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**The Blue Flame and the Red Flame:  
Love and Eroticism**

**Nisrine Jaafar**

**A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Sociology and Anthropology**

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**ABSTRACT**  
**The Blue Flame and the Red Flame: Love and Eroticism**

**Nisrine Jaafar**

**This study is an explorative journey into the realm of eroticism. A primary emphasis is placed on the necessity to differentiate erotic experience from the pornographic one. The claim here is that eroticism cannot unfold where the notion of an “indispensable other”, and hence the element of love, do not come into play. Eroticism, as this study will attempt to demonstrate is not a game to be played solo. In the fire of desire, eroticism or the red flame, embraces recognition, alterity, mutuality, empathy and unity –all of which constitute the blue flame: love. Once both flames collide and dance together in celebration of sexual desire, a new kind of reality unleashes. In order to delve into erotic reality, partners are supposed to transgresses everyday life and its binding confines. How successful the endeavor turns will be depends on a couple’s ability to slide in and out of both realities with subtlety and equilibrium.**

**Developing a theoretical framework based on the works of Bakhtin, Paz, Bataille, Giddens and Gonzalez-Crussi, I review five Films (Eyes Wide Shut, Lolita, Exotica, The Lover and Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love). These films debate the issues of eroticism, love, taboo and obsession in different but illuminating ways, expand our understanding of heterosexuality and explore the relationship between the blue flame of love and the red flame of eroticism.**

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I stand speechless, or should I say “wordless” before Randa’s comforting presence; for, despite the physical distance keeping us apart, she managed to accompany my thesis journey step by step. To her and to Roberto, I owe a great part of my confidence.

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**“Esthétique du détour, l'érotisme est en tout cas le discours conscient de l'autre”.**

**Michel Zeraffa,  
(*Erotique: Revue D'Esthetique 1978. 1/2*)**

**To him, whose mere presence has made it possible to taste pleasures, everlasting  
and ephemeral.**



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## **Introduction:**

Eroticism is a highly problematic issue. Little consensus has actually emerged about its symbolic nature as well as the functions it fulfills in society. Quite often, eroticism is confused with pornography, even though in my view, they happen to be situated at two opposite ends of the same continuum: that of sexuality. Eroticism, as I will attempt to explain it throughout my thesis, is defined by the Oxford English Preference Dictionary (1995) as the “state of sexual arousal, the insistent sexual impulse/desire”, brought to an individual by means of his/her response to “erotic images –ones that stimulate sexual love/desire”.

This is not however, the heart of the matter. Indeed, “eroticism cannot be discussed, unless [humans] too [are] discussed in the process” (Bataille, 1957: 8). In a sense then, eroticism is envisaged as an experience inherently wedded to life itself. Initially springing from sex, eroticism does not stay within the latter’s confines. On the contrary, in involving what Bataille labels the individual’s “inner life”, eroticism transcends sex per se, in an attempt to transform carnal desire into meaning. Eroticism eventually starts from the body and its urge to reach pleasure. Nevertheless, it does not at any point cause the “other” to be undermined.

Eroticism therefore embodies a constant yearning for an “extra locally situated consciousness” or an “other” –a core concept borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin’s essays on *Art and Answerability*. This other is supposed to be at once, one’s object and subject of desire. As Gonzalez-Crussi puts it, desire -which is the animator of all erotic manifestations- is “the concrete way of relating to others”. According to him, if desire were merely explained as being a “desire of a body”, the explanation would not only

partially account for the gestalt of its prevalence (Gonzalez-Crussi, 1988: 12). What we try to possess then, is not just a body, “but a body brought to life by [free] consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 166) Hence, inside the body, an active consciousness shall be solicited and addressed in its deepest fantasies.

My assumption is that an involvement with the potential other is not only about acquiring recognition, but also about knowing the former on a much deeper plane than that of everyday life.

In what I will be labeling after Murray Davis, the “erotic reality”, an amalgam of inner and outer experience is bound to take place. What is implied by outer experience in this context is one’s relationship to his/her bodily contours as well as the other’s, to the senses, and to the setting within which this erotic reality is instigated. Inner experience on the other hand, refers to the powers of imagination, the individual’s anguish vis-à-vis his/her finitude, the understanding of pleasure, and most importantly, feelings of reciprocity and love. Indeed, for erotic reality to be acutely activated, it seems to me that love is a necessary element.

By looking at “erotic reality”, I shall demonstrate how eroticism embraces the sexual act, yet goes beyond it in the same instance. Eroticism in sum is a process involving the body, the senses, the faculty of imagination as well as the emotions.

Adopting such a description will allow me to identify what Weitman has chosen to describe as “the ideal” of eroticism –i.e. the meaning with which erotic sexuality is endowed, so that every individual manages to detect it without losing his/her particular preferences.

The notion of the ideal I am alluding to here makes it adequate to consult, in terms of analytical data, the plethora of records in mass media highlighting the assumption that erotic sexuality (used interchangeably with the word eroticism) is one of the greatest interpersonal rituals. Indeed, photographs, paintings, poems, newspaper clippings, films and even sculptures have emerged from their authors' concern with crystallizing the notion of eroticism (Weitman, 1998).

The theoretical framework for this thesis draws on the large amount of literature that has been produced in view of studying eroticism. My first chapter discusses the difference between pornography and eroticism. Then, the second chapter proceeds to defining the extent to which eroticism is mainly fostered on the presence of an indispensable other, with whom an all-embracing unity is supposed to occur. I will mention here that the "erotic dimension" –a terminology borrowed from anthropologist Esther Newman- within which I am locating my research, is that of heterosexuality, where men are attracted to women and women to men. Other sexualities (auto sexuality, homosexuality, bestiality, pedophilia and others) would require alternative discussions.

In studying the notion of the other, love, recognition and transgression will be addressed before moving on to the third chapter, where the prevalence of "erotic reality" is introduced and justified. The different components this reality calls into play, such as the body, the senses, the special alterations in spatial and temporal dimensions, the concepts of mutuality and that of alterity are all explored. Then, a shift to consumer culture's manipulation of eroticism is operated to highlight the manifold ways individuals could be enslaved both in their bodies and beings

The fourth chapter analyzes five selected movies -namely, *The Lover*, *Exotica*, *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*, and *Lolita*- in order to examine how erotic reality unfolds in modern filmic representation. This section explores how eroticism lives the Western imagination. It also reveals how the proposed theory relates to the practice of eroticism in all its complexities.

The films –as carriers of constructed meanings and signs- expose and display the possible prevalence of common and essential components characterizing erotic reality; and in doing so, they test the appropriateness of my theorization about the latter’s development.

Eroticism is an intersubjective ritual trying to encompass love and the yearning for an indispensable other, while at the same time accounting for both sexes’ fantasies. By defining it as such and closely looking at its capacity to ensure a middle-ground setting defying society’s gender dichotomies, I will attempt to show that eroticism is the process of transforming desire from a drive to violate and conquer, to a language of knowledge and understanding. Erotic reality is the realm of enchantment.

## **I. Theorizing Eroticism**

Theorizing eroticism requires that I first draw the distinction between eroticism and pornography. After locating eroticism on the continuum of sexuality, I will discuss the reasons why eroticism cannot unfold, unless the notion of an indispensable other is prevalent. This other however, being the opposite sex in my research, is not socialized to observe eroticism in the same fashion. Culture, notably Bauman's "consumer culture", has the ability to create and/or enhance gender dichotomies. Nevertheless, these clashing modes of receptivity do not succeed in undermining the importance of eroticism. Men and women eventually meet, in the vicinity of erotic reality, where love and taboo transgression animate their union.

### **Eroticism versus Pornography**

"What is pornographic and what is not. Understanding and identifying it is complicated by the fact that there is not a clear cut definition of what is pornographic" (Fithian, 1999: 119). Indeed, there is no consensus about "pornographic material"—especially since the latter is "infinitely public and political" (Hunter, 2000: 2). Eventually, the conclusion stemming out of heated examinations dictates as D.H Lawrence already mentioned long before: "what's pornography to one man is laughter of a genius to another" (1936: 11). Mc Nair adds to Lawrence's consideration: "pornography and the elements said to compromise it are shifting, slippery things, changing their content and meaning over time and between cultures" (1996: 57).



This may well explain why eroticism and pornography are often used interchangeably. Starting with a review of the divergent opinions about pornography, I shall attempt to unleash the fine line distinguishing it from eroticism -as I define it.

### **Anti-Porn Scholars**

“La pornographie appartient à l’imaginaire de l’homme”, or “pornography is a particular feature of male imagination” (Alberoni, 1987: 13). According to Alberoni, pornography is a “hallucinatory” form of satisfying desire. Voyeurism, i.e. the fact of making an object out of something/someone, happens to be one of its most prominent constituents. No identification is bound to occur, when voyeurism is at play, between one’s fantasies and the other’s. Indeed, for Alberoni, ever since antiquity, the production of naked statues has been a popular task, undertaken to merely feed male masturbatory fantasies (1987: 13). I am not sure whether female fantasies were quenched in the way by the sight of naked male statues at the time. One would have to research the epoch’s artistic creations anew and seek their underlying connotations/purposes. However, it is in my opinion undeniable that voyeurism has been more prominent among men than amongst women, due to a host of socio-cultural prohibitions.

Now after antiquity, more “modern” productions, have taken over in order to fulfill the same duty. A proliferation of movies, magazines and best sellers came along to simply portray a series of sexual acts, whereby male protagonists and apparently females also, received sexual gratification.

Yet, females within pornographic representations, as Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut suggest, had to entertain the needs of those men, and deliberately propose to

grant them pleasure. Sex was offered in the form of an uncontested gift-giving activity from avid females, to passive male receivers (1987: 14). This kind of imaginary universe, excludes any alternative feeling to pure sexual impulse. Relationships are based on shared grounds of understanding and commitment. As Anthony Burgess assumes while addressing some of the manifold pornographic representations, “a pornographic work...encourages solitary fantasy...a pornographic book [as well as any other creative/artistic work] is then, an instrument for procuring a sexual catharsis, but it rarely promotes the desire to achieve this through a social mode, an act of erotic congress: the book is, in a sense, a substitute for a sexual partner” (Hughes, 1970: 5). Excluding the notion of the partner does not imply “sexual liberation”. Rather than functioning as “an expression of human erotic feeling and desire...of love of the life and of the body”, pornography is primarily channeled towards bestowing silence upon both Eros and human desire (Griffin, 1981:1). A sense of violence hence, lies at the very heart of pornographic productions, which reduces the other -namely females in this context- to simple tools in the game of desire. Robin Morgan expanded further on the issue of violence by analyzing pornography as “sexual-violence propaganda”. In her view, “pornography...is in effect the ‘theory’, while rape, battery, molestation and other increasing crimes of sexual violence against women are, not so coincidentally, the ‘practice’” (Morgan, 1984: 110). This is why Morgan drew the “analogy between women and colonized peoples”, specifying that:

Colonization involves control over the land (so that it can be mined for natural resources), enforced alienation of the colonized from their own territory by a system based on exclusion and mystification, and the readiness on the part of the colonizer to

meet all demands for self-determination with a repertory of repression, from ridicule through tokenism to outright brutality (1984: 52-53).

The way out of such a labyrinth lies then in “what has been called feminism”. According to Morgan, the latter represents “a vision of extraordinary love –expressed in a necessarily purgative form of rage” (1984: 31). The sort of “feminist revolution” invoked here is supposed to refute “the depth and breadth of The New Pornocracy [or] porn aristocracy”, managed by mob-like and “exploitative” minds.

New pornocrats (like the Beast) are not stupid. Their virulent sexual fundamentalism more and more emerges in tones peculiarly resembling civil libertarians, revolutionary, and even feminist rhetoric. They degrade the First Amendment by claiming that any objective research done on pornography’s effects is book burning. They stand on their platforms of ‘sexual liberation’, and deliberately try to confuse ‘sexual revolution’ with ‘feminist revolution’ –a circumnavigation that preserves and expands their power even if it does seem, logically, rather like putting the cart before the horse; they insist on putting the coarse before the heart (1984: 112).

Gloria Steinem in turn, highlights a great concern with reduction and exclusion, when she speculates according to Hunter, on the difference between “bad pornography” and “good erotica”. Steinem argues in fact that “erotica may be the word that can differentiate sex from violence and rescue sexual pleasure”. The word’s origin seems to stem from “the Greek root *eros* (sexual desire or passionate love, named for Eros, the son of Aphrodite), and so contains the idea of love, positive choice, and the yearning for a particular person” (1978: 222).

This is eventually contrasted to pornography whose “Greek root *porné* (harlot, prostitute, or female captive) and *graphos* (writing about or description of)” entails the objectification of women (1978: 221).

So, from Steinem's perspective, pornography's message culminates in the conquest of one sex by the other. Sexuality becomes the medium in this case, pornography the tool, for the purpose of selling inequality and propagating the notion that pain alongside humiliation are not really any different from pleasure itself. Nevertheless, sex should be "untangled from aggression and violence" –a tedious process, primarily based on the discovery that "cooperation is more interesting than submission [and] that empathy with [a] sex partner increases [one's] own pleasure" (1978: 221). In a sense then, "pornography is not about sex"; and thus, not about sexual liberation. "It is about an imbalance of male-female power that allows sex to be used as a form of aggression" (1978: 222).

Susan Griffin asserts that women portrayed in pornographic art are there only to be "loved physically"; i.e. admired in terms of their sex appeal (1981: 3). Drawing the analogy between the racists' minds and the pornographers', Griffin indicates how the latter undermine "women's souls", especially by setting aside the amount of pain these may experience in daily life, every time their bodies possibly get "mastered, bound [and] silenced" (1981: 2). Instead, females are painted in the shape of sex goddesses, always ready to jump into any passing man's bed. So, if pornography does not account for every individual existence and speak to both sexes' desires and aspirations, then what is the gestalt of it as a social production? In Griffin's words, "pornography...is a medium designed primarily to arouse sexual excitement", and sell women's bodies in the form of commodities, without for that matter taking into consideration, whether the latter's needs have been met or not (1981: 106).

Along the same lines, Catherine McKinnon also argues in a 1983 paper presented at the Minneapolis City Council “pornography eroticizes [both] dominance and submission” (<http://www.igc.org/Womensnet/dworkin/OrdinanceCanada.html> /).

Criticized at heart for its capacity to undermine the real female self and replace it with what could be dubbed a “false self” –one imbued with dependence and timidity vis-à-vis expressing her own desires- pornography could not consequently by any means, genuinely represent the human erotic faculty (Griffin, 1981: 217). In Griffin’s perspective:

“[The] erotic feeling brings one back to this state of innocence...to make love is to become like this infant again. We grope with our mouths toward the body of another being, whom we trust, who takes us in his/her arms. We rock together with this loved one. We move beyond speech...We cry out in ecstasy, in feeling...in this world, to touch another is to express love; there is no idea apart from feeling, and no feeling which does not ring through our bodies and our souls at once. This is Eros. Our own wholeness. Not the sensation of pleasure alone, nor the idea of love alone, but the whole experience of human love...here is the capacity for speech and meaning, for culture, for memory, for imagination” (1981: 254).

In a 1985 winter edition of *City Woman* (Canada’s Career Woman’s Magazine), author Mary Wilde quotes Anaïs Nin “the doyenne of erotic writers”, in a letter she addressed to a “French collector of pornography”:

Dear collector, we hate you. Sex loses all its power and magic when it becomes explicit, mechanical, overdone, when it becomes a bore. You have taught us more than anyone I know how wrong it is not to mix it with emotion, hunger, desire, lust, whims, caprices, personal ties, deeper relationships that change color, flavor, rhythms, intensities...sex is intellectual, imaginative, romantic, emotional. That is what gives sex its surprising textures, its subtle transformations, its aphrodisiac elements.

For Wilde, erotica as opposed to pornography, “is sensual as well as sexual, playful and unlimited in scope...it eliminates the negatives of fear, anger and oppression and emphasizes the positives of spontaneity and reciprocal pleasure” in such a way that it has become the “Realpolitik of the new female sexuality”.

In a word then, eroticism could not be called thus were it not for the lively and consensual presence of a necessary other. In the realm of the erotic, the achievement of the sexual act alone is not the essence of the story, but the process that yields to its fulfillment. Such process entails an ardent recourse to the senses that one deploys in favor of experiencing one's desires in a full-fledged fashion, as well as empathizing with the other's desires. Imagination plays a prominent role too, by transplanting lovers from the "real" to "erotic reality" –an idea that will be examined later in the course of my thesis.

### **The Pro-Porn debate:**

On the other hand, authors like Paul Abramson and Steven Pinkerton assert that pornography is "a very powerful and effective vehicle for graphically portraying the idea that sex is pleasurable, and for extolling sexual diversity" (1995: 167). In their view, pornography's social function is constantly being undermined by "prevailing morality", mainly due to its "unconventionality" (1995: 168). Nadine Strossen suggests, contrary to Griffin, that pornography is beneficial to many women (1995: 164). Following Judith Gardiner's argument that "for some women, pornography may actually de-objectify women because they can use it to validate their own desires and pleasures", Strossen also emphasizes the fact that females are, through this medium, capable of reinterpreting fantasy and taking control of it. In a sense, pornography is judged as a guiding manual for successfully achieving the sexual liaison. Not only that, Strossen insists that pornography is a means to defy the way in which sexuality is normatively regulated via everyday institutions, such as schools, families and workplaces. "Perhaps, pornographic fantasy is

one of the few ways that women and men, captives together of those institutions, victims alike of their alienating procedures, are permitted connection” (Strossen, 2000:175).

Similarly, in an article taken from her 1994 book *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, Pat Califia describes how “the flaws of pornography make it difficult to defend”. Yet, despite “the constraints under which it is currently produced, [it] is valuable”. For, what pornography does is that “it sends out messages of comfort and rebellion. It says: Lust is not evil. The body is not hateful. Physical pleasure is a joyful thing and should not be hidden or denied”. According to Califia, women are endowed with an undeniable “sexual hunger” that they release by identifying with the works of others –namely, pornographers. Those who manufacture pornography seem to “think about and do the things you dream about” without feeling the obligation to repress their yearns. Hence, in their action, Califia discerns a ray of freedom, a possibility to make a personal choice ([http:// www.eserver.org/cultronix/Califia/meese /](http://www.eserver.org/cultronix/Califia/meese/)).

The same point is made in Wendy McElroy’s position as a “pro-sex feminist”. Her contention is that “pornography benefits women, both personally and politically” for many reasons that I will be briefly sketching out on her behalf. Indeed, McElroy argues that pornography constitutes a useful/informative documentation on sexuality as it offers “a panoramic view of the world’s sexual possibilities [and] allows women to ‘safely’ experience sexual alternatives and satisfy healthy sexual curiosity”. By operating in this way, pornography manages to “strip away the emotional confusion that so often surrounds real world sex”. Not only this, it is even capable of breaking away from “cultural and political stereotypes”, in order for each female to achieve a personal interpretation of sex, rather than responding to its urges with shame and repression.

Allowing pornography or legitimizing it implies in this context, not only a re-appropriation of free speech by women “whose sexuality has been controlled by censorship through the centuries”; but an evidenced protection for “women sex workers, who are stigmatized by society” and often considered as purely “indoctrinated” individuals.

McElroy assumes then, that the law should not make pornography illegal. According to her, two antagonistic perceptions about the purpose designed for law in society, perpetually underscore the debate over pornography:

The first view, to which pro-sex feminists subscribe, is that law should protect choice. *‘A woman’s body a woman’s right’* applies to every peaceful activity a woman chooses to engage in. The law should come into play only when a woman initiates force or has force initiated against her. The second view, to which both conservatives and anti-porn feminists subscribe, is that law should protect virtue. Law should enforce proper behavior. It should come into play whenever there has been a breach of public morality, or a breach of ‘women’s class interest’ ([http:// www.Zetetics. com/ Mac/ freeinqu. html/](http://www.Zetetics.com/Mac/freeinqu.html/)).

Still, regardless of this “old wine in new bottles” one has to peek through at the law itself and seek its definition of pornography, as well as the social implementations on the basis of which the latter is being judged.

### **Pornography and Law**

Given the disparity in the ways courts and governmental agencies around the globe choose to define pornography, I have decided to limit the scope of the present research to an understanding of Canada’s and the United States’ legal approaches to the issue. In a 1993 Harvard Law Review, Rebecca Eisenberg argued that “beside geographic proximity, Canada and the United States share many sociological similarities”. The author did not fail to mention that both countries are also ruled under the same kind of



constitution. Nevertheless, Canadian and American perspectives concerning pornography are not exactly identical (<http://www.bossanova.com/rebeca/clips/porno.html/>).

**The United States:** In an online-posted *Backgrounder*, the Minnesota Family Council contended the following:

Pornography is the term used to describe a work, which uses sexual images with the primary purpose of causing sexual arousal. Some of this material may be 'indecent', that is, offensive to some but still protected by the First Amendment. But some pornography is 'obscene' and is not constitutionally protected (<http://www.mfc.org/resources/backgrounders/pornography.html/>)

The problem remains however, in reaching a verdict around the definition of "obscenity". According to Hunter, the term obscenity has its roots in the Latin *obscensus*, meaning, "filthy or repulsive...originally used by 18<sup>th</sup> century English judges to describe and censor sexually suggestive poems and stories" (<http://www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/chunter/>). In the United States, the term obscenity has been loaded with a fixed legal connotation, dictated by the Miller v. California test that emerged in 1973 and consisted of three criteria, the U.S Supreme Court chose to put forth:

1. The average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, when taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest in sex.
2. The work depicts conduct specifically defined as patently offensive.
3. The work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value (<http://www.mfc.org/resources/backgrounders/pornography.html/>).

Given the prevalent vagueness in the above-enumerated criteria, another "less technical way of classifying pornography" is used, dividing its material into two major categories that the Minnesota Family Council addresses in the *Backgrounder*:

**Hard-core and soft-core.** Hard-core porn often features total nudity, lewd display of genitalia, actual representation of sex acts, bestiality, incest, fetishes...exploitation of children and violence. Soft-core porn such as Playboy magazine, may also include full

nudity and lewd representation of genitalia, but will not emphasize violence and sexual perversion (<http://www.mfc.org/resources/backgrounders/pornography.html/>)

Deciding upon which material should be banned in the United States remains at the discretion of the judge and his/her court. Stemming from the constant fear to transgress the First Amendment, no firmly established law is hence bound to punish pornographic works –a fact that has led to a tremendous growth in the fiscal benefits of pornography in the U.S (Hattemer& Showers, 1993: 59).

**Canada:** As in the United States, the Supreme Court has also issued its own version of the obscenity law and “upheld [its] statute, which criminalizes the publication and distribution of obscene materials, defined as those that have as a ‘dominant characteristic’ the ‘undue exploitation of sex’” (Eisenberg, 1993). In taking this measure, the Canadian Supreme Court did admit that its action infringed upon “section 2(b) of the Charter [for] it sought to prohibit certain types of expressive activity on the basis of the content or meaning being conveyed”. Yet, such transgression proved weaker than the “overriding objective of the [formulated] law, [which culminated in] the avoidance of harm in society in general and to women in particular”. The latter interest was perceived as poignantly sufficient to inflict a certain restriction upon free speech (Eisenberg, 1993).

It is noteworthy that the Canadian legislation on pornography addresses the issue of women, by pointing out the demeaning implications the former can devolve upon them. An overt display of pornographic works, especially hard-core ones including “impairment of then body...affliction of physical pain...somasochism...and necrophilia” may well function as assertive statements of “dehumanization, subordination and servile submission” –especially that the “very appearance of [participants’] consent

makes the depicted acts even more degrading”, yet often legitimized in the eyes of exposed individuals (Eisenberg, 1993).

### **Cyberporn**

Apart from North American laws and their speculations on the issue of pornography, there seem to be growing concerns with “the negative and highly controversial consequence of new computer technologies”, namely “cyberporn” (Alvi, De Keseredy & Ellis, 2000: 361). Unlike pornography, which cannot be subjugated to a single definition, cyberporn is perceived as “sexual material (pictures, words, etc) distributed on the Internet that uses women for the purpose of sexually exciting men” (2000: 361). Researching websites has allowed the authors to “conclude that North American society is currently experiencing a rapid growth of pornography disseminated on the Internet” in an unprecedented diversity: “There are thousands, perhaps millions, of different pornographic images, audio clips, texts, etc...located in cyberspace” (2000: 362). Many of these productions display extreme violence inflicted upon men, women and children alike. Nevertheless, Alvi, De Keseredy and Ellis argue that the availability of cyberporn material is mostly beneficial to males:

[It provides] men with many opportunities to view or read about sexual violence against women and other people...[and] enables [them] to engage in the on-line victimization of women...[by] ‘virtually assaulting’ or ‘virtually raping’ women who use pornographic, real-time communications media such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC), teleconferencing, videoconferencing and so on (2000: 362).

In fact, all three authors seem to agree that cyberporn is the artifact of “male subculture”, animated by “ideologies of...dominance” and aimed at “conquering” as well as “consuming” women like mere commodities (2000: 362).

However, the perspective shed in this discussion brings us way back to the never-ending conflict over the meanings and uses of pornography. Eventually, lack of data about women's active participation in cyberporn "plotting", makes it difficult to understand the real essence of its rapid growth. Many women get involved "undercover" in cyberporn promotion. Indeed, they chiefly hide behind male identities to join what Alvi, De Keseredy and Ellis label "cyberspace male peer support groups" (2000: 362).

A more pressing problem lies in the consideration that "no effective way" is available "to determine the...age of a user who is accessing material through e-mail, mail exploders, news groups or chat rooms" (Rohde, 1999: 84). Hence, minors' exposure is not subjugated to any form of plausible and/or possible censorship.

Actually, since the U.S Supreme Court "found that the Internet is a unique and wholly new medium of communication" and judged its content to be "as diverse as human thought", cyberspace was granted "the fullest degree of First Amendment protection available under the Constitution" (1999: 83). Did the U.S Supreme Court break the Communications Decency Act of 1996 "which had made it a crime to knowingly transmit 'indecent' messages over the Internet to anyone under eighteen years of age" (1999: 83)?

The answer depends on one's proper definition of 'decency'. One thing is sure though, that the Supreme Court's decision has once more heated the discussion about child pornography and its influences on juveniles –who would give anything to freely surf cyberspace.

In an environment permeated with fake "selves" and camouflaged identities, only a plethora of intriguing questions still stand: Do cyberporn people quench their yearning

for pleasure? Do they satisfy their desires? And if so, how do they manage to reach this stage from behind their computer screens? Being enslaved by technology how do they enjoy erotic freedom?

Inevitably, further research projects should be launched to understand the common thread, linking cyberporn to victimization and to the notion of pleasure (as defined by those who actually purchase cyberporn material/practices).

### **Brief Comparative Critique:**

I will consider at a later stage the notion of sexual regulations, imposed by society's institutions and consumer culture's abuse. What I wish to suggest in a closing statement to this ongoing debate, is that pornography has not made it possible to bring males and females together in their desires. Those pro-pornography and those who are against it are simply reasserting that gender dichotomies are deeply engraved in pornographic work. None of these parties has mentioned that both sexes manage to empathize with one another's fantasies and openly embrace them, in an attempt to achieve unity. The notion of the deliberately chosen other is absented from the dialogic discussion; to the extent that the war over pornography divides people into many camps: mainly those who judge it detrimental to female fantasy, and those who find in it, an appropriation of powerful tools to reassert the latter's fantasies and desires over those of males.

For Alberoni, what pornography does most, is that it paints a world where refutation of sex cannot occur, where sex is easily obtained with no efforts. It seems to me, that pornography in these terms gravitates only around sex. Contrarily, "eroticism

cannot be reduced to pure animal sexuality”, says Octavio Paz in his *An Erotic Beyond: Sade*. In his perspective, both entities –eroticism and animal sexuality- belong to “the same vital universe”; yet, sexuality per se, is “general”, while eroticism “is singular” (1998: 9). That is, emerging from the heart of nature, eroticism happens to be at the same time an “unnatural” manifestation” (1998: 10). For, it displays a higher level of complexity than sexuality per se, mainly because the latter, is basically endowed with the function of ensuring reproduction. This is a point that Bataille raises extensively in *Eroticism, Death and Sensuality*. Now, this locus called reproduction makes sexuality an “impersonal act” (1956: 10). (Remember that the erotic dimension I am discussing, embraces only heterosexual relations). Again, Paz strongly advocates the idea that eroticism “is a form of the social domination of instinct” (1995: 11). For him, similarly to William Simon’s formulation, the so-called “raw sex”, can “only be found as a sequel, as a last sentence” (Simon, 1996: 149). For, even though sex and eroticism “are aspects of the same phenomenon, manifestations of what we call life”, the former remains a “primordial source”, while eroticism adds further meaning to sexual instinct (Paz, 1995: 7). In his book, *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism*, Octavio Paz elaborates further on the importance of eroticism, by drawing the analogy between the latter and poetry: “The relationship of poetry to language resembles that of eroticism to sexuality”, he indicates. What is implied here is that, language in a poem “deviates from its natural end”, which culminates in pure communication (Paz, 1995:4). Hence, a poem “presents us with another sort of communication, one governed by laws different from those [ruling] the exchange of news and information. The language of the poem is everyday language, yet that everyday language says things quite out of the ordinary” (1995: 5).

In like manner, eroticism manages to place reproduction in brackets and manifest itself in a host of other ways –given the fact of course, that individuals do not all observe the same erotic rites; for, as Bataille explains “one man’s eroticism is another man’s disgust”. Being “sexuality socialized and transfigured by the imagination and the will of [humans]”, eroticism could thus best be described as an invention, a recreation of the moment (Paz, 1995: 8); i.e. a process of reciprocating pleasures in a full-fledged manner.

George Bataille elaborates in turn on the comparison between sex and eroticism by emphasizing that people’s “inner life”, comes into play with eroticism (1956: 29). What does he imply by inner life, though? For Bataille, eroticism allows one to battle the utmost anguish: that of mortality. Fully conscious about their “discontinuous” state of being, individuals yearn to transgress the taboo on immortality. The act of stripping naked becomes in these terms, a decisive act, behind which a relinquishment of one’s “selfish self” is sought. A receptive and totally aware other is needed here, in order for the experience of continuity to flourish. This is one distinctive feature of eroticism that deserves further discussion.

In the next chapter I actually examine the process of including the conscious other in a game that could not be played solo: that of eroticism.

## **II. On the Notion of the Indispensable Other.**

*“The BELOVED has become the only force in this world in dissolution that has kept the power to bring us back to fervent life”*

*G. Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”*

### **Recognition, Empathy and Unity**

In discussing eroticism, Bataille argues that the latter could be divided into three categories: physical, emotional and religious eroticism. This thesis will primarily be examining the first two and advocating the fact that they are inevitably entangled, rather than delving into the resemblance between eroticism and divinity.

“The whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still” (Bataille, 1956: 17). Bataille suggests that the transition from a so-called “normal state”, to that of “erotic desire”, presupposes “a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity”, i.e. in humans’ everyday life, or “real world”. What dissolution implies here is that for partners, the way is paved towards “a fusion, where both are mingled”, in such a fashion as to destroy “the self-contained character...[embodied] in ...normal life” by each participant. Stripping naked in eroticism is the foremost decisive action; one that rids the individual of self-possession and overtly declares a deliberate self-giving to the involved other (1956: 17). This does not however entail an undermining of a person’s individuality per se. Hegel already explained that existing for oneself has at its very roots the urge to exist for an



other and desire him/her. In fact, through the process of desiring, one is seeking subsequent recognition. As Jessica Benjamin explains:

We try to realize this desire in an act, but if this act completely destroys the other, the other cannot recognize us. If it consumes the other, leaving her or him with no consciousness, then we come to incorporate or embody this dead, not conscious being. As a person who is utterly destroyed can give no recognition, the alternative is to subjugate, to enslave him or her (Benjamin, 1983: 283).

Subjugation cancels out the meaning of eroticism. That is, a sense of dependency should be felt in eroticism, since unity is not made possible where partners do not realize it. Mikhail Bakhtin has extensively discussed the notion of recognition. According to him, individuals constantly yearn for an outside presence, i.e. some sort of “extra locally situated consciousness”. The corner stone to Bakhtin’s theory, as Caryl Emerson suggests, is the fact that “each of us is incomplete alone” (Emerson, 1996: 111). Sharing is what allows human beings to equally discern their similarities and their differences. The latter are to be sought, according to Bakhtin, and enjoyed at the same time. That is, even though a person has to acknowledge his/her proper uniqueness and assume responsibility for its development, he/she is urged to understand that this sense of uniqueness could not prevail without the other. This is why recognition sets itself in the form of an *a priori* for existence. Hence, “the plastic value” –as Bakhtin labels it- of one’s own body, is drawn to him/her by the manifold reactions of others. What the author terms “excess of seeing” is supposed to work back and forth from one’s “I” to the other’s, and vice versa, so that the encounter –especially the erotic encounter- successfully unfolds (Bakhtin, 1990: 23). This is why “transgression” should occur.

By transgression, Bakhtin means a move outside one’s self and into the other’s “horizon of consciousness”, so that experiencing the latter’s fantasies “from within him”

(or her) is made possible. Empathizing –mainly with the other’s fantasies and desires- in these terms, is a necessary driving force in unleashing eroticism (Bakhtin: 1990: 25-6). Eventually, after empathy and the unity it entails, the individual shall not stay immersed in the other’s self. A return path to one’s proper consciousness ought to be traced. Nevertheless, the end of this path is marked with an enhanced understanding of who one really is, in the light of experienced oneness with the desired object/subject. Jessica Benjamin reiterates this consideration:

My premise is that recognition of the other is the decisive aspect of differentiation. In recognition, someone who is different and outside shares a similar feeling; different minds and bodies attune. In erotic union this attunement can be so intense that self and other feel as if momentarily inside each other, as part of a whole. Receptivity and self-expression, the sense of losing the self in the other and the sense of being truly known for oneself all coalesce. In my view, the simultaneous desire for loss of self and for wholeness (or oneness) with the other, often described as the ultimate point of erotic union, is really a form of desire for recognition. In getting pleasure with the other and taking pleasure in the other, we engage in mutual recognition. Understanding desire as the desire for recognition changes our view of erotic experience (1972: 126).

In a sense then, as Paul Smith reports in his study on Bataille’s works, “the erotic explicitly disrupts the abstract or legalistic wholeness, the assumed plenitude of the individual. The erotic dismantles the controlled and fixed existence of any notion of the completeness of the individual” (Smith, 1995: 234). Hence, by means of meeting the other, an individual becomes aware that he/she is not alone in the world and that the latter does not solely gravitate around their desires.

## **On Love**

An essential component of the struggle for recognition in the realm of eroticism is the element of love. As often as not however, love and eroticism are not considered in their amalgam especially since the erotic is often linked to pure licentiousness alone.

“Le Larousse en onze volumes justifie le pire usage, identifie érotique et licencieux. S’il reconnaît qu’érotique signifie ‘relatif à l’amour’, il ajoute, ‘licencieux: littérature, gravure érotique’” (Etiemble, 1987: 32). Hence, the intimate link bringing love together with eroticism is undermined. For, even though “people long for sexual gratification and for an intimate relationship” to prevail at the same time, these longings are still considered “contradictory”, especially since “traditions providing examples of how to integrate [them] have disappeared” (Wouters, 1998: 187). Post modernity has seemingly compelled social theorists to write about love –particularly romantic love, i.e. the type I am addressing here- in terms of a “functional resource for increasing social integration and communication in a social universe that is fragmented and atomistic...a direct consequence of the evolution of an uncertain ‘risk society’ which has liberated individuals from the moorings of kinship, social status and religion without offering any alternative points of attachment or security” (Lindholm, 1998: 243). This said, in an epoch where self-identity is shaken at heart, “the romantic dream of an erotic bonding to an idealized and unique beloved” is supposed to “serve as a substitute for outmoded loci for identity, offering an experience of self-transformation, personal choice...and sensual expansion” (Lindholm, 1998: 244). This is not to imply that romantic love is only the faculty of those Western societies, falling under Beck’s rubric of “risk”. On the

contrary, a host of other societies experience phenomena akin to what we are used to labeling romantic love.

In my perspective, love and eroticism are two faces of the same coin. And if the aspired for bonding with “an idealized and unique beloved” were to emerge in search of recognition/identity, this would not possibly occur without the emergence, throughout the same process, of carnal desire. Hence, I will essentially perceive romantic love in its link to eroticism. But let me first offer an explanation of the anticipated function attributed to the former.

Bakhtin pays particular attention to this concept, and perceives it to be an absolute “need”. The prevalence of love, he explains, restructures the person’s chaos into an inner meaningful form. Such an end is met, once recognition is granted. So, recognition, which is a “gift” that cannot be founded from within oneself, is simultaneously considered the outcome and the motor force underpinning love (Bakhtin, 1990: 49).

“Love, Lacan says, is a...death of the ego” (Martinson, 1996: 20). Yet, this death of the ego does not entail a radical annihilation of one’s inner self. In *L’Amour à L’Etat Naissant Comme Figure et Mouvement*, Francesco Alberoni asserts, “l’enamouement est quelque chose qui se développe exclusivement dans l’esprit d’une personne. L’autre doit exister...pour que la première, en la retrouvant, soit confirmée dans son enamouement” (Alberoni, 1984: 277). By using the word “enamouement” instead of “amour”, Alberoni defines love as an ongoing process, arising inside a person and bringing him/her closer to the other. The latter’s presence, or so one concludes from the above-mentioned quote, is endowed with the power of confirming to the lover that his/her ego, which has relinquished its “selfishness” or “solitary plenitude” –if one were to borrow Bataille’s

terminology (which was in turn taken from Sartre)- has hitherto managed to meet its full-fledged human existence.

Again, my point is not to eulogize love. Love is “probably the most complex and ambiguous feeling that we know”, for “each love has its own internal logic” (Martinson, 1996: 10). Likewise, one is not capable of avoiding reluctance, vis-à-vis defining “love for all times...given its intimate connection with the processes of becoming”. Therefore, “there may be no single great truth to be unveiled about love” (Dillon, 2000: 24-5).

However, drawing on Octavio Paz’s example, I shall borrow the metaphor associating the “red flame with eroticism and the blue flame with love -human representations of sexuality symbolized by fire”, in order to outline “the limits and the confluences” between both entities (Maciel, 1998: 395). In doing so, Paz suggests a “rehabilitation” of the notion of love, by defining it as “the most powerful force of lived erotic experience”. This testimony stems from his disenchantment with the way desire has been commercialized, and the concept of love drastically undermined in “contemporary consumer capitalism” (Maciel, 1998: 399) –an idea reiterated by Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 26).

George Simmel’s perspective kind of collides with Paz’s speculations around the latter issue. For, he argues that “even the mystery of sexual eroticism lies in the fact that we actually love the body of the other person...we do not merely ‘want’ it and contemplate it only aesthetically. Desire and esteem may be connected with love” (Simmel, 1984: 158). In a sense then, the form of love I am most concerned with observing here -and which those authors obviously advocate- necessitates the presence of what Paz ponders as “the other, the other and its complement, that which converts desire

into agreement: the free will, freedom”, and in the absence of which, eroticism would not be possibly experienced (Paz, 1995: 47). That is, eroticism being a “thirst for oneness”, love –this “mysterious passionate attraction for a single person”- comes into play so that the object of desire does not undergo objectification.

It is noteworthy that the notion of “passionate attraction” is well evoked by Charles Fourier. According to Giddens, Fourier addresses “pleasurable cooperation based upon *attraction passionée*, not passionate love but the flowering of Eros in communicative love”, as the “dominant medium of sociability” (Giddens, 1992: 167-68). Even Giddens himself pays great tribute to “communicative love” or “confluent love” –to use his exact terminology:

In the realm of sexuality, emotion as means of communication, as commitment to and cooperation with others, is especially important. The model of confluent love suggests an ethical framework for the fostering of non-destructive emotion...it provides for the possibility of a revitalizing of the erotic (1992: 202).

That is, as Paz translates it, “love transforms the object of desire into a free subject” (Paz, 1995: 72). Freedom in this context, allows the beloved to fall for the lover’s “seduction” or cease revealing any interest. The concept of seduction is a theme borrowed from Kierkegaard that Paz’s analysis did not tap into. I would assume that seduction techniques are the missing link in the passage from the stage where love is theoretically rehearsed, to the stage where eroticism observes its full-fledged expression. What keeps the blue flame in total concord with the red one, are manifold strategies that a lover applies, and efforts that he/she deploys to empathize with the beloved’s fantasies and desires. Seduction in these terms then, is not endowed with a negative connotation. It actually clearly outlines the process of stepping outside the boundaries of one’s enclosed

self, in order to meet the other. For, “impersonal forms of social intercourse”, as Jessica Benjamin tags them, lead to a repudiation of recognition and an irradiation of all the symbolism inherent to eroticism (1983: 295).

### **On the Notion of Transgression**

*“Ce qui est en jeu, dans l'érotisme, c'est toujours une dissolution des formes constituées”.* Georges Bataille

The course of relinquishing one's self is inevitably accompanied, Bataille asserts, by the occurrence of violence. “In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation” (Bataille, 1956: 16). The use of the word violence may sound quite inappropriate. However, the author justifies it by endowing “violence” with a new definition. Proposing that it is not eventually channeled towards the other, the function violence serves here then, is that of ensuring total fusion between an individual and the desirable object/subject, that of erasing all barriers standing before their unity, while at the same time shaking each one's relation to mortality/“discontinuity”. Violence's first stirrings are hence characterized by the aptitude to dispossess an individual's self of its confinement to its narrow boundaries, to its “selfishness”. “The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives” (Bataille, 1956: 17). Empathizing with the other's desires becomes the primal end to achieve, without for

instance undermining one's own. Given this consideration, a person's relinquishment of their "selfish self" devolves recognition upon them.

Reverting back to the concept of violation that Bataille evokes, what is implied here is that one's fusion with the deliberately chosen other, defies the greatest of taboos: immortality. Human beings, according to Bataille, are aware of the fact that they are inevitably "discontinuous", i.e. bound to die sooner or later. In ensuring unity through the medium of erotic experience, they manage to somewhat, even though in ephemeral fashion, to transgress their anguish vis-à-vis mortality: "The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire, presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity" (Bataille, 1956: 17).

Eroticism does not then simply entail an ingrained desire to appropriate a person's corporeal as well as psychic presence. Through the act of surrendering to the other and having them surrender simultaneously, a sort of (temporary) continuity is secured for both beings. Transgression as defined here, turns eroticism into a ceremonial activity where intersubjectivity is constantly at play. However, this feature of ceremonial representation is deeply embedded in culture. Eroticism is thus, at once, the progeny of culture as well as one of its deepest markers.

Dissolution takes place, when the individual looks for an object outside himself that could answer the innerness of his desire and indicate to him that the latter shall meet its final end; namely, pleasure. Michel Zeraffa puts it rather beautifully, by identifying the other with desire itself, and depicting this intrinsic bond relating desire to the potentiality of accessing pleasure: "L'érotisme en soi, désir de désir en quelque sorte; désir-plaisir potentiel" (Zeraffa, 1978: 107).



It should be understood, however, that “in eroticism...our discontinuous existence is not condemned...it is only jolted”. Indeed, this “discontinuous existence” has to be “jarred and shaken to its foundations”, so that we yearn further for experiencing eroticism. Such speculation is derived from Bataille’s establishment of a tightly knit link between eroticism and taboo transgression.

I would like to pause a moment here in order to discuss taboo. According to Bataille, “taboos founded on terror are not only there to be obeyed. There is always another side to the matter. It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier; the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it, and invests it with an aura of excitement” (Bataille, 1956: 48). Octavio Paz adopts an identical stance, when he argues that “a passion will be more forceful when it has a greater resistance that must be overcome” (Paz, 1998: 37). Does this imply that actions such as bestiality, incest or even pedophilia can therefore be justified as simple transgressions of rigid barriers? The answer is obviously negative. In fact, there prevails “not only [a] great variety [in] their subjects but also a certain illogicality that makes it difficult to discuss taboos” (Bataille, 1956: 63). Actually, “transgression is complementary to the profane world” and could even “exceed” it. Nevertheless, it is not meant to destroy this world (1956: 67). A defined threshold is to be maintained; otherwise, total chaos would reign. For, “if transgression proper, as opposed to ignorance of the taboo, did not have this limited character it would be a return to...animal violence” (1956: 65).

Now, the first barrier to metaphorically transcend in Bataille’s analysis is that of mortality, leading to our identification as “separate individuals” (1956: 18). Yet, this is

not the essence of what he terms taboo. I will not be revisiting the author's concern with the sacred and/or religious forms of taboo, to which he dedicates a good deal of his work. On the contrary, I will chiefly focus on his understanding of transgression as "an inner experience, in which an individual...exceeded the bounds of rational everyday behavior, [that is] constrained by considerations of profit, productivity and self-preservation". In a sense, as Susan Rubin Suleiman reports on Bataille's behalf, "the experience of transgression is indissociable from the consciousness of the constraint or prohibition it violates; indeed, it is precisely by and through its transgression that the force of a prohibition becomes fully realized" (1995: 317). Actually, Bataille does not fail to translate the latter idea, as he elicits the urge in meeting "the inner experience of eroticism", for the subject to clearly develop "a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo, no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it" (Bataille, 1956: 38-9).

Back to the definition of taboo, what instigated my interest in Rubin Suleiman's analysis is what she reveals about the importance Bataille bestows upon equating it with "everyday behavior" and its components. Rival, Slater and Miller describe Bataille's philosophy, as a "Manichaeic" one. For, in his view, "society exists through the positive productivity of labor, order, taboos and morality, political involvement and social solidarity"; nevertheless, "these profane values and moral ideals are not sufficient to make us human" (Rival, Slater and Miller, 1998: 297). This is the reason why eroticism comes into the picture as a necessary condition for unleashing "true communication". Erotic sexuality ardently challenges, in Bataille's understanding, normative rules and social structures, that enslave human beings and make them undermine their desires. Yet,

it should be mentioned that Bataille does not devote many pages to physical pleasure. His ideas represent a philosophical set of speculations on eroticism and death.

Contrarily, this thesis will be arguing that eroticism is both a psychological and a biological quest, attempting to bridge the gap between the sexes and bring their fantasies together, under the rubric of pleasure. Radical social constructionists' main claim culminates in highlighting how "desire constitutes the foundational core of self-identity...that self-identity requires continuity and that the continuity of the person and of her/his inner self is not the inevitable unfolding of biological truth, but self-made history", in such a way that "the individual becomes the artist of his/her life who constructs the self as a creative self" (Rival, Slater& Miller, 1998: 313). Even though a great part of their argument holds true, I would like to highlight that desires are rooted in biology, as well as physical and psychic needs/drives. Eroticism is thus at the same time, an incarnation of carnal desire and a ceremonial representation of intersubjective exchange. "Eroticism unfolds in society, history; it is inseparable from them, like all the other acts and works of mankind". Yet, despite the consideration that "it is born, lives, dies and is reborn in history", despite the stipulation that "it is fused with it", eroticism cannot be "confused" with this history. On the contrary, the former is inevitably "in perpetual osmosis with sexuality and with the historical world" (Paz, 1998: 14-5). By "historical world", one shall in this case understand, the psychological quest for love and recognition that I have already elaborated on – an ardent quest underlying the full realization of intersubjective exchange.

However, eroticism has its roots in the body. "The first law governing erotic sexuality is the law of the body, of the centrality and paramountcy of the body –one's

own and that of the other” (Weitman, 1998: 75). Similarly to love, already described in previous sections by Lindholm, the body has actually “become a project for increasing numbers of people living in what Ulrich Beck has referred to as ‘risk societies’”. In an era of high modernization, Chris Shilling recapitulates Mary Douglas’s formulation, “the social body constrains how the physical body is perceived and experienced” (Shilling, 1993: 73). This might be the reason why a great process of undermining the physical ramifications of eroticism is constantly at play. Nevertheless, Sasha Weitman asserts that in erotic sexuality –which is interchangeably used with the word eroticism- “the mate’s body...details of his or her personal belongings...as are the time, the place, the circumstances [and] even the ambivalent weather conditions of their first or subsequent amorous encounters”, happen to be highly cherished (Weitman, 1998: 72). Love-makers, as he tags them, do not merely get fixated on their partners’ sexual parts. On the contrary, every single trait or bodily feature, alongside the atmosphere that sets eroticism on fire, are all somehow “fetishized”. It seems to me then, that erotic sexuality unfolds in a world of its own, where unity of bodies and souls (remember the notion of deliberate self-relinquishment), as well as unity with the hospitable highly “segregated” surrounding, feverishly meet completion. I will soon revert back to the notion of space segregation. But the notion of the indispensable other brings us inevitably to a discussion of “erotic reality”.

### **III. Erotic Reality.**

*“The goal in our love life is to achieve a natural state of sensuality within ourselves and then, when we are whole, to join with another. This is a transcendent, cosmic experience in which a person is unified in mind, body and spirit with a lover. The experience of sex, of course, is first a product of our own level of sexuality and sensuality. There is physical, genital-oriented sex –and then there is a higher union that is whole, complete, and outside the realm of the mundane, that takes us to mythic experiences”*

(Sussman, 2001: 137)

“Those who copulate and those who merely want to, experience the world in a manner strikingly different from those who go about their ordinary activities in everyday life...sexual arousal alters people’s consciousness, changing their perception of the world. Sex, in short, is a reality-generating activity” (Davis, 1983: 3).

I am enticed to slightly alter Davis’s insight, by pondering that eroticism, rather than pure sex alone, is endowed with the ability to generate “reality”. That is, due to the consideration that eroticism embraces both the process leading to the act and the sexual act itself, I found it more adequate to perceive the latter as the instigator of the erotic reality in concern. Murray Davis restates it clearly in *Smut: Erotic Reality/Obscene Ideology*: “Perhaps the most essential feature of sexual experience is its development” (Davis, 1983: 44). Along the same lines, Sasha Weitman argues that “erotic sexuality...besides being able to last for hours [includes] this kind of sex [that] may also begin hours, even days, before the lovers engage in actual sexual intercourse, and may linger on well after the completion of the sex act” (Weitman, 1998: 72).

I would like to clarify Weitman’s use of the word “lovers”, rather than Davis’s “copulators”, in referring to those who engage in erotic sexuality –and consequently

manage to “shift” into erotic reality. Such decision stems from the argument that erotic sexuality, is to be equated with the concept of “love-making”, instead of “sexuality tout court”. Given the fact that it entails the action of copulating and much more, Alberoni has actually labeled it “le grand érotisme” (Weitman, 1998: 72).

My concern with regards to erotic reality culminates in characterizing it, as the appropriate setting in which eroticism is bound to unleash. Hence, rather than “searching for its pure essence”, I will be depicting lovers’ relationship to the manifold and peculiar components of erotic reality –i.e. the things an individual is supposed to do, feel and eventually relate to, while undertaking the love-making activity. My recourse to the word “supposed” is deliberate. From the very start, I have proclaimed that my study is about redefining erotic reality in terms of an “ideal”.

Real-life erotic sexuality is most of the time “a confusing amalgam, a resultant of the interplay of diverse, heteronomous logics”. That is, beside the inherent “erotic logic” embedded in it, this erotic sexuality “may also be affected by a power-driven ‘political’ logic, by an interest driven ‘economic’ logic, by a semiotic logic of impression-management, by a hygiene-driven logic of disease-avoidance and the like” (Weitman, 1998: 74).

Complex sexuality will be examined in the section to follow. However, we will only examine the first three aspects, as intrinsic elements of consumer culture’s massive diffusion in society, without delving into the hygienic implications on erotic sexuality – which seems less relevant.

Another reason for considering erotic reality in its “ideal” form is Weitman’s suggestion that “implicit ideals underpin all critical analyses of social realities”.

According to him, “critiques of extant, real-life sexuality draw on ideals...usually felt implicit or woefully under-articulated, of what erotic sexuality could be and should be”. This is why translating “erotic ideals”, functions as a sort of “generative grammar” (Weitman, 1998: 74).

Erotic reality possessing a logic that exclusively pertains to it implies that another logic prevails, which characterizes “real-life sexuality”, and that Weitman opposes –in a sense- to the former. What is the prevailing difference, marking the dissociation of “erotic reality” from the realm one usually dubs “real life”? And how is it that an individual possibly comes to experience two different “realities”?

Starting from Schutz’s phenomenological consideration that a person undertakes multiple “temporary social roles”, I will be arguing with Murray Davis, “it is one of the most remarkable features of human existence, that we live not in one reality but in two (at least) and that we continually alternate between them”. Thus, in some instances, “we are pulled into erotic reality...at other times we are forced to fall back into everyday reality” (Davis, 1983: 10). Nevertheless, the movement back and forth from and to any of these realms, does not necessarily occur in a subtle fashion. Hence, a certain kind of “shock”, Murray Davis explains, takes place, which manages to shake the individual’s being. Someone who is sexually aroused, experiences the world in a much more focused manner than someone who is not (and from his or her own world-experience before and afterward).

Let me just clarify that the concept of “reality” adopted here equates with Schutz’s “finite provinces of meaning” while at the same time adding a slight alteration to it. In Schutz’s phenomenological analysis, “reality” embraces both the experiences a

person was subjugated to in his/her life “as primary everyday life-world”, and the “secondary ‘other-worldly’ enclaves, as dreams, fantasies and science” (Davis, 1983: 3). With the proposed modification, the term “everyday reality” came to genuinely translate the experiences one was exposed to, in the “ordinary round of life “; whereas “erotic reality” encompassed experiences “generated by our actual or potential” erotic endeavors (1983: 3).

Indeed, “sexual arousal brings new phenomena to one’s attention while old phenomena fade from it; previously minor aspects loom larger in importance, while previously major aspects shrink in significance” (1983: 12). What Davis’s assertion entails, is a change in one’s “system of relevance” –a term coined, again, by Alfred Schutz in his work *On Multiple Realities*. Swept by the powers of eroticism –rather than sexual arousal per se- an individual is then inclined to open up to a new understanding of the surrounding material world, of his/her self and of the other.

On this note, I shall now delve into the multiple constituents of erotic reality.

### **The Body**

The body “is not just skin and bones, an assemblage of parts, a medical marvel”; contrarily, “the body is also, and primarily, the self” (Synnott, 1993: 1). The assertion that “we are all embodied”, makes the coalescence between inner and outer experience more intelligible; i.e., learning that a person’s self is rooted in his/her body, allows one to gradually trace back, how the choice of a loved partner is initially instigated. Since I have previously elaborated on notions of meeting the other’s self and mutually exchanging recognition, I will here address the body’s material aspect, utterly involved in firing



erotic experience -my ultimate goal being, an examination of the way in which the former is conceived, in the vicinity of erotic reality. Consequently, I shall be advocating Murray Davis's assertion, pondering that "in erotic reality...the exact locus of identity seems to travel around the body" (Davis, 1983: 53).

The physiological aspect of eroticism or better, "erotic attraction" is complex. The EBE theory (the exotic becomes erotic) postulates that "individuals can become erotically attracted to a class of [other] individuals from whom they felt different during childhood". Hence, the theory implies that the "exotic becomes erotic because feeling different from a class of peers in childhood produces heightened nonspecific physiological arousal, which is subsequently transformed into erotic attraction". Nevertheless, no substantial evidence has been provided to prove, or for that matter refute, EBE speculations. As Mook observes in *Motivation: The Organization of Animal and Human Action*, one well-documented observation could hold firm: that novel/exotic stimuli are endowed with the capacity to heighten physiological arousal in many species, including our own.

Again, Mook's analysis does not really account for the fascination derived from the exotic concept, and the source it stems from. For, how is physiological arousal to come about? And what is the place allotted to the body in the whole process of eroticization -as Bern calls it?

M.C Dillon elaborates the fashion in which one starts acquiring exposure to eroticism through the body -for it defies, in some sorts, what has already been highlighted in the EBE suggestion. Dillon has noted the adolescent body's importance:

*Something happens to human bodies at adolescence. Granting Freud the point that infants are sexual, it is nonetheless true that qualitative change in human sexuality*

*takes place during puberty and adolescence...we tend to recapitulate the models imprinted upon us in infancy. Still, it remains true that during adolescence, we rebel. That rebellion may indeed amount to a recapitulation in the negative mode, but it may also take on new forms: every celibate was conceived, and to the distress of sociobiological theory, an unbroken chain of heterosexual reproduction can produce an individual who decides that he or she is exclusively homosexual* (Dillon, 2000: 20).

On this basis, Dillon ponders the final question, “is there a promising prospect to be found –or made- by changelings in search of sexual identity and erotic love?” (2000: 20)

I shall discuss the author’s question further in the next section, but return now to the concept of the erotic body. “The body, or more precisely the erotic body, is the site, the *raison d’être*, the subject and the object of erotic sexuality” (Weitman, 1998: 75). Seemingly, an accentuated concern devolves upon the body, as soon as lovers enter the realm of erotic reality. “Moving from everyday into erotic reality, changes the way people perceive the body...it seems to intensify their experience of physical characteristics” (Davis, 1983: 33).

This does not however imply, that mere fixation on the beloved’s sexual parts, occurs. Attention is not for instance channeled towards genitals –despite the fact that, borrowing Murray Davis’s assertion, bodily orifices neatly stand out during the erotic experience. Yet, the main interest is located around the individual’s whole embodiment as both flesh and self. Weitman elaborates further in his text, that soon after its immersion in erotic reality, the self “frees itself” from most of its everyday roles. In short then, “the self, abstract and dispersed in everyday reality, becomes embodied and localized in erotic reality” (Davis, 1983: 34).

This is when it becomes “increasingly centered on the body, coextensive with it”. Consequently, the function of the “undressing” act becomes endowed with “a twofold

significance". On the one hand, the notion of centrality attributed to the body by means of "stripping naked", hereby serves to "reveal [the latter as] the centerpiece of erotic reality" –this process unfolds, identically to the movement of "unveiling a statue". On the other hand, the same line of action is undertaken, in an attempt to "shed, along with the clothes, the roles and statuses of which lovers' selves are composed in everyday life" (Weitman, 1998: 75).

In a sense, once the shift into erotic reality is finalized, lovers loosen their ties with daily life's constraints. Actually, George Bataille argues that the latter realm, has managed to move individuals from "unashamed sexuality to sexuality with shame" (Bataille, 1956: 31). Nevertheless, the controversy lies in the consideration that sexuality, in everyday life, has lately been dramatically publicized. Facing a back and forth flux from the new urge to expose sexuality in the public arena, to the personal yearning for keeping it as one's personal and intersubjective ritual, has compelled people to adopt one of two inevitable stances: either they discard the body –like Sartre, who has in *Being and Nothingness*, poured all his interest into a depiction of the sexual experience only "to prove the durability of the individual in contrast to the ephemerality of all relations between individuals, of which sex is the prototype (Davis, 1983: 2)- and end up turning their speculations on eroticism into mere philosophical constellations; or they publicly proclaim their erotic experiences, with no great emphasis on their nature as intersubjective/ceremonial events. Indeed, they focus on the simple act of copulation, without considering that it requires some sort of privacy. This is when the self –one's own as well as the other's- ceases being a locus of interest, on a par with the body. Hence, erotic reality loses one of its cornerstones and is eventually shattered.

This said, “the direct involvement of the body [is] taken as a sign of the reality of the relation”. As Sasha Weitman remarks, “lovers do engage in long-distance interaction –phoning, writing, sending flowers or detachable parts of themselves (locks of hair, scented letters, lipstick-imprinted napkins)- and they manage by these and other telecommunications to stir considerable erotic emotion in one another”. Yet, nothing resembles the presence of bodies “close at hand”, by means of which lovers “seem to know, that their liaison is ‘for real’, ‘something no one can take from [them]’”. Knowing in this context implies a feverish involvement of senses, particularly those of touch, smell and taste: the proximity senses. Thus, it becomes assumed that “bodies willy-nilly give off tell-tale signs” indicating to individuals that their unity is not an imaginary one. Indeed, “it is as if, by being physically together, lovers can pinch not only their own selves but their mate as well, to reassure themselves that what is happening to them is really real, that they are not dreaming”. In a sense then, the body fulfills the function of a “guarantor” or tacit “proof” that the lovers’ “experience of being” is eventually not a disputable occurrence (Weitman, 1998: 76).

The use of terminologies like “real” and “reality” does not undermine the fact that both concepts embody, in the Nietzschean sense, a recognizable range of relativity. Yet, in erotic reality, the “real” does not concern anything, but the actualization/deployment, in a full-fledged manner, of the lovers’ desire.

Along the same lines, and through her study of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Flows of Desire and the Body*, Dorothea Olkowski takes Weitman’s formulation a step forward, by means of translating the latter author’s consideration that, “desire orders and organizes bodies”. In erotic reality then, the activity of articulating one’s desire, happens to be “a

process of production which, by assembling singularities, manufactures effects”, and acts as “the real itself, not a sign of the real” (Olkowski, 2000: 186).

### **Desire and Pleasure**

On desire, Howells reports that Sartre defines it as “[pursuing] not just the body of the other, but the body and soul –the conscious, corporeal being, the spirit incarnate”. Thus, desire is depicted in its yearning to “possess the other as both subject and object, for-itself and in-itself” (Howells, 2000: 88).

Despite this formulation, Sartre does not develop this idea of the “desiring consciousness” further. Indeed, he displays a hostile attitude towards any complicity linking desire to the body. Hence, his subsequent elaborations reiterate the negativity underlying the transformation of desire into a pure bodily one. This is where he is coming from when he depicts –as Christina Howells again indicates- the “incompatibility” between “flesh and agency” (Howells, 2000: 88).

Becoming too focused on the flesh, could eventually lead to a loss of subjecthood, enticing one to perceive the other through the loop of objectification, and vice versa. This does not, however, rule out the fact that desire is also a desire for pleasure. Sexual intercourse and orgasm are not the sole aims of eroticism; yet, they do constitute a great part of an individual’s erotic experience. Sartre argues that “pleasure entails a death of desire, not just because orgasm brings desire temporarily to an end, but because pleasure may become not the product but the object of desire” (Howells, 2000: 88). I suggest however, against this position, that pleasure does not kill desire and does not divert from meeting the other –which is, for Sartre, “its true end” The controversy in Sartre’s

perspective emanates from his description of desire, as a fervent quest for the “impossible”. Desire’s “fundamental goal” –if I were to borrow his words- is not a realizable one. Possessing “the transcendence of the other as pure transcendence, yet as body”, is apparently a mission doomed to failure. “The other is ‘insaisissable’: elusive, protean, fleeing me when I seek him and possessing me when I flee” (2000: 91). Sartre does not for that matter advocate that desire is a mission to be aborted. Yet, the echoes of a masochist reaction make themselves clear in his analysis. For, what he proposes, according to Howells, is a celebration of the condition that “makes us truly human: desiring the impossible” (2000: 95).

Surely, it is never enough to helplessly speculate on one’s condition whenever one is capable of creating new spaces of venture, outside everyday life. This is why erotic reality, as I suggest in this thesis, represents an open realm for the development of “an invisible and ever-active participant: desire” (Paz, 1995: 9). The latter, in my understanding of it, rotates in a circular fashion that the Greeks recognized long ago. Indeed, Foucault outlines their concern with the dynamics amalgamating desire, the sexual act and pleasure: “the desire that leads to the act, the act that is linked to pleasure, and the pleasure that occasions desire” (Foucault, 1978: 43).

This said, the entanglement of all three elements necessitates that one considers a host of additional components, which inevitably come into play.

### **The Senses**

“Erotic ceremonies and games are innumerable and continually change through the action of desire, the father of fantasy” (Paz, 1995: 9). From Paz’s postulation, one can

detect the intimate bond between desire and fantasy. Not only that, but while proposing that fantasy fills in for the motor force underpinning pleasure, one also feels the urge to posit the former as the instigator of imagination. The latter being again, a distinguished feature of erotic reality, regiments the manifold/ceremonial manifestations of eroticism. This is rendered possible primarily through recourse to the senses.

Indeed, “the conceptual and existential significance of the sensorium is obvious. We are social beings, and we communicate in and with and through the senses”. Thus, “life without the senses does not make sense” (Synnott, 1993: 128). The Western philosophical tradition’s ancient concerns about the “fallibility” of the senses, their so-called “moral danger”, their “hierarchy” or even their “linear noetic economy”, are now largely subordinated to interest in the senses’ “utility...historical and cultural relativity...[and] their holographic dimensions”; i.e. the balance between them (Synnott, 1993: 155). Yet, all these properties displayed by senses, make them necessary constituents of everyday reality –as well as the erotic one. What is then the function our senses serve, in the latter realm?

“A particular scent, a particular image, is apt to call up ‘the memory of the thing desired’” (Foucault, 1978: 41). The example provided in Foucault’s quote, emphasizes the fact that senses, especially the proximity senses, manage to enhance the erotic experience.

In what follows, I will briefly sketch the role performed by each sense, in an attempt to depict the way in which the “slide into erotic reality” is crystallized.

Sight serves a prominent purpose, by gradually unleashing one’s embracement of his/her lover’s body. “In general, the fall into erotic reality is retarded by clothing,

which minimizes curves and conceals bodily textures, hair and genitals. Conversely, it is accelerated as the clothing that muffles these erotic generators is removed” (Davis, 1983: 54). The act of stripping naked occurs gradually in erotic reality. Hence, “erotic momentum increases through each stage of undressing” (1983: 58).

One’s eyes are granted the appropriate amount of time to taste each and every part of the partner’s body, before consummating it. This tasteful visual exploration –with all the suspense it entails- instigates the powers of imagination. In gazing at one another, protagonists do not only take the chance of reciprocally investigating their respective bodies; they also rehearse in their minds, a number of times, the sexual act’s scene that is eventually going to achieve their unity.

The tactile phase comes to “accelerate [the] sensual slide even more rapidly” (Davis, 1983: 59). Quite often however, tactility and vision overlap, for “physical contact usually begins while partners are fully clothed...and even when they are partially nude and touching, they often draw back to admire their handiwork visually” (1983: 60).

Now, touch –which mainly relied upon caresses and embraces-, marks the beginning of a “self-embodiment process”; i.e. with the tactile phase, the protagonists’ selves are drawn closer to their bodies. Sartre expands on this:

It is not by chance that desire, while aiming at the body as a whole attains it especially through masses of flesh which are very little differentiated, grossly nerveless, hardly capable of spontaneous movement, through breasts, buttocks, thighs, stomach...the true caress...is the contact of two bodies in their mostly fleshly parts, the contact of stomachs and breasts; the caressing hand is too delicate, too much like a perfected instrument. But the full pressing together of the flesh of two people against one another is the true goal of desire (Sartre, 1956: 396).

Seen from another perspective, tactility in erotic reality allows each partner to indicate to his/her loved one, the “key” to his or her fantasies; i.e. through the medium of



touch, every protagonist is capable of detecting the other's fantasies, in an attempt to fulfill them. Hence, barriers fall and resistance is appropriately ruled out, so that the next erotic stage unfolds.

Of course, along with sight and touch, smell and taste actively participate in introducing the lovers' to one another's bodily features. "The profound intimacy of olfaction and perfume lies in the fact that one person is breathing and inhaling the emanations of another person. Thus, the two people become one, in an olfactory sense; and in the empire of odor, the fragrance is the aroma of the soul" (Synnott, 1993: 202). Through the medium of olfaction, partners are capable of accessing one another's deepest pores. Such deep penetration lasts after the individuals' shift outside erotic reality, and constantly reminds them of the latter, even when they're most immersed in their daily lives. For, "smell is...often associated with memory". Helen Keller described smell as "a potent wizard that transports us across thousands of miles and all the years we have lived" (Synnott, 1993: 186).

The function of smell is therefore not a temporary one. On the contrary, it vitally ensures, that after "the individual descends into everyday reality...[the latter is not] quite the same after orgasm" (Davis, 1983: 75).

I will not be expanding on the sense of taste, assuming that one cannot but notice its prominence in the erotic realm. For, taste works in pair with touch, and is praised for its powers of arousal. One thing I would reiterate here is the consideration that taste, like smell, allows one to both explore the other's fantasies and divulge his/her own. In a word, all senses function in erotic reality, as active stimulants: powerful tools to achieve an aspired for unity.

## **Experiencing Space and Time**

So far, I have emphasized human physical features, and their involvement in erotic reality. It should be mentioned however, that the lovers' bodies, exist in surrounding physical environments, with which their relationship is altered, as soon as they slide into erotic reality. Thus, the protagonists' experience of time and space undergoes major modifications that I shall now be addressing.

Whoever moves from everyday to erotic reality, then, experiences a lascivious shift in relevances in the temporal [and] spatial...dimensions, along which he/she organizes his/her world (Davis, 1983: 13).

Starting with the "distortions" –borrowing Murray Davis's label- inflicted upon the notion of time, I shall first indicate that these distortions display positive connotations. Time, in the erotic realm, happens to be experienced in the form of "fun and games". Indeed, partners engage in the love-making action, for its own sake. This consideration clearly explains why, "negative consequences extrinsic or intrinsic", such as "fear of failure, disappointment, frustration, shame [and] conception" are ultimately discarded (Weitman, 1998: 78). What Weitman implies by "shame" here, is a feeling stemming from one's failure to meet the beloved's desires and fulfill his/her needs.

Protagonists cease being concerned with "preceding or succeeding events" in view of becoming "fully caught up in erotic reality". What full-fledged preoccupation with the latter arena implies, is that lovers are impelled to get entirely consumed in the process leading to the sexual act, as well as the act itself. Anything pre or post temporarily loses its relevance until the point where "both partners subjectively feel finished" and consequently mark the end of erotic reality (Davis, 1983: 13). In a sense then, erotic reality's temporal horizon happens to be an open one. Not only is it open in

terms of its ending; it is also quite flexible with regards to its start. In fact, people often consider that erotic reality's unfolding is likely to occur at "bed time". Such conclusion is brought along, according to Davis, through "society's...attempts to restrict sexual arousal to the vague temporal ghetto we call 'bedtime'" (1983: 15). One should admit that the latter period is deemed "eroticizing", primarily because "it occupies the residual period that remains after the duties and diversions of everyday existence are over. Its time horizon is infinite enough to allow the copulators to couple at their own pace, unrushed by the external deadlines of life" (1983: 16).

Nevertheless, surrendering to this confinement implies that one is not capable of meeting his/her desires as they mount. Besides, the reduction in the time span allotted by society to erotic reality may well reduce the chances of a partner's availability and responsiveness. So, I will be advocating that erotic reality has no appropriate timing. On the contrary, it is bound to be unleashed, whenever lovers unravel the mutual urge to experience "togetherness". That is, "ideal-typically, erotic reality is a reality in which everything conspires to provide lovers with pleasure, nothing but pleasure and always more pleasure, literally until they can take it or give it no more" (Weitman, 1998: 79).

Let me revert back to the effective alterations erotic reality bestows upon lovers' perceptions of space. Having already tackled the modifications operated on the level of temporal experience, I shall tap into the new dimension that space embodies in the erotic realm.

On the one hand, "during erotic time, one's experience of the spatial expanse of everyday world shrinks drastically". Hence, one's active consciousness in erotic reality limits the boundaries of his/her own space into the other's bodily contours and the

location in which the erotic encounter is genuinely deployed. “Spatial extremities (distant)” are in a sense set aside, in favor of intensifying the “here and now” of individuals (Davis, 1983: 23).

However, the relation between space and erotic encounter is not a unilateral one. For, while the erotic encounter manages to restrain the scope of spatial experience, the spatial setting in which erotic experience itself develops might either “hinder or facilitate” the latter’s prosperity. Once protagonists’ preferences for benign or even hostile settings coalesce with the given space surrounding their encounter, a smoother transition crystallizes that transports them from everyday to erotic reality.

Everyday reality often exposes individuals to the settings they fantasize about. According to Murray Davis, despite the fact that society tries to “minimize contact between [erotic and everyday] realities...[by means of restricting] sexy settings to clearly circumscribed spatial ghettos” –be they private spheres like one’s own bedroom, or ‘commercial locations’ such as erotic films - these “ghettos of sexuality leak eroticism in space and time” (Davis, 1983: 21). What Davis implies here is that “society” ‘localizes’ eroticism, and therefore controls it in such a way that it becomes ‘all-consuming’. The thing that lacks though for intensity to flourish is mutual desire that a love affair is able to ensure. “The lovable are those to whom [one] wants to make love” (1983: 27); and making love, entails a practice of mutual “gift-giving” that is supposed to bring both partners to fulfillment.

Mutual “gift-giving” activities in the erotic realm come “freely, spontaneously, naturally”. Hence, as soon as partners are “overcome by pleasure”, the beginning of erotic reality is set; “otherwise, if pleasure is feigned or...forced [say, in terms of time,

for instance], it is not pleasurable, hence ideally, is out of place in erotic reality” (Weitman, 1998: 77).

Now, how is erotic reality timed out? In fact, “escalation”, is the step that regiments the “falling apart” in exhaustion, yet satisfaction, of lovers. This last erotic activity has as its progeny, what Weitman tags the “violently pleasurable tremor”: orgasm (Weitman, 1998: 79).

Nevertheless, reaching the stage of “escalation” could not be achieved, were it not for two essential notions characterizing erotic reality: alterity and mutuality.

### **Alterity and Mutuality:**

Taking a giant leap back in time, one detects that “the courts of love of the twelfth century supremely wise in the erotic, set it down as an article of their code of law, that there is no flavor in what a lover takes by force from the other lover” (Gonzalez-Crussi, 1988: 13). Free eroticism cannot thus be equated with the notion of dominion. Contrarily, in eroticism, a relinquishment of the “selfish self”, as Bataille dubs it, inevitably occurs. An ardent search for recognition by the mate is undertaken, which starts out as an “aspiration”, and consequently turns into an essential right, without which one would be unable to delve into the depths of oneself.

Eroticism presupposes the notion of alterity, as Sasha Weitman noted: “even auto-eroticism requires an imaginary playmate to fire the erotic imagination” (Weitman, 1998: 80). The “rule of alterity” has *a priori*, the presence of a playmate. Pleasures deriving from love-making cannot be “self-administered”. Instead, meeting their gratification implies the ardent search for an “other”. Hence, offering gratification and receiving it

back in like manner, signifies that partners have managed to detach themselves from “autarchic, narcissistic tendencies” and/or destructive self-enclosures. Alterity dictates then, that love-making could not prevail without the other; that his/her presence is a blessing rather than a despicable event. This consideration radically refutes Sartre’s famous dictum that “hell is other people”, only to insist that heaven itself is *autrui*. In sum, the rule of alterity reiterates the need for “love” and “co-reliance”. The term “co-reliance” in this context has no negative implications. On the contrary, it is perceived to be “an emotionally desirable condition”, ensuring that lovers acquire a more enhanced amount “of good”, than that which they could ever procure themselves outside the boundaries of the relationship (Weitman, 1998: 80).

Alongside alterity, the concept of mutuality comes into play. “Applied in erotic reality, mutuality entitles lovers to be recognized by their mate as they present themselves, thus to have their sexual aversions and proclivities respected and catered to, whatever they might be” (1998: 81).

This opinion is also reflected in the work of Anthony Giddens, who indicates that “eroticism is the cultivation of feeling, expressed through bodily sensation, in a communicative context; an art of giving and receiving pleasure”. For him, eroticism should be “shorn of differential power” and revitalized through “mutuality rather than through unequal power” (1992: 202). Highly alarmed by gender inequalities and the way in which they can harshly manipulate the development of the erotic experience –mainly to the detriment of women- Giddens seems to call for a sense reciprocation –one that does not take into account, society’s deeply rooted dichotomies.

The erotic therefore compels one not to seek the projection of his/her peculiar desires, onto the other's fantasies. Instead, a relinquishment of a partner's "selfishness" (sole fixation on personal fantasies) visibly imposes itself, so that the beloved's "inner most secret desires...those not known to the mate", meet full recognition and fulfillment.

One should actually draw the distinction between mutuality and equality. Weitman puts this consideration rather beautifully, by indicating that "where the latter stipulates that what is good for the goose is also good for the gander, [the former stipulates] that the goose's wishes are the gander's commands, and vice versa" (1998: 80). Hence, in erotic reality, the notion of mutuality devolves recognition upon lovers. They thus come to experience, what it means to be "unconditionally accepted".

Consequently, a "democratization of intimacy", as Giddens calls it, is activated. This is why no alterations are required that may subjugate partners' wishes to any form of conformity, in order for them to be warmly welcomed; instead, love is granted to them as they remain faithful to "what they want to be". Such an experience is eventually retained after partners take the return path into everyday life. Indeed, lovers feverishly look forward to meeting in erotic reality, those scattered and brief moments "when they could be wholly themselves, when they need to be ashamed of nothing, when their every want and aversion [are] recognized, respected" and gratified –an occurrence that is scarcely met, in the realm of real life (Weitman, 1998: 81). Indeed, I will be addressing the reasons behind such scarcity in the next section on consumer culture.

## **Consumer Culture and Its Influence on Eroticism**

Alain Touraine considers love-making to be an activity which narrows the gap between “goûts sociaux, culturels ou politiques et l’univers de l’érotisme”; i.e., not only does love-making allot the other a privileged space, it also takes into consideration one’s proper preferences and/or aspirations vis-à-vis eroticism. Hence, the love-making act reminds protagonists that recognition of the beloved in his/her subjecthood is an essential element that needs to be combined with their personal definitions of the erotic encounter (Touraine, 1997).

Touraine’s point does not negate the differential socialization of both sexes to eroticism. Culture, notably Zygmunt Bauman’s “consumer culture”, animates deep gender dichotomies, which force males and females apart by contrasting their everyday tastes and aspirations vis-à-vis erotic experience (Bauman, 1998: 22).

Thus, Alberoni explains, “l’érotisme féminin se confond avec l’amour, tant le projet de séduction individuelle...chez l’homme, au contraire, l’excitation érotique peut exister sans le besoin de l’engagement amoureux” (Alberoni, 1987: 149). Francesco Alberoni argues that females do not perceive eroticism void of love; while men, on the contrary, are able to experience it without displaying the urge to engage in any amorous bond.

One justification underlying this dichotomy is provided by Ann Barr Snitow, according to whom Harlequin novels are “only one strain in the mass paperback market aimed primarily at women readers” and reflecting consumer culture’s direct interference with their erotic tastes (Snitow, 1983: 246). What the Harlequin romance formula is based on is a reflection of the deep cultural gap between the sexes.



Indeed, “the sexes have different needs and interests, certainly different experiences”, visibly permeating daily life (Snitow, 1983: 247). John Gray has already discussed this in his popular series of books, revolving around the theme that women are from Venus, men are from Mars.

Peter Parisi does not even think that Harlequin novels display a concern with eroticism per se. In a talk he delivered at Rutgers University, Parisi rated the former as undercover pornographic productions, tailored to the needs of audiences ashamed to overtly consult pornography. Even though I do not share his view that anything openly speaking to sex and fantasy should be deemed pornographic, I cannot refute his view concerning Harlequins’ abuse of romance and fulfilled marriage promises –which they put at the forefront as the real *raison d’être* underlying their wide diffusion on the market. Both Parisi and Snitow suggest that such writings manage to provide female readers with a form of “sexual release”, they are unable to secure in everyday life (Snitow, 1983: 254). The sexually charged atmosphere that bathes Harlequins is originally supposed, as Helen Hazel asserts, to enhance the audience’s imaginary faculty. But do they create a real erotic space, allowing readers to learn about their deepest sexual desires and affirm them?

“L’imaginaire féminin possède en effets ses propres mythes et se nourrit d’images et de fantasmes spécifiques”. For Alberoni, female imagination is not the same as the male one. It possesses particular mythical representations, imageries as well as fantasies that feed it and keep it alive. These elements are effectively secured, Alberoni indicates again, not only in Harlequins but also in “de Delly, Liala [or even] Barbara Cartland”, films, art and a host of cultural manifestations (Alberoni, 1987: 9).

In an attempt to assert the popularity of these productions, Alberoni reports that Barbara Cartland, on one hand, had sold more than four hundred million copies of her novels until the year 1987 (when he wrote his book *L'Erotisme*). Harlequins, on the other hand, have managed to sell one hundred eighty eight million of its books to the United States of America, twenty five million to France and around twenty million in 1980 (1987: 16).

Those writings try to tackle females' concern with affective tactility, full-fledged deployment of the senses and most notably, emotional attachment. By affective tactility, Alberoni implies women's ardent interest in the skin. Actually, the "organ of touch is the skin"; and, "unlike the other senses, which are located in specific organs of the head...the sense of touch is located in the skin, which clothes the entire body" (Synnott, 1993: 157). However, sexes experience different tactile lives. Polarization is indeed perpetually enhanced, as socialization continues throughout life (1993: 165). This might be the reason why women, unlike their male counterparts, seem to devote more weight and time to skin care. An indicator of this trend lies in cosmetic sales, which have not till date, ceased prospering. New products, ranging from shower gels to cleansing creams and moisturizing lotions –to state only a few- frequently reiterate the notion that an appropriately maintained skin is apt to enhance one's sensual/sexual life.

Yet, while marketing their formulas, cosmetic companies do not directly address feminine desires. Rather, their emphasis is primarily fostered around the necessity to meet men's fantasies –which could be but is not always a female desire.

In like manner, romance novels and women magazines seem to call for an erotic encounter where males' needs are adequately catered for, before anything else. Eventually, applying the principle of mutuality dictates that the latter be accommodated.

Yet, it also requires that females' fantasies be actively met for their own sake –a notion that mass media productions seldom address. Rather, a greater emphasis is granted to the gratification of male erotic experience, in its focally visual aspect. From Penthouse and playboy to blue/adult movies, all speak the language of voyeurism. “The sexual advice offered by women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* places an emphasis on...instructing women [about] how to turn themselves into the ultimate sexual commodity for their partners’ pleasure” (Lupton, 1994: 46).

Even though *Cosmopolitan* and other women magazines might sometimes provide tips on how to become for instance “multi-orgasmic” or increase a female’s “orgasm”, a prominent and observable trend is that of marketing clues for satisfying the partner’s desires.

An illustrative example may be drawn from *Cosmopolitan*’s second “lust survey”, administered online in August 1999. Directed to male respondents, the survey was designed to “unlock their secret desires”; so that women grasp after consulting the “confessions”, “how to be the type of tantalizing...babe in bed that will keep [them] coming back” (Amodio, 1999).

As Rosie Amodio expands on the survey’s results, females’ deepest fantasies are undermined. Instead of learning how to affirm their sexuality and experience an erotic encounter that would mutually satisfy them and their partners, women are primarily encouraged to have a first hand experience on masculine desires –were they to maintain a successful life in bed. “We will tell you what he wants, what he really, really wants”: this is the way in which the survey’s essence is sketched out from the very beginning.

The concepts of alterity, mutuality, recognition or even playfulness are then, not depicted as core elements pertaining to sexual experience. Hence, both sexes are solicited to remain enclosed in two separate cocoons, whereby divergent modes of experiencing eroticism unleash.

In the male realm for instance, the gaze is a primordial constituent. For, men are inclined to develop some kind of fixation on women's erogenous zones: “[Les] hommes se sont toujours intéressés aux zones érogènes définies par l’oeil masculine –les seins, les fesses, le pubis”; while in the feminine realm, more attention is paid to the senses, their deployment and the atmosphere coating the encounter rather than men's genitals per se. “L'érotisme féminin est, quant à lui, plus tactile, musculaire, auditif, lié à l'odorat, à la peau, au contact” (Alberoni, 1987: 10).

Now, what about the notion of love, the part it is supposed to play in erotic encounters and the way in which it is effectively marketed to different sexes? I do agree with Alberoni that women and men are endowed with an equal ability to fall in love. Nevertheless, males are often socialized to simply display their promiscuity. The prelude to such display is not necessarily love in this case.

Females are taught to value their male counterparts' promiscuity. They even deliberately invest in becoming its targets. This is why for instance they tend to fall into the game of “beautyism”, a term coined by Anthony Synnott, which enhances the harshness of their journey into recognition and love. Even though women eventually value men's “attractive looks”, the action they undertake for the purpose of turning themselves into lovable objects is marked by manifold “cosmetic procedures...[like] liposuction, breast augmentation and collagen injections” –that males do not very often

consider inflicting upon their bodies (Synnott, 1993: 75). The great concern with breast implants as well as hips and thighs' size diminution, accurately depicts females' feverish attempts to conform to the draining, yet "accelerating beauty mystique" –and recognizably institutionalizing it (1993: 76).

The problem is exacerbated among women experiencing menopause. "Aging is difficult for women today because our culture values youth and beauty above all else" (Sussman, 2001: 188). Possessing the latter two seems to imply higher recognition in the realm of male voyeurism and thus, better chances of achieving "social power":

We can't flip through the pages of fashion magazines or watch TV commercials or movies without being bombarded with images of beauty and youth –how to get it or keep it- with makeup, diet, exercise, plastic surgery. Anorexic models are acceptable cultural icons of sex appeal, but a menopausal woman who naturally pads up a little in her belly and thighs is not desirable (Sussman, 2001: 188-89).

If this is the case, then are menopausal women definitely unable to air erotic vibes and receive them? The response is absolutely negative. For sensuality, this "inner warmth that radiates...and makes people objects of desire...is not the sex appeal generated by the contemporary social icons of a 'hot body'...[constituting] a short-term, artificial, outer image". As Sussman again puts it, "people are sensual when they feel sensual" (Sussman, 2001: 11). This is never achieved, where love and sex do not collide. Apart from emotional fulfillment, a frenzied sexual experience is bound to develop. It might sound that Sussman is suggesting two radically opposing statements. Nevertheless, by clarifying the "real" meaning of sensuality, she tries to vigorously challenge the market's abuse of clichés around the issue of erotic fulfillment.

Now, molding their bodily contours in a manner that satisfies the male gaze's standards, women wish to acquire the type of love they are constantly promised in

romance stories and magazines. However, what conformity yields in this context is a female subjugation to consumer culture's massive productions that draw the telos of their sexual lives for them. At the same time, women fall under the male gaze's scrutiny, as "objects" rather than "subjects" of desire. It is noteworthy here that men can also be objectified in a manifold ways ranging from physical objectification to the economic one. A certain height and a certain level of economic security often act as prerequisites for the engagement in a romantic relationship. In both cases then, the active and free consciousness needed to fire erotic encounters becomes jeopardized by mutual objectification, which could generate inevitable frustration and disappointment with regards to the validity of love.

In fact, this whole notion of love is blurred by the "late modern or postmodern rendition of eroticism". An unprecedented and genuine breakthrough has occurred, which refutes the prevalence of any alliance between eroticism and love.

"[Postmodern eroticism] proudly and boldly proclaims itself to be its only, and sufficient reason and purpose". Hence, post-modernity displays an ardent inclination towards "[seeking] sexual delights for their own sake", and turning eroticism into one "with no strings attached...free to enter and leave any association of convenience, but also an easy prey to forces eager to exploit its seductive powers" (Bauman, 1998: 21).

The exploitation that Bauman mentions here could possibly be illustrated by the flourishing, in "late-capitalist societies [of] the popular media" which have become "important forums for the uncovering of sexual secrets and the production [as well as] circulation of a proliferation of knowledges and experiences relating to sexuality" (Lupton, 1994: 45). This contemporary yearning for discussing sexuality falls under the

rubric of “openness”; i.e. the process of publicly debating sexual experiences is supposed to broaden individuals’ scopes about “the varieties and vagaries of human sexual behavior...so that their own sexual activities are not hindered [or restrained]” (1994: 46). This increased concern with the notion of openness has somewhat contributed to the development of a communicative context, whereby individuals thoroughly articulate their fantasies, desires and dissatisfactions. Yet, this communicative context has abolished in many instances the element of privacy, intrinsic to erotic experience.

Sex talk shows and the public debates they entail have indeed transferred any couple’s erotic encounters to the realm of everyday life, exposed them to strangers’ scrutiny and/or sometimes even turned them into an anecdotal representation of sexuality. That is, what happens to be focally analyzed in these broadcasted sessions is not eroticism in all its constituents –such as love and recognition- but the sexual act alone.

So, while claiming to endow partners with a place to redefine their erotic experience and revise its deficient sides, mass media have added to eroticism what Bauman describes as “an unheard of lightness and volatility”, that viewers or watchers are encouraged to espouse (Bauman, 1998: 21).

Not only have post-modern uses of eroticism collaborated in the confinement of its meanings to pure sex; they have also reached the point of generating a new kind of eroticism, stemming from technological advancement and fetishizing its inventions. Hence, the emergence of what Claudia Springer calls “techno-eroticism”, which has heavily imbued “twentieth century Western culture” and continues to do so (Springer, 1996: 3). In fact, techno-eroticism or “the celebration of technological objects of desire” still flourishes in the present electronic era. According to Springer, society’s shift from

industrialization to newer electronic technologies has developed and refined rather than banned, previous techno-erotic imageries. These imageries are instigated indeed, by attributing male or female sexual characteristics to mechanical objects; “consequently, representations of machines have long been used to express ideas about sexual identity and gender roles” (Springer, 1996: 9). Such fixation on turning technological/electronic objects into sexed ones replaces the presence of the other by what I wish to call a synthetic self.

Undermining the need for a free consciousness in order to develop an erotic experience is the development of “virtual reality/sex”. Actually, “virtual reality is not the first technological medium to come into existence amid speculation about its potential for providing sexual gratification” (Springer, 1996: 12); yet, its utterly problematic quality lies in the assumption that it dramatically enhances rather than decreases gender dichotomies. I would suggest that the more people fall into the trap of virtual reality and the gratification it markets, the less likely they are to invest in learning about and feeling the components of real eroticism –as I have been trying to define them. Hence, participants in virtual reality carry the rigid gender role package that has always stifled them in society, into the virtual realm and do not feel compelled to contest it.

This is not to say, that no major efforts have been deployed in order to minimize gender dichotomies and redefine the erotic encounter’s pillars. Even though drawing a chronological picture of the struggle to battle gender dichotomies lies beyond the scope of my study, I would like to mention that the rise of second wave feminism and the constant alterations in gender roles have succeeded in subjugating radical gender differences to further restraints. Yet nothing disappears without leaving an impact



(Alberoni, 1987). Indeed, eroticism embodies an interchange of roles, whereby each sex penetrates the other's erotic fantasies to partake in them.

Overcoming dichotomies, and hence treating the other as an equal being, implies from the very beginning a respect for these deeply rooted dichotomies. According to Alberoni once again, cultural dictates are never bound to vanish. On the contrary, they undergo some elaborations, without for that matter being "exorcised" (1987: 12). Where men and women shall meet then is in the vicinity of erotic reality. This created setting where eroticism lavishly unfolds, where protagonists are supposed to slip, escaping the "real world", seems to me the most appropriate context for transcending everyday life's dichotomies/clashes.

Eroticism, in sum, happens to be this medium that manages to blend differences and instigate attractions. Love, which I have already mentioned, is an essential element for such a blend: one that animates and is animated by eroticism. Yet, as Bauman has explained it, consumer culture has long banned the idea of love's intrinsic relationship to eroticism, making it harder for the sexes to experience the latter in its essence (Bauman, 1998).

However, what I have tried to argue is that love constitutes an inevitable component of the erotic experience, enhancing the prevalence of alterity, mutuality and concord between one, and the deliberately selected "other".

#### **IV. Analyzing Eroticism: A Film Study Approach**

##### **Why Film?**

“ Research methods and data are derived from a theoretical position about how the world (reality) operates. This means that one selects a method to study certain kinds of data to answer a particular question because there is ‘reason’ (or theory) to expect that the method is appropriate for the data and question in mind” (Altheide, 1996: 9).

Indeed, I am not for the time being, specifically interested in collecting data on people’s perceptions of eroticism per se, or the function it currently fulfills in society; rather I am more interested in understanding the “aspired for” aspect of eroticism and the ways in which it could possibly unfold. This is why I have discarded the host of available data collection methods, in favor of consulting filmic representations on eroticism.

At the same time, I have decided to adopt Bataille’s suggestion, that “eroticism has a significance for mankind, that the scientific attitude cannot reach” (Bataille, 1957: 8).

By choosing to screen films and analyze their contribution to my research, I am anticipating that they would outline for me the construction of “erotic reality” in modern cinematography, and emphasize the full-fledged encounter between the sexes within the boundaries of love, alterity as well as mutuality. The five films I have selected are also expected to elicit the difference between pornography and eroticism, in emphasizing the tightly knit bond linking eroticism to the notion of “transgression” coined by Bakhtin; i.e. they are supposed to explicitly depict the path undertaken by protagonists, in view of stripping themselves of their “selfish selves” to acquire a better understanding of who they are, in the mirroring eyes of the other.

### **How To Go About It?**

All these assumptions cannot possibly be tested, unless a certain form of “protocol is drawn”. According to Altheide, subsequent to the pursuit of a “specific problem to be investigated” and the familiarity one acquires with it, drafting the protocol is inaugurated (Altheide, 1996: 25-6).

In fact, “a protocol is a way to ask questions of a document...[it is] a list of questions, items, categories, or variables that guide data collection”. For the purpose of qualitative content analysis, themes and frames are extracted from the document under scrutiny that translate the message of the overall work and convey its actual contribution. Indeed, “the goal of qualitative research is to understand...types, characteristics and organizational aspects of the documents as social products in their own right, as well as what they claim to represent” (1996: 42).

### **Film As Social Process: Turner**

I have decided to go about analyzing my films by examining them from a social perspective. This is where I will be borrowing Turner’s consideration, that film is endowed with socio-cultural significance. Unlike other film theorists who speculate on the aesthetic aspect of film, Turner is chiefly concerned with film as “entertainment, as narrative, as cultural event” (Turner, 1993: 1).

What he wishes to earn, is “an understanding of [film] production, [its] consumption, its pleasures and its meanings”, since the latter components are “the workings of culture itself” (Turner, 1993: 2).

Yet, considering film to be a social practice “producing and reproducing cultural significance” does not imply that film merely portrays cultural givens. My assumption is that film can also speak to one’s innermost aspirations and depict them.

By virtue of the manifold applied filmic techniques, film acts as language. Language in this context is defined *à la* Roland Barthes; i.e. it is envisioned in its inclusion of “all those systems from which [one] can select and combine elements in order to communicate” (Barthes, 1973). Hence, instead of naming reality, language attempts to recreate it (Turner, 1993: 45).

Drawing the analogy between film and language implies then that the former, which substitutes images for words –and even combines them-, carries meaning for the audience to decode. Indeed, meanings are not “fixed”. Being open to interpretations, the film’s text is diagnosed through both personal preferences and social norms.

“Audiences make films mean; they do not merely recognize the meanings already secreted in them” (Turner, 1993: 123).

Expanding on the idea of interpretation stems from my awareness that commonalities and differences shall inevitably mark people’s translation of the meanings embedded in film. I am sure that my analysis might appear to some, as a monolithic dissection of richly constructed texts. However, I would just like to mention that the bulk of my concern culminates in reporting how film, instead of merely reflecting or recording reality, “re-presents” and re-constructs it. “[Film] works on the meaning systems of culture –to renew, reproduce, or review them- it is also produced by those meaning systems” (Turner, 1993: 131).

Hence, there prevails in film, an intimate link between its text and its ideology. According to Turner, both ought to function in coordination for the purpose of resolving “social contradictions” (1993: 133).

In the erotic productions I have chosen to study, those social contradictions are accurately pinpointed. Yet, their depiction is not one operated for its own sake. On the contrary, in highlighting daily life’s constraints and dilemmas, all five films delve into a reconstruction of erotic reality –this “ideal” I have been attempting to define throughout the present work.

### **Data Collection**

Let me revert back to the process I undertook in view of adequately picking my data. Scarcity being not a characteristic of erotic films, I had to reduce the pool from which I was to finalize my selection. Hence, I found myself under the obligation to primarily define, a specific time period I wished to focus on. Since I wanted to observe a contemporary perspective on eroticism, I restricted the time span in concern to the twentieth century’s last decade. My main attempt here was to choose current works, widely disseminated and somewhat valued by public opinion.

A major task for me though lay in the consideration that I had to set clear standards for distinguishing between erotic and pornographic motion pictures. For, it is “our understanding about the topic [that] influences our awareness of where we should look for documents” (Altheide, 1996: 32).

## **Pornographic Versus Erotic Productions**

The most common remark that has permeated my perception of pornographic films was their lack of plot. George Gordon added to this depiction, the notion that modern pornographic productions displayed “furtive and sleazy qualities”. Even though he does not elicit further the meaning of these two adjectives or their source of relevance, Gordon does indicate that pornographic motion pictures are simply content with a vulgar display of orgasms, principally simulated “to arouse viewers and/or convince them of the verisimilitude of the action” (Gordon, 1980: 111). Unlike Simon Hardy, Gordon does not consider that pornographic works ensure a form of “sexual discourse” (Hardy, 1998: 159). Like Gordon, Alberoni describes pornographic productions in their mere capacity to portray a series of sexual acts, that have no preceding or subsequent implications, except for the fact that they draw an image of the surrounding world as one with no constraints, void of love, where seduction is easy and gratification instantly granted (Alberoni, 1987: 14).

Contrarily, erotic movies seem to be situated at the opposite end of the continuum. They actually have a plot; and their main concern is not simply located around meticulously depicting the sexual act itself. Ado Kyrou explains that a movie could not be labeled erotic, if it merely relied on nudity scenes (Kyrou, 1957: 16). In his understanding of it, erotic cinema had at its very basis, the notion of love. Love and eroticism then ought to work in tandem, so that the physical as well as the spiritual dimension of the plot be appropriately highlighted (1957: 18).

## **Detecting Common Frames**

Based on these primary qualifications, I launched my search for erotic films and managed to choose five samples -which are not all Hollywood deliveries. Indeed, since my study was addressing Western culture with no particular emphasis on a single country, I tried as much as possible to embrace a wider variety of productions.

The main questions I pondered in order to provide my analysis with a sense of orientation revolved around the common themes or frames that the chosen films drew, in their re-presentation –borrowing Turner’s terminology- of erotic reality: How is it depicted and what are its components that the selected motion pictures are most concerned with eliciting? What kind of meaning did the five films produce around erotic sexuality and how much did the scope of their depiction, tap into my own hypothesis to solidify its claim about experiencing erotic reality?

Let me –before separately elaborating on each- briefly sketch in reverse chronological order, starting with the most recent production, the films I have relied upon to analyze the concept of erotic reality:

1. *Eyes Wide Shut* by Stanley Kubrick (1999).
2. *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* by Mira Nair (1998).
3. *Lolita* by Adrian Lyne (1997).
4. *Exotica* by Atom Egoyan (1995).
5. *The Lover* by Jean-Jacques Annaud (1992).

Prior to my analysis, I will first be providing a very short summary, capturing every film’s plot and thus paving the way for the reader’s understanding of it.

## **A. Eyes Wide Shut**

### **Brief Summary**

In a film that “resembles a nightmare”, “Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman star as Dr. Bill and Alice Harford, a married couple who move in rich Manhattan society” (Ebert, 2001: 184). One night, as they get “stoned on pot”, Alice describes to her husband “a fantasy she had about a young naval officer she saw [the previous] summer on Cape Cod” (2001: 184). This incident sets off a “long tortuous” journey on the part of Dr. Harford, for “extra-marital adventure” (Mayo, 2001: 150). Wandering the streets with a “mind inflamed by images of Alice making love with the officer”, Bill begins an adventure where “he is not really the protagonist but the acted-upon, careening from one situation to another, out of his depth” (Ebert, 2001: 185). Hence, he involves himself with an old friend Nick -the “society piano player” whom he meets at the Ziggler’s party- in a secret and dangerous orgy (2001: 184). This is not however the only time Dr. Harford’s life becomes endangered. In a journey filled with sexual fantasy and restless, yet mostly failing seduction attempts, Bill’s life is constantly about to be jeopardized.

### **Analysis**

The slip from everyday life to erotic reality is well highlighted in Stanley Kubrick’s production. While I would not like to think of the erotic realm as totally separate from “real” life, I still consider that the experience of one is not similar to the kind of experience one acquiesces in the other.

Towards the end of the movie, in a sort of final reconciliation scene, Alice Harford and her husband Bill exchange intriguing thoughts:



*"We should be grateful that we've managed to survive through our adventures, whether they are real or only a dream...no dream is just a dream...the important thing is that we are awake now...are we?"*

The protagonists refer to dreaming here, because their journey into erotic reality has been marked by failure. Indeed, each individual's journey was launched separately, as they surrendered to the heavy weight of daily life. Thus, the fine line separating the erotic realm from the "real" one has been totally blurred –a deeply frustrating stage, as Murray Davis would assert.

For Alice, lack of recognition by her husband and his failure to secure the kind of attention she is lavishly yearning for have "made" her embark on a journey with an "imaginary" partner. It is noteworthy as well that her full-time housewife status did not make her life easier. For, while her husband was granted recognition –at least for his job-, Alice fell in the trap of habit. Indeed, according to Bataille "the most serious thing is that habit dulls intensity". In his speculation on marriage Bataille suggests that a "remarkable connection [exists] between the innocence and the absence of danger offered by repeated intercourse, and the absence of value on the level of pleasure generally associated with this repetition". This is why "without the intimate understanding between two bodies", the type of conjunction bound to grow is essentially "furtive" and far from achieving pleasure (1986: 111).

Given the furtive aspect visibly permeating her life with Bill, Alice had to "set some action" by revealing to him what Bataille labels "capricious urges" -this time channeled towards an officer she only met *en passant*. In overemphasizing her hidden fantasies, Alice wishes not to be taken for granted as a wife/possession any further.

However, the end result of her attempt seems to prosper in different direction from that she had probably expected. Rather than simply showing her his jealousy, Bill tries to launch his proper journey into an erotic reality fetched outside the vicinity of marriage.

Nevertheless, wherever he attempts to purchase eroticism, the ghost of death seems to haunt him. My assumption is here that in Stanley Kubrick's scenario, once eroticism is void of love and the notion of alterity, it is inevitably doomed to die. For instance, a near death experience threatens Bills when he attempts to establish a relationship with Domino the prostitute, who is infected with AIDS. Another illustrative incident that puts his life in jeopardy is his brisk venture into the orgy scene.

However, as Bataille explains again, it is quite hard to preserve the notion of alterity within marriage. A stranger tells Alice in a party at the Ziggler's house:

*"One of the charms of marriage is that it makes deception a necessity for both parties".*

Yet, do partners really need deceit in order to transcend the dullness of habit and the routine-like aspect of daily life? Do they require betrayal, in order to learn that their erotic life can still be fired, that it is not dead but needs rehabilitation?

According to Alice, the problem lies in the deep gender dichotomy vis-à-vis sex. She reports to her husband during their heated fights that men are able to have sex with "anything", let alone anyone; while women yearn for security and commitment.

Now, while the movie acts here as a vehicle of deeply rooted social problems, it also proposes an alternative, by means of re-structuring erotic reality.

In listening to Alice confess that she prefers being naked in her dreams to stripping naked in front of her husband, one remembers Bataille's analogy between the naked body and the self willingly relinquishing its selfishness.

*We were in this sort of city and our clothes were gone...and I was terrified and I felt ashamed and I was angry because it was your fault...as soon as you were gone... I felt wonderful. Then I was lying in a beautiful garden...and a man walked out of the woods...he was the man from the hotel...he stared at me...he was kissing me and then we were making love...then there were all these people around us...I hoped you could see me in the arms of all these men...I wanted to make fun of you, to laugh in your face.*

Apparently, a deep rupture has marked both partners' relationship, to the extent that it has become impossible for their bodies to unite in concord.

Despite the beauty of its filming, the single orgy scene that Alice's husband attends, represents what Bakhtin would label "carnavalesque eroticism". This type of eroticism is also void of love and recognition. Masked females go through a form of initiation rite that delivers them afterwards to other masked strangers. The whole purpose of the ceremony is to acquire sexual gratification without for instance addressing the other, in his/her subjecthood. Behind their costumes, rich and corrupted individuals hide to practice a voyeuristic and utterly dangerous game. This is why, once again, death is portrayed at the other end of the practice.

Now the notion of transgression is also displayed in the film. For, both partners attempt to break their matrimonial vows, in search for an idealized/possible erotic experience. Nevertheless, since transgression is not led to an extreme, i.e. it stays within the limit of challenging habit and normativity without effectively involving protagonists in external love affairs, the intensity of their erotic feelings towards one another is soon revived after reconciliation is secured.

**Their divergent trips have actually clarified for both husband and wife that alterity was existent in their relationship. What was missing though was a much-needed break from everyday life, with an enhanced sense of recognition attributed to each person's deeply rooted fantasies.**

**The uniqueness of this film lies in the way it deals with death and eroticism, counter pointing them throughout and symbolizing thus the failures of eroticism as well as the lack of love.**

## **B. The Lover**

### **Brief Summary**

Jane March, Tony Leung and Jeanne Moreau star in this “adaptation of Marguerite Duras’ story”: *L’Amant*. “Set in Vietnam in 1929”, the film depicts the struggle of a French schoolgirl to “gain independence from her difficult family life and...understand her own sexual awakening”. The journey begins with “a torrid and illicit affair with a wealthy Chinese man”, that her family despises but tries to manipulate for financial profits (Bleiler: 1999: 348).

Annaud manages to “capture the tension-filled colonial setting” dictating the “displaced” protagonists’ final telos and heavily weighing on their relationship from the very beginning (1999: 348).

### **Analysis**

She was 18 years old, poor, beautiful and white. He was 32, Chinese and rich. One never learns anything about their names; just the fact that they met on a ferryboat. Crossing the river in “Southern Indochina...plane of birds”, a relationship inevitably develops. Yet the film portrays a host of social inhibitions that oppress both characters. Coming from different social and racial backgrounds, their bond was inevitably doomed to condemnation:

*“In my family’s presence, he ceases to be my lover”.*

So, the protagonists are compelled to run away into an erotic setting considered their own: the bachelor’s house.

There, erotic reality's experience reached a peak. Away from inflicted inhibitions, *"in the dark room surrounded by the city"*, the young girl and the "China man" were pronounced lovers:

*"We are lovers, we can't stop loving in the sleepest street of Saigon, in the bachelor's room"*.

Soon as they enclosed themselves in their "private space", her senses seemed to become fully aroused. She explored the little room as a total opposite to her own house, inevitably marked by *"pain, horror and disaster"* –a realm where no recognition could possibly be granted to her.

On the contrary, in this room where she experiences the meaning of erotic reality for the first time and totally slips into it, her lover gladly catered for her needs. The lovers' encounters culminated in a series of discoveries that occur every time they stripped naked. Indeed, they explored another type of reality –one that eventually left a great impact, even after their relation was torn apart.

Now, I am not sure they really broke free from the burdens of racism, tradition and stigma. The pressing city's image, its ability to integrate itself in the bachelor room's overall ambiance and the young girl's constant distraction by the *"smell [and] the noises"*, all imply that the lovers' moments of intimacy were interrupted.

Not only that. Avid for a thorough discovery of her sexuality, the girl is not ready to succumb to compromises. In her man's hat -which "made her whore"-, in her revealing dress and her cabaret shoes, she refused to conform. In fact, she was not appalled by the idea of prostitution. For her, the latter offered any girl the privilege of going with a plethora of strangers, whose faces were not likely to be seen again. This is how she starts

her relationship with the China man anyway –a rich stranger she met on a ferry and deliberately chose to discover her sexuality with.

Even she herself could not believe her personal aptitude to take *“so much selfish pleasure with a stranger”*. Actually, the young girl chose to treat her lover as a complete stranger at the beginning. When they made love the first time she intentionally “did not look him in the face”.

Yet, a certain bond developed between them that he called love and she did not want to consider more than a yearning for a fascinating novelty. Often stating that she was inevitably doomed to the same destiny as her mom’s, the young girl was ardently trying to escape the latter. And, if her mother was “too serious for so long [that she] lost the feeling of [her] own pleasure”, the daughter sought pleasure while playing the role of a *fille frivole*.

Hence, she radically refused to confess any sort of love for the China man and at times attempted to convince him about conveying a casual aspect to their relation:

*“Oh, I’d rather if you did not love me”*.

She even went ahead and let him penetrate her for money one night. Outraged by her parents’ mistreatment, the China man sought a confirmation that his beloved was not with him for the money. However, the little girl refused with determination to grant him his wish and accepted the price he tagged for the sexual favor she offered.

Contrasted to the other love making scenes, this one marked the difference between eroticism and sex as commodity. The latter idea is in fact constantly juxtaposed to their intimate moments. It is as pressing as the image of the surrounding city. When describing her family’s means of survival, the young girl tells her lover:

*"We do the best we can...we are shameless".*

Despite the fact that she struggled to despise everyday reality and escape its constraints, the young girl still fell in its trap by refraining from granting her lover some mutuality and alterity. It was not until he got married and she took the boat heading to France, that the young girl realized how *"her love for him had lost itself in their story like water in sand"*. Memories of their bodies melting together, of this little room in the midst of the a crowded city, of dim lights and curious explorations all repeatedly haunted her; to the extent that she never forgot about him. The erotic reality she experienced with him changed her entire life, and his as well.

*"At 18 I aged"*. This is when she met him and managed to put on a "new face".

However, at the time she is writing the novel, hers is a "destroyed face". This might be the reason why we are not any point exposed it in the film. Apparently, the young girl/narrator endows the face with great importance that Anthony Synnott elaborately highlights: "the face [is] the prime symbol of the self...it is public, but also intensely private and intimate" (1993: 73). Eventually, soon after she loses her lover, part of her own self is ripped apart.

As for the Lover, even long after his marriage, his message was sent off to her that things were still the same, regardless of distance. Indeed, despite the forced arranged marriage his parents strictly subjugated him to, the erotic experience he shared with her remained deeply rooted in him.

Unfortunately, wealth was the one thing this China Man could not sacrifice for the sake of the woman he loved. Actually, when the young girl met him, her first impression was that *"wealth [took] his strength away"* and that "what he did in life"



consisted in solely “making love”. Having developed a great dependence on his father’s fortune, he was totally incapable of surviving without it. This consideration brought him down from erotic to everyday “reality”, in quite an abrupt manner.

Unable to tolerate his father’s determination to fix him up with a rich Chinese girl he had never laid eyes on, and totally devastated by the consideration that his beloved would not reciprocate his feelings, the China man admitted to the young girl: *“I am going to die of love for you”*. All of a sudden, the meaning of death took another turn from that described by both Bataille and Bakhtin. Death did not in the China Man’s words culminate in a relinquishment of oneself for the purpose of meeting the other in their deepest fantasies. Dying marked here the imposed rupture with the only intimate place he possessed and his failure to face the situation.

Both characters in the film are drained by the surrounding circumstances. Their privacy is repeatedly infringed upon by a multitude of factors that hinder the full-fledged prosperity of their erotic experience.

I am assuming that Giddens’ “confluent love” was needed here. For, how would eroticism unfold without communication and mutual consent upon the nature of the prevalent bond?

The Lover recounts the story of transgressed taboos for the sake of experiencing erotic reality. Both cross-class and cross-race, the protagonists’ relationship attempted to break all imposed barriers. The difficulties surrounding it may have imbued it with an “exotic” aura that animated the attraction and filled it with unquenched desire for the other. Nevertheless, the lack of balance in reciprocating emotions made it impossible to maintain the erotic experience untainted.

## **C. Exotica:**

### **Brief Summary**

“The film is a mystery where motivations and intentions are not at all what they first appear to be”. Mia Krishner plays “the central character Christina, a dancer at Exotica, a relatively classy Toronto strip club”. One of her most “devoted customers is Francis Brown (Bruce Greenwood)” who is obsessed with her (Mayo, 2001: 148). While this obsession does not seem to bother Christina, it bothers Eric (Elias Koteas), the club’s D.J, who is also obsessed with the young dancer.

During the day, Brown leads a different type of life; yet one permeated with the same amount of complexity and mystery as his nightlife. In fact, “he goes over the books at a pet store, owned by Thomas Pinto (Don McKellar), a gay man who has reasons to be worried about tax audit” (Mayo, 2001: 148). That is, Pinto is “involved in illegal importation of exotic egg birds” –an affair that the government is trying to pursue (Bleiler, 1999: 182).

“That synopsis only begins to describe the levels of complexity that are revealed” (Mayo, 2001: 149). Actually, Egoyan “weaves several characters and their stories together as he explores such ominous themes as voyeurism, grief, betrayal and the search for healing, forgiveness and salvation” (Bleiler, 1999: 182).

### **Analysis**

Christina is not any longer Tina Turner’s “private dancer” when it comes to her performance before Francis Brown. Hiding behind a schoolgirl costume, she is –from my point of view- totally “un-erotic”. The reason is that Mr. Brown goes to visit her at

Exotica every single night for a different kind of pleasure than that sought by other men in the room. Wishing to successfully fulfill the role of Christina's protector, he constantly wonders in remorse about the motives that could possibly drive a person to hurt a schoolgirl:

*"How could anyone hurt you...take you away from me?"*

Actually, for Mr. Brown, Christina fills in for his late eight-year-old daughter Lisa who was brutally murdered on her way to school. Eric, the organ man who is paid to present the strippers at the club and make each feel special, feeds Brown's imagination further with a host of questions:

*"What is it about a schoolgirl that is considered that special innocence? The way they gaze at you expecting that you would say something that would paralyze the silence?*

*The way they walk? The sweet smell of their perfume? That they have a whole life ahead of them and you have wasted half of yours? That they still have self-respect and dignity?"*

Indeed, while acting thus Eric simultaneously feeds his own voyeurism. Having traumatically experienced Christina's rupture with him (triggered by the fact that he lied to her while he promised never to), he is fixated on watching her dance to customers. However, if her movements and dress soothed him at all times, they ceased to have the same function when it came to her relationship with Francis Brown. The latter's presence seemed to threaten Eric's voyeurism, for he never understood the nature of the strong bond between them. How could Brown's fixation on Christina be justified if sexual arousal was not his primary objective?

Actually, while Francis "substituted" Lisa for Christina and attempted to roll back in time for the purpose of protecting her –his "angel"–, the young stripper was awarded

recognition in the process. This type of attention was not at all new or earned in the club. Ever since she was Lisa's baby sitter, Brown used to lend Christina an ear and commend her on the type of "responsible" personality she had. Yet, this recognition shifted in a drastic way that Christina failed to realize, or refused to realize. In fact, what Francis saw in her was the image of his lost little girl rather than her own subjecthood. Maybe Christina enjoyed the fixation permeating his mind, for it made him get excited about her presence and devolved a sense of security upon her that could not possibly be found in Exotica or anywhere else.

In Exotica, despite the dancing, the stripping and fixation, there is nothing really erotic. Like the "outside world", it is marked by betrayal, surveillance and bitterness. Atom Egoyan visibly draws the analogy between Canada's Customs where passengers are watched without their realizing it, and the club where a big hallway has been particularly built for all sorts of voyeurs yearning to maximize solitary pleasure. Even Tom Pinto's pet shop markets "exotic animals". Nevertheless, Pinto refuses to recognize his animals as fragile creatures:

*"Not because they are exotic this has to mean that they cannot endure extremes".*

His statement radically contradicts Eric's repetitive meditations about "the innocence" of schoolgirls –which Christina is supposed to represent at Exotica, as the major erotic/seductive image.

Individuals trapped in Exotica do not seem to make assertive choices. Even Christina, who constantly blames others for their surrender, strictly believes that *"not everybody has the luxury of choosing their lives"*. Francis Brown drives her consideration to an extreme by pondering that people were not asked their opinion about coming to this

jungle-like world. Actually, having lost control over his personal life, having been unwillingly subjugated to major deceptions, Brown tries to earn a sense of control at Exotica.

The particularity of this film lies in the fact that it draws the antithesis to erotic reality in a way that suggestively questions the possibility of yielding a successful erotic experience. By being un-erotic, Exotica's atmosphere suggestively launches the quest for "Erotica". What is it that makes a place erotic? What is it that animates an individual's journey into eroticism and away from the constraints of everyday life? If deceit, mad fixation and sheer voyeurism are not the appropriate media, then what is it that lacks?

Seemingly, the exotic could not be experienced as erotic when the presence of an indispensable other is not felt, when mutuality is not activated and recognition deliberately granted. The exotic is not necessarily erotic.

## **D. Lolita:**

### **Brief Summary**

In an ending comment to the fifth chapter of his book *Roman et censure, ou la mauvaise foi d'Eros*, Maurice Couturier suggests that “Nabokov [transgresses] the interdict against the representation of sexing a novelistic and poetic context, and [arouses] *poerotic* pleasure in his readers”. According to the critic, Lolita “is perhaps one of the most disturbing novels” of its century. For, “it tells the...story of a middle-aged man who falls in love with a twelve-year-old girl, a nymphet as he calls her, and who has sexual relations with her for two years. After she elopes with another even more perverse middle-aged man, he does his best to find her and discover the identity of his rival, whom he finally executes. Lolita, after marrying a simple man and moving to Alaska with him, dies in childbirth”. This fixation that Humbert Humbert displays towards the little girl is explained in the novel by the “first erotic scene [that] takes place between Humbert, still an adolescent and Annabel Leigh, a girl who is about the same age and who is the model for Lolita” (<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/iasweb/Nabokov/coutur1.htm>). The brisk death of Annabel leaves the narrator with a sort of grief that brings him misery and everlasting emotional instability.

Adrian Lyne’s film borrows the same plot and captures it to his audience, with meticulous attention paid to the details of the journey Humbert and Lolita lead “together”.

## **Analysis**

The theme of the schoolgirl is again reiterated in Adrian Lyne's film –with a different twist though. Mr. Humbert admits to himself while observing Lolita with her young peers one day:

*“You have to be an artist, a mad man, one full of shame and melancholy...to recognize the daemon among them”.*

In fact, it is this melancholy he mentions that animates the yearning he displays for his stepdaughter, rather than the question of “innocence” pondered in *Exotica*.

Melancholy actually stems from the consideration that Humbert, despite the years, never got over his love for Annabelle. It was in Cannes during the year 1921 that he had met her and explored the meaning of passion. With her, he shared his only erotic experience. Annabelle was destined to die four months later, only to leave her lover with great grief and “poison in the wound”. His wound never healed, and Humbert lived all his life on the echoes of a fading memory, which was briskly revived by the sudden appearance of Lolita.

Having moved to America as a professor, Humbert found in Lolita a reflection of his Annabelle. The girl was 12 years old. She lingered in the kind of youth he first detected in his lost one. I do not think Humbert was a sick pedophile. For me, he was only stuck in a discontinued period of his life that he had constantly wished to revisit. Lolita was only a substitute for Annabelle on whom he developed a destructive fixation.

Oscillating between the gravity of sin and the temptation to knock the barriers surrounding his reunion with love down, Humbert admits that he is experiencing

“paradise with hell flames”. As he tries to possess Lolita, to have her all for himself even by “purchasing her favors” -as he explains- Humbert transgresses all kinds of taboos.

According to Paz, “a passion will be more forceful when it has a greater resistance that must be overcome” (1998: 37). Bataille too emphasizes that “the domain of eroticism” is one intrinsically permeated by “violation” (1956: 19). What both authors imply here is a deliberate deliverance to the act of relinquishing self-confinement in order to empathize with the chosen other’s fantasies. Actually, consent should emerge on both sides, so that communication embarks on the right foot and erotic experience gets fired.

In Humbert’s case there is no empathy. Nor is Lolita a conscious and deliberately consenting other. The old professor is simply projecting his aspirations on her, wishing to crawl back to the one erotic reality he was never capable of releasing himself from. My assumption is that Humbert never moved back to what Murray Davis would call “real life”; the reason why, he destructively plunges in the game of “incest”. It is not like he did not realize it. Humbert assesses his life by stating that he was playing a dual role after Lolita’s mother died: that of a “willing corrupter” to an “innocent” and that of a “housewife”.

Lolita on her part could visibly detect his passion and play around with it and uses it to her advantage. Young and intentionally seductive, she seemed embarked on an explorative sexual journey. Humbert states that he was “not even her first lover”; was he in fact her lover at any point?

Seemingly, Lolita was attracted by his willingness to succumb to her desires, nurture them and make them come true. While he surrendered to his madness and her torture, she gave herself up to the only man she happened to be crazy about: Clair Quilty.



The latter however was a pornography addict, who abused young girls and sold their bodies to a filthy market. Obviously, Lolita made the wrong choice again. I am not sure I should be using the word “choice” in this context, especially since Humbert blames it all on himself and deems himself guilty of the misfortunes that have fallen upon his Lolita: *“She had nowhere else to go”*.

This might be the reason why he decides to kill Quilty. Indeed, throughout the entire film, Quilty’s appearance resembles the shadow of death: pressing and haunting no matter how far one tried to escape it. The moment Quilty stole away Lolita could be compared to the death of Annabelle. Given the consideration that he was utterly fixated on Lolita even after her marriage and her drastic transformation into what he described “a dead leaf echo”, Humbert still failed to perceive her in any other image than that of her “initial beauty”. This is why he imposed on Quilty what he could not impose on the ghost of death before: murder.

Only after revenge was Humbert immersed again in “real life”; was he really? What distinguishes Lyne’s film is this bitter juxtaposition of opposing worlds: one permeated by an erotic reality that would not leave way for real life to move forward, to the extent that the character in concern did not grow beyond his fourteenth year; and another realm marked by ignorance on the matter of love or eroticism, lost in the darkness of everyday life. The film also demonstrates the seductive power of the young and the self-destructive power of the old, as the latter attempts to infringe upon age to capture the young’s soul by force. Ironically, both old and young in Nabokov’s story are finally destroyed by the distorted forms of love they choose to embrace: Humbert by his immature emotions and Lolita by her perverse yet everlasting lust for Quilty.

Like Exotica, Lolita does not quench the search for eroticism, but shakes its constituents at heart. From the agony of sin, devastation and failure emerges this indication that erotic reality shall not prevail where love, communication and understanding do not.

## **E. Kama Sutra: A Tale Of Love**

### **Brief Summary**

Set in 16<sup>th</sup> century India, the film covers “the sexual and political wiles of palace life” during that epoch. “Princess Tara (Sarita Choudhury) and girlhood friend/Servant Maya (Indira Varma) are close, until the princess becomes jealous of the even more beautiful Maya”. Publicly humiliated by her so-called friend, Maya plots for revenge. Hence, she “seduces Tara’s dissolute fiancé, Raj Singh (Naveen Andrews)” just prior to their wedding (Mayo, 2001: 241). Nevertheless, in asserting that she was “tired of the leftovers tossed to her”, Maya “receives a one way ticket to exile” (Bleiler, 1999: 305). This is why she ends up finding her niche “as a student of the famous courtesan Rasa Devi” (1999: 305). The latter teaches her the “sexual arts of the Kama Sutra”, leading her to become the “chief courtesan to Raj” -Tara’s husband and the *voyeur* king- who becomes obsessed with her (Mayo, 2001: 241). At the same time, Maya falls in love with the Raj’s sculptor Jai Kumar (Ramon Tikaram) and vainly fights at the end of the movie to unite with him.

In this “semi-erotic tale”, director Nair delves into “the pleasures of the flesh...of lust and forbidden love” (Bleiler, 1999: 305).

### **Analysis**

The film’s title promises a lesson on the art of love; and this is what it actually conveys. Actually, according to “Kama, one of the most profound notions of Sanskrit culture which India evolved as the life-pattern of her vast people...the momentum of love is the very source of life on this earth” (Agrawala, 1983: 1).

In a world permeated with male dominance, stigma and constant subjugation to tradition, the Kama Sutra acts as a useful manual addressed to those aspiring for a full-fledged exploration of erotic reality. By asserting that men and women together comply in the game of love –which is “meaningful and complex”- a particular emphasis is attributed to the art of love rather than the mere act itself. Indeed, in the Kama Sutra teachings, reunion with the other is supposed to enlighten us on the issue of handling our innermost desires. This is one of the first “commandments” Maya acquiesces when she joins the courtesans’ house.

Yet, being a courtesan does not always reflect Kama Sutra rules. For experiencing intimacy with rich men like King Raj does not imply an immersion in erotic reality on the part of the courtesan. While she treats him nicely and gently, while “she dances as if he was the only one left in the world”, she solely feeds his voyeurism and avidity for sexuality. Becoming the man’s possession, the courtesan may be well treated and generously appreciated for her services; but does this appropriate her a successful erotic experience?

If the answer were positive, Maya would have never decided to break away with Jai Kumar –her lover- from the privileged position the King granted her. Soon after she experienced the real meaning of eroticism and love combined through a night with her Jai Kumar, Maya was never again able to be with another man.

Appalled by her determination, the King sank into an unprecedented voyeurism. He treated women like “helpless animals”, who had to eventually fall at his feet even against their own will.

Maya was actually rebellious enough to break the rule; unlike her fellow courtesans who were compelled to reside in the corrupted palace. What helped her though, was her initiation into the “real” erotic world and the fact that she tasted something sweeter than ephemeral satisfaction.

What one learns in the Kama Sutra is this necessity to meet the other in his/her deepest fantasies and have them reciprocate such acts. Willingness, consent and compliance have to overshadow the encounter; otherwise, it is inevitably doomed to failure. At the same time, eroticism cannot unfold in a rushed encounter where its aura is not valued or recognized.

Delving into the vicinity of erotic reality is not supposed to become a mechanical action. Every encounter between lovers has to be endowed with a special touch of its own. Candles, ornaments, music, smells, clothes and the actual physical performance of lovers all comply for this purpose. Nevertheless, where love is not at play, these elements do not really seem sufficient.

This can be observed by contrasting the encounters Maya had with Raj and those she shared with Jai Kumar. Had Raj shared the initial yearning Maya expressed for him at the beginning, had he prevented the town from despising her as a “whore” when she lost her virginity for him, I would assume their bond would have grown and love would have eventually governed their relationship.

Nevertheless, Raj surrendered to tradition and married Tara –Maya’s so-called friend, yet utter rival at the same time. Wishing to transgress the heavy burden of everyday reality, of the caste system and its unfair treatment, Maya offered herself to Raj

on his wedding night. It must have been this event that enhanced his voyeuristic tendencies.

Indeed, after Maya's expulsion from the city, the King never managed to transcend his experience with her. I am not sure he ever read her underlying fantasies or the determination with which she violated a rigid system of values to live an erotic experience with him. All he was concerned with was the satisfaction of his carnal desires; and so he remained until the end.

Kama Sutra addresses eroticism in all its components: Love, transgression, mutuality, alterity and recognition of the indispensable other. It also describes in detail how erotic reality unfolds as well as the possibility of embracing all its components. Indeed, the film traces the tale of a psychological quest that does not at any point cease being a physical one.

## **Conclusion**

From an early fascination with the one thousand and one Arabian nights, I developed an intriguing relationship with the concept of eroticism. The perplexity I encountered every time I attempted to define the word triggered my enthusiasm about understanding its structure, components and development.

What did I end up discovering? Eventually, that erotic reality was constantly clashing with everyday reality and that this constant clash determined my incapacity to recall the most erotic thing somebody ever did or said to me, the most erotic film I have seen or book I have read. From this sense of confusion my quest for the meaning of erotic reality as an ideal was launched.

Again, I have already mentioned that the notion of ideal is introduced in an attempt to oppose the kind of erotic reality I chose to define to that which is marketed to individuals. In fact, the main components/constituents I have described are not necessarily agreed upon ones. Yet, I would not expect them to be met with utter refutation. For, who is it that does not yearn for recognition, love, mutuality and alterity? Who is it that does not feel threatened in his/her own subjecthood by the implications of an “all-mighty” consumer-culture, which is imposing increased surveillance over our innermost desires? Who is it that does not despise the burdens of everyday life with all its confines and frenzied experiences –especially when it comes to sexuality?

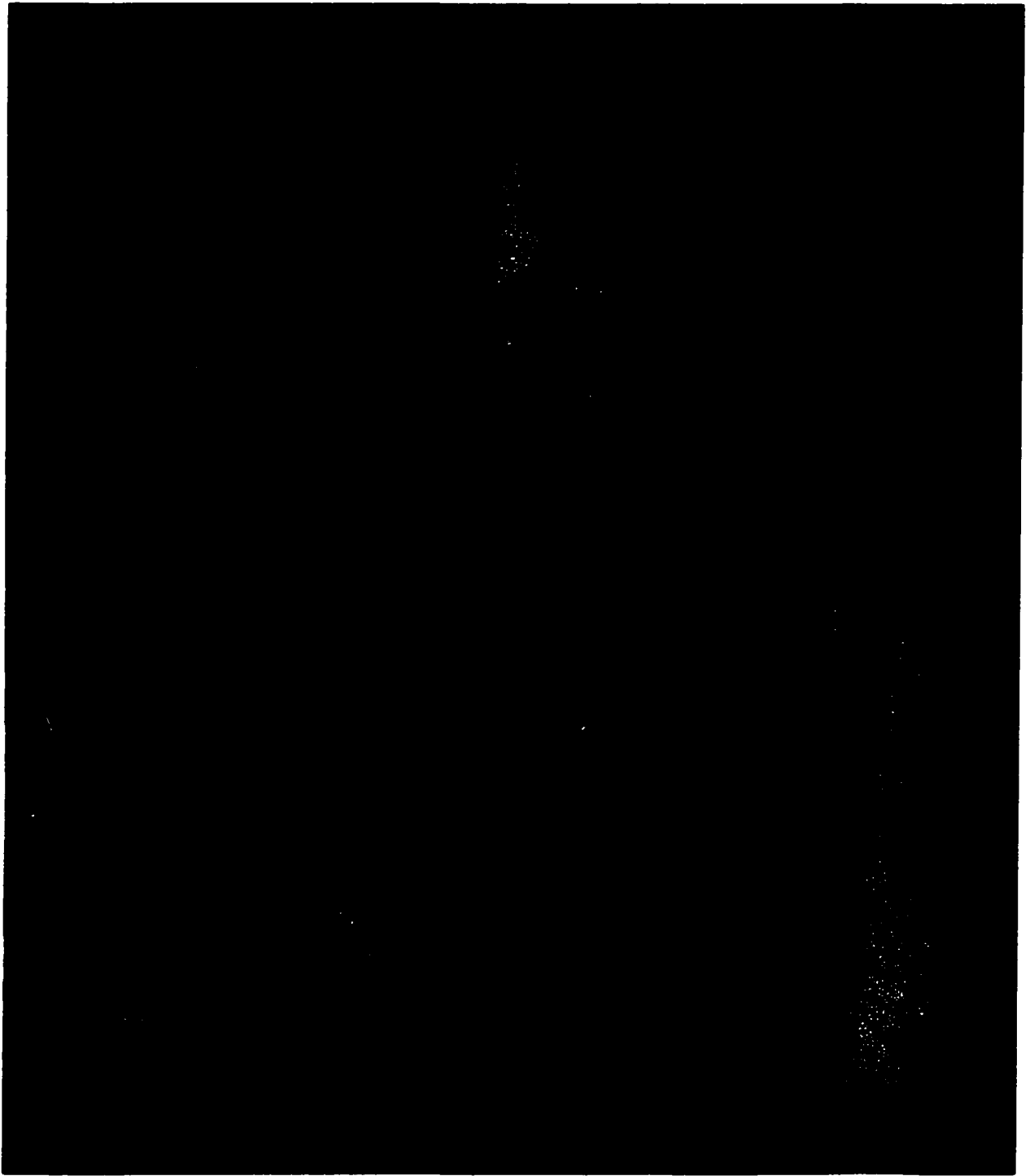
The five films we have reviewed clarify the complexities and the enchantment of eroticism, as portrayed by five different directors. Actually, the particularity of each

scenario contributed further to the reinforcement of my claims. Erotic or “un-erotic” in essence, all the productions I analyzed highlight the fact that eroticism is not a game to be played solo. However, as they clarify, eroticism is not always the land of enchantment. It is also, or can be, highly destructive. All five films close badly: there is no happy ending; only process. The themes that weave through films include eroticism, passion, sex and love, but also taboo, obsession, voyeurism and murder. They illuminate the flames of eroticism, which both warm the lovers and burn them up.

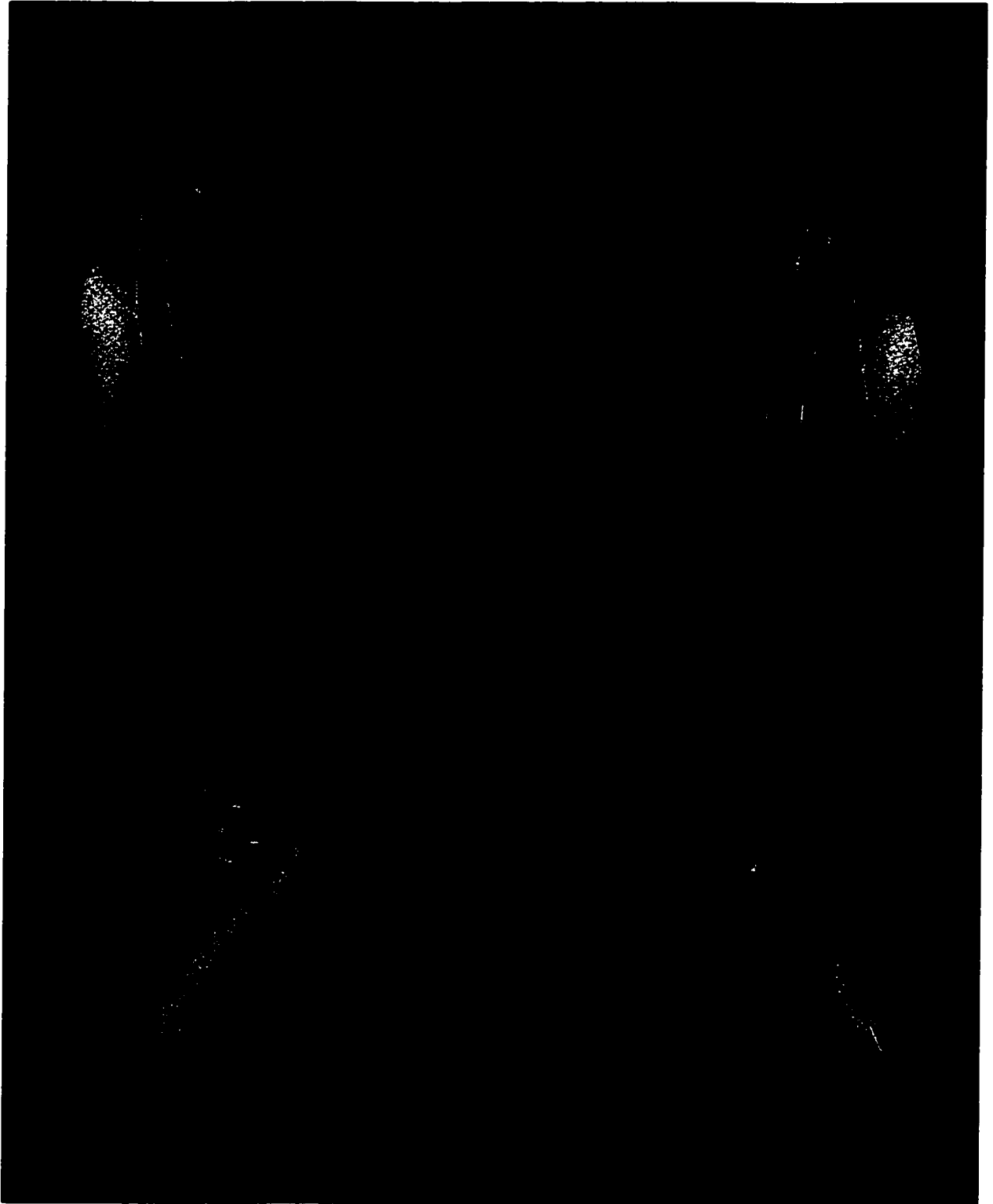
Each of the five films deals with transgression: of age (*Lolita*, *Exotica*, *The Lover*), class (*The Lover*, *Kama Sutra*), race (*The Lover*) and marriage (*Eyes Wide Shut*, *Kama Sutra*, *Lolita*). Bataille has actually discussed the acceptable limits to transgression, while both Bakhtin and Paz have elaborated the notion of the indispensable other as an active participant in the development of the erotic self. While the metaphor of the blue and red flames drawn from Paz emphasizes the intriguing relationship between love and eroticism, Giddens in his discussion of “confluent love” stresses the unification of the lovers. Indeed, cherishing sexuality, pleasure and fantasy –all shared with a deliberately chosen partner- helps partners realize that “everything lies in desire”; that “desire is a form of curiosity, and ongoing desire is a form of insatiable curiosity” (Morgan, 1984: 100).

In this thesis, I have wondered about the essence of eroticism. Throughout my research I was not really looking for answers; maybe a ray of light, a glimpse of hope indicating that the body still mattered, that love still prevailed, that sexuality was valuable, that the other was indeed indispensable and that the double flame was not bound to fade any time soon.

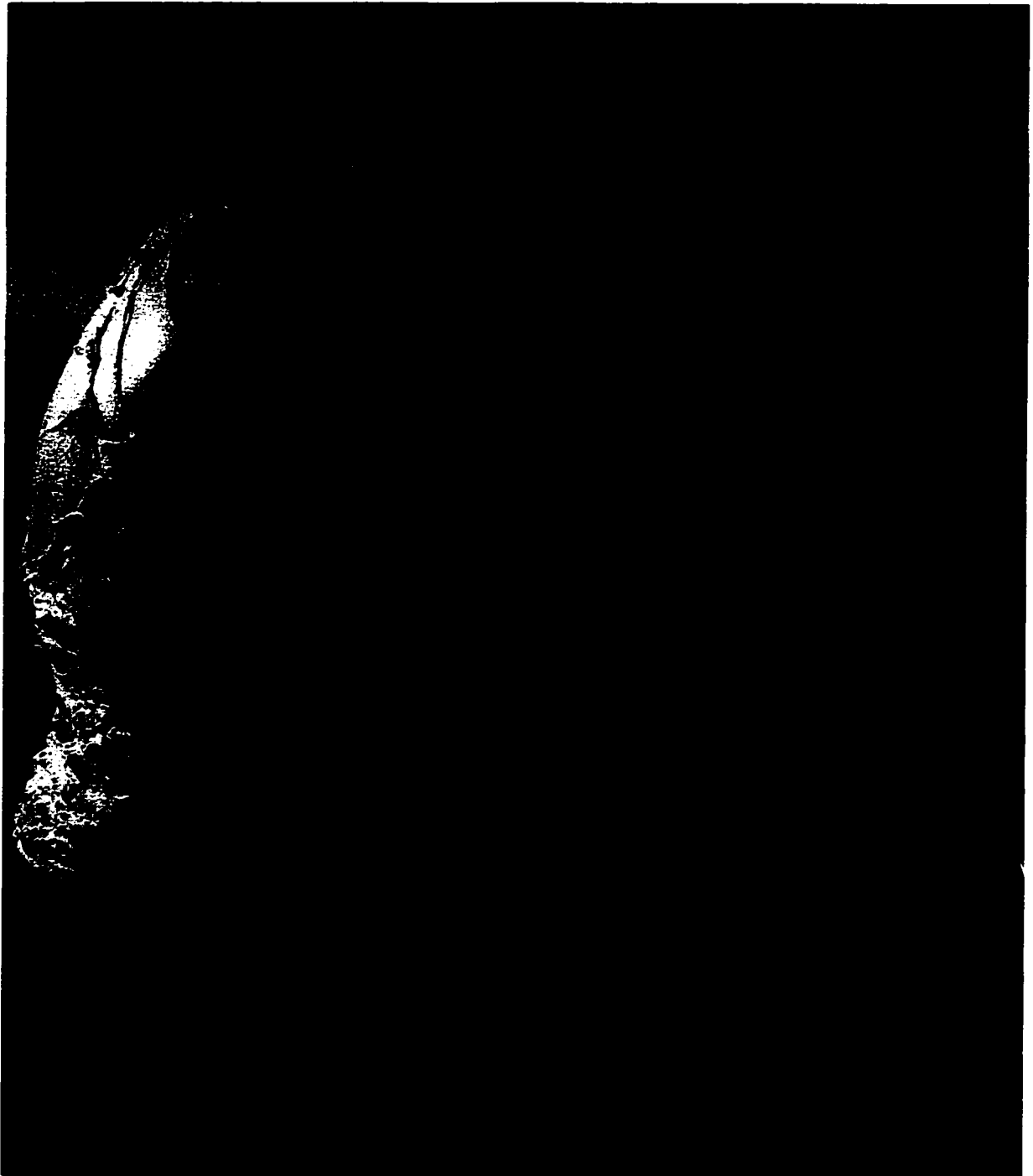




*Fig. 1* "Eroticism is at once, the progeny of culture as well as one of its deepest markers"

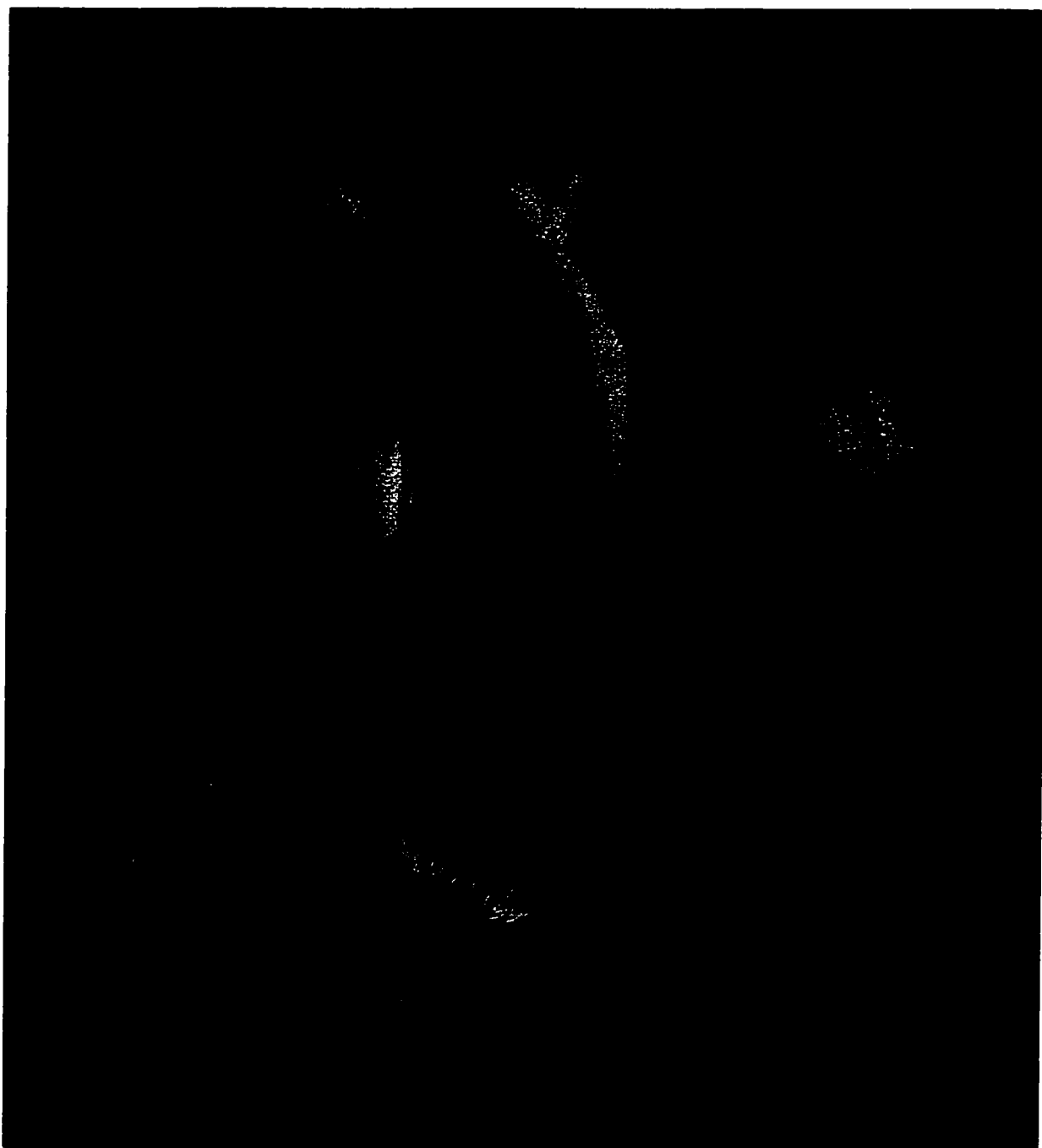


*Fig. 2* "In erotic reality, an amalgam of inner and outer experience is bound to take place."

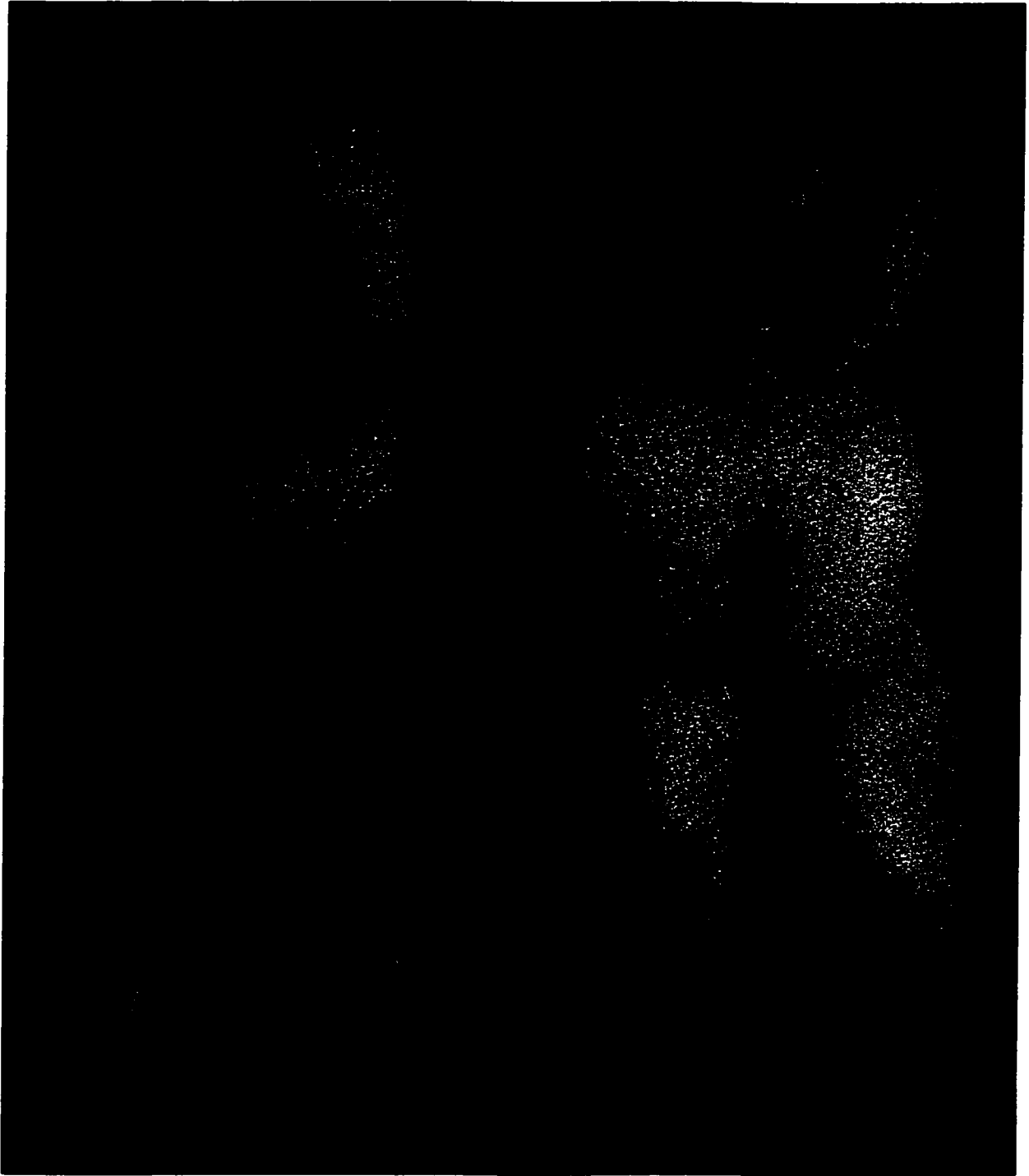


*Fig. 3*

**"Eroticism does not simply entail an ingrained desire to appropriate a person's corporeal as well as psychic presence. Though the act of surrendering to the other and having them surrender simultaneously, a sort of (temporary) continuity is secured for both beings. Transgression turns eroticism into a ceremonial activity where intersubjectivity is constantly at play."**



*Fig. 4* "Erotic reality is the realm of enchantment"



*Fig. 5*

**"By means of meeting the other, an individual becomes aware that he/she is not alone in the world and that the latter does not solely gravitate around their desires."**

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