

When discussing the recent findings in the field of the audiovisualization of literature, one should pose a question about the presence of eroticism in the literary texts written in the last decade and the way it has been shaped by audiovisual sources and, especially, digital media.<sup>4</sup> Raising such a question does not aim to cause scandal; nor is it motivated by a fad or a desire to shock. It is rather a consequence of the developments in audiovisual studies that call for a closer insight into a small and yet significant element of a fictional reality.

After the commercial success of E.L. James's 2012 *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it is difficult to ignore the immense potential embedded in this subject matter, which has led to its great popularity. Certainly, this type of literature always provokes aesthetic (shallowness, kitsch) and moral (obscenity, immorality) reflections. One cannot, however, deny the fact that the American novel that has its roots in blog literature brought the subject of eroticism (or even pornography) to light. In bookstores, E.L. James's novel stands on the same shelf as *The Elementary Particles* (1998) by Michel Houellebecq and was made into a film, just like the French novel. Similar to Lars von Trier's film *Nymphomaniac* (2013), the adaptation bombards the modern viewer with pornographic content. Comparing James's novel to the works of such distinguished novelists as Houellebecq may raise objections, but the fact is that all of these texts make use of pornography.

This reflection is based on a few assumptions. The first one concerns the presence of eroticism in its pornographic form in literature, irrespective of whether we are dealing with popular literature or the so-called "belles-letters". The examples presented below are the latest Polish prose works, awarded, and

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Regiewicz. *Audiowizualność literatury. Próba konceptualizacji*. "Teksty Drugie" 2020 (in print). A short version of this analysis can also be found in Regiewicz, Warzocha 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, erotic visualization has recently been revolutionized by new communication technologies and their availability, in other words: broad reception, new channels of web distribution, blurred lines between the author, actor, producer, and film distributor, etc. (McNair 2002: 39).

distributed by well-known publishers who are well-known for promoting works of high artistic merit.<sup>5</sup> The second assumption concerns the pornographization of imagination. It seems that the tradition of Polish *sowizdrzał* or libertine literature, which used to shape the reader's erotic imagination, has been replaced by an audiovisual simulacrum. Those assumptions lead to the question about appropriate tools in literary studies that should be applied when analyzing such a text. This, in turn, leads to a somewhat provocative question regarding the necessity of incorporating porn studies, which has earlier been functioning in legal studies (e.g. Filar 1977; Kunicka-Michalska 2004), social sciences (e.g. *Pornography* 2002; Nijakowski 2010; Charkowska-Giedrys 2013; Dines 2010), psychology (e.g. Pospiszyl 2008), culture studies (e.g. Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin 1953; Giddens 1992; *Praktyki* 2006), and film studies (e.g. *Wstydlliwe przyjemności* 1995 and especially the articles by: Loska, Pitrus, and Damsz; Williams 1999, 2008), as a research area of its own right,<sup>6</sup> into literary studies.

### The Founding Fathers

The aim of the present article is not so much to make a new list of “perverse books”<sup>7</sup>, but to investigate the influence of erotic literature on audiovisual pornography and that of pornography on contemporary literary imagination when the latter seeks to describe sexual intercourses. As James Barke (1959) argues, pornography and bawdry in literature are a complex matter, and their definition depends on the social and cultural context determined by the moral norms of a given community or times. The obscenity of the noble culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries differed considerably from the obscenity of the nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. Trends, tastes, and beliefs change in time, as do ethical and social norms. What is more, the stronger the pressure on preserving chastity, the stronger the need to demonstrate eroticism in cultural representations, as exemplified by Victorian England or the Habsburg monarchy.

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<sup>5</sup> The most appropriate term would be *middlebrow literature* which is accessible, but maintains a reasonably high artistic level. It relieves the tension between high and popular literature. “Contemporary works of literature represent, on the one hand, more easily accessible variants of high literature (they adapt high literature to the needs of a «middlebrow» reader) and, on the other hand, they are examples of mass literature; they are sophisticated and created for more than just a reader's entertainment (they have subplots, do not avoid irony, parody, stylization, etc.)” (Stempczyńska, Mięowska 2011: 7; also cf. Uniłowski 2006).

<sup>6</sup> This is best exemplified by “Porn Studies”, a journal with a high impact factor, which has received a lot of recognition in cultural studies, health studies, and sociology.

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to the metaphor used by Justyna Sobolewska, a Polish journalist who in her article discusses the tradition of sentimental and kitschy erotic descriptions in Polish literature (Sobolewska 2011: 60).

Nowadays, as evidenced by the representatives of different disciplines: from sociologists, through ethicists, to media experts, pornography has become the domain of audiovisual texts, which feeds the imagination of an average resident of the global PopWorld. The excessive sexualization in the audiovisual domain does not, however, pair with cultural puritanism; yet one ought to note that the way in which it manifests itself indicates a tendency towards directness, which does not seek the equivalent of freedom in the erotic sphere, but is closely connected to the voyeurism that is typical of film culture.

The contemporary pornographization of literary imagination is a complex issue which is founded on reciprocity. At the beginning, it was literature that catered for audiovisual pornography, which is explicit in etymology of the latter. After all, literature can be “a graphic prompt to sexual fantasies” (qtd. in McNair 2002: 40) which lead to erotic titillation and sexual arousal.

*Fantasy* is the key term here; it covers a whole range of experiences and activities that are inaccessible in real life. This inaccessibility is related to the restrictions imposed both by culture (e.g. the taboo on rape or sexual intercourse between parents and their children) and by the nature of sexual activity (e.g. full sexual readiness and potency of men and women at any time or place). Pornography, as shown by Roland Barthes (1989), who analyzed the libertine works of de Sade, is not just a collection of descriptions of sexual acts, but it is embedded in a broad narrative context. And although for Marquis de Sade sex is the center of the narrative, his works are not about sex but about the limitations of human experience and the end of the eighteenth-century world as he knew it.

The works of de Sade address two issues: 1. The limits of the language with which one could describe and express (conceptualize, imagine) the experience that transgresses any social, ethical, and moral restraints, and that forms the foundation of one's sexuality; 2. Transgression, understood as crossing the boundary between shame and shamelessness, subjugation and indulgence, and as the basis of sexual activity. These important observations were, in fact, further developed by Sigmund Freud, who clearly separated the dark *id* from oppressive culture which subordinates individual desires and lust. Therefore, the works of de Sade seem so fundamental to contemporaneity, as they help understand the breakdown of the eighteenth-century culture as well as the emergence of modernity.

The argument presented in this article is closely connected with the main issue that de Sade addressed in his works – the connection between sexual acts and the language of a novel. De Sade's eroticism is, above all, a work of mind, not loins. For him, everything is prearranged: the characters play their parts according to the author's scenario, and alternative erotic poses are created because it is imagination that serves as the cradle of true satisfaction, although it has its

limits which lead to boredom (Dąbrowski 2018: 78). The theatricalization of sex can be considered as a prelude to the modern civilization of the spectacle, including media spectacle (see: Pułka 2004; Vargas Llosa 2015). A sexual act is a choreography, a devised and well-organized performance of positions that cater for specific needs.

One should note that a given need or expectation is stimulated by imagination which has strongly been influenced by specific cultural clichés created by literature. De Sade can be credited with making a link between sex and cruelty. Literary descriptions of sex that pushes all accepted boundaries in the name of freedom<sup>8</sup> created a belief that sex and crime or violence are closely interconnected. According to de Sade, they are even closer to life than virtue is. He introduces to literature all possible sexual configurations which will feed cinematic imagination: from Pier Paolo Pasolini's films<sup>9</sup> to hardcore pornography featuring orgies, sex between clerics and law enforcement officers, sexual acts of parents and their children or of siblings, etc.

Another person who is equally important for the understanding of contemporary pornography is Georges Bataille, not only as a theorist, but also the author of the provocative *Story of the Eye* (1928). If for de Sade crime (cruelty) is the driving force of lust, for Bataille the same role is played by prohibition. The attitude to sex is culture-specific and shaped by the religious sphere, as he argues in *The Tears of Eros* (Bataille 1988: 73). The link between sex and religion has two sides. On the one hand, it indicates a strong connection between sexual life and religious experience, which is evident in old cults of sacred prostitution (and the contemporary cult of orgasm as a tantric or mystical experience). On the other hand, religious beliefs and practices determine the boundaries of shame and the taboo, which in the Christian tradition is most visible in St. Paul's teachings. Bataille stresses the significance of the moment of transgressing the boundaries of shame, which serves as an act of a transition from culture (staying within the boundaries of decency) to animalistic and rampant sexual desire. His *Story of the Eye* is an attempt to break the taboo mostly related to family relations (between a sister and a brother) and to public places. This act is degrading in that it reduces a human being to an animal that copulates to

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<sup>8</sup> In his monograph on de Sade, Donald Thomas states: "Despite the unremitting display of sexual deviations, it is the creation of a world of his own, beyond the power of gaolers or judges to impair, which Sade regarded as his greatest achievement" (Thomas 1992: 180).

<sup>9</sup> I am referring here to the 1975 movie entitled *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, which was inspired by the art of de Sade. The movie is not set in the eighteenth-century France, but in the Nazi Italy of 1944. Four gentlemen: a judge, a bishop, a duke, and a banker and their female partners decide to have an orgy with the local people in a suburban villa. They kidnap local teenagers and perform with them erotic scenes of humiliation, perversion, and cruelty, as described by de Sade.

survive. Sex in Bataille's novella is dirty; it destroys and humiliates in a similar way as contemporary gonzo pornography.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, Bataille's picture of sexuality – undoubtedly inspired by theories of Sigmund Freud – resembles the one present in pornography where the female body is completely bare, and it is *that* body that is befouled during a sexual act (usually with semen, but also with blood, faces, urine, or saliva), while the male body is reduced to a penis<sup>11</sup> whose ejaculation guarantees sexual pleasure.

Yet, the most important transition towards pornography in the sphere of erotic imagination took place in the twentieth century. Its causes are numerous. Some researchers point to a typically modernist transition from the ethics of duty and obligation to the ethics of pleasure, from the work-oriented order to the reign of consumption and satisfaction (Krasnođębski 1991: 184–190). Others argue that the transition was caused by the “invention” of sexuality (Weeks 1997: 11–37), in other words a conscious separation of the sexual act from its natural goal, namely procreation. The socially-constructed category of pleasure became fundamental to sexuality. Yet, other scholars seek for the causes of the phenomenon under discussion in the development of the media which fostered the expansion of the *porn-sphere* to other areas of popular culture, such as: commercials, TV shows, music videos, or fashion.<sup>12</sup> With this in mind, it is useful to examine some literary examples which have helped, even if not directly, shape contemporary pornographic imagination: the works of such writers as: Henry Miller, Vladimir Nabokov, and Jean Genet.

The quintessence of Miller's attitude to eroticism can be found in the following passage of his novel *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939):

[w]hat holds the world together, as I have learned from bitter experience, is sexual intercourse. But fuck, the real thing, cunt, the real thing, seems to contain some unidentified element which is far more dangerous than nitroglycerine (Miller 1993: 216).

Typically Milleresque, the explicitness of the passage, fits in the modern tendency to marginalize imagination in favor of literality and concreteness which appeal to basic instincts. Miller's characters act like sexual machines or automatons that

<sup>10</sup> Gonzo – a style of porn films that present scenes of violence against women during a sexual act. A woman is reduced to a slave or a prostitute whose body can be used for every sexual practice: from a gang rape to sadistic and scatological acts (Dines 2010: 59–78).

<sup>11</sup> “Male sexuality can only be expressed through one's head and one's «penis» – from a cultural point of view, these are the main parts of a male body. [...] The «penis» is related to a male picture of sexuality, which focuses on a single element, is restricted to a single form of experience, and strives for «unity». And this also finds an expression in logic” (Buczowski 2005: 52).

<sup>12</sup> This is referred to as *porn-chic*, i.e. the pornographization of art and culture through the proliferation of sexually explicit references in the entertainment industry (McNair 2002: 61–87).

have been programmed to copulate. Everyone is treated like an object: men are judged by the performance of their penises and women are seen through the prism of their whole bodies, either given away without any inhibitions or after some resistance, which only fuels male fantasy. As Mieczysław Dąbrowski puts it,

Women are passed over to friends as gifts or because their users got bored of them. It is unbelievable that they never object and always easily agree to this! They have the mentality of sexual slaves dreaming of love (Dąbrowski 2018: 155–156).

The description of the sexual relationships presented in Miller's prose could also be used to describe film pornography. The similarity concerns not only the presentation of characters, but also the language, i.e. the formal devices that are used to present a sexual act. The pursuit of explicitness is characteristic of both Miller's writing and the pornography of the last two decades. Aestheticization or adding a broad history to context is to be avoided in favor of fast and hasty mating. The background vanishes; what remains is, to paraphrase Miller, brutal fucking.

The second author was selected because of the fashionable and popular porn theme of lolitas and nymphets. Described by Nabokov in his novel, the fantasy of Humbert (a mature man who becomes infatuated with the physicality of a teenage girl), pushed ajar the door that was earlier closed in pornography. From the legal point of view, film scenes of sexual intercourse with a minor are instances of pedophilia. That is why such scenes are absent from general circulation (excluding the *dark net*). The ones available are simulacra and imitations. Many categories are therefore tagged as "barely legal" or simply "lolitas". Similar categories include: babysitters, stepdaughters, or friends of one's children or even granddaughters. Just as in Nabokov's novel, the arousal stimulated by girliness is the driving force of the film. That is why, such scenes ideally feature slight-built, slim actresses with small breasts and depilated bikini areas which serve as an evidence of their immaturity. Even if the language with which Nabokov described Humbert's erotic fantasies is not directly responsible for the appearance of nymphets on screens, the very theme of a young girl who is so much aware of her sexuality has been stimulating pornographic imagination ever since the publication of his novel.

The reference to Jean Genet was made in connection to the development of homosexual pornography. Justyna Sobolewska may be right in claiming that today the best erotic scenes can only be found in gay and lesbian literature (Sobolewska 2011: 60). Undoubtedly, Genet, who linked sexual experience with the criminal underworld, had an impact on the way in which a homosexual act has been imagined. The themes of a prison, male prostitution, and streetwalking, all related to the writer's own experience, are conspicuous in the manner in which

he presented sex scenes. These scenes are dominated by the conscious rejection of rules and social restraints, the need to provoke, and the unmasking of the bourgeois falsehood and hypocrisy. At the same time, Genet distinguishes two ways of representing a homosexual act: the “fruity” way, i.e. soft, tender, and feminine, and the masculine way, i.e. strong, energetic, and typical of “tough guys”. Homosexual pornography is becoming increasingly brutal and violent, avoiding “fruity” fondness and subtlety. This does not mean that there was no pornography depicting homosexual acts before Genet; the point is that when homoeroticism and feminism entered prose and cultural theory, these representations became more prevalent.

### **We Are All from “YouPorn”**

All the same, when reading new works of literature, it is difficult to escape an impression that their language and the way they present sexual acts do not stem from literature itself, but rather from audiovisual pornography. For instance, in his novel entitled *Sonnenberg* (2018), Krzysztof Varga addresses these matters in the story of Attila, one of the protagonist’s close friends, who recalls screenings of porn movies “with chambermaids, nurses, female teachers, secretaries” (Varga 2018: 155). He states that “[w]atching porn can, in fact, be useful as long as one watches proper porn”, because, as he states with authority, video cassettes had the same role for his generation as

dirty books and rhymes for the whole generations of [his] ancestors, beautiful and esthetic porn which was nothing like breaking the Olympic record in fucking, but presented sublime fucking; it was not cheap but purest, not dirty and obscene, but epiphanic (Varga 2018: 155–156).

Audiovisual pornography, as Attila argues, changes the way in which pornography is presented; it is becoming direct, violent, and obscenely crude. At the same time, such pornography is more accessible and common, since it has entered those spheres of popular culture that earlier remained sexually neutral: fashion, music, and the lives of celebrities.

András, the protagonist of Krzysztof Varga’s novel, praises porn actresses of Hungarian origin, who occupy a much higher social position than celebrities:

[a]nd this is probably our Hungarian power over this world, the power exercised by our Hungarian women, as brave as the female defenders of the Castle of Eger in 1552. Millions, no, dozens of millions, hundreds of millions of men all over the world are addicted to them. Hungary has introduced more great porn stars than footballers to the world [...]. Our porn-women gave people more happiness than all Hungarian

men taken together, including sportsmen, scientists, artists and, of course, the heroes of national uprisings. Invariably, Hungarian men bring sorrow, war, tears, and disappointment and Hungarian women – happiness and fulfillment (Varga 2018: 217).

Apart from water polo stars, these women are the ones that shape the identity of András, a literary scholar who has for many years been working on Austrian literature. In the same way, the schoolmates of Jakub Dejmán, the protagonist of Wojciech Engelking's *Lekcje anatomii doktora D (Doctor D.'s Lessons in Anatomy, 2016)*, are fascinated by consecutive Playboy playmates:

they kept pondering: well, how you do it? Into which hole do you put your prick? The same one with which she pisses? Because probably not the one with which she shits. What? Does she shit, does shit at all? They talked about it as if it was some great secret (Engelking 2016: 84).

When talking about his relationship with his beloved Ágnes, who abandons him because of his indecisiveness, the protagonist even makes a reference to porn business. Expressing his love, he states: "I would have nothing against Ágnes being a porn star, since I loved her completely and unconditionally" (Varga 2018: 215).

Allusions to contemporary *porn-chic* can be found in many contemporary works of literature. Julia Mrok, the protagonist of *Rok Królika (The Year of the Rabbit, 2016)* by Joanna Bator presents herself from the very beginning of her story as a person from the porn business. Similarly to her Hungarian friends, she changes her identity and demands to be called Anna Karr. Together with Aleksander and Al, she makes a video of a sex triangle, a theme which is popular in porn movies ("One day I woke up aching and scraped, with marks of rope on my body. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. [...] Then I remember Aleksander and Al taking photos of me and recording my humiliation", Bator 2016: 268). Finally, having abandoned her previous identity, she finds employment at "Rabbit's Spa" which turns out to be a shelter that offers erotic services to individuals who are homeless, abandoned, ill, suffering from depression, etc. It is difficult to see the service providers as more cheerful versions of Mother Teresa, because, as Wiktorina Frankowska, one of the sex workers, explains:

[d]o not forget that we are modern geishas. What counts is the whole atmosphere, the stage design, the performance in which the clients can, with the help of the therapists, act out their desires and face their loss. One may get simple sex anywhere. Oral, anal, cheap push-push, a bit of bondage, lesbian duo – boring, she yawned excessively, demonstrating how bored she was with that banal list of human pleasures (Bator 2016: 250).

Pornographic themes and motifs in Bator's novel filter into everyday life thanks to newspaper headlines, and they feed the protagonist's imagination: "Cannibal Guide Eats Tourist and Rapes his Wife", "Juliusz K. Has Sex with Postbox", "Vibrator Lays Eggs in Women's Bodies", "Cook Zofia R. Has Mango in her Anus". The main character's relationships have a pornographic edge to them, as in the case of her rendezvous with Myszkin, lieutenant Hardy, or Natan who was placed in her charge. As in porn movies, the protagonist does not avoid theatricalization. Far from it, she uses the category of the spectacle, emphasizing its pretense and artificiality. Some of her descriptions allude to movie contexts, as is the case of the excerpt about "Rabbit's Spa", which refers to Ben Lewin's *The Session* (2012).<sup>13</sup> In a similar manner, the kitchen scene from Houellebecq's *Platform* (2001) brings to one's mind Adrian Lyne's *9½ Weeks* (1986):

[s]he pressed her palm harder against my balls, enveloping them in her hand. With the other hand she took some raspberry jam and spread it on my penis; then she conscientiously began to lick it off with sweeps of her tongue. [...] I ejaculated violently into her half-open mouth (Houellebecq 2003: 138–139).

The focus on the details of the sexual activity does more than just create the erotic tension that is characteristic of the scene featuring Kim Basinger and Mickey Rourke.

The ways in which literary scenes allude to motifs from pornographic films seem even more important for my argument. In Wojciech Engelking's novel *Lekcje anatomii doktora D*, Maks, who is Jakub Dejmian's friend, watches on a MacBook's screen Saha Grey sticking out her buttocks John Sins. There would be nothing surprising in it if it were not for the situational context of the scene. The pornographic movie is juxtaposed with a scene in an apartment: Elvira (a black maid who was earlier smuggled by Jakub to Poland) "takes a step towards him and rapidly shakes her head; the girl is walking on bent legs and her hairy, unshaven pussy is getting closer and closer" (Engelking 2016: 132). Focusing on the pubic hair, this image invites filmic associations (a long list of female characters moving naked on all fours supports the fact that it is one of the best recognized images typical of pornographic cinema). This simple trick introduces two semantic contexts: firstly, it refers to vintage style porn, where hairy female genitalia are the expected norm and, secondly, it suggests African savagery and wilderness. The scene also alludes to a typical, exhibitionistic first nude scene in a porn movie.

<sup>13</sup> The film presents the story of Cheryl, a sex therapist who has sex with people with disabilities as part of her job. The main focus is on the paralyzed Mark who, thanks to his newly acquired sexual experiences, starts to reconsider his life and existential situation.

What seems even more important in this context is the pornographization of literary language. While in the recent past sexual vocabulary was still considered too limited and insufficient to express sexual content in an explicit manner,<sup>14</sup> today one may have a completely different impression. Language, as is the case of Miller's novels, becomes crude or even obscene. What has, however, changed is not the vocabulary itself but the composition which is characteristic of film narration. This is, for instance, evident in Anna Mazurek's novel *Dziwka* (*Bitch*, 2019):

[h]e returns to his room and plays the video labeled "9". Weronika and Mery enter the apartment. They are laughing. They are tipsy. Weronika turns on some music. Tomek turns the volume down, lowers his trousers and fast-forwards the video to skip a few minutes. Weronika exits to the kitchen and brings a bottle of wine and two glasses. Mery sits down on the couch next to her. Weronika kisses her neck. Mary starts laughing but immediately gets serious and kisses Weronika's naked shoulder. Weronika caresses her short hair. She puts her tongue into Mery's ear. Baldie closes her eyes. This is what he called her a few years ago – Baldie. Weronika helps Baldie take off her top and bra. She quickly gets undressed. Their bodies are slim and supple. When they are penetrating each other's mouths with their tongues, their protruding nipples meet. Tomek clenches his dick. Firmly, until he almost feels pain. When Weronika kneels down by the couch, takes off Baldie's trousers, and buries her head between her legs, he moans – not too loud so as not to wake up his mother. Baldie swings her hips, stretches back and grasps Weronika's hair. Weronika keeps teasing Baldie's clit. Then she stops and emerges from between her thighs to kiss Baldie's mouth. She pinches her nipples and Baldie moans into Weronika's mouth. She puts her fingers into her wet pussy. Baldie trembles all over, her breasts move to the rhythm of Weronika's moving hand. The breath of the person in front of the screen gets faster. Tomek imagines himself putting his cock into Baldie's ass. He is going to come. Tomek wants to synchronize with Baldie's orgasm which happens in the fifteenth minute. They come one after another. When Baldie screams grasping Weronika's shoulders, he ejaculates (Mazurek 2019: 123–124).

Although what attracts the reader's attention is certainly the explicit vocabulary related to the sexual sphere, it is the syntax that seems to be much more interesting. The short sentences in the present tense used in this excerpt correspond to camera shots. This is a typical narrative technique that seeks to convey the work of a camera. Additionally, one may find here more specific evidence of cinematic

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<sup>14</sup> "We have banned sexual vocabulary and transformed it into a taboo; in this way we have made our language impotent, in a sense. The barrenness of our literary language is a result of the castration of our everyday speech. Our poets and prose writers are like castrates, and the young literary avant-garde is no better than their old precursors. Even erotic literature in magazines [...] it is all written in a dialect of eunuchs which makes the readers doubt if any of these authors has ever been in bed with a woman" (Borneman 1989: 53).

techniques, such as close-ups on selected parts of the women's bodies. The passage also features an example of the shot reverse shot technique: the narrator focuses on the sexual organs and the other woman's face when she is making sounds of pleasure – so typical of pornographic productions. In fact, it is the sound that proves the authenticity of female pleasure; there is no other (visual) evidence of it. Finally, the whole scene ends up with a *money shot*, the last moment of ejaculation, which is very characteristic of porn.

When studying descriptions of sexual activity in literary texts, one can easily notice that they are inspired by contemporary pornographic films whose plot is constructed in a chronological manner: “exhibition of the body, a «genital show» in a form of different sex positions” (Loska 1995: 112) and the final ejaculation on the female body, which closes the last scene. At the same time, a new type of pornography based on amateur productions (or, at least, pretending to be amateur) reworks the traditional composition in a different way. It either almost completely ignores the first part and instantly and suddenly proceeds to an intercourse, or it concentrates on one element only, as in Houellebecq's *Platform*, when Valérie

would open [the protagonist's] flies and jerk [him] off right there, hidden by the tablecloth. In the mornings, too, when she woke [him] with fellatio and handed [him] a cup of coffee before taking [him] into her mouth again (Houellebecq 2003: 208).

In his description, Houellebecq uses sexual fantasies that are most frequently depicted in porn films; these include: sex in public places and combining sex and with other activities, such as eating or cleaning.

Piotr, a forty-year-old character that can be found in Polish blog literature and, more specifically, in Piotr C.'s *Pokolenie Ikea* (*The Ikea Generation*, 2012) recalls a corporate retreat in which he participated in the following way:

she was three years older than I, married, with a child. She came here for a seminar, which now does not seem important. She looked like Desnuda from Christian Gailard's paintings or Izzie Stevens from *Grey's Anatomy*. Long hair. Shapely bottom. She had a touch of class. [...] I respected her. She left offended. Because I could show her respect in only one way – by throwing her on a bed. Pulling up her dress. And finally entering deeply into her and splattering my sperm directly on her naked bottom. She wanted a shower fuck in different positions. She wanted to get up in the morning with a painful crutch and bleeding lips. She wanted to feel like a whore. Like a woman. And later to look at her husband with a mysterious smile (Piotr C. 2014: 42).

Even if the protagonist describes an unfulfilled sexual act, one may distinguish its particular elements. The act itself is violent and instantaneous. It is somewhat

unceremonious, as in Szczepan Twardoch's short story *Masara* (2017). Bullied as a schoolgirl because of being overweight, Paulina years later decides to see her boyfriend who caused her a lot of suffering. But she has changed; now she is slim and attractive. She accepts an invitation to Jacek's house and takes off her top the moment she arrives. There is nothing erotic in the way she undresses, no trace of striptease. She simply takes off her bra and throws it on the ground, exposing her breasts that show signs of plastic surgery. Then, she throws Jacek on the bed and pulls up her skirt. As we learn from Jacek, "she sits on me, and I recall an old joke: *She told me that we were making love on the table, but I was only fucking her*. Finally, she stands up, reaches for her bag, takes out tissues and wipes her crotch, without turning back or taking off her pulled up skirt" (Twardoch 2017: 167–168).

What seems striking is that the sexual act is performed instrumentally. It is totally devoid of emotions or sensuality, which were still present in erotic literature not so long ago. This description is typical of a new type of pornography which is sender – rather than addressee-oriented (with the sender wishing to demonstrate their sexual prowess). An amateur video is a form of self-stimulation; it serves as a proof of sexual attractiveness and a sexual catalog. It is evident in the passage that describes Bruno being questioned in relation to Weronika's death:

[o]nce I got drunk and I called her names right here, in front that boozier. That's it. I wouldn't have any reason to do this. I shot my load into her mouth and she let me put it in her butt and that's all. Later I had five such girls with narrow twats who liked to take it hard (Mazurek 2019: 48).

The compositional ellipsis used in Bruno's testimony, where a sexual act is reduced to his ejaculation into her mouth and anal sex, exemplifies the pornographic fetish: anus to mouth. Besides, words such as "take it hard" suggest a violent or even inhumane way of performing a sexual act. This is very characteristic of contemporary literary imagery, even if closer relationships are at play. This tendency is, for instance, conspicuous in the description of the sexual lives of main characters of one of Wojciech Kuczok's short stories:

[t]he sexual marathon lasted till genital pain. They did not leave the bed – they said that there were just about to leave, but they could not free themselves, they couldn't disentangle and separate. Wiktor fucked her out like a schnitzel, spanked her buttocks as if they were meat chops. He stretched her already loose vagina, reintroduced it to the world of debauchery. Sachalina realized that she was, unfortunately, deeply in love, sometimes, against herself she was going sheepish. When she was making love to Wiktor, she had her heart in her cunt. He swung her in all directions, sometimes

he fucked her with indecent speed. When he was inside her (and he almost did not leave her), she talked to him tenderly and lovingly, usually asking: “You won’t leave me, will you?”. Sometimes he got annoyed by her irritating and clumsy fake orgasms. Maria screamed and simulated convulsions, and he slapped her face lightly but firmly. When she had a real orgasm, or was about to have it, she would squeak and mew like a newborn kitten. When Maria wanted him to cum inside her, she would say: “Come to me” (Kuczok 2013: 106).

This excerpt features a number of elements that are typical of a pornographic movie: penetration that lasts longer than usual, instrumental attitude to sex, spanking during fast and violent penetration, acts of humiliation, such as slapping one’s face, a sonic equivalent of female orgasm, and the final ejaculation. What is more, such acts are repeated many times and described without any redundant narrative elements:

[h]e fucked her more and more briskly, and when the moment was coming when he wanted (with her kind permission) to finish inside her, he ejaculated his sperm into his own sperm, which was splashing in her vagina like a breaking wave (Kuczok 2013: 106).

The juxtaposition of such animalistic, mechanical sex with a declaration of love can cause the reader’s mixed feelings. While this way of presenting an intercourse is often seen as suitable for paid sex with prostitutes, some would find it difficult to imagine it as part of conjugal life. Still, many amateur videos available online<sup>15</sup> depict exactly this form of sexual expression. More and more often, literary characters express their erotic desires without any inhibitions. They initiate sex in public places and start anonymous sexual relationships (group or other casual sexual encounters). More and more often, sex scenes in literature are devoid of their humanistic or existentialist aura<sup>16</sup> and are thus reduced to pure pornography.

### Embarrassing Tools

These tendencies in literature bring us to the problem of finding adequate tools to research the phenomena under discussion. Should not *porn studies*, even if niche but still present in the academia, be introduced to literary analysis and

<sup>15</sup> There are websites where one can upload one’s private videos presenting sexual acts; for example the Polish website *zbiornik.com*.

<sup>16</sup> Such an idea was put forward by Mieczysław Dąbrowski, who argues that the roots of this phenomenon can be found in the twenty-first-century civilization which restrains emotions and natural emphatic reactions, resigns from close relationships and reduces a human being to his or her outward appearance. Reduced to a mechanical intercourse, a sexual act becomes a substitute for intimacy (Dąbrowski 2018: 265–268).

interpretation? This question is related to a number of minor issues which start with the question of whether such literary descriptions should be studied at all, and end with the dilemmas concerning the choice of adequate theoretical tools to examine this type of texts. Literary studies has been dominated by the opponents of this type of research which has commonly been associated with impurity, prostitution or, simply, immorality.<sup>17</sup> They have questioned the legitimacy of introducing descriptions of sexual acts to literature as well as their artistic and moral value, claiming that such texts only seek cheap fame. In consequence, instead of searching for an adequate theoretical language and tools which could help interpret such “impure” imagery, certain fragments of literary texts were silently ignored.<sup>18</sup>

The belief that the academic reception of such descriptions could lack objectivity turned out to be problematic as well. For years, it has been claimed that this kind of literature stimulates imagination in an immoral way and thus impedes proper literary analysis. If a scholar decided to study literature that contains erotic or pornographic scenes at all, they tended to focus on such issues as poetics, metaphors, language or, occasionally, genre, and cultural and social philosophy. The approach has been changing in response to the affective turn, which emphasized the sexual metaphors used in the description of textual reception – those of “seduction”, “pleasure” (Barthes 1990), and “love affair”<sup>19</sup> – and the development of women’s studies which calls for interpretations that are embedded in a bodily, sensory experience.<sup>20</sup> The discovery of the erotic potential of literature has not, however, led to devising an appropriate set of tools which would help examine pornographic scenes.

Even a superficial analysis of scenes which have a pornographic edge to them makes us realize some deficiency (or helplessness) of literary studies. All the analyses in the fields of esthetics, poetics, language, or semiotics that have so far been carried out in this area do not reveal the full picture of what a text does. Nor do they explain the meanings that need to be examined in a new

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<sup>17</sup> With his radical declarations, Jerzy Ziomek played a crucial part in reinforcing a negative attitude to pornography in literature (Ziomek 1974: 147–152).

<sup>18</sup> It suffices to mention Stefan Żeromski and the public response to the erotic scenes in his *Ashes or Seedtime*, or to Witkacy’s uninhibited literary imagination. Aneta Szyłak (1997) reflects on this problem and states that charges of immorality cause that a given artefact is shrouded in silence (also cf. Tramer 2007: 71).

<sup>19</sup> Even Jan Błoński, who can hardly be identified as a representative of the affective turn, presents the process of reading as a love affair with dramatic turns and a division of sexual roles. He refers to a male reader penetrating a text, which is feminized, i.e. seen as open and exposed to the actions performed by a male reader (Błoński 1981: 19).

<sup>20</sup> Women’s studies hold that literature should be sexually reclaimed and liberated. A literary text should become a space for female sexual expression (Cixous 1976).

(often audiovisual and popular) cultural context. This, however, does not mean that when analyzing contemporary pornographic descriptions in literature, we should resign from linguistic analysis; quite the opposite.<sup>21</sup> Contemporary explicitness and directness which are conspicuous in descriptions of sexual acts, when compared with the literary tradition, may seem inspiring. That is mainly because the old “pornography operated with a language of decency and understatement, which aims to evoke certain lascivious images” (Ziomek 1980: 31). Today, it operates with simplifying statements and pure voyeurism which is so characteristic of the contemporary society of the spectacle.

The issue of reception, which is closely related to these phenomena, is not limited to the readers’ experiences, as evident from the examples that have been mentioned. Thus, it is necessary that a researcher should examine the audiovisual context. The reception and influence of these texts can only be fully examined if one uses appropriate analytical tools typical of film studies or media studies. The pornographization of culture, understood as a turn towards directness, obscenity, and vulgarity, certainly finds a reflection in the literary imagination which has been shaped by audiovisual images. For instance, prose works which abound in sex scenes, scarcely ever present the faces of female sexual partners and focus directly to erogenous spots. This strategy originates in contemporary, popular amateur porn videos and sex cam streams, which avoid showing one’s face in order to guarantee privacy and anonymity and draw attention to genitals (see: Soltys 2014: 426).

There are two main, easily recognized ways of thinking about sexuality which derive from film and digital pornography. The first one reduces sex to physiology, to satisfying one’s needs, and is often interpreted as an act of hygiene, which is necessary to stay healthy and have a clear mind. The second one, as described by Zbigniew Nosowski (2008), conceptualizes sex as similar to sports. What counts is the final score: the number of partners, the duration of an intercourse, the number of orgasms, etc. Both of these perspectives determine the contemporary social imaginary which gives shape to public discourse, including literature; this is the reason why it is difficult to imagine any discussion on the subject of

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<sup>21</sup> The problems related to describing sexual activity are caused by the fact that the Polish language lacks words and terms pertaining to the erotic sphere. The language is either too infantile and too vulgar or too medical. Contemporary explicitness may be a reaction to the lack of appropriate expressions in description of sex. Ignacy Karpowicz states: “Yes, indeed, the language is a problem because, on the one hand, there is a medical «dick» and «vagina» or vulgarisms and, on the other hand, there are those nightmarish descriptions, such as «her nipples were like fuchsia petals». The hard task with the Polish language is to find something in-between” (qtd. in Dzikowska 2019: 24). As Wojciech Kuczok adds, “[t]hose Polish euphemisms have always driven me mad” (qtd. in Dzikowska 2019: 24).

pornography in literature with no reference to constructivism. For it must be remembered that the reality presented in a literary text as well as film scenes (despite their realism) are but constructions or fantasies which are, after all, examined by porn studies.

It sometimes happens – especially in gay and lesbian literature – that pornographic descriptions are used in order to reflect upon one's sexual identity and right for self-determination. Consequently, such an approach connotes a liberal discourse and uses pornography (in as similar fashion as de Sade) as a weapon against the hegemony of culture (in this case, heterosexual). This shows that a porn movie has much more to do with literature (or with writing in general) than one could think. If one considers the act of writing as a messianic gesture that offers an opportunity to get released from one's bonds, and such a belief is commonly inspired in the reader in modern times,<sup>22</sup> then a porn movie is a perfect expression of such a gesture, as it gives one an opportunity to transgress the boundaries of social decency.

Although the impact of pornography should not be overestimated or located at the center of academic research, it should not be neglected in literary studies either. Studies of eroticism in literature have so far deftly ignored such an approach. This can, of course, be easily explained with a number of reasons:<sup>23</sup> ethical (studying obscenity can be seen as morally dubious), aesthetic (the form is far from beautiful), academic (pornography, just like pop culture, is not considered as worthy of academic study) and, last but not least, gender reasons (authorizing pornography by the academia can be seen as a permission to treat women as objects and sanctioning the male-centric view of the world) intersect and form a common line of defense against this type of scholarly reflection.

And yet pornography, just like other phenomena that can be found on the margins of literature, is a very important and interesting aspect of social life which has been giving shape to contemporary literary texts. This is one of the reasons why it should be studied and interpreted. If it is true that pornography is sincere, does not pretend or aim too high and it keeps its promises, then literary studies will get a useful (even if somewhat embarrassing) research tool.

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<sup>22</sup> Modernity defines itself through negation and strives for novelty, an idea founded on the myth of progress. Every gesture that liberates one from what restricts one's individual freedom is esteemed by modernity which considers transgressing boundaries as its main aim. For that reason, pornography has always been an ally of art and the avant-garde (Franczak 2007: 542–543).

<sup>23</sup> Let us leave aside those moral arguments that defined porn studies scholars as men who derive various (not only academic) kinds of satisfaction from their research.

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*Adam Regiewicz*

## THE PORNOGRAPHIZATION OF IMAGINATION SOME COMMENTS ON PORN STUDIES IN LITERARY RESEARCH

(abstract)

The exploration of human sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century did not immediately stimulate the development of research in literary eroticism. Its development is associated not so much with the discoveries made by anthropologists as with the influence of the Nietzsche's philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis. The theory of Dionysian culture with its concept of libido (which in times of the supremacy of high culture remains hidden in the language of literature) contributed to the first wave of erotic criticism. Decades later, its development was related to feminist criticism, followed by gender studies and homoerotic studies. What seems interesting in this context is the lack of reflection on the role of the audiovisual pornographic imagination in most contemporary literature. While porn studies is present in sociology, anthropology, and film studies, it is still absent from literary studies. The article presents the mutual influence of literature and pornographic cinema, showing the limitation of the traditional tools used in literary studies in the analysis of contemporary literary descriptions of sexual acts. It examines the

reason for the lack of research on this topic, paying attention to the ethical and aesthetic consequences of changing this situation. Finally, it outlines the areas of interest that porn studies could help explore.

#### SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

porn studies; literatura erotyczna; pornografia; współczesna literatura polska