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EROTICISM AND THE VISUALITY OF INTIMACY IN THE AGE OF AI

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Abstract

Eroticism is a complex and evolving field of study. In visual media it has come to reflect the changing cultural and personal tastes of viewers. The rise of OTT platforms has revolutionized the consumption of erotic content, offering unprecedented accessibility, personalization, and discretion. They operate with fewer censorship constraints, allowing for nuanced explorations of sexuality, intimacy, and desire. This has eventually led to a rise in bold storytelling, where eroticism is a narrative device that explores human relationships, power dynamics, and psychological depth. Unlike traditional cinema or television, OTT platforms provide space for diverse sexualities and identities, contributing to a more inclusive representation of eroticism. The intersection of eroticism with immersive technologies redefines intimacy and desire in unprecedented ways. As AI-generated content and virtual reality (VR) become more advanced, the boundaries of erotic visual storytelling continue to evolve. Emerging technologies like AI-generated avatars, VR erotica, and interactive adult content are redefining intimacy and sexual representation in media. This paper attempts to trace the influence of AI on the erotic.

Keywords: *AI, eroticism, desire, hyperreal, VR, OTT*

Eroticism is a cultural function par excellence. It is so cleverly cultural that it can hide its cultural aspect successfully behind biological explanations for intimacy, and appear visceral and organic. Cultures use representational paradigms - verbal, visual and digital - to construct specific kinds of eroticism. In fact, it could be argued that every age of cultural representation has had its own specific variety of eroticism. Oral cultures have had bawdy songs and stories that drew on transgressions specific to the tribes that spoke the language. As the age of print began standardizing cultures across continents, slowly, a global circuit of printed erotic content - photographs and literature - came into circulation. The western idea of sex and eroticism, favoring heteronormative tangents, won an upper hand during these centuries of the dominance of print culture since Europeans almost monopolistically controlled the industry of printing and circulation of 'knowledge' and 'moralities.' Centuries later, when the digital representational regime started making inroads, the scenario underwent a sea change. The global digital network redefined the expression, consumption, and censorship of erotica and all desire-based cultural content.

The phenomenology of eroticism in the digital epoch manifests as a profound Bataillean paradox: while the ubiquitous proliferation and frictionless accessibility of pornographic data suggest a hyper-saturated sexual culture, this very "pornographization" serves only to atrophy genuine sensuality and the lived experience of the erotic. Within the theoretical framework established by Georges Bataille, eroticism is defined not by the mere visibility of the biological sex act, but by the "psychological quest" for a lost continuity of being through the "transgression of the taboo" (Bataille 13). In the digital sphere, however, the systematic elimination of the taboo through instant, algorithmic delivery strips the sexual encounter of its transgressive potency, relegating it to a mere commodity of profane, productive consumption. This shift underscores a historical rupture; erotica appears to have been a sensibility fundamentally contingent upon the print-read-contemplate modality of the print age. Print literature afforded a "venerable space" for the erotic because the text necessitates a subjective, imaginative mediation—a slow, internal unveiling that mirrors Bataille's concept of the 'breach' in the individual's isolation. Conversely, digital pornography operates through a regime of visual immediacy and hyper-explication that bypasses the imaginative labour of the subject, effectively transforming what should be a sovereign act of "unproductive expenditure" (Bataille 9) into a functional utility of the digital market. Furthermore, while Jacques Derrida posited that binaries such as 'eroticism' and 'obscenity' are inherently 'tainted' by their counterparts—rendering them undecidable signifiers—the contemporary digital reality suggests an ontological collapse in the field. As the graphological gives way to the algorithmic, these categories no longer haunt one another in a state of trace-like deferral; rather, they achieve a state of totalizing fusion. The "venerable spaces" once reserved for the erotic in high-print culture have been flattened by the velocity of the content-market. Consequently, eroticism

and obscenity in the cyber-world do not exist in a relationship of mutual contamination or tension; they have instead melted into a singular, undifferentiated whole that lacks the sacred dimension of Bataillean transgression, ultimately liquidating the distinction between the sacred interruption and the profane exhibition.

The historical evolution of erotic literature is characterized by a persistent history of reinvention, wherein the genre continuously recalibrated its aesthetic strategies to mirror shifting epistemological and cultural sensibilities. In his semiotic interrogations of contemporary popular culture, Roland Barthes elucidates this transition by contrasting the traditional modality of the striptease with the rigorous, almost industrial mechanisms of the Sadean oeuvre. For Barthes, the essence of the erotic resides in the 'delay-tactic'—a calculated suspension of disclosure that heightens desire through the deferral of the terminal act. However, as Barthes observes in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, the Marquis de Sade's prose fundamentally subverts this erotic tension by cancelling the narrative function of stripping. Instead, Sade's subjects are orchestrated within a "copulatory apparatus" of mechanical precision, a spatial arrangement that prioritizes the exhaustive cataloguing of bodily functions over the nuanced play of seduction. This transition moves away from the "veiling" inherent to erotica and toward a "matter-of-fact" and "unpretentious" exhibitionism that Barthes identifies as essentially pornographic in its transparency (Barthes 97).

The shift from the suggestive to the mechanical is also stressed upon by Bataille, who posits that eroticism is a 'violation' of the self that requires the preservation of a boundary to be meaningful. Bataille argues that eroticism is "the transgression of the taboo," a process that necessitates a state of "anguish" and "trembling" that the mere mechanical display of sexuality lacks (Bataille 59). From a Bataillean perspective, the Sadean move toward the "copulatory apparatus" risks collapsing the sacred tension of transgression into the profane world of objects and utility. Bataille, alongside Michel Foucault, observed that the representation of sexuality in print literature constituted one of the principal ontological dilemmas confronting modern humanity; yet, this inquiry has been historically marginalized. Due to the pervasive influence of heteronormative, political, and ecclesiastical dictates, the rigorous academic examination of erotic expression has been systematically repressed. The 'venerable spaces' of literature, which once allowed for a sophisticated dialectic between the forbidden and the manifest, are increasingly flattened by a modern sensibility that favors the immediate, visual evidence of the pornographic over the complex, delayed "sovereignty" of the erotic (Bataille 9). Consequently, the contemporary study of these forms must grapple with the loss of that 'internal communication' that Bataille believed was the hallmark of true erotic literature: a loss precipitated by the transition from the slow, graphological unveiling of desire to the instant, mechanical saturation of the modern sexual image.

Modern erotic sensibility, evolving in the internet-hosted visual space, constitutes a layered interaction of technological proficiency, neurological reaction, and platform determinism, wherein the spectator assumes the roles of participant, consumer, and that of an algorithmically determined profile. The striptease paradigm of eroticism is by-passed by the user whose control over the content supersedes the kind of narratorial interventions present in erotic literature. Eroticism is as much contingent upon the viewer's cultural background and individual preferences, as his or her ability to control the content and participate in the representation that happens on screen. The psychological sub-strata of a society and the stability of its institutions hinge on the paradoxical discourse between a control (of content) and (a need for) indulgence. Eroticism's evolution and transformation is contingent on this context. While the thematic content of erotic literature undergoes continuous transformation in alignment with shifting socio-political sensibilities, it could be noted that the fundamental *representational paradigm* remains remarkably consistent. Central to this aesthetic regime is the 'striptease' methodology—the strategic, incremental disclosure designed to systematically intensify libidinal desire. Historically, the genre has occupied a liminal space within the cultural hierarchy, functioning as a subcultural force that oscillates between the realms of ephemeral popular fiction and the established literary canon. Furthermore, biographical evidence suggests that a significant plurality of canonical prose stylists have, at various junctures in their professional trajectories, engaged in the production of erotica, thereby blurring the distinctions between high art and marginalized discourse.

The contemporary convergence of eroticism with emergent structures such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Extended Reality (XR) constitutes a more critical frontier of inquiry, necessitating a rigorous re-evaluation of ethical, psychological, and ontological parameters. Within this digital milieu, the percipient is reformulated as a "Cyborg Subject"—a multifaceted entity that functions simultaneously as a participant, a consumer, and an algorithmic data point. Unlike the traditional spectator, the digital subject in interactive formats, such as VR erotica, is compelled toward an "embodied experience" where the boundaries between the self and the synthetic interface are increasingly blurred. This engagement is further complicated by the pervasive influence of platform analytics, which commodify the libidinal impulse by transmuted the clicks and haptics into behavioral data markers. Consequently, the machine learning models do not merely reflect desire but actively pre-empt and circumscribe it, often narrowing the subject's exploratory potential through predictive loops that prioritize the familiar over the transgressive.

This immersive paradigm represents a radical departure from the immersive qualities inherent to the print medium. In the 'graphological' age, the reader of erotic literature was required to architect a private imaginative world, a process necessitating a *sophisticated* sensibility grounded in the decoding

of metaphor and the internalizing of scripted affect. This traditional immersion mirrors what Georges Bataille described as the "inner experience," wherein the erotic act is inextricably linked to a profound, subjective "anguish" and the slow, deliberate dissolution of the individual's boundaries (4). However, the contemporary immersive view effectively dissolves this 'sensibility' in favour of a raw, unmediated 'sense'—specifically the visual sense. While print literature employed 'delay-tactics' and lavish descriptions to heighten anticipation—functioning as a textual striptease that preserved the sacred tension of the taboo—digital immersion offers a regime of instantaneity. The digital subject can simply 'forward' or skip the narrative build-up, thereby bypassing the very 'anticipation' that Bataille argued was essential to the erotic transgression (Bataille 7). In this technological shift, the 'sensibility-borders' that once demarcated the venerable space of erotica from the profane exhibition of pornography are outmoded. The senses are directed toward a state of constant, high-velocity consumption that lacks the 'sovereign' quality of non-productive expenditure, instead aligning sexual expression with the mechanical efficiency of the cyber-market. Ultimately, the transition from the imaginative labour of the reader to the passive-active consumption of the algorithmic subject marks the end of the erotic as a poetic 'breach' and its rebirth as a calibrated, data-driven utility.

The proliferation of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms has additionally restructured the libidinal economy of contemporary media, engendering a paradigm shift in the accessibility, customization, and privatized consumption of eroticized content across national borders. Unlike the rigid teleological and moralistic constraints of conventional cinema or broadcast television, the decentralized architecture of streaming services facilitates a radical circumvention of traditional censorship, allowing for nuanced phenomenological inquiries into the nature of intimacy, desire, and the human condition. This newfound creative inclination has affected a revamping of audacious narrative strategies—notably within the burgeoning Indian digital landscape—where sexuality is no longer relegated to the peripheral or the gratuitous but is instead utilized as a sophisticated semiotic tool to deconstruct power dynamics, psychological interiority, and the complexities of human relationality. In this context, the OTT medium serves as a heterotopia for marginalized sexualities and identities, challenging the historical hegemony of heteronormative perspectives that have long dominated mainstream cinematic discourse. This evolution can be understood through the Batailleian lens of the "sacred" versus the "profane"; while traditional media often codified sexuality within a profane system of utility and reproduction, these digital platforms permit a space for "sovereign" expressions of eroticism that exist for their own sake, echoing Georges Bataille's assertion that eroticism is a "state of communication" that transcends the mere biological function to reach the core of human continuity (Bataille 37).

The convergence of high-velocity streaming technology and shifting consumer behavioural patterns has permitted an unprecedented investigation into the "accursed share" of human desire—those excesses of energy and affect that were previously suppressed by socio-political and religious taboos (Bataille 59). By dismantling the 'sensitivity-borders' of the print age and the gatekeeping of the broadcast era, digital media has fostered a more inclusive representational field where LGBTQ+ narratives, polyamory, and non-normative intimacy are integrated into the cultural mainstream. This transition from niche, 'art-house' isolation to globalized saturation suggests that the erotic has moved from being a transgressive secret to becoming a pervasive narrative mechanism. However, this mainstreaming also invites a new set of ethical exigencies and psychological paradoxes; as the forbidden becomes visible and the 'taboo' is incorporated into the corporate algorithm, the very nature of Bataillean transgression risks being neutralized by the comfort of the domestic screen. Eroticism in the digital age, therefore, oscillates between a revolutionary tool for inclusivity and a commodified "expenditure" that must continually reinvent its boundaries to maintain the "trembling" fascination that Bataille identified as the hallmark of true erotic experience (Bataille 7). Ultimately, the OTT revolution represents a democratization of the erotic gaze, yet it simultaneously challenges the subject to find authentic 'inner experience' within a landscape of infinite, algorithmically-mediated visual abundance.

As the technical sophistication of AI and VR continues to improve, the practical boundaries of erotic visual storytelling undergo a radical change. The convergence of eroticism and immersive technologies does not merely represent a shift in medium, but rather a profound transmutation of human intimacy and the structures of desire themselves. Within this digital shift, the role of OTT streaming services - such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, alongside burgeoning regional entities - has been instrumental in rehabilitating nuanced and explicit representations of the sexual aspect that were historically suppressed by the moralistic gatekeeping of conventional theatrical distribution. Netflix, in particular, has emerged as a preeminent architect of this new libidinal landscape, seamlessly synthesizing high-fidelity cinematic narratives with a graphic intensity of intimacy that challenges traditional aesthetic norms. Unlike the broad-spectrum broadcasting of the past, the algorithmic architecture of these platforms facilitates a precision in the dissemination of eroticized content, catering to highly specialized and niche audiences with a data-driven efficiency that bypasses traditional social taboos. This environment reflects a modernized iteration of what Georges Bataille identified as the "profanation" of the sacred; by bringing the hidden depths of sexual experience into the domestic, everyday sphere of the "home screen," these platforms effectively dismantle the barricades that once isolated the erotic from the profane world of work and utility. Going by this perspective, the "sovereignty" of the erotic act—traditionally an unproductive expenditure of energy that defies the logic of conservation—is here confronted by the "restricted economy" of the algorithm, which seeks to quantify and predict the "trembling" of the human subject (Bataille 94-95).

Consequently, the immersive potential of VR and AI-driven narratives suggests a future where the "inner experience" of the subject is no longer a solitary imaginative labor, but an interactive, technologically-mediated spectacle. As the digital image moves closer to a totalizing sensory simulation, it risks liquidating the 'anguish' and 'secret' nature that Bataille deemed essential to true erotic transgression, potentially replacing the sacred violation of the taboo with a hyper-real, frictionless consumption. Thus, the current trajectory of digital media indicates that while eroticism has gained unprecedented visibility and inclusivity, it simultaneously faces a crisis of essence, as the mechanical precision of the 'cyborg subject's' tools may ultimately outpace the human capacity for the 'sensibility' and 'delay' that historically defined the erotic genre.

Historically, the scopic regime of eroticism in visual media has been predominantly favorable to the 'male gaze,' a structural orientation that instrumentalizes feminine desire. However, contemporary visual narratives are characterized by a shift, transcending mere objectification to explore the emotional and psychological profundity of the intimate subject. This decentralization of erotic representation is further accelerated by social media ecosystems like Instagram, that empower individuals to reclaim the means of libidinal production, effectively governing their own expressions of sensuality. Yet, this democratization remains fraught with tension, as the boundaries between authentic self-expression, high art, and neoliberal commodification become increasingly porous, precipitating anxieties regarding performative sexuality, digital voyeurism, and the risk of predatory exploitation. In this new layered landscape, the dialectic between artistic eroticism and sensationalist pornography gets intensified. While filmmakers like Abdellatif Kechiche utilize eroticism to map the intricate topographies of human affect (seen in *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, for example) a parallel industry thrives on the production of gratuitous content that leans toward the profane utility of the sensational. This evolution finds its most radical expression in the emergence of generative AI and immersive technologies, which signal a departure from the 'graphological' or even the physical limitations of the past. As Jean Baudrillard posits, we have entered an era where simulations and simulacra supplant the real, rendering desire "hyperreal"—a state in which the fabricated image is more salient than the original reference point (Baudrillard 12). The deployment of deepfake technologies and AI-generated avatars, such as the digital persona Miquela, marks a terminal point in this trajectory; visual authenticity no longer requires a referent in actual bodies. Like the preceding tradition of anime erotica, AI-generated content supersedes the biological constraints of the human form, creating a libidinal space that Georges Bataille would describe as the dissolution of the "discontinuous" individual into a state of total, albeit synthetic, continuity (Bataille 7). From a Bataillean perspective, however, this hyperreal saturation risks neutralizing the sacred essence of the erotic. If eroticism is defined by the "transgression of the taboo" and the "trembling" of the subject before the forbidden, then the frictionless, algorithmically-perfected digital entity risks collapsing the

erotic back into the profane world of objects (54).

In this postmodern economy, sexuality is meticulously curated through ‘Instagram-ized aesthetics’ and virtual reality, transforming the libidinal impulse into a managed digital art form. Popular cultural critiques, such as the *Black Mirror* episode "Striking Vipers," exemplify how these technologies do not merely facilitate desire but actively reshape its ontological core. As representation supersedes actuality, the "accursed share" of human energy is channelled into virtual avatars that exist in a state of perpetual, non-biological exuberance (Bataille 9). Consequently, the contemporary erotic image functions as a Baudrillardian simulation that obscures the distinction between the authentic and the virtual, leaving the modern subject to navigate a landscape where intimacy is increasingly a by-product of the code rather than the flesh. The advancement of artificial intelligence and virtual reality will precipitate a paradigmatic shift in the experience of sexuality, as digital avatars, deepfake erotica, and haptic-integrated immersive environments redefine the parameters of intimacy. This convergence necessitates a rigorous interrogation of conventional understandings regarding agency and consent, particularly as erotic media transitions from a state of passive spectatorship to one of active, embodied engagement. Within this digital frontier, the proliferation of non-consensual deepfake material--generated through the algorithmic appropriation of celebrity or private likenesses--manifests as an escalating ethical crisis that destabilizes the "venerable spaces" of the human subject. This transition into the hyperreal is further complicated by the rise of *waiifu* culture, AI-driven chatbots, and sentient robotics, which offer sophisticated simulations of emotional and sexual connection, effectively bypassing the complexities of interpersonal friction. As robotics firms develop AI-enhanced dolls capable of responsive facial gestures and customizable ‘personalities,’ the distinction between genuine human desire and the ‘artificial imagination’ becomes increasingly indistinguishable, posing a profound challenge to the traditional structures of relationality.

Drawing upon Georges Bataille’s concept of ‘sovereignty,’ one might argue that while erotic self-expression has gained accessibility and reduced historical stigma, it has simultaneously been subsumed by the logic of ‘platform capitalism,’ wherein desire is no longer a sovereign act of non-productive expenditure but a meticulously commercialized commodity (Bataille 18). The evolution of eroticism in digital media is characterized by an unprecedented fluidity and diversification; however, as technology increasingly mediates intimacy, the ‘inner experience’ that Bataille identified as the core of human continuity is threatened by the mechanical precision of the algorithm (Bataille 10). In this context, AI does not merely facilitate desire but actively reconstructs it, employing user data to architect personalized erotic narratives that precisely address individual proclivities. This customisation represents a terminal point in what Jean Baudrillard describes as the ‘hyperreal’—a state where the

simulation of the erotic supersedes the biological reality, rendering attraction an algorithmically driven modality rather than a visceral impulse (Baudrillard 65). The meticulously curated visuals of platforms like Instagram and TikTok serve to cultivate desire through optimized aesthetic standards, establishing new benchmarks for allure that are increasingly divorced from physical actuality. This shift prompts significant inquiries into the fundamental essence of human interaction, as the ‘cyborg subject’ navigates a world where the ‘sensibility’ of the print age is liquidated in favor of a totalizing sensory saturation. As the digital image moves closer to a totalizing sensory simulation, it risks neutralizing the sacred essence of the erotic; if eroticism is fundamentally "the transgression of the taboo," the frictionless, consumer-grade delivery of AI-generated content may ultimately strip the act of its transgressive power (Bataille 7). The forthcoming challenge for contemporary visuality, therefore, resides in achieving an equilibrium between technological innovation and the essential human requirement for authentic, non-simulated closeness. This situates modern eroticism as a contentious domain where technological potential and platform-driven exploitation intersect, transforming one of humanity's most ancient modes of expression into a data-driven utility.

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