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Colas Duflo, *Philosophie des pornographies: Les ambitions philosophiques du roman libertin*. Paris: Édition du Seuil, 2019. 302 pp. Bibliography. 23.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-02-140417-3.

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*La Philosophie des pornographies* sets out to explore the connection between Enlightenment philosophical ideas and what Colas Duflo calls “pornographic” novels of eighteenth-century France. Achieving this goal requires at least three critical steps: defining what specifically qualifies as an articulation of Enlightenment philosophy, who are the pornographers of the title (and more aptly which texts count as pornography), and the significance of this coexistence to our understanding of eighteenth-century literature and thought. While the author Colas Duflo offers an impressive body of evidence of the philosophy in the novels, his emphasis on establishing a place for these examples of materialist philosophy in the canon of Enlightenment thought leaves the other two important aspects of the argument underdeveloped.

A crucial aspect of a study entitled *La philosophie des pornographies*, is a precise definition of *les pornographies*. Certainly, the category of libertine, erotic, or obscene literature has long been notoriously difficult to define, and its boundaries remain elusive. The work of Henri Coulet, Joan DeJean, Michel Delon, Jean M. Goulemot, Raymond Trousson, and Patrick Wald Lasowski offers a broad range of perspectives on this question.<sup>[1]</sup> Duflo rightly acknowledges that the term pornography was not understood at the time of these novels as it is today, but fails to elaborate on what he intends “pornography” to signify here. One cannot help but think of Justice Potter’s famous comment about not being able to define pornography but knowing it when he sees it. Literary historians, fortunately, have succeeded in developing definitions for the genre. Lynn Hunt has provided the most persuasive description, defining it as sexually explicit material with the primary purpose of arousing the reader.<sup>[2]</sup> This definition would, of course, discount all the texts in this study as they contain philosophy and therefore another motive beyond physical stimulation. Given the complicated connotations and anachronism of the term pornography, Duflo thankfully shifts away from the adjective *pornographique*, and names the novels *romans libertins*, *romans clandestins*, and finally *romans clandestins à ambition philosophique*.<sup>[3]</sup> Duflo ultimately settles on this designation, and while it is somewhat cumbersome when frequently repeated, it is in fact the most accurate one. But even in arriving at this apt term, he still leaves unexplained his criteria for inclusion in his body of texts.

The author also rightly recognizes that the body of literature he examines here includes a wide variety of texts ranging from innuendo-filled libertine novels to cruder works with raunchy scenes and bawdy humor. Turning to the work of Robert Darton, he persuasively justifies the

heterogeneity of his corpus given the historical context in which all were published clandestinely because of their politically, religiously, and morally subversive content.<sup>[3]</sup> These diverse texts can and should be grouped together because—in the minds of their publishers, booksellers, and readers—they were part of the same category. Five novels receive the most attention here: *Le Portier des Chartreux*, *Thérèse philosophe*, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, *Aline et Valcour*, and the *Histoire de Juliette*. These titles are well chosen as perhaps the best-known texts of the genre and as temporally and stylistically representative of the genre.<sup>[4]</sup> Duflo supplements these novels with examples from some thirty-five other works, demonstrating his impressive knowledge of the genre and thus lending credence to his observations.

The passages constituting the *philosophie* of the *pornographes* are similarly apt choices and are much easier to pinpoint than the parameters of the genre. In all the novels the action is repeatedly interrupted with a philosophical digression in the form of a question and answer dialog or a long discourse, usually explained as a necessary lesson for the libertine mentor to impart to his pupil or as the narrators' justifications of their decisions. These disruptions in the narrative are at once intentional breaks in the rhythm of the text to keep the reader from being lulled into passive enjoyment of the story and unsurprising interjections for the readers of the time, in that the ideas in the discourses were just as shocking as the lewd acts that surrounded them.

These philosophical digressions articulate a view of sexuality and free will that Duflo terms *les Lumières hétérodoxes*. This vein of Enlightenment thought focuses on several primarily materialist principles. An over-arching anti-religious theme permeates all the novels and manifests in several recurring lessons: God and nature are one and the same, as are the body and the soul; nature dictates our (sexual) desires, which we cannot resist as metaphysical liberty does not exist; and we should never feel guilty for satisfying these desires (through sex and masturbation). In chapter nine, which specifically addresses materialist philosophy, Duflo explains that the reasoning these authors employ is an incomplete form of materialism. For instance, they do not delve into the composition of nature, as Duflo states, “si la nature est souvent évoquée à l’appui d’une légitimation du désir, on se demande rarement ce qu’elle est” (p. 198). Duflo concludes that even if materialist discussions are “peu développées” (p. 199), these novels contribute to the philosophical tradition by circulating descriptions of the “conséquences morales renversantes” of materialist philosophy (p. 204).

The greatest contribution of the book is Duflo’s development of what he calls the *hybridité* of these novels: the back and forth between sexual adventures and philosophical discourse, resulting in a reader at once physically and intellectually stimulated. The physical effect of the action serves to destabilize the reader, making it impossible to assume a cold distance from the philosophical ideas. This hybridity is a unique contribution of these libertine novels to the tradition of Enlightenment thought, and the interplay between the two facets allow each to reinforce the other: the narratives demonstrate the philosophy, and the philosophy legitimizes the characters’ actions. In an echo of Zola’s experimental novel, Duflo characterizes these libertine texts as *expériences*, both physical experiences and scientific experiments testing the materialist hypotheses. As in the sciences, the observable results must be transformed into discourse to reach any conclusions, “car l’expérience ne produit sa fonction libératrice qu’accompagnée du raisonnement” (p. 107).

Despite his persuasive and interesting observations of the interplay between the philosophical and the pornographic, Duflo fails to connect the titillating depictions of illicit sex in the novels

with the philosophy through a close reading. One example among many of these missed opportunities will suffice. In a section on the novels' treatment of taboos, Duflo recalls a scene from the anonymous *Mémoires de Suzon, sœur de D.B. portier des Chartreux*, in which the narrator experiences sexual pleasure from her patroness's dog.<sup>[5]</sup> Instead of exploring this scandalous scene, Duflo focuses on Suzon's speculation that monkeys could also be domesticated to satisfy the needs of women. Duflo justifies the novel's treatment of bestiality here with examples of other writers who refer to the possibility of sex between women and monkeys, including Voltaire (the Oreillons in *Candide*), Prévost, and Rousseau. Without examining the two sentences he cites, Duflo concludes (once more) that the *Mémoires de Suzon* show how these novels explore "les conséquences narratives des questionnements quant à la continuité des espèces et à l'animalité de l'homme, à la naturalité des conduits et à la présence ou l'absence de normes en matière de morale sexuelle, qui préoccupent l'époque" (p. 138).

Yes, the texts do touch upon those topics, but the more interesting and unanswered question is how? In addition, the particular taboo in this scene goes beyond the bestiality it depicts and endorses. The dog in question pleases Suzon with his tongue, a remarkable fact considering oral sex of any kind is conspicuously absent even in the most explicit of the libertine novels. When it does occur, the otherwise unabashed narrators express horror or shame. In one novel, when the news spreads that the heroine once generously performed fellatio on her lover in a stairwell, she becomes the humiliated object of ridicule.<sup>[6]</sup> The local marionette troupe even performs a mockery of the act so the whole town can witness what was a shameful deed. In another memoir novel, the narrator—who elsewhere describes with glee an orgy she attends with the hilarious and stimulating entertainment of two small children running around nude and attempting to mimic the activities of the adults—recounts with horror a client who blackmails her into oral sex.<sup>[7]</sup> There are clearly degrees of the *risqué* in the libertine realm, which understandably differ from those of our own time, but nonetheless need to be addressed. That this dog is willing to do what men presumably would not is a significant aspect of this passage and could provide useful insight into this particular description of bestiality and the way it interacts with materialist philosophy. Instead, as is too often the case in this book, Duflo avoids a deeper analysis, seeing the fact that a certain kind of sex occurs as sufficient evidence.

The lack of sustained, detailed focus on a few passages or works in favor of an accumulation of underexplored examples similarly weakens Duflo's larger arguments about the significance of these novels. Duflo defends the easily dismissed work of the pornographies as not only worthy of study but also vital sources for understanding the full history of Enlightenment thought and its dissemination. Even though he goes to great lengths to uncover similarities between these novels and the more respected works of well-known philosophes, he also carefully clarifies that these novels are not simply vulgar imitations of "real" philosophy (for many reasons, not the least of which that many of the novels predated the texts of philosophes like La Mettrie and d'Holbach). However, rehabilitating pornography with the argument that it is useful is not the same as demonstrating its uses. Delving into any number of interesting questions could accomplish that approach: Why is the focus of all these novels sexual transgression? Why not other indulgences of desires like theft or gluttony as means of pursuing personal freedom? How do these texts and their messages mesh with other Enlightenment concerns, such as anxiety over depopulation? Is there a difference between the ways the more euphemistic texts exemplify the philosophy and how the more explicit novels do? Certainly, exploring all these aspects would be beyond the scope of one scholarly monograph, but in privileging breadth over depth, Duflo appears to be satisfied with proving that libertine novels—many of which contain some form of the word

“philosophe” in the title--contain philosophy. The intended audience for *La Philosophie des pornographies* appears to be historians of Enlightenment thought whom Duflo sees as skeptical of the value of obscene novels, as he parenthetically imagines their dismissal: “non seulement il s’agit d’un roman, mais en plus il est cochon” (p. 12). But is it really necessary in 2019 to establish the legitimacy of obscene literature as valuable cultural products, when scholarship on Sade’s *œuvre*, *Le Portier des Chartreux*, *Thérèse philosophique*, and many other salacious texts have been proving their usefulness as points of entry into eighteenth-century thought for over forty years?

To be clear, Duflo reveals many insightful interpretations throughout the book, including the observation that the risk of tiring the reader with too many repetitive examples of sex in *Le Portier des Chartreux* mirrors the anxiety the novel expresses around impotence from an overindulgence of sex. As he often does, Duflo makes his point succinctly and eloquently: “Si bien que le texte s’épuise, autant que le personnage principal, Saturnin, miné par la lassitude, le roman mimant narrativement le risque esthétique du genre pornographique” (p. 60). However, such insights are too often buried in the book and never sufficiently developed.

The final missed opportunity for a more meaningful contribution to our understanding of the Enlightenment occurs in the epilogue when Dulfo expresses disturbingly unqualified praise for *les Lumières*. He argues that the free expression of thought is the heritage of the Enlightenment and is particularly essential in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack. His unequivocal praise effectively dismisses the valid critiques of the Enlightenment as the foundation for the hierarchical and hegemonic belief in the superiority of Western European civilization, and as the theoretical framework for the misogyny, racism, and colonialism of the following two and a half centuries. But the phenomenon of French philosophical pornography could have served to in a sense rehabilitate the Enlightenment itself, which also included shocking and radical approaches to disrupting received ideas. The philosophes were overturning hierarchies and hegemonies here while building them elsewhere. We should remember that those ideas some may find shocking and transgressive today—transgender identities and non-Western conceptions of time, the physical environment, and nationality, to name but two—should be embraced and explored, as the philosophes—*pornographies* and otherwise—would have wanted. The intellectual potential of *La Philosophie des pornographies*—like Duflo’s many valid observations and suggestions—remains to be realized. One can hope that this knowledgeable scholar will delve into these avenues in future work.

## NOTES

[1] Henri Coulet, *Le Roman jusqu’à la révolution*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition (Paris: Armand Colin, 2000); Joan DeJean, *Libertine strategies: Freedom and the Novel in Seventeenth-Century France* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981) and *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Michel Delon, *L’Invention du boudoir* (Paris: Zulma, 1999); Jean M. Goulemot, *Ces livres qu’on ne lit que d’une main: lecture et lectures de livres pornographiques au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Editions Alinea, 1991); Raymond Trousson, ed., *Romans libertins du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1993); and Patrick Wald Lasowski, pref., *Romanciers libertins du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2000 and 2005).

[2] Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography, 1500–1800: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Zone Books, 1993).

[3] Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789* (New York: Norton, 1995), and *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Prerevolutionary France*. (New York: Norton, 1996).

[4] Jean Charles Gervaise de Latouche, *Histoire de Dom Bougre, Portier des Chartreux* (1741); Jean Baptise Boyer d'Argens, *Thérèse philosophe* (1748); Denis Diderot, *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (1748); Alphonse Donatien François de Sade, *Aline et Valcour* (1795) and *Histoire de Juliette ou Les Prospérités du vice* (1797-1801).

[5] *Mémoires de Suzon, sœur de D...B... portier des Chartreux, écrits par elle-même, où l'on a joint la perle des plans économiques ou la chimère raisonnable* (1778).

[6] Gaillard de la Bataille, *Histoire de Mademoiselle Cronel, dite Frétillon, actrice du théâtre de Rouen, écrite par elle-même* (1739).

[7] César Ribier, *La belle Cauchoise ou mémoires d'une jolie Normande devenue courtisane célèbre, ouvrage pour servir de suite à tous les ouvrages de la philosophie de la nature, par un auteur critico-satirico-dramaturgique* (1783).

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