

## **Illustration, Performativity and the Explicit Body of Marie-Antoinette in Eighteenth-Century French Pornographic Pamphlets**

Dr Carolyn Shapiro, presented at the *Illustrating Identity/ies* conference, University of Lorraine, Nancy, France, November 8-10. 2017.

The word “performativity” has become a fashionable academic shorthand term referring to theatricality or live action imbued within examples of visual culture. But this misunderstanding, in its conflation of “performance” with “performativity”, misses out on the deconstructive whammy introduced into metaphysical presumptions about language and truth and, I want to argue here by extension, about visual imagery and truth that was put forward by the philosopher and speech-act theorist J.L. Austin in the 1950s. Austin’s ground-breaking lectures entitled “How To Do Things With Words,” delivered at Harvard in 1955, would subsequently be picked up by theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler as starting points for identifying and questioning foundational presumptions of about representation itself. Traditionally, according to the philosophical edifice established by Plato, representation, or *mimesis*, comprises a copy— designated a *mere* copy—of a concept of a thing, which is the “true” and “real” thing. It is the essence of the thing. This entity cannot be an image. Only philosophers and higher-minded men would be able to conceive of and construe this higher concept. The rest of us are left with inferior versions of comprehending it: either a physical object which materialises it, or, even more inferior to the material object, a picture or a linguistic signifier of that object. To explain this mapping of mimesis, Plato, in Book X of *The Republic*, tells his pupil Glaucon the allegory of the three beds: the picture of the bed, is what is described in the dialogue between Glaucon and Socrates as “thrice removed” from what is real and Good, and therefore, the image is false and bad, because imitation, by its very nature, professes to be “true.” And we might say that illustration is all about aiming to represent something with truth and accuracy. But painting and poetry, as discussed in the dialogue of Book X of *The Republic*, are only copies of *appearance*—which is the material object—not of the real entity (which is an abstract concept). This removal from Truth is characterised by Socrates to Glaucon as “deception.”

Thus, representation acquires, from Plato onwards, into the centuries, a highly negative charge. But what it also acquires, from Plato onwards, is a particular relationality of referentiality. A picture or word refer to something anterior to it. While the virtuosity and inspiring aesthetic sensibilities of artists and writers since Plato have certainly proven Plato's negative value judgement about representation to be misguided, what has stuck and not been dislodged quite so much is the less visible presupposition of referentiality itself, in other words, that an image or sentence exists in order to refer to or relate to, something, and that this referral is the image or word's very function. The function of referentiality seems obvious when thinking about illustration. Illustration tends to refer to text; or, it may refer to phenomenal objects (as in information illustration); or, it may refer to a person or an event. The word "descriptive" could characterise this referential notion of illustration. But even in what might be seen as the glory of description, illustration still sometimes retains the stigma of being a copy—it's not the "real thing", and, as such, is even, if slightly, less valued.

Enter J.L. Austin, the post-war Oxford moral philosopher, so much of whose work focused on truth and truth-conditions of language. For Austin, a linguistic utterance, or locution, was not, contrary to most philosophical approaches, about or founded upon the condition or value of "truth." This view of language rather bucks the system. To assume, said Austin, that language is based on conveying truth or stating something that "is", is not understanding the workings of language, the operations of language, in short, the performativity of language. This approach to language introduces a big leap or intervention which questions basic metaphysical, Platonic values. It requires what Austin characterised as a "prising off", or pulling apart of a long-established relation of referentiality governed by a hierarchy between copy and reality. It proceeds along the assumption that words and images do not possess a neutral, logical transmissive property but are arbitrarily used a part of an operating system.

A large part of recognizing this arbitrariness of words, and, by my extension, of images, involves approaching language not as descriptive, or “constative,” Austin proposes, but as *performative*, meaning, that the utterance (which we understand here to be either verbal or imagistic) performs a particular action in its very utterance. Austin’s prime examples of performative speech acts include the following: “I apologise”; “I hereby christen this ship HMS Pinnafore”; “I now pronounce you husband and wife”. Here, the words are not describing something, that is, referring to what they *mean*; they are, in their very utterance, actually performing the action of those words. They therefore offer an alternative model to the one which proceeds metaphysically, where the role of language is to state or describe something more “real” outside of itself. For Austin, the referential function is replaced by the performative function. To further elucidate his point about language’s performative function, Austin divides performative locutionary acts into two types: illocutionary speech acts, which perform an action in their utterance; and perlocutionary speech acts, the performed action of which are consequential to the speech act. Both types offer alternatives to the truth-function implied by a referential model of language.

Eventually, at the end of his lecture series on How to do things with Words, Austin comes to the conclusion that in fact, all language is performative, not just certain obvious speech acts such as “I apologise.” And we can say the same of illustration: all illustration is performative in that it always functions illocutionarily, by the very virtue of its being relational. And sometimes, illustration also has a consequential action embedded within it, acting perlocutionarily.

From the example of the infamous Charlie Hebdo illustration, we already know that an illustration is not simply descriptive or representative—we know that the making itself of this illustration constitutes an action (in some eyes, blasphemy), and that unfortunately, it also might also bear perlocutionary consequences.

In the words of J.L. Austin, "...words are not (except in their own little corner) facts or things: we need therefore to prise them off the world, to hold them apart from and against it, so that we can realize their inadequacies and arbitrariness, and can re-look at the world without blinkers."<sup>1</sup>

A recent editorial illustration from the NYTimes illustration shows *how* Austin's ideas of language can be easily transposed into the register of the image: an informational image depicting a ship is implied to be referring to a real ship which "exists". However, this image can be warped and manipulated by a single act of tilting the phone, making the ship to appear to be sinking. That this illustration accompanies an article about the manipulation of fact on social media speaks to Austin's point that language is not a neutral transmitter which presumably refers back to something real; on the contrary, representation is an operation, a high-performance machine. In the larger philosophical perspective, language, for Austin, can be considered to be the proving ground for dislodging what philosophers would call the positivist assumption carried through years of Western philosophy beginning with Plato's antagonism towards representation as imitation or *mimesis*.

A useful term which encompasses both language and imagery is "discourse," and this term is used frequently in much post-structuralist theory because it recognises an equivalence between high literature, populist literature, advertising, exhibitions, fine art, illustration, and so forth: all of these examples, and many more, can be read as productions of larger ideological value systems at work. The word "discourse" comes from the Latin root *discursus*, which means, "running about". So, discourse "gets around", like a courier, and, it has a span.

Pornography is a prime example of "discourse". Today I want to look at the performative role of 18<sup>th</sup>-century pornography in France, with particular focus on the way in which pornographic

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Longworth, "J. L. AUSTIN (1911–1960)," citing Austin, 1956a/1976 , 195, [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/people/longworth/research/austin\\_keythinkers.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/people/longworth/research/austin_keythinkers.pdf), 3.

pamphlets disseminated at the time of Marie Antoinette's reign acted discursively to reinforce a new Republican national identity for France. Pornographic novels came about in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, with a flourishing of pornographic pamphlets circulating in Europe and Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Historian Margaret C. Jacob attributes the introduction of this new literary discourse of pornography to the rise of urban social networks which brought forth new buyers and sellers, in all realms of the marketplace. Transactions in private spaces—including sexual ones-- replaced activities previously determined by family, guilds, and churches.<sup>2</sup> Much of the critical analysis of 18<sup>th</sup>-century pornography focuses on a new prominence of "the body" in both private and public discourse. The sexual body which served as subject matter in the rise of the new genre of pornography corresponded to the collective public body first introduced as the body of the king in medieval times but which grew into the collective incorporated body suggested by Rousseau in *The Social Contract* in 1762. As the eighteenth century progressed, the prevalent metaphor of the collective people as being the body of the King morphed into a Republican body whose unity and coherence was marked by a fraternal bonding. This Revolutionary cohesiveness relied upon the exclusion of any female bodies. Marie Antoinette became the primary target, among other female bodies, to be deemed foreign, obscene, and traitorous to the nascent Republican body politic.

As the historian Lynn Hunt has argued extensively,<sup>3</sup> female sexuality posed a distinct threat to what Enlightenment philosophers, already long before the Revolution, proposed for an ideal body politic. "...[female eroticism] was the major source of corruption for the [body politic]. Female eroticism was particularly disturbing because it blurred the lines between private and public; eroticism was the intrusion into the public sphere of something that was at base private... This public would come to see femininity as incompatible with a virtuous public sphere." (Hunt, 5, 7) The mass production of

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<sup>2</sup> See Margaret C. Jacob, "The Materialist World of Pornography," in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt, New York: Zone Books, 1993, 158-159.

<sup>3</sup> See *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

pornographic pamphlets manifested a fear of the incursion of feminine sexuality into the healthy body of the emerging Republican nation which would threaten that body with moral decay.

In an engraving of 1792 which was advertised in an ultra-royalist, and of course counter-revolutionary, newspaper, a scene of “*débandement*” is described, a satirical pun on the verb *débander*, meaning, “‘to disband’; ‘to uncock a firearm,’ and ‘to lose one’s erection.’”<sup>4</sup> The text describes the action of Théroigne de Méricourt, “‘a woman of modest birth from Liège, who lived in France, organized groups of armed women, and was imprisoned by the Austrians and who “showed her *République* [a pun on *res publique*].”’ (Cameron, 91.) The rest of the women are shown baring their buttocks to the Austrian army, an insulting gesture which has the effect of making the men fall down, sometimes on their own sabres, consequently “disbanding” them. Théroigne, the woman in charge, in the center of the front row, exposes her pudenda, which further foils the soldiers. This image is interesting in terms of its performativity. While it can be said to be depicting an event in a constative fashion (to use JL Austin’s word), its execution most definitely acts as a satire, reinforcing counterrevolutionary messages to its readership of ultra-royalist aristocrats. The image performs a complex maneuver of emasculation of the revolutionary hoards, the the revolutionary hoards signified, paradoxically, by the counterrevolutionary royalist army. It’s a complex semiotic rhetorical strategy, but the ultimate message conveyed is that the revolutionary bands of men fighting for liberty, fraternity and equality, would allow women to hold the emasculating power of men, and, in allowing this intermixture of the sexes they are doomed to fall apart or fall down, just as the men in the royalist army have been disbanded and disempowered. The anonymous royalist illustrator of the *Grand débandement* was hitting the Revolutionists in their most vulnerable spot: their own fear of introducing sexual difference into their national collective body. Revolutionary men did fear that the

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<sup>4</sup> Vivian Cameron, “Political Exposures: Sexuality and Caricature in the French Revolution,” in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Hunt, 91.

presence of women would disintegrate the fraternal bonds of the Republic. The female body was a foreign body to that of the French national body.

The pun "*res public*" which was the word used for what Théroigne de Méricourt shows to the oncoming soliders, comes up again in another anonymous engraving entitled *Ma Constitution*. In the engraving, Marie Antoinette is depicted with her fictional lover, General Lafayette, Commander of the National Guard, who is touching her "public thing". In the background, we see a pedestal with an ejaculating penis, on which is a globe with the king's crown being knocked off by a *putti* or cupid. This engraving serves as the frontispiece of one of the pornographic pamphlets circulating at the time, "The Uterine Furies of Marie Antoinette." (approx.. 1791) (Cameron, 97) The illustration conveys the following meaning: the public body, a function of the king's own body, is being deteriorated by the sexual appetite of the Queen, not only a woman, but a foreign, Austrian, adulterous woman. Generally, the pornographic pamphlets circulating at the time relied upon a general fantasy about all the debauched aristocracy in the court of Versailles, but it was the female aristocrats in particular who were used as the main vehicles for the emboldening of a new, fraternally bonded, virtuous Republican body through the illustrated dramas about the Queen's shocking and diverse sexual exploits. These pamphlets performed as active discursive agents which acted to banish the corruption to the national collective body posed by the presence of sexualized female bodies, bodies which should have remained in private spaces but which "got out" into the public domain

The fictionalised lesbian exploits of the Queen, as well as the other exploits which included incestuous relations, and the illustrations that accompanied these dramatized exploits in the pamphlets, functioned as "proof" of the weakened power of the King, Louis 16<sup>th</sup>. His Queen's salacious extramarital relations signified his impotence, and many of the pamphlets characterised the Queen as being unsatisfied by the King. As Lynn Hunt notes, 1789, the year of the French Revolution, marked a turning point at which the pamphlets grew in number and in the span of their

circulation, and, in this growth, they shifted from being scandalous stories told within the court, to widely published pornographic stories disseminated across a much wider general public. Today, the actual truth of the stories is not even relevant: public opinion, rumour and calumny work outside the realm of truth, purely within the realm of performative discourse. In other words, the action and consequences set by the pornographic pamphlets would be the same, whether the stories about Marie Antoinette were true or not true in the least.

Nevertheless, certain textual strategies may have been in place to convey a *representation of* truth. Lynn Hunt identifies the use of first-person narration (the Queen's voice) in the *Essai Historique* seen previously, as an immediately open window into the "truth" of what was really going on inside Versailles. She explains that from 1789 onwards, "the public no longer 'hears' courtier rumours through the print medium; it now 'sees' degeneracy in action."<sup>5</sup> This "seeing" of degeneracy in action speaks to the performativity of pornography itself, where the very utterances, both words and images, perform illocutionarily as being pornographic, and perlocutionarily through their consequences. In this sense, all pornography is illocutionarily performative, and in this case of the pamphlets, the reader is not just a reader or passive viewer of the images but an active voyeur and even moralist. (Hunt, *Erotism and the Body Politic*, 120) This moralism acted to constitute the emerging collective body, a virtuous public body.

Thus the pornographic stories about the court of Versailles, enhanced immensely by their illustrations, operated as performative utterances. In their depiction of the debauchery of the court at Versailles, the publishers of the pamphlets reinforced a national identity, but at great expense to womankind. In Freudian terms we would say that the Queen's sexual voraciousness signified a castrative threat to the unity, and to the morality, of the nation. In their myriad executions (pun

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette," in *Erotism and the Body Politic*, 119.



intended,) the misogynistic pamphlets about Marie Antoinette explicitly illustrated how she was “the antonym of the nation” (Hunt, 113).

## References

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