

## **The spectacle of pornographic photography: presence and agency in Italian censorship nets, 1839-1919**



Starting from the *The Society of Spectacle*, by Guy Debord, the METIS Doctoral School 2021 followed the purpose to explore the theme of spectacle and spectacular in the contemporary era. Many elements concerning the phenomena related to the aspect of spectacle and spectacular can be analysed through different research themes, as the experience of this Doctoral School suggests. My attempt was to focus on the aspect of technology and the role of consumption in the creation of spectacle and spectacular. Could technologies determine the nature of spectacle and visual experiences? Do the audience have the possibility to influence and reinvent spectacles?

I tried to answer these questions through the theme of the origins of pornographic photography in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Italian century society. I explored the possibility that photography could build new ways to think at «pornographic imaginary»<sup>1</sup> or made pornography spectacular in new ways through new visual experiences. In this perspective, it is possible to think that photographic spectacle in the pornographic genre consequences could reshape habits and behaviours, and that social reactions against it could emerge. To verify these hypotheses, I looked at both the photographic innovations in images production and consumption and the agency photography could actively perform on society<sup>2</sup>. The sources used are photos from various collections and censorship documents from State archives all over Italy.

Since its birth, photography offered a new kind of images, closer to reality than any other. The first automatic process of images realization through light, which were the daguerreotype, patented by Daguerre in 1839, and the calotype, patented by Talbot in 1841, were officially presented in scientific societies and conferences. This connection with truth and reality is part of the photographic

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *The Pornographic Imagination*, in *Partisan Review*, Volume XXXIV, Number 2, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

photography's DNA, even when it intentionally lies or talks about a fictional world<sup>3</sup>. The first photographic images of naked models, used in art academies since about 1845, due to their connection to reality, were resold and reused as erotic objects. The realistic experience could also be amplified with the stereoscopic photography, which offered the third-dimension perception. Photos showing explicit sexual acts did not wait to follow.

Until 1861, when Italy was unified under Savoy crown, censorship lived various solutions in each Kingdom, and the attention on pornographic photography was almost absent. This occurred for two main reasons: the central position of textual culture<sup>4</sup> and political contents, and the still defining idea of pornography (a word not used in these documents). Only in the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom censorship documents reveal us an increasing attention on «obscene photography» from about 1850. With new-born Kingdom of Italy, a liberal attitude excluded censorship, even if there were expression against pornographic photos in public opinion. This debate brought to first institutional attentions on the theme of pornography around 1890, associations against pornography and in defence of morality, and finally first decisive attempt to stop pornography circulation from 1910. Sources in this period are explicitly labelled «against pornography», and images are almost the only pornographic material under police surveillance. Journals advertisement tells us about the existence of pornographic photos whose images appeared only through particular strategies, an obscene spectacle for a selected and limited audience<sup>5</sup>. Even in cinemas, photos were protagonist of a particular kind of spectacle called *black nights*<sup>6</sup>.

Pornographic photography audience became wider only fifty years after its birth, thanks to photomechanical print and new forms of spectacle, and it is only after this that it could be perceived as a threat: technology does not determine culture and society alone. In the same way, we can't accept Guy Debord's perspective of a self-determining mechanism in spectacle. Pornographic photography history shows us that photographers and «image artisans», producers really close to consumers (probably consumers themselves), invented both visual experience as spectacle impossible to be imagined even by photography inventors, and pornographic products which contributed to build the idea itself. Spectacle can't live without spectators, who are active producers of the spectacle and have possibility to reinvent it.

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<sup>3</sup> Claudio Marra, *Che cos'è la fotografia*, Roma: Carrocci, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> *Graphosphere over videosphere*: Régis Debray, *Media Manifestos. On Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms* (1994), London – New York: Verso, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato, *Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913-1915*, busta 151.

<sup>6</sup> Carlo Alberto Zotti Minici, *Prologo per serata nera*, in *I limiti della rappresentazione. Censura, visibile, modi di rappresentazione nel cinema*, a cura di Leonardo Quaresima, Alessandra Raengo, Laura Vichi, Udine: Forum, 2000.