

**2. From Fashion to
Pornography : The
Viewer Confronts
Himself in Current
Photography**

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From 1999 to 2008, the famous clothing brand Sisley hired Terry Richardson, the so-called soft porn photographer, to shoot its new advertising campaigns. The result of this meeting of porn and fashion was rather unexpected... The boundaries between porn and fashion pictures have become porous ever since the work of such photographers : glamour has become a part of decadence and decadence a part of the sublime.

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Note : The viewer here is generic, neither masculine nor feminine by definition.

From 1999 to 2008, the famous clothing brand Sisley hired Terry Richardson, the so-called soft porn photographer, to shoot its new advertising campaigns. Richardson, hitherto known for his trashy and pornographic aesthetic, was solicited by the fashion industry to construct a new model of the human body and thereby a new way to consider clothes. The result of this meeting of porn and fashion was rather unexpected : in a first image, a model wearing Sisley underpants is masturbating in front of Richardson's camera (<http://s11.radikal.ru/i183/0908/bf/a5b0b7356381.jpg>) ; in a second image, a girl is sticking out her tongue to receive cow's milk in her mouth - even though she is not naked, the clothes that she is supposedly advertising are hardly noticeable (http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_E2Ed7lgEABs/R_plkbXN4eI/AAAAAAAC-s/iYJiELSqrdQ/s400/Terry+Richardson+++Sisley+-+Farm+-+2001.jpg) ; and in another image, a girl is wearing no bottoms and is kneeling on her hands and knees (http://www.andamosarmados.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/terry_richardson_sisley001.jpg). These are just a few among many other such advertisements. Sisley was not the only brand interested in Richardson's work : Tom Ford, Supreme, Lee and many more wanted his authentic wild style to promote their products.

David LaChapelle, another American photographer (this time, in the vein of « porn chic »), was hired in 2003 by the very famous Italian coffee brand Lavazza to create its new campaign. The result did not really please Lavazza's managers. LaChapelle shot two girls, both wearing pink latex masks with brilliant red lipstick and pretending to kiss each other. A very small cup of Lavazza coffee is situated where their tongues meet. Lavazza's managers decided that the image was too sexual and then, instead of two girls, only kept one (<http://medias.photo.fr/medias-factory/m/cms/article/photo/6/5/2/2/256/logo.jpg>). Like Richardson being published in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, *GQ*, *Vogue* and *Bazaar*, LaChapelle's work is coveted by many luxury brands as well as by magazines that want him to shoot their covers (*PHOTO*, *Interview*, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, among others).

LaChapelle and Richardson are both photographers of-the-moment. On the one hand, the former is known for his trashy, pornographic and wild aesthetic ; on the other hand, the latter is known for his glamorous and aesthetically pleasing photos. They are the products of a movement which has grown very popular over the past twenty years : porn chic (or soft porn). In the case of porn chic, we witness an aesthetic revolution as well as a transgression of rules of genres. This aesthetic first emerged in the United States, as a trend mixing two genres that used to be quite separate (porn and fashion), in defiance of norms and expectations. Porn chic, then, is the encounter between glamour and the obscene, a union of fashion and pornography.

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The boundaries between porn and fashion pictures have thus become porous. I say "porous" because, ever since the work of these photographers, glamour has become a part of decadence and decadence a part of the sublime. In two different ways, they provoke the viewer's gaze as they mix up categories and genres. Here we see how both pornography and fashion converge, so that the former is popularized while the latter is sexualized. Advertising posters no longer serve a merely commercial ideal, but are also used for aesthetic, ideological and artistic purposes. As for pornography, it had to wait for the emergence of a critical discourse that attributes to it a new status in popular media. Such a discourse not only interrogates the very purpose of pornography, but also raises questions about the directors within this « sex industry » (i.e. the pornographers). The concerns of this criticism are no longer merely pornography's consumers and their sexually deviant practices. Thus pornography, which was long considered to be in opposition to fashion, has seen its decadence, its raw and trashy aesthetics, become a model, the new norm in terms of advertisement.

With these porno-fashion pictures, the way that we perceive bodies has evolved alongside our tolerance for viewing a mash-up of these two kinds of images. I would like to ask then : what does the viewer take away from this confrontation with popularized obscenity ? And how does the spectator consider his own body in the light of contemporary artists' reworking of the puritanical images that we still have of bodies in general ? When "beauty" (fashion) is more pornographic and pornography becomes another form of beauty, how does one find one's place within this new aesthetic and rethink one's body ? Should we still be disgusted by pornography and should we still condemn it ?

When fashion betrays its own body

A piece of clothing is an obvious commodity, whether it is a suit or a grass skirt. Men regularly dress their bodies, either to protect themselves either from the weather or from the exterior gaze. Garments, then, have become a statement of identity. Fashion, on the other hand, is used for a seductive purpose. A few years ago, in advertising, the "sexiness" of clothing represented its greatest selling point. Fashion remains a special vector which not only nourishes itself from the aura of the body but from what is known in French as its {visu} as well (the surface). The fashion-body is a garment and the garment is a symbol, a "signe qui marque le corps" (Baudrillard, 1976 : 155). With these words, Baudrillard takes up the question of erotic accessories, the "mise en sexe" not only of bodies but of the images behind bodies. We are these pictures that we see. We dream ourselves as such in any case. As Théophile Gautier wrote in his text *De la mode* :

Elles font bien de préférer ces jupes amples, étoffées, puissantes, largement étalées à l'oeil, aux étroits fourreaux où s'engânaient leurs grand-mères et leurs mères. De cette abondance de plis, qui vont s'évasant comme la fustanelle d'un derviche tourneur, la taille sort élégante et mince ; le haut du corps se détache avantageusement, toute la personne pyramide d'une manière gracieuse. Cette masse de riches étoffes fait comme un piédestal au buste et à la tête, seules parties importantes, maintenant que la nudité n'est plus admise. (Gautier, 1858)

We see in Gautier's description the importance of showing oneself as sexually attractive. Because "nudity is no longer authorized" (my translation), as he writes, women had to dress so that their nakedness was not forgotten. Even when dressed, bodies still attracted the gaze and garments hinted at what was underneath.

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Today, promotional campaigns push further what was not yet authorized in Gautier's time. One hundred and fifty years after him, Lee, the jeans manufacturer, hired Terry Richardson for its controversial 'Lolita' advertisement campaign for the spring-summer 2006 line. Pictures selected for this promotion were clearly marked by Richardson's aesthetics, featuring the standard clichés of soft porn aesthetic : lollipops being sucked, breasts half-exposed, legs spread...

(http://www.theage.com.au/ffximage/2006/10/04/lee_wideweb__470x319,0.jpg) Here, the model is clearly sexual and even mimes a sexual act. But I would go even further and say that in one of Lee's pictures, the model is in a position that 3/4 of porn consumers look for when purchasing pornography : on hands and knees, she evokes the act of anal sex

(http://media.photobucket.com/image/terry%20richardson%20lee/artasgoodasdrugs/number9/lee4_25.jpg). This evocation is ironic considering that sodomy is still measured among the most extreme sexual activities and is condemned in a number of states in the United States and in countries around the world : the Catholic Church still considers sodomy as a form of deviance and a perversion. Visit any porn website and you will see that anal sex is the pornographic sex of the moment, the ubiquitous sexual act. Even lesbian videos find a means to show anal penetration. The position of the Lee model clearly refers to the mise-en-scène of anal and extreme sex in current pornography. The model, even if she is dressed, still suggests nudity and the world of "triple x." The photographer's presence in the photo (we see his legs in the mirror) further heightens this pornographic ambiance. This second character seen in the mirror, this voyeur, us, spectator of a so-called non-pornography, is directly implicated in the image.

I am not saying that Lee's consumers are porn connoisseurs. Au contraire ! I would say Lee attracts the consumers who, because they do not dare visit forbidden websites, turn to new fashion advertisements and to these "trashy" artists whose works have become trendy to admire and who, in any case, are not doing anything wrong because, after all, "they are artists !" The picture is then a trap. We believe we are dealing with publicity for clothes, but the image actually plunges us into the history of Western pornography, a history in which we participate without effort or desire. This history influences our sexuality.

For his part, David LaChapelle uses the codes of porn as well, but through a totally different aesthetic. Pornography, whose most famous image is perhaps that of a plumber, sweating in his boiler suit, who has come to help the poor housewife in distress, has had its own aesthetic for a long time. In one of his pictures, LaChapelle depicts a set clearly inspired by porn : a kitchen, leopard underpants, a woman in a sexual position, high heels...

(http://phototrend.fr/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/david_lachapelle_12.jpg) Because of the nakedness of bodies in porn, accessories are emphasized. Porn fetishizes accessories and clothes just as it fetishizes bodies. Nothing is left to chance in porn ; nothing is left to chance in LaChapelle's work.

LaChapelle uses a "clean" aesthetic to show a dirty purpose.

In another picture, LaChapelle photographs the top model Naomi Campbell. He voluntarily sexualizes her, making her body a pornographic object. Here the model (model of perfection) is pornified. Naomi Campbell is naked, perfect : perfect make-up, perfect lighting, perfect body

(http://www.staleywise.com/collection/lachapelle/naomi_cambell_b.jpg). Just as in porn's aesthetic, LaChapelle's aesthetic is one of cleanliness : his bodies are always "clean." I use this term in its 17th century meaning, when whiteness of clothes meant a perfect hygiene of the body : "La netteté du linge est celle de toute la personne," writes Georges Vigarello in *Le propre et le sale* (Vigarello, 1985 : 75). "Netteté" here means the whiteness of the clothes, purity and control of an exteriority. Vigarello goes on : "Quant à l'habit, mode et propreté finissent au XVIIe siècle par se confondre" (Vigarello, 1985 : 93). That is to say that the genuine hygiene of the body does not matter. What matters is to look clean, to appear to be in good shape and "in control." In porn, we find the same dynamic :

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bodies have to look clean, hairless, "nets," "propres," spectacular. They have to look controlled. We have to pretend to master our body, to master our sexuality, and then to master our own representation ; as in Lachapelle's pictures, where bodies are clean, perfect and without any story. Lachapelle creates a fantasy while Richardson creates a dirty reality.

How then can Richardson's pictures still be considered more pornographic than Lachapelle's ? Why is Terry Richardson still considered a pornographer whereas David LaChapelle is considered a photographer ?

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A porn aesthetic ?

It appears that 70's and 80's porn has strongly influenced the fantasy and myth surrounding today's pornography. The young model in Lee's publicity still (http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_E2Ed7lgEABs/R_plkbXN4eI/AAAAAAAAAC-s/iYJiELsQrdQ/s400/Terry+Richardson+-+Sisley+-+Farm+-+2001.jpg) looks high, a wild child. She sticks out her tongue to receive cow's milk in her mouth (an image more than obviously of masculine ejaculation which reminds us of another "normal" practice in today's porn suggesting the "facial" - another extreme transgression). Richardson's model touches the cow's teats. She squeezes them to obtain the milk, and thus she has physical contact with the cow, a *real* contact. On the other hand, in Lachapelle's picture, Naomi Campbell is in a purified space with fake bottles of milk and fake lights. The milk falling on her body symbolizes ejaculate as well, but the colors and the set are so elaborate that what the viewer remembers is not the pornographic image but the artistic work.

Lachapelle's image reminds me of a very famous French milk advertisement from the 90's : (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXCXHqf6INA&feature=related>). The slogan was "Les produits laitiers... des sensations pures !" This commercial staged teenagers drinking milk and, after drinking it, sensually wiping white liquid from their lips. The sperm reference was obvious and sexuality very present. Why does white liquid on the mouth have this sexual connotation ? To answer this question, we have to return to a long pornographic film tradition and to the Deep Throat generation, when porn looked fun and liberating, and when buying a ticket was "an act of freedom, an act of revolution," as explained in the documentary *Inside Deep Throat*. In the 70's, porn was not yet the big industry that it is today ; it looked light, easy, refreshing - even if, as McNeil and Osborne show in their book, *The Other Hollywood : The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film Industry*, mafia and traffickers used to control porn and "fun porn" was always already an illusion.

So, am I claiming that porn aesthetic is an aesthetic of the real ? Am I saying that, because these images stage a true event, they are pornographic ? It seems that, in its own way, Nan Goldin's work was as pornographic as Richardson's pictures. Junkies who used to shoot up in front of her camera showed an authentic truth. The syringe was real, the spoon was real, the lighter as well, everything was authentic. This mixing of porn and fashion has come to influence and sexualize fashion, but what about porn ? Is it now accepted because of its entrance into the fashion world ? Some of Richardson's exhibits started debates, including one of his pictures in particular. He took a picture of himself while having sex with a girl, an image which has been exhibited and acclaimed throughout the world as a work of art, as part of Terry Richardson's amazing corpus. How does such a picture change the reception of the sexual body ? Is the naked body (with the exception of shoes and socks conscientiously kept on !) accepted or considered a pornographic body ? Or is it considered as an

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artistic and aesthetic work ?

The real question is then : when porn is everywhere, does the category still have a meaning ? Does the excitement of porn not reside in the fact that it is hidden and forbidden ? And then, is this modified (chic and soft) porn still pornographic ? What is the interest of being pornographic when porn is accepted and seen by everybody ? I think the most important point here lies not merely in the mixing of genres, but in the impact of this mixing on the viewer, on the consumer and on his body. Fashion was supposed to perfect the body, to fire the consumer's imagination through images, while porn was supposed to realize deviant, unspeakable and even unviewable desire. Lachapelle's perfect bodies, even if extremely sexualized, are still kept on the viewable side. On another hand, Richardson's bodies show a truth and a kind of body we do not want (and are not allowed) to see.

New images, new viewer ?

As I said earlier, with these porno-fashion pictures, the viewer is trapped. Trapped because we think we are watching an advertisement, when in fact we are watching a normally unauthorized picture, an unauthorized body - unauthorized by society, church, morality (perhaps we can recall here the difficulty for women of talking about sodomy and of confessing to doing it). Fashion is supposed to be the model to follow, that of the perfect body. Thus, if fashion sexualizes its bodies and its clothes, we are supposed to do the same. This process destabilizes what we used to believe in, and what used to be our limits. While playing with the importance of the body and making defects an aesthetic asset, Richardson undoes our narcissist identification.

Porn is not a place of identification because a pornographic picture is by definition saturated, in Baudrillard's sense ("saturé") : the subject cannot creep into this image, he is never looking at his own desire but at the orgasm of the Other, or what he thinks is the Other's orgasm. Since it is "saturée," the image cannot work as a mirror. The pornographic image is not a model as fashion can be, nor is it a norm (and we know how normative fashion is). Instead, it is the place where the subject returns to himself as a viewer. Sociologist Richard Poulin explains, in his book *Le sexe spectacle*, that arousal could come from a self-satisfaction, a desire to see ourselves come to an orgasm, a desire to be a viewer. He takes the example of clients in a strip club, showing how all the artifices surrounding the dance and the dancer's body (during private dances, she is surrounded by mirrors so that her body is seen from every angle) are conceived to allow the man to watch himself while he is watching the dancer. The client is then as excited by the object he watches (a naked woman paid by and for him) as by the very idea of seeing himself watching and feeling his own arousal. This all adds up to a feeling of power over the desired object. The kind of voyeurism that Poulin uses in his analysis puts the viewer at the center of the pornographic logic. The Other is merely a support for oneself : the dancer is only used to reflect the narcissistic desire of one's own body, of one's own sex.

In Richardson's picture, we also find this idea of being aroused by one's own gaze as a viewer. The photographer likes to take part in his pictures as a participant ("actant") and not just as a maker. He wants to be identified within the picture and, at the same time, he embodies the viewer's body. Because he has the impression of being in the image, the viewer can therefore begin the usual process of identification. With Richardson's work, the image is mocking us ; we believe that we are watching an advertisement when we are actually facing a sex scene. Then what we used to believe to be certain and established collapses. Our reference points do not apply any more (the bodies change, the aesthetic changes and, therefore, the message changes). Psychoanalysis would speak

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here of the collapse of the self and of the mourning of the ideal self, a collapse that would turn the body (as it was imagined) into a cadaver. But I would rather speak here of a rebuilding of the subject. The subject is betrayed in the process of being shown images that reconfigure the usual representations and their limits. The subject is given a new model, a new path to follow. —

Richardson completely embodies this idea. He first induces in the viewer a form of mourning while presenting him the opposite of a fantasy (the dirty reality), and inflicting on him bodies that are the opposite of what he is expecting, but he ultimately proposes a new model for identification. As I already explained, the Sisley picture, where a girl is going to masturbate in front of Richardson's camera, reminds us of "homemade" porn (this phenomenon made possible thanks to webcams) rather than an advertisement. Richardson imposes grieving on the viewer ; he shows the viewer the collapse of what he believed was the truth. It seems that Richardson sees in such a de-dramatization of bodies (sexual and sublime), in such an ironic game of being, a symbolic new birth. While turning technical "defects" into an aesthetic asset and dealing with bodies in a highly frivolous manner, he turns narcissistic identification into something more constructive. Since his desire for narcissistic identification is not satisfied, the viewer grows frustrated, disappointed with too much realism. The idea that a picture must be the embodiment of a dream, or a way out of reality, is here taken against the grain. Richardson constructs a new reality with his free and spontaneous, fun and unprepared snapshots, and he turns it into the new dream, the new model. If Fashion accepts Richardson, we must then laugh at ourselves and take our bodies less seriously, laugh at Fashion, laugh at sexual taboos and then, laugh at pornography.

Although he proceeds differently, aesthetically speaking, Lachapelle also plays with the consumer's desire to identify. He gives way to dreams, to the sublime, but he acts in a much more perverse manner than Richardson does. With Lachapelle, the fall is harder, the cadaver much heavier. The viewer is betrayed by the illusion of a so-called satisfied fantasy. The image is perfect : it corresponds to expected fashion standards and yet, the message denounces and points a finger at us. In the documentary that was based on his work, Lachapelle explains that he hates, among other things, coffee, luxury clothes, fur, junk food and plastic surgery. Nonetheless, he has worked for Lavazza, Louis Vuitton, and the TV show *Nip/Tuck*. He uses images and his work to convey his political ideas and surrounds them with glitter and glamour. For the Lavazza campaign, for example, one of his pictures shows, for example, a black woman with a small cup of Lavazza covering her sexual organs and some white sugar spread on her breasts. The sugar represents cocaine and coffee thus becomes, for Lachapelle, a drug like any other.

Thus, yet again, narcissistic identification is thwarted. The process moves towards a re-opening of the inquiry, an obligatory questioning, instead of towards a reunion with the ideal self. And yet, once again, faced with the anguish of betrayal, the viewer looks for safety. It is therefore within himself, within the fantasy that he had of his own life, that he will find the means to overcome his own loss. Richardson was laughing at us from the very beginning, while Lachapelle starts with glitter in order to humiliate us even more deeply, and, eventually, more openly. These two artists give us beautiful disillusionments that attack every single one of our reference points : fashion, sex, society, politics, art, nothing will be spared. Everything deserves to be processed and thought about again.

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