

Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity

Allison Pease



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I Civil society: aesthetics and pornography in the eighteenth century

As aesthetic philosophy emerged and created the modern notion of the art object in the eighteenth century, so pornography as we understand it today came into prominence in the Age of Reason. They emerged in Britain not as mutually exclusive entities, but as mutually generative ones that relied conceptually on interest and disinterest for their completion. Theorized versions of pornography and aesthetics also participated in a larger cultural debate about the formation of a new ideological, political, and economic order after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. In doing so, their development contributed to and commented on reformulating tensions between public and private, sense and idea, individual and community, Whig and Tory. By looking at their mutually constitutive emergence in this chapter, I seek to avoid representing what was categorized as pornographic or aesthetic as either liberating or repressive. Instead, I demonstrate how they emerged as conceptually interdependent, and how they challenged, while they constituted, each other's ability to make meaning.

Since the eighteenth century, what is aesthetic and what is pornographic have repeatedly been defined as mutually exclusive, pornography often marking a boundary or frame within which "true" aesthetic texts operate. One important distinction between the two has characteristically been the level of physical response elicited from them. Pornographic texts work to create embodied readers, readers whose awareness of their own body is heightened as they consume pornographic texts. Aesthetic texts are characterized in the modern period by their ability to create an experience of disembodiment, a movement away from sense toward rational or intellectual pleasure. In a post-Kantian paradigm that helps to

articulate the interdependence of dominant aesthetics and pornography in the modern period, T. W. Adorno suggests that the aesthetic encounter is always a wresting away from, if not simply an objectification of, the physical interests of the body:

Perhaps the most important taboo in art is the one that prohibits an animal-like attitude toward the object, say, a desire to devour it or otherwise subjugate it to one's body. Now, the strength of such a taboo is matched by the strength of the repressed urge. Hence, all art contains in itself a negative moment from which it tries to get away. If Kant's disinterestedness is to be more than a synonym for indifference, it has to have a trace of untamed interest somewhere. Indeed, there is much to be said for the thesis that the dignity of works of art depends on the magnitude of the interest from which they were wrested.¹

Adorno's text, aided by psychoanalysis's notion of repression, suggests that what is aesthetic exists in dialectical unity with an almost devouring sensuousness, the grounding impulse of pornography. Though Adorno is intrigued by the "animal-like" sensuousness that threatens to unravel the moment of aesthetic apprehension, he makes it clear that it is the cognitive work of transferring the sensuous to the intellectual that guarantees what one apprehends is art.

The project of the dominant Western tradition of modern aesthetics, beginning in the eighteenth century with Shaftesbury and carried further in the nineteenth century after Kant, was to derealize the body even as democratization and pornography were working simultaneously to *realize* the body and the body politic.² Aesthetic philosophy developed out of moral philosophy in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Working to maintain social order in the changing landscape of a post-Revolutionary England, moral philosophy espoused self-control as the condition of granting civil liberty in an increasingly egalitarian society. Aesthetic philosophy in the Kantian tradition maintained that level of internal subjection even as it made abstract the social order upon which moral philosophy grounded itself, creating in its stead an idealized set of aesthetic referents. In what I will call in this work the aesthetic tradition of Shaftesbury and Kant – the aesthetic tradition that has dominated Western art for the last two hundred years – art functioned as a substitute body, but was only legitimated when it entered into the realm of judgment, knowledge, or reason, the harmonious, purposive purposelessness of the aesthetic. In the aesthetic tradition forged by Shaftesbury and Kant, the play of the aesthetic permits the illusion of a freedom from materiality while in fact relying quite specifically on materiality.

Pornography developed simultaneously as both an extension of, and a counter to, modern aesthetics. On the one hand it was an absolute objectification of and substitute for the body and in this mirrored, or perhaps even exaggerated to the point of parody, the aesthetic; on the other hand it remained quite distinct from the aesthetic in that it elided the reflective or contemplative distance invoked by it. Instead, the pornographic functioned, as Adorno suggests above, by provoking an “animal-like” attitude in the subject, whose primary aim became the subjugation of the representation to the body’s interests. To be sure, if the aesthetic operated as a sublimation of the senses, pornography’s effort was to de-sublimate the senses.³ In opposition to the aesthetic, pornography was and still is characterized by interest, both in the sense of sensual desire and commercial profit, its use and exchange values.

Before the eighteenth century, sexually explicit works were regulated in England primarily through the licensing acts. They were found problematic not because of their content, but because pornographic publishers reaped large profits from works without paying appropriate licensing fees.⁴ In 1580, for example, William Lambard proposed “An acte to restrain licentious printing” in which he condemned books that “set up an arte of making lascivious ungodly love.” His motives were commercial as well as moral. He objected that sexually explicit literature sold well “to the manifest injurie of the godly learned, whose prayse woorthie endeavours and wrytings are thearfore lesse read.”⁵ Pornography, it appeared, was more popular than divinity. Though Lambard viewed this as creating private catastrophes for ignored authors, by the eighteenth century many educated or propertied individuals would come to see pornography as threatening a broader group of interests. The emergence of pornographic texts in the seventeenth and eighteenth century signified the burgeoning abundance of private interests, both commercial and personal, that threatened the propertied and educated elite who composed the public sphere. Simultaneously, the propertied and educated elite were creating new forms of representing themselves to themselves through an economy of values circulated within a newly defined category of experience, the aesthetic. In the modern period, the use and exchange values of the pornographic form a necessary complement to the apparent disinterest and inutility of the aesthetic, whose only capital is cultural. More than a mere coincidence of chronology, the aesthetic and the pornographic emerged as distinct genres in the eighteenth century through a mutually generative dialectic whose terms relied upon one another for completion.

Pornography in the time of the aesthetic

The technology of modern pornography's appeal to the senses was fostered in part by the European philosophical shift in the seventeenth century towards an empirical, subject-based epistemology that privileged individual sense experience as the source and basis of all knowledge.⁶ Though language problematizes its ability to do so, pornography offered itself as pure sensation. It tendered description after description of physical sensations which were then refracted through other sensations, seen or felt. As pornography gradually evolved into its modern form throughout the eighteenth century, its features distinguished themselves from those of a simultaneously emerging view of the aesthetic.

Though forms of pornography have existed and been distributed narrowly for centuries, they were until the eighteenth century primarily imported into England from the Continent, and were often ancillary to other causes, political or religious. As Lynn Hunt has argued, pornography in early modern Europe, between 1500 and 1800, was most often a vehicle for using the shock of sex to criticize religious and political authorities.⁷ The oft-quoted 1668 diary entries by Samuel Pepys regarding his purchase and, some interpret, masturbatory use of *L'Ecole des filles* prove that pornography from the Continent was available in London bookstores in the seventeenth century, and those who could read in French or Latin had access to it.⁸ David Foxon, in *Libertine Literature in England, 1660–1745*, has suggested there were three Continental works that received a fairly wide distribution in England in the second half of the seventeenth century: *La Puttana Errante* (1650), *L'Ecole des filles* (1655), and *Satyra Sotadica* (1660).⁹ Term Catalogues advertised a number of licensed titles that indicate sexually incriminating works of a political or religious bent were also being printed in English. The catalogues include: *The Nuns Complaint Against the Friars* (Easter, 1676); *The London Jilt; or The Politick Whore* (Easter, 1683); *The Ten Pleasures of Marriage* (Trinity, 1683); *Eve Revived; or The Fair One Stark Naked* (Michaelmas, 1683); *The Confessions of the New-Married Couple* (Michaelmas, 1683); *The Amorous Abess, or Love in a Nunnery* (Easter, 1684).¹⁰

The content of pornographic texts in this period resembled modern pornography in several fundamental aspects: through the naming of parts and sensations the texts overtly set out to sexually stimulate their readers; they posited a physical, sexual reality of individual selfishness in order to expose “hypocritical” social conventions, especially those of the church; and they created a self-contained, hedonistic world of sensual gratification that cut off individuals from any higher moral authority.¹¹ Enabled by the new discourses of science, pornography

participated in the view that valorized nature and the senses as sources of authority. Indeed, pornography's aim to provoke a physical response in the reader formed part of its attack on the public's denial, or sublimation, of individual, sensual interest, for a reader's arousal forced an acknowledgment of what otherwise proved socially problematic because of its potential to disrupt community: the senses form a powerful part of one's subjective response.

The belief in an embodied, private subjectivity played into the political strategies of the libertine ideas spreading across Europe in the wake of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Pornographic works of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries positioned the material "truth" of sex against the "hypocritical" conventions of church and society. As David Foxon notes, these pornographic stories took "place within a tightly knit family circle, with the shocking suggestion that all the conventional relationships are merely a facade for personal gratification, into which even the local priest enters."¹² Early modern pornography was never simply solitary or homosocial male pleasure inspired by writing on or across the sexualized body. Rather, that body was always also configured as the body politic, the body of the people.¹³ The sexually explicit literature of this period insisted that selfish interest and material gain were at the heart of any individual act. These works collapsed every public figure or act into a private one, thereby threatening emergent conceptions of social order.¹⁴

The bawdy plots of English Restoration drama as well as the notoriously explicit works of the Earl of Rochester may be said to be continuous with, or to have participated in, this general movement toward a more libertine outlook. However, as a public backlash ensued and drama became more chaste by the turn of the eighteenth century, pornography written in English disproportionately absorbed sexual discourse and began to resemble what we would now recognize as modern pornography: texts written with the specific purpose of sexually stimulating their readers. Pornography began to achieve a wider, though publicly segregated, distribution as print technology increased and authors began to write not for patrons, but for a relatively new, autonomous market supported by the emerging wealth of the middle classes. While these texts did not acquire the name pornography until well into the middle of the nineteenth century, works of an explicit sexual nature were printed, sold, and occasionally prosecuted throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁵

In the second half of the eighteenth century and even more so in the nineteenth century, the ability of sexually explicit texts to produce interest – that is, to provoke both personal interest in the form of sexual excitation and commercial interest in the sense of profit – began to take precedence over their political

content. Though still used for political attack in the early nineteenth century, pornography was increasingly identified as a commodity with a specific use in the form of the solitary sexual experience it engaged. One nineteenth-century text, *The Adventures of Lady Harpur* (1894), shows modern pornography's awareness of this aspiration by having its title character relate that the impetus for her story is solely to stimulate her readers:

The intention of all Literature [sic] of this kind is to excite and gratifying [sic] our amorous inclinations, therefore those descriptions which do most surely and speedily produce the desired effect will be the most satisfactory and successful; and as the employment of such names and expressions are in common use, even those which are generally considered coarse and vulgar, is universally found most provocative of amorous emotion, they are the best suites [sic] to the purpose.¹⁶

As Lady Harpur indicates, modern pornography concerns itself with the intensification of bodily sensation through naming. Pornography works to write the body in as many minute variations as possible, to evoke its materiality and palpability for the sexual imagination of its readers. While Steven Marcus contends that pornography constantly tries to escape language, such an assertion seems counter to the entire project of written pornography which, by writing the body and sexual acts, extends, proliferates and continues the body and the sexual acts in a never-ending stream of words.¹⁷ Pornography in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was primarily constructed in language and its technology was utterly rooted in a faith in the materiality of language.

For this reason, influenced as English pornography was by works from the Continent, it participated in what Foucault has characterized as a broader cultural move toward self-examination: "the nearly infinite task of telling – telling oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex."¹⁸ The reader of pornography deploys a practice of reading which opens a relation to the self and the body by querying the insinuations of the flesh. The reader is encouraged to mimic the pornographic narrative's voyeur figure – more thoroughly explored below in this chapter and in chapter three – by engaging in an act of sensual self-scrutiny, gauging the body's complicity with the mental recitation of sensations or voluptuous imaginings, and in doing so achieving sexual stimulation and gratification. Pornography, by this account, is not so much a representation of sexuality as a specific practice of it.

The narrator of *The Whore's Rhetorick* (1683) shows that looking at sexually explicit pictures is an act continuous with sexual performance:

Besides the Male Picture prescribed for your use, you must be stockt with others of a different nature to operate on your visitants more effectually than the similitude of your Ganymede could affect your self . . . These obscene images do produce marvellous effects toward the propagation of Love, they insinuate at every Pore of the Eye an extravagant desire to gratifie the sensitive appetite, they spur Men on by an irresistible impulse toward the venereal Bed; from whence he ought at no time be suffered to come off a winner.¹⁹

As this text makes clear, pornography values embodied response above all else. Tellingly, this passage glosses the relationship between the empirical and the theoretical so that any cognitive excitement is understood only as empirical. Images penetrate the body, as it were, physically. They “insinuate at every Pore of the Eye.” Once “inside the body,” these images purportedly create a desire to mimetically recreate the sensations they portray. No art validates the mimetic so profoundly as pornography, and this is its most powerful and threatening aspect.

The voyeur figure, one of pornography’s most classic and consistent tropes, offers a model for the reader to engage with, and reproduce for his or her private use, the pleasures of the seen and heard. Such a technology can be seen at work in the eighteenth-century pornographic classic *Fanny Hill*, when Fanny accidentally finds herself in a closet next to a bedroom occupied by a prostitute and her client. This scene depicts Fanny’s physical awakening as she witnesses the sexual act for the first time and then responds to her body’s demand for sexual satisfaction:

I instantly crept softly, and posted myself so that, seeing everything minutely, I could not myself be seen . . . As he stood on one side, unbuttoning his waistcoat and breeches, her fat brawny thighs hung down, and the whole greasy landscape lay fairly open to my view; a wide open-mouthed gap, overshadowed with a grizzly bush, seemed held out like a beggar’s wallet for its provision.

But I soon had my eyes called off by a more striking object, that entirely engrossed them.

Her sturdy stallion had now unbuttoned, and produced naked, stiff, and erect that wonderful machine, which I had never seen before, and which, for the interest my own seat of pleasure began to take furiously in it, I stared with all the eyes I had: however my senses were too much flurried, too much concentrated in that now burning spot of mine, to observe anything more than in general the make and turn of that instrument, from which the instinct of nature, yet more than all I had heard of it, now strongly informed me I was to expect that supreme pleasure which she had placed in the meeting of those parts so admirably fitted for each other . . . and now the bed shook, the curtains rattled so, that I could scarce hear the sighs and murmurs, the heaves and pantings that accompanied the action, from the beginning to the end; the sound

and sight of which thrilled to the very soul of me, and made every vein of my body circulate liquid fires: the motion grew so violent that it almost intercepted my respiration . . .

Whilst they were in the heat of the action, guided by nature only, I stole my hand up my petticoats, and with fingers all on fire, seized, and yet more inflamed that centre of all my senses: my heart palpitated, as if it would force its way through my bosom: I breathed with pain; I twisted my thighs, squeezed, and compressed the lips of that virgin slit, and following mechanically the example of Phoebe's manual operations on it, as far as I could find admission, brought on at last the critical ecstasy, the melting flow, into which nature, spent with excess of pleasure, dissolves and dies away.²⁰

This scene is notable for the excess of sensation that Fanny both produces and consumes, an economy highlighted by the "circulation" of liquid fires throughout her body. Sensation as knowledge is excessively detailed in this passage, Fanny citing carefully all that she sees and hears. She gives preeminence to the "centre" of her senses, notably not her mind, but her genitalia. Fanny takes a privileged position as voyeur, seeing "with all the eyes" she has, while not herself being seen. The knowledge precipitated by what she sees induces her to explore her own body, creating a form of physical self-knowledge that can only be produced when sensation is perceived as a primary agent in the epistemological process. The body is constructed here as the site of affect, which in turn can manufacture a form of knowledge-as-sensation, the only form of any importance in pornographic writings.

As this archetypal passage conveys, pornography invites readers to indulge their own sensations through a mimetic imaginative practice extended and complemented by the physical act of masturbation. Pornographic texts repeatedly celebrate their own technology, their own ability to self-reflexively create the sensations they describe. For instance, in *A New Atlantis for the Year One Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Eight* (1758) the narrator describes how reading pornography assists a young woman toward sexual self-knowledge:

Having soon reached her teens, and by the means of her chambermaid got a translation of Ovid's *Art of Love*, Rochester's Works, and the *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, all her doubts about her inward feelings vanished; she was convinced what use she was designed for, and made acquainted with the canal thro' which it was to be admitted; which, with her new-disciplined fingers, she used frequently to explore.²¹

Ever aware of its ability to induce sexual arousal, if not masturbation, pornography reinforces this power through repeated textual example. Significantly, terminology for solitary sexual practices was established in English in the eighteenth century. The first record of the word onanism noted by the *Oxford*

English Dictionary was in 1727, and self-abuse appeared in 1728. The first use of the word masturbation was recorded in 1766. The emergence of these terms in the eighteenth century indicates that the concept of solitary sexual stimulation entered British parlance at the same time that those pornographic literary practices that encouraged a solipsistic engagement with the senses began to find a reading public.²²

Distinguishing itself as a distinct genre in the late eighteenth century, the sexual self-interrogation that is pornography can be seen as an aspect of the wider shift to the reflexive self-interrogation that encompassed the Romantic movement.²³ Just as Romantic artists were concerned with the imaginative interplay between the self and the seen, so pornographic readers imaginatively “read themselves into” the works they read. Indeed, just as Romantic writers focused on the power of vision to imaginatively link a speaker to what he or she saw, so pornographic narrative relied on visually imagined descriptions to verbally emplace its readers. Most written pornography depends on vision to accomplish a sensational replication, as the passages above from *The Whore’s Rhetorick* and *Fanny Hill* suggest. In *Venus in the Cloister* (1724), two nuns discuss the masturbatory transports of another nun in language that shows the importance of visual emplacement:

Angelica: “*Thou would’s’t have seen* that innocent, half naked, her mouth smiling with those amorous, gentle contractions of which she knew not the cause. *Thou would’s’t have seen* her in an ecstasy, her eyes half dying, and without any strength or vigour fall beneath the laws of undisguised nature, and lose in defiance to all that care that treasure, the keeping of which had cost her so much pain and trouble.”

Agnes: “Very well, and it is in this that I should have placed my pleasure, *to have considered her thus naked and curiously to have observed* all the transports that love would have caused in the moment she was vanquished.”²⁴ (my emphasis)

The text continually prods the reader to approach the material with a visual imagination. It does not describe sexual ecstasy as an emotionally or physically experienced phenomenon, but rather verbally cues the reader that it must be experienced visually. This passage also makes clear pornography’s insistence on the replication of sensation as a form of knowledge. To be sure, the readership of an early eighteenth century piece like *Venus in the Cloister* (published first in the late seventeenth century) would have been as interested in the anti-authoritarian, anti-clerical sentiments as the sexual ones. But increasingly, sexually explicit works were produced for sensual stimulation only. To those in the eighteenth century concerned with maintaining civic order as well as the exclusive privileges of literacy and polite culture, the emergence of the pornographic

as an English prose genre prompted serious questions about the category of art, its purposes and appeals.

In eighteenth-century England, pornography became both a crime and a business. In 1727 the King's Bench declared that selling sexually explicit literature was a common-law misdemeanor, fining Grub Street hack and bookseller Edmund Curll £43 for selling *Venus in the Cloister* and placing him in the pillory at Charing Cross for an hour. In 1749 Ralph Griffiths published *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Lady of Pleasure* by John Cleland with only minor legal incident and with legendary commercial success. Griffiths's profits from the book, reputedly as high as £10,000, enabled him to indulge in a flagrant display of social climbing in which he purchased a large country estate and maintained two coaches.²⁵ Cleland was arraigned before a Privy Council for writing *Fanny Hill*, where he pled poverty as his excuse. The Earl of Granville, President of the Council and a relation of Cleland's, determined the case by settling upon him a £100 annuity with the request that he not write anything like *Fanny Hill* again. Though Griffiths's profits on *Fanny Hill* are surely exaggerated myth, the myth reveals an important shift in the public perception of pornography as a commercial enterprise: in the eighteenth century pornography began to be seen as a lucrative business.

At the same time that popular reading materials like the novel and the periodical entered the newly autonomous market in the eighteenth century, pornographic texts began to surface within the market with their own specific aim of moving readers sexually. By doing so pornographic texts created physical interest – stimulation – in the bodies of their readers while creating financial interest, profitable returns on their investments – for their publishers.²⁶ Directives, such as one given by the Marquis de Sade, reinforced the notion that there is an end, a use, to such narratives:

Your narrations must be decorated with the most numerous and searching details; the precise way and extent to which we may judge how the passion you describe relates to human manners and man's character is determined by your willingness to disguise no circumstance; and what is more, the least circumstance is apt to have an immense influence upon the procuring of that kind of sensory irritation we expect from your stories.²⁷

The end product of pornography is a form of "sensory irritation." The increasing commodification of cultural products, whether novels, periodicals, or pornographic works, provided an impetus to move customers to purchase such products. Pornography proved the most facile of consumer products in that it

reproduced itself for the buyer, whose consumption of a pornographic work could produce an empirically realized physical stimulation and, potentially, satisfaction. Its commercial and individual utility were central to its gradual distinction from the aesthetic.

Civil society and the arts in the time of the pornographic

British theories of taste in the eighteenth century were an outgrowth of secular, moral philosophy which, in the wake of Hobbesian proclamations of a ubiquitous self-interest, sought to relate those private interests to the public good and to find in the disposition of the senses, so often seen as a product of providence, a harmony akin to an idealized social order. British theories of taste were therefore imbricated with the ideas that sought to justify civil society. Many refuted the claims of Hobbes and Mandeville that individual desires prevent society from having naturally common or harmonious ends. Proponents of civil society, like many British theorists of taste, argued that reasonable choices were governed by a logic which ensured the common good.²⁸ Theorists such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Kames, Hume, and Burke, thinkers who shaped what Linda Dowling has called the “Whig aesthetic,” but what I will broadly call taste in the Shaftesbury tradition, defined aesthetic experience as a model for disinterested, socially generous behavior against the philosophical and pornographic claims of an individually interested and sensually selfish social order.²⁹ Though each of these thinkers represented aesthetic experience diversely in its particulars, they shared a general consensus about the broad nature of taste and the subject’s experience of it. What I will call taste in the Shaftesbury tradition are theories of taste that: attempt to posit a universal agreement or, as Hume termed it, “standard” of taste; assert a subject’s disinterested pleasure in apprehending an object of beauty; locate aesthetic pleasure in rational and reflective rather than sensual faculties; emphasize the importance of form in producing beauty; find objects of beauty autonomous and irreducible to utility.

In the eighteenth century, taste became a self-identifying behavior through which gentlemen could demonstrate their participation in what John Barrell has called “The Republic of Taste,” a group of like-minded citizens able to abstract the true interest of humanity, the public interest, from the labyrinth of private interests which were imagined to be represented by disordered detail.³⁰ The perceived need to conceptualize and stand apart from the particularities of material experience followed from the empirical philosophy of Locke which, in asserting that all knowledge derives from the senses, played a role in the shifting cultural

order. Locke's philosophy was emblematic of the new ways of understanding the construction of knowledge, belief, and opinion in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Knowledge was no longer perceived as emanating from a center, but was seen as forming collectively in a new social space, the sphere of public opinion.³¹ Aesthetic appreciation played a central role in concretizing this symbolic realm of the public sphere by exposing and thereby tacitly ratifying the mutual understanding of rational individuals. Like pornography, British theories of taste in the eighteenth century took as a given that the senses formed the fundamental basis of the epistemological process. However, while pornography both began and ended with the senses, theories of taste in the Shaftesbury tradition acknowledged sense only to seek to show its eventual irrelevance in any "true" aesthetic interaction. Where sense led inward into private experience, aesthetic experience was theorized as that which moved individuals away from sense into an objectified, rational public sphere.

With the goal of affirming a *sensus communis*, a shared public sense, many theories of taste in the eighteenth century that were later integral to Kant's appraisal of the aesthetic sought to prove that art's appeal to the senses was limited. Beginning with Shaftesbury's widely read ideas on taste in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), the measure of a work's value shifted from its pleasurable effects on an audience, or affect, to such purely intrinsic considerations as the "perfection" and "harmony" of the work itself. Shaftesbury's work, notably influential in Germany, explicitly stated that "provoked sense" was antithetical to the contemplation and judgment necessary to appreciate what is truly beautiful. Beauty, Shaftesbury claimed, could not be the object of sense. In language that suggests a political analogy between sensual subjects and the mob, Shaftesbury claimed that only "the riotous mind" was "captive to sense," and could "never enter in competition, or contend for beauty with the virtuous mind of reason's culture."³² Shaftesbury's language reveals a central issue underlying the concept of taste after the settlement of 1688: political accountability. As Linda Dowling has argued, beneath the debate between sense and reason in matters of taste was the "question of how legitimacy is to be achieved in the liberal polity, how a state that derives its authority from the consent of its people may pretend to be founded upon anything more secure than – as its enemies kept warning – the restless, irrational appetites of an ignorant population."³³ To counter such irrational forces, Shaftesbury conceived of taste as a force that educated one to choose virtue and reason over pleasure, thereby fostering an ideal political order.

Building on Shaftesbury's theories, Kant's philosophy of aesthetic judgment

placed artistic consumption in explicit opposition to the kind of sensual consumption by which the pornographic reader made use of his “art,” claiming that “A pure judgement of taste has, then, for its determining ground neither charm nor emotion, in a word, no sensation as matter of the aesthetic judgement.”³⁴ Disinterested aesthetic contemplation was figured as antithetical to the kinds of physical reaction prompted by the pornographic. Throughout the eighteenth century, the aesthetic was viewed in its most dominantly understood forms as an invisible social contract. The aesthetic was no hedonistic cult of individual sensibility, as it came to be figured later in the nineteenth century, but rather a binding structure between what Kant saw as “on the one hand, the universal feeling of sympathy, and, on the other, the faculty of being able to communicate universally one’s inmost self – properties constituting in conjunction the befitting social spirit of mankind, in contradistinction to the narrow life of the lower animals” (*CJ* 226). Art was that which allowed the growing community of educated and propertied individuals to represent itself to itself.

As the market for cultural products gained relative autonomy in the first half of the eighteenth century, theories of taste sought to discriminate between modes of consumption, and in doing so to define the boundaries of polite society. Taste was figured in the writings of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Jonathan Richardson, and Addison, among others, as that which gave purchase to the polite society of gentlemen. In an article in the *Weekly Register*, Shaftesbury declared that “So much depends on true Taste, with regard to eloquence, and even morality, that no one can be properly stil’d a gentleman, who does not take the opportunity to enrich his own capacity, and settle the elements of taste, which he may improve at leisure.”³⁵ Taste became a sign of conspicuous leisure through which one displayed one’s distance from certain types of work through polite conversation about the arts. Taste, however, did not simply display one’s leisure, but leisure rigorously and morally applied toward the secular arts.³⁶

In a more clear example of taste as upward mobility and a mark of cultural distinction, Jonathan Richardson advised in his 1715 treatise *A Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage of the Science of the Connoisseur* that taste in the arts promotes morality:

If gentlemen were lovers of painting, and connoisseurs, this would help to reform themselves, as their example and influence would have the like effect on the common people. All animated beings naturally covet pleasure, and eagerly pursue it as their chief good; the great affair is to choose those that are worthy of rational beings, such as are not only innocent, but noble and excellent. Men of easy and plentiful fortunes have commonly a great part of their time at their disposal, and the want of knowing how

to pass those hours away, in virtuous amusements, contributes perhaps as much to the mischievous effects of vice, as covetousness, pride, lust, love of wine, or any other passion whatsoever. If gentlemen therefore found pleasure in pictures, drawings, prints, statues, intaglias, and the like curious works of art; in discovering their beauties and defects; in making proper observations thereupon, and in all the other parts of a connoisseur, how many hours of leisure would be profitably employed, instead of what is criminal, mischievous, and scandalous!³⁷

From this excerpt it is possible to see why Ronald Paulson has remarked that in the eighteenth century “Aesthetics is religion empirically challenged, belief turned into appreciation of beauty, [and] good manners.”³⁸ Taste in the arts was figured by Richardson as a secular alternative to scriptural morality. However Richardson did not emphasize the moral lessons of individual works of art so much as the forms of pleasure available through the process of engaging with them, pleasures “worthy of rational beings.” In doing so, he signaled an important shift in eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy. Where classical aesthetics was primarily oriented toward the work of art, modern aesthetics was, and still is, concerned with the subject enjoying the art; modern aesthetics endeavors to gain a knowledge of the subject’s inner state and to describe it with the instruments of empiricism.³⁹ Richardson was no philosopher, but he implicitly addressed a central concern of most theories of taste in the eighteenth century: how to direct empirical stimuli toward positive, rational, ends. If pornography showed how aesthetic consumption could gratifyingly indulge sensation, theories of taste in Britain, and later in Germany of the aesthetic, offered an alternative view that relied on subjugating the body’s interests to those of the mind.

The senses were thus figured as both a problem and a solution in aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century. Given the etymological meaning of the term aesthetic – things material and perceptible to the senses – the project of aesthetics in the tradition of Shaftesbury and Kant, their efforts to limit or transcend the sensual, appear counter-intuitive. However, to understand the importance of limiting the powers of sense in aesthetic theories, one should understand the relationship between the project of taste and the creation of a public sphere of (predominantly Whig) gentlemen.⁴⁰ Political authority in this period was granted to those who could abstract ideas out of the raw data of experience and think in general terms. To think generally was to be able to consider the good of the whole over one’s personal good. John Barrell has explained that men of independent means in the early eighteenth century were thought to be above private interest, and therefore more worthy to act on the public’s behalf. In contrast, a man with an occupation might discover a desire to promote the interests

of his occupation, and this would prevent him from discovering what is good for man in general. The experience of such a man would be considered too narrow to serve as a basis of ideas general enough to be represented as true for all mankind. Because mechanical arts (and pornography was considered a mechanical art) are concerned with things, material objects, it was thought they could not offer an opportunity for the exercise of a generalizing and abstract reason. Barrell claims that men of the public sphere believed: "The man of independent means . . . who does not labour to increase them [his means], will be released from private interest, from the occlusions of a narrowed and partial experience of the world, and from an experience of the world as *material*."⁴¹

If a gentleman considered himself free from materiality, he saw the common man as wallowing in it. James Harris in *Philological Inquiries* (1780–1781) commented that "The vulgar . . . [are] merged in sense from their earliest infancy, never once dreaming anything to be worthy of pursuit, but what either pampers appetite, or fills their purse."⁴² Materiality was seen as anathema to politics and gentleman-like behavior. It was vulgar. By extension, it was unsuitable to displays of taste and aesthetic consumption, the activities of the gentleman.

Materialism and selfishness were perceived as forces that worked against polite society and the new breed of gentlemen–rulers who composed the public sphere. As Shaftesbury wrote in *Characteristics*, "A Man of thorow *Good-breeding*, whatever else he be, is incapable of doing a rude or brutal Action. He never *deliberates* in this case, or considers of the matter by prudential Rules of Self-Interest or Advantage. He acts from his Nature."⁴³ One's "Nature" Shaftesbury argued in his works, is not derived, as Hobbes would have it, from self-interest, but born of a moral "sense" and "natural affection" for society, an ethical sociability that disapproves of individual pleasure.⁴⁴ Lawrence Klein has suggested that Shaftesbury and his contemporaries frequently connected Hobbes with the sort of sexual libertinism represented by the Earl of Rochester. The two were associated after an account of Rochester's deathbed conversion circulated the idea that Rochester confessed reading Hobbes had turned him into a voluptuary.⁴⁵ Associating Hobbesian individualism with sensual indulgence, Shaftesbury asked,

Who is there who can well or long enjoy anything, when *alone*, and abstracted perfectly, even in his very Mind and Thought, from every thing belonging to Society? Who wou'd not, on such Terms as these, be presently cloy'd by any sensual Indulgence? Who would not soon grow uneasy with his Pleasure, however exquisite, till he had found means to impart it, and make it *truly pleasant* to him, by communicating, and sharing it at least with some *one* single Person?⁴⁶

Implicit in this and countless other shapings of the experience of taste is an attack against the sensually solipsistic pleasures of pornography. Acquiring, having, and displaying taste is always a communicable, communal activity.

One of the objectives of the philosophies of taste in the Shaftesbury tradition was to discriminate between the proper and improper use of sensations, showing how to abstract the senses into reason or understanding so that they could be articulated as/for communal experience. Philosophers of taste in the Shaftesbury tradition each began from sensuous perception, but worked outward from individual perception toward a conformity with higher laws, often those of divinity, in order to reconcile individual with community, sense with idea. Taste in the Shaftesbury tradition was disembodied as it was abstracted into a sense provided by God. Caygill has suggested that equivocation over whether taste was sensible or ideal issues from the providential foundation of British theorists who claimed that individual judgment was an intuition that was given the status of an idea through providence. Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Kames, and Burke all claimed that providence could be experienced immediately, like a sense. "In this way," Caygill claims, "the freedom and autonomy of the individual at the level of sense is reconciled with the lawlike characteristics of universality and necessity at the level of idea." However, the result of this conclusion was "the disembodiment of taste; it became an intangible medium of exchange between the rational will of providence and the irrational individual sentiment."⁴⁷

The search for conformity between sentiment and reason, individual sense and universal law that Caygill observes in the thinkers of the Shaftesbury tradition is often expressed as a *je ne sais quois*, or gift of providence. Ironically, the *je ne sais quois*, through its divine provision, grounds the sense of taste as a rational principle, legitimating subjective sentiment by showing its accordance with (divine) law. Shaftesbury articulates the *je ne sais quois* as that which defies analysis and can be described only in terms of the effect it produces:

However difficult or desperate it may appear in any Artist to endeavour to bring Perfection into his Work; if he has not at least an *Idea of* PERFECTION to give him Aim, he will be found very defective and mean in his Performance. Tho his Intention be to please the World, he must nevertheless be, in a manner, *above it*; and fix his Eye upon that consummate *Grace*, that Beauty of *Nature*, and that *Perfection* of Numbers, which the rest of Mankind, feeling only by the Effect, whilst ignorant of the Cause, term the *Je-ne-scaj-quoy* [sic], the unintelligible, or the I know not what; and suppose to be a kind of *Charm*, or *Inchantment*, or which the Artist himself can give no account.⁴⁸

The *je ne sais quois* is supposed to demonstrate the union of sense and reason that reflects the laws of a universe over which God, who gives reason to mankind,

presides. But the inability to posit a logical explanation for the relationship between reason and sense leaves the aesthetic *je ne sais quois* vulnerable to the attack of at least one pornographic text, *Venus in the Cloister* (1724). *Venus* mocks the *je ne sais quois* by intimating that it reflects a natural order over which one's own sensations, not God or reason, have sovereignty. The narrator relates:

After this moment do they kiss who truly love each other, by amorously darting their tongue between the lips of the beloved object. For my part, I find nothing in the world more sweet and delicious when one does it as one should do, and I never put it in practice but I am ravished with ecstasy and so feel all over my body an extraordinary titillation and a certain *je ne sais quoy*, which I am not able otherwise to express than only by telling thee that it is a pleasure which pours itself out with a sweet impetuosity over all my secret parts, which penetrates the most profound recess of my soul, and which I have a right to call the sovrein pleasure.⁴⁹

Sovereign in this passage is not God or reason, but sensual pleasure. This passage shows clearly how pornographic texts viewed themselves in dialogic opposition to the theories of taste and morality of their time. Perpetually asserting the dominion of sense over reason, they frequently attempted to expose the class biases of such theories.

Notably, William Hogarth departed from the Shaftesbury tradition in politically decisive ways that revealed his more solidly middle-class origins. In the *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), he invited *all* readers into his analysis, “Ladies, as well as gentlemen,” and stated that “no one may be deterr’d, by want of such previous knowledge, from entering into this enquiry.”⁵⁰ In doing so, he attacked the very thing which educated gentlemen, as educated males, relied on to assert their ability to judge – abstraction. By opening up the faculties of taste to anyone, Hogarth’s treatise ran counter to Hutcheson’s notion in *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1735) that though “the noblest Pleasures of the internal Senses, in the Contemplation of the Works of Nature, are expos’d to every one without Expence . . . there are Objects of these internal senses, which require Wealth or Power to procure the use of them as frequently as we desire; as appears in Architecture, Music, Gardening, Painting, Dress, Equipage, Furniture; of which we cannot have the full Enjoyment without Property.”⁵¹ Hogarth’s *Analysis* worked against much of the early eighteenth-century aesthetic tradition. He suggested that physical stimulation is at the heart of all aesthetic encounters, and that the objects themselves are more important than rules and theories.

Ronald Paulson has done much to recuperate and recontextualize Hogarth’s interesting ideas in *The Beautiful, Novel, and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy*

(1996) and his introduction to the reprinted version of *Analysis of Beauty* (1996). Paulson argues that Hogarth's theories were an antidote to the ideological elitism of the Shaftesbury/Hutcheson school of thought:

Hogarth, the astute mirror of his society, recognized, [that] Shaftesbury's aesthetic disinterestedness had a political underside: the alliance of monarch and church is corrected by a government of disinterested (because property-owning, well-off) civic humanist gentlemen; royal patronage of art is corrected by similarly disinterested connoisseurs (the same persons). The only people who can *afford* to appreciate virtue and beauty are the Whig oligarchs – the “many” which the Shaftesburys wanted to balance the “one” of the monarch.⁵²

However, as Paulson notes in his introduction to the treatise, “The *Analysis* was not, like Hogarth's prints, a best-seller. There was only one edition in his lifetime.”⁵³ By contrast, eleven editions of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* were printed between 1711 and 1790. Though in hindsight, as subsequent chapters of this book will implicitly show, Hogarth looks like a visionary of twentieth-century aesthetics, his materialist and democratic aesthetics were out of step with his time, and Monroe Beardsley claims they were generally considered “single-minded and simple” by his contemporaries.⁵⁴ The critical censure of Hogarth's ideas provides more evidence of the prevailing ideology that aesthetic reception should demonstrate a rational effort to balance or subjugate the effects of sensory stimuli, and in doing so lay claim to one's subject position as a disinterested gentleman of the public sphere.

One motivation for the push against pure sensation was England's increasing wealth in the eighteenth century. As John Guillory has argued, the cultivation of taste in the cultural domain became a means of checking the greed and social irresponsibility associated with luxury and uncontrolled consumption.⁵⁵ To counter the individual interest in material properties or bodies, appreciation of art had to be realized as that which led away from the particular toward the general. In the tradition of Shaftesbury, Lord Kames argued this idea in *Elements of Criticism* (1785):

To promote the Fine Arts in Britain, has become of greater importance than is generally imagined. A flourishing commerce begets opulence; and opulence, inflaming our appetite for pleasure, is commonly vented on luxury, and on every sensual gratification: selfishness rears its head; becomes fashionable; and infecting all ranks, extinguishes the *amor patriae*, and every spark of public spirit. To prevent or retard such fatal corruption, the genius of Alfred cannot devise any means more efficacious, than the venting opulence upon the Fine Arts; riches employ'd, instead of encouraging vice, will excite virtue.⁵⁶

Kames's statement exemplifies the way philosophies of taste and morality vilified the senses for their invitation to selfish, anti-social behavior, a behavior troped in the language of sexuality, "inflaming," "exciting," and "begetting." Kames's text also clearly links the project of the aesthetic to the creation of a public sphere. If religion could no longer be relied on to incite virtuous acts of public-spirited beneficence, art had to take its place through an internal disciplining of the aesthetic subject.

An earlier version of this view appeared in Addison's essay *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712). The essay's description of the aesthetic as a form of occupational leisure provided an alternative to the drinking and gambling notable in both the aristocratic and lower classes. Because there were "but very few who know how to be idle and innocent," Addison said, virtue had to be cultivated through proper use of the imagination:

Of this Nature are [the pleasures] of the Imagination, which do not require such a Bent of Thought as is necessary to our more serious Employments, nor, at the same time, suffer the Mind to sink into that Negligence and Remissness, which are apt to accompany our more sensual Delights, but, like a gentle Exercise to the Faculties, awaken them from Sloth and Idleness, without putting them upon any Labour or Difficulty.⁵⁷

If the arts were to become an alternative form of leisure to those that inculcated sloth and sensual indulgence, their mode of consumption had to be regulated in such a way that turned the feelings and sensations produced by art not inward upon the subject, as in pornography, but outward toward the idea of universality. Through this perceived universality a public bond could be created that was based on one's seemingly innermost subjectivity. Though the object of a private and intimate feeling, beauty, as it was represented in theories of taste, purportedly awakened the *idea* of reason present in everyone. In this way it transcended private subjectivity and represented the experience of a *common sense*.

Ironically, British empirical philosophy started out by its own opposition to reason and its belief in sense, but as one classic text of aesthetics notes, "little by little and in various ways [it] allowed the animal frame to absorb reason again, to do its work, and to wear its colors."⁵⁸ Thus the work of British empirical philosophies of taste led quite naturally into the conclusions of Kant, who insisted that the fundamental feeling of beauty be perceived "not as a private feeling, but as a public sense" (*CJ* 84) and that beauty's production of the idea of understanding, or reason, necessarily transcends the personal. Kant denied the title of philosophy to British theories of taste because they didn't properly account for the universality and necessity of judgments, but he was nevertheless deeply read in them, and his work shows traces of their thinking, notably, Shaftesbury's.⁵⁹

Kant and modern aesthetics: excising sense

As I have shown, taste in eighteenth-century Britain was really a code of behavior signaling membership within a distinct group of individuals who were in the process of redefining the social order. Though these individuals also likely formed part of pornography's readership, it was central to their public ideal of a civic society that they display taste in a manner distinct from the consumptive patterns of pornography. As the century progressed, the aesthetics of manners became less prominent than theoretical contributions to aesthetics. Frances Ferguson has argued that "The aesthetic, in the process of coming to be defined as something potentially distinct from taste as a particularly demanding version of consumption, becomes less important as social and sociological phenomenon and more important for representing a distinct kind of experience."⁶⁰ Kant distinguished himself from British theorists of taste by rigorously attempting to define the aesthetic as a philosophical category. Eighteenth-century Germany differed socio-politically from Britain. Germany had no large urban center, no central authority, nor an educated middle class. While in Britain proponents of taste reflected a mainstream, increasingly dominant view of the social order, in Germany aestheticians reflected an increasing alienation on the part of artists and intellectuals.⁶¹ The mercantile and social differences of the two countries account for some of the distinctions between theories of taste and what in Germany was called the aesthetic.

Throughout this book I will use Kant's *Critique of Judgement* as the focal text for examining the concept of art and aesthetic experience in the modern period. Though since the early eighteenth century there have been a number of different aesthetics whose values are both diachronically and synchronically contingent, as of course are Kant's, no text has dominated modern Western aesthetic thought as Kant's has. The purpose of modern aesthetics was to categorize and distinguish the fine arts as a separate sphere of human activity, distinct not simply from the sciences, but notably from commerce and base sense.⁶² 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. To foreground that break, I want to trace the critical ideas