

The Discounted Face of the Pornographic Other

French phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas, responds in *Ethics and Infinity* that, “[T]he relation to the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: ‘thou shalt not kill.’”¹ For Levinas, it is the face of the Other which issues a cry that “I” become responsible for her. The face is signification, pointing to the transcendent and saturating mystery of the Other, yet is beyond the reduction of visual perception. It is the objective of this paper to apply Levinasian thought, the ethical response to the face of the Other, to the injustice² associated with the production and commodification of pornographic images and videos. As the abuse of pornographic materials is an injustice, a failed response to the cry of the Other, it begs the question, “Does the pornographic Other even possess a face?” Subliminal as it may seem, this question is nonetheless essential to address in the consideration of pornographic injustice.

This paper argues that in the case of the abuse and exploitation of the Other within the pornographic industry, the pornographic Other possesses a face which issues a cry to recognize the inviolable mystery of the Other and to become responsible for him or her. Pornography, by its very nature, discounts the face of the Other, not rendering the face unknowable, but never giving the face a chance to be known. From the beginning of the abuse, the pornographic viewer reduces that which cannot be reduced, the face, to an object for use, a direct violation of the ethical cry of the Other.

The human face is a phenomenon undoubtedly saturated with meaning. Whether or not a face may be fully perceived is a question which is subject to debate. According to the French phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas, “The face is signification, and signification without context.”³ For Levinas, the question does not concern the face of the “I”, rather the question of the face is always focused on the Other. It is Levinas that argues that the face of the Other is irreducibly saturated with meaning, to the point of existing beyond mere perception and appearance. For Levinas, it is the face of the Other which issues a cry that “I” become

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Dunsque University Press, 1985), 87

² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 59, a. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981) In the case of pornographic injustices, the injustice derives from the lack of charity which therefore robs the pornographic Other of dignity, reducing them to an object for use.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Dunsque University Press, 1985), 86

responsible for her. The face is signification, pointing to the transcendent and saturating mystery of the Other, yet is beyond the reduction of visual perception. Levinas' theory is firmly rooted in physical encounters with the Other, being in proximity to the Other. But what would happen if the I and the Other were removed from the personal and physical encounter, separated by miles of cords and screens which still project perceivable images of the face? Does the ethical relationship, called for by the Other, collapse in this case of impersonal meeting? This paper will evaluate such an exchange through the lens of the pornographic encounter of the Other. It is the objective of this paper to apply Levinasian thought, concerning the ethical response to the face of the Other, to the sin associated with the production and commodification of pornographic images and videos. In addressing a failed response to the cry of the Other, this paper asks and seeks to answer the essential and imperative question, "Does the pornographic Other possess a face capable of speaking?"

It must be confessed that Emmanuel Levinas lived before the present times of easy access to the internet, skype, facetime, and the free and uninhibited distribution of pornographic materials. Make no mistake though; Levinas did live in a time where the abuse of pornographic materials was no stranger to the world. Yet, he does not seem overly concerned with impersonal relationships between "myself" and the Other, especially in the context of a pornographic exchange. For Levinas it is very clear that anytime "I" encounter the Other, there is a call to responsibility issued, to which "I" must respond. He responds, "The irreducible and ultimate experience of relationship appears to me in fact to be elsewhere:...in the face to face of humans, in sociality, in its moral signification."⁴ Levinas' use of the phrase "face to face" indicates how he understands relationality between "myself" and the Other. Beyond the technicality of a "face to face" relationship, the encounter of the pornographic Other is extremely dissimilar, as it

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Dunsque University Press, 1985), 77

almost always leads to use and abuse of the mystery of the Other. In examining the face of the pornographic Other, and the subsequent abuse of the mystery conveyed in that face, it is clear that the pornographic other may be reduced to an object of utility, rather than a face. Thus, the question becomes, “Does the pornographic Other possess a face capable of calling ‘me’ to responsibility to prior to the abuse?”

According to Levinas, every encountered Other possesses a face equally capable of calling out in responsibility. The mystery of the Other is not signified through the intimacy of sexual encounter, rather through the intimacy of the face. Levinas responds,

The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill.⁵

Thus, the face of the Other is that which is most vulnerable, not the nakedness of her body, because it is in the face that the mystery of the Other is signified. What appears to be the most intimate revelation of the Other, namely her bodily nakedness, is only subject to objectifiable appearance and does not carry the meaning of her complete mystery. “But the relation to the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: ‘thou shalt not kill.’”⁶ The demand “thou shalt not kill” is ignored every day by any number of individuals. In all cases, the command against killing implies that “thou”, rather “I” shall not abuse, neglect, imprison, or torture any Other. The Other falls victim to “me” not when the Other fails to issue a call to responsibility, for the call is always present in the signification of the face, but when “I” discount the face of the Other so as to shield “myself” from listening to the call to responsibility. “I” can deny responsibility to a discounted face

⁵ Ibid. 86

⁶ Ibid. 87

precisely because “I” have reduced the irreducible and made the face only a perceptible image, and not the signification of the transcendent and saturating mystery of the Other.

The case of the pornographic abuse of the Other is no different from any encounter with the Other. Her face issues a call to responsibility just as any other face does. The fact that her face is conveyed through an image and not a physical encounter does not diminish its ability to act as signification and call “me” into an ethical relationship. The ethical relationship to which “I” am called to enter with the Other is one way. “I” assume responsibility for her. Levinas addresses reciprocity in the relationship with all others, replying,

In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjection to the Other; and I am “subject” essentially in this sense. It is I who support all...I am responsible for a total responsibility...The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others.⁷

If the reader doubts the fact that responsibility is not a reciprocal call, he or she needs only to ponder the experience of watching relief fund commercials. Images and videos of starving children, maimed veterans, and suffering families call “me”, whomever that may be, to an ethical response. For the pornographic Other, there is clearly no difference other than the fact that at the end of a clip of pornography no one lists a 1-800 number for pornographic users to respond ethically. The face of the pornographic other calls to “me”, yet “I” discount her face to the point which her call for responsibility may no longer be understood or even acknowledged. Simply put, this reduction of the face of the pornographic Other to a means to an end is precisely what allows the pornographic abuser to perpetrate his or her abuse, defying the persistent call to responsibility.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Dunsque University Press, 1985), 98

In discounting the face of the Other, ignoring her call to responsibility, “I” commit an injustice, a sin of indifference. In all reality, the pornographic Other issues a very real call to “me”, a call for responsibility and an ethical relationship. By discounting her face and thus ignoring or suppressing her call, “I” sin. James Keenan, S.J. understands all sin to be rooted in indifference, writing, “Sin, therefore, is not really the choosing of the wrong or even the failure to choose the right. Antecedent to choice, sin is the failure to be bothered, which often results in wrong intentions and wrong choices.”⁸ Thus “I” not only discount the face of the Other, “I” sin against her by not even bothering to listen for her call before reducing her to an object for use.

In conclusion, the pornographic Other, although experienced primarily through a screen, is no different than the everyday Other, the neighborly Other.⁹ Just as the face of the Other, experienced face to face, is signification, so too is the face of the pornographic Other. Pointing to her transcendent and saturated mystery, the signification of the face of the Other, applies equally to the pornographic Other. It is the face of the Other which issues a cry that “I” become responsible for her. In ignoring this call, “I” discount her face, so as not to be plagued by her incessant call for responsibility. “I” sin against her when “I” choose not to even bother to accept the face which she possesses and to respond accordingly. The pornographic Other possesses a face no less acute in its call for responsibility than the face of a neighbor and friend. It is only when “I” fail to recognize her call that “I” sin against her, and discount her face to an object for use. In doing this, “I” reduce the irreducible, and rob the pornographic Other of her call for responsibility.

⁸ James Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 186

⁹ Indicating one who is neigh or near.