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The Stereoscopic and the Erotic

Pornographic Stereoviews in the Nineteenth Century

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THE STEREOSCOPIC AND THE EROTIC: PORNOGRAPHIC STEREOVIEWS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Art History

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“Perhaps there is something whorish about the very act of representing, since its product—a book or picture—is promiscuously available to all eyes, unless some outside authority restricts access to it.”
Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*

“He was a collector who strayed into marginal areas—such as caricature and pornographic imagery—which sooner or later meant the ruin of a whole series of clichés in traditional art history.”
Walter Benjamin, “Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian”

“The difference between pornography and erotica is lighting.”
Gloria Leonard

“The pornographic imagination has its peculiar access to some truth. This truth—about sensibility, about sex, about individual personality, about despair, about limits—can be shared when it projects itself into art.”
Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination”
Consider for a moment…

First, only flatness. Then, something deeper. Eyes adjust, shift, search for a promised effect. Gaze bores through binocular lenses as twin images become one, gradually uniting until—there. The eyes continue their movement, soaking up three-dimensionality as limbs protrude out into space. A mirror in the background adds to the depth drenching the scene, allowing the gaze to move in, out, and around the bodies. Naked flesh appears as though inches away, close enough to touch. There is an entire world in here, inside this scope inside a parlor entirely at the mercy of the gaze. The eyes work hard to construct a scene of three-dimensionality out of flatness, visceral form out of cardboard and glass, erotic potential out of still image. It is all here. Readily tangible (it would seem anyway), thrillingly present, until eyes lift from scope and bodies disappear and the gaze is on the parlor once more.
Introduction

A fundamental problem facing art historians is the impossibility of reproducing gazes of the past. Though we can look closely, mining an image for all the visual material we could possibly gather from its depths and immersing ourselves in the historical material which gives the image its context and meaning, something of its essence—the knowledge of what it would actually be like to view this image as a contemporary viewer would have done—will always be lost to us.¹ There will always be some gaping hole, impossible to fill, in our approximation. And even if we could understand a viewing experience of the past, the fundamental problem remains the translation of that experience into written language. Try as we may to capture images in text, the visual resists linguistic expression. Due to all of these factors, the passage on the previous page, which imagines something along the lines of what a Victorian viewer might have seen when gazing through a stereoscope at a three-dimensional pornographic image, is an exercise in impossibility.² This project is a response to that impossibility, a what if which urges us, despite knowing that we will fall short, to attempt to see the past as not so very far away, offering generosity to material that is all too often scoffed at and extending empathy to a viewpoint which begs to be embodied.

Though stereoscopic images have been largely forgotten today outside of curiosity shops and history of photography classes, from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, they represented the dominant photographic medium, stunning viewers with their immersive and mimetic capabilities.³ It is difficult now to imagine a medium more shocking to innocent eyes than one capable of turning a flat image into a three-dimensional one. Stereoscopes, which were used to view stereographs, achieved their immersive effect through the eye’s merging of two nearly identical images, set at a distance of 2.5 inches apart, or roughly the distance separating a
pair of human eyes. The unification of these dissimilar images by means of the stereoscope, with each image perceived by one retinae, resulted in the perception of depth, as though the object in front of the scope was a three-dimensional one, rather than a dual flat image.

While the earliest popular subjects for stereography were landscape and to a lesser degree portraiture, a market quickly emerged for pornographic images, a genre that had much to gain from the pleasurable effects of immersion and three-dimensionality. Pornographic stereocards, which became increasingly more risqué and provocative over time, were produced in the three main centers of France, Britain, and the United States. As we will come to see, these images were not simply born out of pornography taking advantage of a new medium, as it is wont to do; rather, pornographic stereoviews epitomized various developments of the nineteenth century—advances in technology, new and changing regimes of viewership, and particular views of bodies and sexuality—all of which coalesced to make the pornographic stereoview a particularly fraught kind of image.

Though nude, sensual, and overtly sexual imagery can be found in nearly every time and place in human history, there is some disagreement between scholars of porn studies over when exactly the origin of the specific designation of “pornography” can be marked in time. While some argue that “explicit, sex-themed imagery—what we now call ‘pornography’—is as old as mankind itself,” collapsing the distinction between sexual imagery on the one hand and pornography as a particular category of political and social image on the other, others insist upon the positioning of pornography as a particularly modern category. This latter camp tends to cast pornography as “historically specific to the modern invention of photography,” thus drawing its origins in the mid-nineteenth century. However, it was not only the arrival of photography, but
the confluence of a number of forces on the nineteenth-century stage that ushered in the arrival of a new history of pornography, one which begins in the 1800s and continues to the present day. The word “pornography” first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1857. It was around this time that—with the help of photography, new printing technologies, faster transportation, and increasing literacy rates—literary and visual pornography alike rapidly became available to a wider audience than ever before. The older pornographic tradition of expensive literary texts featuring Greek and Latin passages and mythical allusions gave way to include more visual forms and cheap ephemera—stereographs, yes, but also mutoscopes, transparencies, and postcards—that did not require a literate consumer and could be taken in with a single glance and no prior knowledge on the part of the viewer. These changes were democratizing in many ways; the lower classes enjoyed newfound access to erotic material that previously would have belonged only to the wealthy. Visual pornography especially enabled the working classes, women, children, and people of color (all groups that had previously been largely excluded from the consumption of obscene materials) to appreciate a pornographic world formerly the domain of only white male elites.

Of course, when we think of the Victorians, pornography is not typically what comes to mind. Instead, we picture austere portraits of drab and dreary individuals, repressed in every way imaginable. Though this myth of the Victorians as prudish and puritanical has been challenged since at least the 1960s, when Steven Marcus published *The Other Victorians* and ushered in a wave of reconsideration in the field of Victorian studies, we are still, as Holly Furneaux puts it, “slow, it seems, to tire of the fantasy that the Victorians only fully experienced sex in the secret, guilty side of their double lives.” We have, then, at least two sets of fantasies to contend with: those of the Victorians viewing contemporary pornographic imagery, and those of ourselves.
looking back on the Victorians, insisting upon a myth of puritanism which allows us to imagine ourselves as liberated foil to the Victorian prude.

Recent years have seen immense curiosity about and investigation into Victorian sexuality. Scholars of Victorian studies have delved deeply into the period’s rich tradition of literary pornography. Meanwhile, art historians and scholars of visual studies have conducted extensive research into shifting discourses of vision in the nineteenth century and their impact on viewing technologies in Victorian society. Rarely, however, have these fields of Victorian pornography and nineteenth-century visual studies/art history intersected in any meaningful way. Victorian visual pornography remains vastly underrepresented in scholarship compared to literary pornography, with pornographic stereoscopes receiving even less attention than other mediums such as postcards. Leaving stereoscopy behind, however, is a crucial omission worthy of further investigation, as mining this gap in scholarship provides us with knowledge about the Victorian relationship to photography, vision, and the body which cannot be gleaned from any other medium. Crucial to my analysis is a wedding of porn studies and visual studies which allows the resounding similarities between Victorian fears and desires surrounding viewing technologies and parallel anxieties and fantasies about sexuality and the body to converge. Stereoscopic pornography, far from being a footnote in the history of photography on one hand or the history of pornography on the other, is actually utterly essential to understanding the history of either subject and has broad implications for Victorian studies at large. In this thesis, I center the intersection of the pornographic/erotic and the stereoscopic to highlight a genre and viewing technology that has been largely left out of both art history and visual studies.

Though this is an art history thesis, the visual material discussed does not neatly fit into the category of “art.” The locations in which these objects are found reveals this as well as
anything; pornographic stereoviews are more likely to be found in niche corners of eBay and erotica websites than they are the walls of museums and galleries. Indeed, with the exception of images from the repository at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the majority of stereoviews I reference in this paper come from police evidence archives, private collections, and the depths of the internet. The art historical canon tends to focus on those works deemed erotic (acceptable, sensual, mythical or biblical, for the benefit of the eyes, etc.) rather than pornographic (unacceptable, sexual, grounded in reality or sexual fantasy rather than myth or religion, for the benefit of the body, etc.) To be accepted into the canon, a work typically must cross over from the pornographic to the erotic, the objectionable to the acceptable, either by its reception into the academy/Salon setting at the time of its making or by an act of reclamation thereafter. My work attempts not only to center the pornographic in its analysis, but to trouble and question the divide between the two terms, which casts one as empty of all meaning aside from pure pleasure and the other as rich and worthy of investigation. In this thesis, I frequently use “erotic” and “pornographic” interchangeably. This choice is not arbitrary but rather is intended to make use of the different strengths of each term and to cast doubt on whether their typical opposition is useful to art history in the first place. In art history and in everyday life, much effort has been put into policing the border dividing the erotic from the pornographic, art from porn, sensuality from sexuality. What I am arguing by including in an art historical project works which would typically not be considered art at all is not so much that these works should be claimed by the canon, but rather that important visual phenomena occur at the intersection of art and pornography. Furthermore, these phenomena cannot come into our line of sight until the distinctions between these categories are at least questioned, if not entirely collapsed.
This thesis is organized into five sub-sections, which build toward an understanding of the technological, social, and phenomenological concerns underlying uses of the stereoscope in the nineteenth century. The first section, “Obscene Origins: The Birth of the Stereoscope,” traces the early history of the stereoscope, from its invention to its ties to photography to its status as a technology of obscenity even before its association with overtly sexual imagery. The second section, “A Technology of Touch: Theories of Viewership and Stereoscopic Haptics,” discusses the stereoscope as a device which, despite its emphasis on the visible, deeply implicated the sense of touch in ways which had profound implications for viewers’ relationship to the three-dimensional images they viewed. This section takes as the bulk of its material scholarship from the field of visual studies which theorize the spectator as haptically implicated in stereoscopy, “feel[ing] around,” rather than merely looking around, the images they viewed. The third section, “Fears and Fantasies: Victorian Sexuality and Masturbation in the Nineteenth Century,” moves more into the territory of women’s and sexuality studies, discussing Victorian views on sexuality, morality, and masturbation. These ideas situate the reader within a Victorian mindset when it comes to the stakes of sex and sexuality and lay the groundwork for understanding why exactly pornography was such a fraught issue in Victorian society. The fourth section, “Power and Pleasure: Victorian Pornography in Legal Debates and Lived Experience,” delves into Victorian pornography, examining the legal and moral backlash against the growing trade in visual pornography in the late nineteenth-century. This chapter especially aims to hold in tandem the official or documented views of the Victorians with unofficial lived realities experienced by Victorians. The final section, “Look But Don’t Touch: Viewing Pornographic Stereocards,” approaches stereoscopic pornography directly, using the previous two chapters as a springboard to speak directly to the effects of embodied viewing experience and situate these stereoscopic
objects as not only a site of deviance, but as a stage on which Victorian fears and desires could be played out. What we gain by sitting with each section, each modality informing the Victorian viewing imaginary, is not the ability to know something certain about the past; it is the ability to empathize with this past—to inhabit the nuance of a Victorian perspective, to see it as worthy of inhabiting, and to learn something about ourselves and our present in the process.15

Throughout this project, I employ what I call an empathic methodology, attempting not only to analyze the visual material and viewing technologies available to Victorian viewers, but also to empathize with as many aspects of these viewers’ experiences as possible, so as to gain a more full and radical view of their conceptions of the pornographic works before them. The lack of a method of this nature has consistently stifled the ability of Victorian studies scholars, as well as laymen commentators on Victorian frigidity and passionlessness, to imbue their analyses of Victorian sexualities with the kind of complexity they deserve. Scholar Diane Mason refers to this as a “lack of empathy with the temporarily distant discourse,” and charges it with inhibiting the ability of modern society to look on the Victorian past with something more than a mocking tone.16 In this text, these axes of empathy extend along technological, visual, and sexual lines. I take considerable time to understand and approximate as closely as possible the kind of pre-conditions Victorian viewers brought to erotic stereoviews: the situations in which they encountered them, the taboos and desires surrounding their viewing, and the place of images and sexuality in their lives. Though these mindsets can never be fully recovered or related to by present-day viewers, they can and should be taken seriously for consideration, a privilege that has yet to be bestowed upon them. While we may never know exactly how visual materials resided in the bodies and minds of beholders in the past, an empathic methodology suggests that there is value in trying anyway, knowing that we will fall short. By considering the complexity
of the preconditions brought to erotic stereoviews, we can come to see them as something more than a straightforward aid for masturbatory pleasure. In the process, we can learn to see these images as multi-dimensional in more than just the literal sense.
Obscene Origins: The Birth of the Stereoscope

In a stereograph from the 1860s titled “The Fresh View Agent Soliciting,” a man sits immersed in viewing a stereocard through a hand-held viewer, oblivious to the fact that a second man, who the image’s caption tells us is a salesman of stereoviews, embraces the former’s wife in a passionate kiss (fig. 1). Hyperbolizing the moral fear that the stereoscope would cause viewers to lose themselves entirely in their viewing experience, this image, though humorous, illustrates some of the anxieties that contemporaries held about the new technology of the stereoscope and its power to immerse a viewer in a private, virtual world of their own, cutting them off from the material world around them in the process. The medium of this image, a stereograph itself, reveals that its creators are not themselves interested in condemning the use of the stereoscope, though a cursory reading might suggest so. Instead, this image illustrates the conflicting Victorian attitudes toward the stereoscope. As much as it was feared and critiqued for its potential to depict something obscene (whether literal or figurative), divorce viewers from the physical world around them, and corrupt the experience of viewing itself, the stereoscope simultaneously acted as a nexus of desire and a point at which the unwritten fantasies of Victorian society could be played out.

In 1838, Sir Charles Wheatstone coined the term “stereoscope,” deriving from the Greek skopion (to see) and stereo (solid), to describe his invention of a contraption capable of combining two flat images together using mirrors, allowing an observer to view a unified image in three dimensions (figs. 2 and 3). In his “Contributions to the Physiology of Vision, Part the First,” Wheatstone details the inconveniences posed by human vision, presenting his invention as a path to remedying these deficiencies of sight as they apply to the fine arts and the sciences. In Wheatstone’s thinking, it is impossible for any artist to faithfully represent any three-
dimensional object in two dimensions because when the eyes perceive a three-dimensional object, they actually perceive two dissimilar images, one seen by each eye. The three-dimensional effect of ordinary vision comes only from the unification of the two disparate images in the brain. “What would be the visual effect,” Wheatstone then posed, “of simultaneously presenting to each eye, instead of the object itself, its projection on a plane surface as it appears to that eye?” The route to answering this question was the stereoscope, an instrument which appeared to convert a flat image into three dimensions by mimicking the effects of human vision, producing a collaboration between eye and mind which would make the two-dimensional appear as though solid.

Wheatstone’s newfangled invention utilized two mirrors mounted at right angles to one another, each presenting the reflection of one image to each of the viewer’s eyes. Wheatstone instructs readers in using his contraption as follows:

The observer must place his eyes as near as possible to the mirrors, the right eye before the right hand mirror, and the left eye before the left hand mirror, and he must move the sliding panels… to or from him until the two reflected images coincide at the intersection of the optic axes, and form an image of the same apparent magnitude as each of the component pictures.

At this precise intersection point, the twin images before the viewer would appear as one three-dimensional image. This, Wheatstone wrote, would “present to the mind of the observer, in the resultant perception, perfect identity with the object represented” by the twin images. Though Wheatstone intended his invention as primarily an instrument for demonstrating optical phenomena, it held within it the capacity for new kinds of vision. As the original 3D, capable of transforming flat images into views approximating the right-thereness of real life, Wheatstone’s stereoscope had immense implications for ideas of representation, artistry, and mimesis.
Wheatstone presented his invention to the Royal Society of Great Britain in 1838, and though the stereoscope was received with much enthusiasm by the scientific community, it would take the arrival of photography for the stereoscope to catch the eye(s) of the public. As photography was in its infancy during the 1830s, the images available to Wheatstone for conversion into three dimensions were hand drawings of various shapes and forms, rather than photographic images. However, in 1844, Wheatstone’s rival in the field of visual technology, David Brewster, began developing his own stereoscope, one which was made with the intention of fusing photographic images. Calling Wheatstone’s model “a clumsy and unmanageable apparatus, rather than an instrument for general use,” Brewster embarked on a mission to improve and streamline the Wheatstone stereoscope. At this point in the history of photography, wariness of the new technology abounded, with many critics worrying that photography represented a bastardization of the arts, or worse, that photography would replace the fine arts altogether. Despite these criticisms, Brewster readily accepted the wedding of the stereoscope to photography, writing:

As an amusing and useful instrument the stereoscope derives much of its value from photography. The most skilful artist would have been incapable of delineating two equal representations of a figure or a landscape as seen by two eyes, or as viewed from two different points of sight; but the binocular camera, when rightly constructed, enables us to produce and to multiply photographically the pictures which we require, with all the perfection of that interesting art.

To Brewster, as to many viewers of photography in the first few decades of its existence, a photograph could produce effects infinitely more realistic than a drawing or painting. The wonders of the stereoscope, then, could be multiplied indefinitely through the integration of photographic technology. Ray Zone remarks in his book on stereoscopic cinema that it was around this time that the stereoscope “came to be seen as a form of ‘perfect vision,’ an opportunity to see the world as it is in nature.” No longer simply a toy to view flat drawings in
three dimensions, the stereoscope was transformed with the aid of photography into a device capable of reproducing reality from flatness.

By 1849, Brewster had perfected his lenticular stereoscope, a more compact version of the Wheatstone model which utilized lenses instead of mirrors and was capable of merging two daguerreotype images (fig. 4). Only two years later, Brewster’s model was a sensation at London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, praised by Queen Victoria herself. Scholars writing over a century later generally agree that “the tremendous popularity of the stereoscope would have been impossible without the aid of photography,” which was enabled by the lenticular stereoscope. Indeed, production and sales of stereographs exploded in the wake of Brewster’s invention. By 1856, the market for stereoscopic photographs was booming, with portraits and landscapes making up by far the most popular stereoscopic subject matter. Robert Hunt, a British photographic chemist, remarked in 1856 that “The stereoscope is now seen in every drawing room; the philosophers talk learnedly upon it, ladies are delighted with its magic representations, and children play with it.” Far from solely a high-class form of entertainment, the stereoscope erupted in popularity across class lines, with various models available at different price points depending upon the means and aims of the consumer. The professed aim of the London Stereoscopic Company was famously “A stereoscope for every home,” emphasizing the ubiquity of the device by the mid-nineteenth century.

Part of the appeal of the stereoscope at this time was that it offered the idea of access to faraway places that a viewer otherwise might never see. By aid of the stereoscope, however, they could “visit” distant lands instantaneously. Stereographs were produced for locations all over the world—sites as far flung as Niagara Falls in the United States (fig. 5), the Roman Colosseum (fig. 6), and the Great Pyramid at Giza (fig. 7). David Brewster himself bragged about the
wonders of stereoscopic travel, writing that the London Stereoscopic Company offered “no fewer than sixty [stereographs] taken in Rome, and representing, better than a traveler could see them there, the ancient and modern buildings of that renowned city.”

Though the stereoscope had captivated British audiences, the device found its biggest champion across the pond in Oliver Wendell Holmes, an American physician, poet, and scholar. In an 1859 article for *The Atlantic*, Holmes established himself as the preeminent spokesperson for the stereoscope, spending the entirety of a column entitled “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph” (along with two more to follow in subsequent years) musing on the instrument’s seeming magical power and immense benefits for society. In his article, Holmes passionately describes the experience of a first glimpse through a stereoscope:

> The first effect of looking at a good photograph through the stereoscope is a surprise such as no painting ever produced. The mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture. The scraggy branches of a tree in the foreground run out at us as if they would scratch our eyes out. The elbow of a figure stands forth so as to make us almost uncomfortable. Then there is such a frightful amount of detail, that we have the same sense of infinite complexity which Nature gives us… It is a mistake to suppose one knows a stereoscopic picture when he has studied it a hundred times by the aid of the best of the common instruments.

This quotation gives us an idea of the kind of shock a first-time viewer of a stereograph might have experienced. Still new to viewing photographs, a stereoscopic viewer would look into the twin lenses of the instrument and emerge into a whole world contained within a photograph, appearing so real as to “cheat the senses,” as Holmes puts it. To Holmes, the stereoscope was a miracle technology, containing infinity within its images and opening new possibilities in every realm of life.

Even as the stereoscope boomed in popularity, it was recognized from the beginning of its history as an instrument with obscene potential. As much as the device allowed viewers to see in new and exciting ways, it was also thought to allow them to see too much, and the technology
quickly came to be associated with excess and salaciousness. No critic decried the stereoscope with more gusto than French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire. In *On Photography*, from the Salon of 1859, Baudelaire biting critiques photography in general and the stereoscope in particular, tying the stereoscope explicitly to the realm of obscenity:

A little later a thousand hungry eyes were bending over the peepholes of the stereoscope, as though they were the attic-windows of the infinite. The love of [obscenity],\(^\text{38}\) which is no less deep-rooted in the natural heart of man than the love of himself, was not to let slip so fine an opportunity of self-satisfaction. And do not imagine that it was only children on their way back from school who took pleasure in these follies; the world was infatuated with them. I was once present when some friends were discreetly concealing some such pictures from a beautiful woman, a woman of high society, not of mine—they were taking upon themselves some feeling of delicacy in her presence; but “No,” she replied. “Give them to me! Nothing is too strong for me.” I swear that I heard that; but who will believe me?\(^\text{39}\)

Baudelaire’s outrage at the fixation of contemporary society on the “peepholes of the stereoscope” reveals an attitude toward the new technology which based itself in the fear that viewers would become overly fixated and obsessed with stereoscopic images, as well as a worry that more risqué images would act to corrupt women and members of high society. Baudelaire cautions against photography replacing art and warns his readers that frequent stereoscopic viewers will “[diminish] their faculties of judging and of feeling” the real/natural by replacing it with the photographic/stereoscopic.\(^\text{40}\) For all that the stereoscope allowed seemingly perfect and mimetic views of the world in which viewers lived, it simultaneously allowed viewers to see too much, making it an obscene technology even when the image behind its lenses was a perfectly tame one. Baudelaire’s sentiments toward the stereoscope and its inherent obscenity are echoed in an 1860 *Vanity Fair* cartoon entitled “So Like Matrimony,” in which a gentleman explains to a young lady that the “principle of the stereoscope” is to “make two people into one” (fig. 8). This cartoon in no way refers to inherently obscene or explicit stereographs, instead deeming the stereoscope an obscene technology through the very logic of its functioning.
In many ways, this is a tale as old as time. New technologies have frequently ushered in moral scares, with photographic technologies taking an especially large share of criticism. Kelly Dennis attributes this to the “immediate materiality of the photographic [which] helped reinforce tactile, fetishistic qualities latent in the image.” In other words, the very qualities which made photography appealing as a reproductive technology simultaneously made it threatening as a technology of excessive sight. This was even more true for the stereoscope, which took mimesis to new heights, thus even more deeply implicating these obscene qualities.

*A Technology of Touch: Theories of Viewership and Stereoscopic Haptics*

Seated in a Victorian parlor, a woman sits immersed in a stereoscopic journey, handheld scope pressed to her eyes as she gazes at an image—we know not of what (fig. 9). Surrounding her, blocked from her own view but readily accessible to our own, tactile cues abound. We are confronted by the rich fabric of the carpet, topped by the fleecy softness of a fur skin. Above, complementing the ground’s softness, the solidity of a stone fireplace suggests a hardness which is echoed by the statuettes and sculptures strewn around the space. We are invited to view the room in as many spatial registers as possible, with furniture placed at angles, allowing the eye to work its way back into the corner of the room. In the center of the image, a drawer slides out of a wooden chest, cheekily capitalizing on the depth effects the stereoscope provides, enticing us to reach in and pull out the stereographs nestled inside of it. This image’s title, “The stereograph as an educator,” tells us that the woman is being instructed by her stereoscope—perhaps she is off traveling to a location as far away as the Colosseum in the frame behind her. While her stereoscopic journey educates her, however, our encounter with this stereograph educates us as
well. Immersed in the rich textures and many registers of this image, we learn how to view a stereograph by feeling around the space, immersing ourselves in the pleasure of depth and tactility.

Alongside the inherent obscene nature of the stereoscope, another factor differentiated it from other viewing mediums: its capacity to invoke the sense of touch, despite its status as a technology of vision. This too comes out in Holmes’s 1859 article:

The mind, as it were, *feels round it* and gets an idea of its solidity. We clasp an object with our eyes, as with our arms, or with our hands, or with our thumb and finger, and then we know it to be something more than a surface. This, of course, is an illustration of the fact, rather than an explanation of its mechanism.⁴²

Holmes takes great care to describe the tactile quality of stereoscopic viewing. Far from purely visual, the act of looking through a set of stereoscopic binoculars was theorized and experienced as intensely haptic, with the sense of touch engaged as much as that of vision. However, as Holmes elucidates, it is of course not actually the hands that do the touching. Rather, the eyes themselves are engaged in haptic sensation, entering the image, “*feel[ing] round it,*” and sensing the image in ways that exceed the typical boundaries of photographic viewership. Holmes’s thinking did not exist in a vacuum. On the contrary, it echoes broad changes taking place over the course of the nineteenth century in the regime of vision, changes which would leave mid-nineteenth century viewers particularly primed to encounter stereoscopic images in a manner that was highly tactile, personal, and embodied.

In his book *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Jonathan Crary suggests that a change in “the very regime of the visible” took place over the course of the nineteenth century, such that Victorian viewers were primed for a visual experience that privileged the bodily and multisensorial aspects of viewing over the purely optical.⁴³ As Crary writes, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, “a new set of relations
between the body on the one hand and forms of institutional and discursive power on the other redefined the status of an observing subject.” The camera obscura or Cartesian model of vision, which privileged monocular perspective and imagined a disembodied viewer hovering over an objective world, was at this point in history collapsing, giving way to a form of vision premised upon the bodily sensations existing within the viewer. In this way, nineteenth-century viewers of stereographs were predisposed to bring to their viewing experience a heightened awareness of bodily sensation, as well as a conception of vision itself as something more related to their own body “in here,” rather than the world “out there.”

By the mid-nineteenth century, as we have seen, photography had already completed the task of generating resemblance to reality; the stereoscope’s job as it grew in popularity was not only to reflect the world back to its viewer, but to implicate the viewer in that world through haptic engagement with stereographic images. The most successful stereocards abounded with tactile information. They were views full of objects, textures, and multiple registers of depth. They were portraits featuring deep recesses into space behind the subject. They contained mirrors that allowed the eye to better feel round the image, gaining access to more than one view, and thus more than one way of sensing and entering the image. As Crary puts it, “The desired effect of the stereoscope was not simply likeness, but immediate, apparent tangibility.”

Active and haptic engagement differentiated the photograph—as a medium limited to two-dimensional, surface-level depiction—from the stereograph, which was capable of delving beneath this two-dimensional surface into a three-dimensional world.

Crucial to this haptic engagement with the stereoscope is the device’s fundamentally private and individual functioning. Jonathan Potter emphasizes the significance of individual experiences of the stereoscope in his own work on stereography, calling attention to everyday
Experiences of the stereoscope that tended to be “domestic, private, and often idiosyncratically imaginative.” Viewers most frequently encountered the stereoscope in the space of the Victorian parlor, which Potter deems a “protected [space] where mediated images opened the world to visual exploration.” In stark contrast to other viewing technologies of the nineteenth century such as the panorama, which viewers encountered in large public groups, and the magic lantern, which might be encountered in the home but typically involved a large audience, the stereoscope was always encountered in a fundamentally private format. In other words, because only one viewer could look through the lenses of the stereoscope at a time, the experience took on a necessarily private and personal tone, “[allowing] for the gaze to be as concentrated and as extended as the viewer [desired].”

We can visualize this kind of individual viewing experience with the aid of a painting by Jacob Spoel from 1868, which depicts a group of women viewing stereoscopic photographs (fig. 10). The women are clustered around a table, pouring tea and glancing over each other’s shoulders at printed matter and stereocards. Their body language and poses suggest that they are engaged in conversation, perhaps commenting on the numerous images before them. However, one figure in the image is sequestered away from the rest. Hidden away behind the table and easy to miss with her face entirely shielded by the stereoscope before her eyes, she sits fully engrossed in activity, face downcast to look at the image before her. Though the women surrounding her engage in the social experience of looking at images together, this figure is fundamentally alone in her encounter with stereography, utterly fixated on the stereoview.

There is something potently psychological to the encounter between stereograph and viewer in Spoel’s painting. She seems lost in a world of her own, plunged into a state of reverie by her viewing experience. Potter nods to this trance state in his text, arguing that private
engagement with the stereoscope primed viewers to encounter stereographs in ways that allowed for the construction of fantasies and daydreams. Because viewers encountered stereographs on their own terms, privately and with little to no instruction on how to view the image, each “individual was free to privately construct his or her own narrative around the images.”

Individuals engaged in a stereoscopic world were free to lose track of the physical world around them (reminded of its presence only by the sensation of wood against their face and the contact of their body with their seat), lost in a stereoscopic realm of illusion and daydream.

Consideration of these states of reverie to which the design of the stereoscope was so conducive is crucial to any analysis of stereoscopic pornography. Potter unfortunately fails to consider the implications of his argument for erotic stereoviews, thus missing out on what could be not only an incredibly interesting body of work in which to consider the idea of fantasy and daydreams, but also omitting what could have been an incredibly useful piece of evidence to bolster his own claims. The immersive and narrative effects which made stereographs of landscapes and portraits so appealing were the same ones at play in stereographs of nude women and copulating couples, images which invited viewers to fantasize about and haptically engage with an erotic image in the private space of the home. At its core, the stereoscope was a technology of intimacy, facilitating deeply personal and private encounters with images and offering potently tactile and embodied modes of engaging with them.

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**Fears and Fantasies: Victorian Sexuality and Masturbation in the Nineteenth Century**

A stereograph made by F. Jacques Moulin around 1860 includes a number of tropes most twenty-first century viewers have come to associate with the Victorians (fig. 11). The lone gentleman in the scene wears a top hat and coat tails, with his female counterparts cloaked in the...
same somber black he wears, the ladies clad in stockings that cover them from ankle to thigh. The setting, too, suggests a Victorian space, with heavy drapes shrouding the window and two antique clocks flanking the figures. This, however, is where the common tropes end. The top hat-donned gentleman’s trousers have been shoved down around his knees, as he kneels on the ground to penetrate a reclining Victorian lady who, though her stockings remain in place, has her dress hoisted up about her waist to provide access to both sexual partner and camera. To the left of the copulating pair is a second woman, her skirts hoisted up as well as she pleasures herself, peering around at the couple in the same voyeuristic position in which the image’s viewer finds themself. This image is a shocking one for modern eyes, as in one fell swoop it shatters the myth of the Victorians as asexual. While this image defies our modern notions of the Victorians as frigid, it simultaneously challenges contemporary Victorian discourses around the dangers of sexuality, thus insisting upon a lack of unilaterality in Victorian thought about sex.

Our frequent insistence on dismissing the sexuality of Victorian society as either non-existent or comical, in the words of Diane Mason:

> reflects the mocking disregard of the views of one society by another which deems itself to be more sophisticated and liberal in its outlook. More disturbingly, it diminishes the ‘serious’ nature of masturbation as a facet of sexuality. Masturbation becomes neither truly sexual, nor as important an issue as the Victorians seemingly regarded it.\(^{54}\)

Far from a silencing of dialogue around sexuality, the Victorian era actually experienced an outpouring of sexual discourse, the “veritable discursive explosion” about which Foucault famously wrote in his *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, in which he observed “an institutional incitement to speak about [sex], and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail.”\(^{55}\) Much of this discourse took the form of psychological and medical texts, which warned against all kinds of sexual deviances and disorders. The Victorian
Era marked a key moment in the history of sexuality, as many of the sexual terminologies and categories upon which we still rely today were being fixed at this time. As Mason delineates above, the tendency to mock Victorian sexuality diminishes not only the realness of sex and sexuality as a subject of major concern for the Victorians, but also the gravity of that chief anxiety of the era: masturbation.

The physical signs and symptoms of masturbation (or onanism, as the common euphemism went) were so well known to the Victorians that writers on the subject often do not fully describe them, instead assuming that their reader is well familiar with the morbid state of the masturbator. Some texts from the period, however, take it upon themselves to practice scare tactics, laying out in vivid terms the endless list of symptoms commonly seen in the onanist, which begins with weakness and ends in death. Writing on “Male Self-Abuse” in his seminal text *Satan in Society*, physician Nicholas Francis Cook calls the “shameful and criminal act” of masturbation “the most frequent, as well as the most fatal, of all vices.” He goes on to detail the physical signs of the masturbator:

At first glance the onanist presents an aspect of languor, weakness, and thinness. The countenance is pale, sunken, flabby, often leaden, or more or less livid, with a dark circle around the sunken eyes, which are dull, and lowered or averted. A sad, shameful, spiritless physiognomy. The voice is feeble and hoarse; there are dry cough, oppression, panting, and fatigue on the least exertion; palpitations; obscured vision; dizziness, tremulousness, painful cramps; convulsive movements like epilepsy; pain in the limbs, or at the back of the head, in the spine, breast or stomach; great weakness in the back; sometimes lethargy; at other times slow, hectic, consumptive fever; digestive derangements; nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, or progressive emaciation. Sometimes the body is bent, and often there are all the appearances of pulmonary consumption, or the characteristics of decrepitude joined to the habits and pretensions of youth.

Other texts from the period contained illustrations depicting these symptoms. One such illustration from *The Secret Companion* by R.J. Brodie represents the “debilitated [sic.] state of the body from the effects of Onanism or Self Pollution” and depicts a gaunt man with bent knees
and a hunched posture (fig. 12). The man appears relatively young but has prematurely aged as a result of his self pollution; his face is that of an old man and he walks with a cane. In another image from the same text “Representing the last stage of mental & bodily exhaustion from Onanism or Self-pollution,” a man lies horizontally on a sofa, eyes staring straight ahead and body limp (fig. 13). He appears clammy, cold, and close to death, with his grip on a handkerchief by his side the only indication that he still possesses the strength to go on.

Such is the inevitable physical fate of the masturbator, doomed to experiencing deeply harmful and highly visible symptoms which would mark him (or her, as some texts on the subject deigned to include) as deviant and sickly. However, the symptoms of masturbation were not thought to remain only in the realm of the physical. Perhaps even more startling were the ethical, moral, psychological, and social effects of “this most terrific and fatal passion.”

Quoting from a German physician, Cooke goes on to detail the less than tangible results of self-abuse:

The masturbator gradually loses his moral faculties; he acquires a dull, silly, listless, embarrassed, sad, effeminate exterior… previously acquired knowledge is forgotten; the most exquisite intelligence becomes naught; all the vivacity, all the pride, all the qualities of the spirit by which these unfortunates formerly subjugated or attracted their equals, abandon them, and leave them no longer aught but contempt…

Masturbation then, though a physical vice, does not relegate its damages to the body. It infects the mind itself, degrading all the qualities which set humans apart from mere animals. Indeed, for Cooke, the onanist is barely human, “a being far below the brute,” doomed to a life of degradation and despondency if his habit is not snuffed out at a young enough age.

Taking a somewhat more moderate approach toward the vice of onanism by the time of his writing thirty years after Cooke, Dr. Albert Moll argues in The Sexual Life of the Child that many of the frequently reported physical and mental symptoms of masturbation are overblown
and bear no real evidence. Unlike Cooke, Moll is not convinced that masturbation taking place during the child or adolescent years is at all harmful to adult life. However, he remains concerned as to the “grave… risk of sexual excess,” as well as the possibility of impotence in onanists. He argues that because frequent masturbation often cooccurs with increasingly powerful erotic stimuli (such as pornography), as well as increasingly vigorous physical stimuli, there is great risk of this excess resulting in sexual dysfunction. Even while debunking many contemporary myths around masturbation, Moll continues to worry about the dangers of too much excitement of the nervous system resulting from frequent masturbation, as well as the risk of damage to the body, and specifically the genital organs. Moll, like other thinkers before him, remains concerned with the possibility of masturbation damaging the mind and body, as well as impeding the ability of adult masturbators or former masturbators to carry out “normal” sexual functioning, engage in connubial intercourse, and have children. By combining Cooke and Moll’s arguments, we come to see that excessive and contagious masturbation, taken to its logical extreme, could be seen to pose an existential threat to Victorian society: either masturbators would die because of their actions, or they would be unable to have intercourse and procreate, making onanism lethal to both self and society.

Cooke and others generally conceived of masturbation as a “solitary vice,” with practitioners going to great lengths to hide their self-pollution from parents, teachers, and other authority figures. However, in the same breath that Cooke names the solitary nature of onanism, he adds that it is “essentially gregarious in its origin,” with boys (and here it is only boys with which Cooke is concerned) teaching and encouraging one another to engage in the practice. Boarding schools, Cooke elaborates, are hot beds of onanism, due to the frequent lack of supervision students experience. Masturbation, then, far from a solitary or secret practice, is
theorized rather as both common and essentially social, residing far more in the public realm than the private.

Masturbation was not merely theorized as the folly of schoolboys, however. This most fatal of practices, along with other urges to pleasure the body, rather than develop the mind, were associated with a portion of the psyche operating covertly at all times and in all people: the Unconscious. According to Eduard von Hartmann’s 1893 work, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, the Unconscious operates in humans as the lower faculty of the mind, responsible for instincts and sexual desires. The Unconscious is, in some sense, a necessary evil. It protects us from harm by motivating us toward what will keep us and our species alive (food, drink, shelter, procreation, etc.), “preserv[ing] the species through sexual and maternal love, ennobl[ing] it through selection in sexual love, and conduct[ing] the human race historically steadily to the goal of its greatest possible perfection.” At the same time, however, the Unconscious “has always something uncomfortably demonic about it.” While leading us toward survival, the Unconscious simultaneously leads us away from rationality, intellectualism, spirituality, and civilization, urging us to pursue the pleasures of the body above all else. As Hartmann elaborates in a different text:

> Would man, at whose command are so many means for satisfying the physical impulse, all equally efficacious with coitus, be likely to discharge the inconvenient, disgusting, shameless, reproductive function, did not instinct always urge him anew, often as he has experienced that this mode of satisfaction yields him, in fact, no higher sensuous enjoyment than any other?

According to Hartmann’s logic, it was in spite of—rather than due to—the presence of the Unconscious that Victorian society had reached the intellectual, social, and technological advances it had. Though the Unconscious is necessary to our survival, Hartmann nevertheless declares that “Wherever consciousness is able to replace the Unconscious, it *ought* to replace it,”
as this will lead humankind to greater progress. In this way, sexual instincts were fundamentally theorized in Victorian psychology as a threat to wellbeing, both on the individual and societal level.

Though all human beings possess an Unconscious alongside a conscious mind, these portions of the psyche were explicitly gendered, with Woman “related to man, as instinctive or unconscious to rational or conscious action.” While men are associated with the conscious, rational, intellectual part of the psyche, women are thought to be more closely tied to the Unconscious, irrational, sexual portion. Though Hartmann notes that it is beneficial for men to spend time with women for these very reasons (so they can tap into the more instinctive part of themselves and thus come in closer proximity to Nature), women’s associations with the Unconscious simultaneously make them potentially harmful to a society in need of sexual restraint. If the Unconscious can be said to epitomize Victorian concerns about the consequences of sexual instincts functioning unrestrained in society, women can be said to represent a concentrated form of the Unconscious, and thus of the anxieties about sexuality which ran amuck in Victorian thought.

This construction of women as located in closer proximity to Nature and instinct than men is reflective of the idea that “the naturalization of female sexuality located sexuality within women, rather than between people.” By and large, most stereoscopic photographs featuring nude subjects centered around the female body—its form, its movement, and its proximity to something wholly sexual. Stereoscopic images of women abounded, from scenes of undressing (fig. 14) to women engaging in household chores (fig. 15), to playful pseudo-lesbian scenes of multiple women together (figs. 16 and 17). And even when women were not the sole subjects of erotic stereocards and a heterosexual couple appeared instead, the female form tends to be
foregrounded far more than the male, with the male subject often partially or fully clothed, his body turned away from the camera or partially shielded by his female counterpart, as is the case with an anonymous stereocard featuring a couple copulating with the woman’s naked body in full view while her form hides her partner’s clothed body (fig. 18). 

Though erotic images from this period represent disproportionately represent female subjects, it would be a mistake to see this trend as merely reflective of the desire by male audiences for nude images of women, as many porn scholars argue tends to be the case with contemporary pornography. As much as there was likely a high demand for erotic images of women in the Victorian pornographic market, the gendered breakdown of images can also be attributed to the proximity of women in Victorian thought to pure sexuality. If women represented the Unconscious, irrationality, nature, and the obscene, their presence in psychological and medical texts would seem to highlight their danger for society and the need to hide and restrain their influence. Yet, this threat of danger did not stop deviant images of women from being produced in great numbers during this period. Similarly, though onanism was heavily vilified in Victorian society, the presence of images of masturbation such as the one which opened this section reveals that this vilification was not so simply as a silencing of discourse (be it literary or visual) around the subject. The wealth of images from this period which call up notions of masturbation, sexual instinct, the Unconscious, and the undiluted sexuality of women reveals that, while these ideas represented a source of immense anxiety and fear, they also generated immense excitement and fantasy. Though Victorian audiences were well aware of the threats to self and society which these images raised, pornography continued to act as a practice site for deviancy, a stage on which the Victorians could play out their sexual desires, and a safe
space in which the most threatening of sexual stimuli could be engaged, all from behind the lenses of the stereoscope.

* * *

Power and Pleasure: Victorian Pornography in Legal Debates and Lived Experience

In a hardcore nude stereoview from the nineteenth century, a couple sits in coital embrace, a woman’s legs wrapping around her partner to accommodate his sprawled legs as she seems to lower herself down onto his body (fig. 19). His fingers grip her buttocks, digging into her flesh and marking it as soft, pliable, touchable. She balances with arm and elbow against his shoulders, adding to the points of contact between the two. Flanking the couple is a mirror which doubles their image, inviting the viewer to peer into and around the pair, taking pleasure in an excessive display of flesh and lustful depth. Though their faces are nearly entirely hidden, nothing else is left to the imagination, with viewer given open access to the bodies before them, obscene as they may be.

The first stereoscopic pornographic photographs were likely produced in 1852, only a year after Brewster’s lenticular stereoscope appeared at the Great Exhibition in London. By the 1880s, the medium had entered its golden age, with an explosion of nude and hardcore images available to an ever-growing audience. In these images, lone female figures pose suggestively for the camera, perform household chores in various stages of undress, or remove articles of clothing to reveal more skin to the viewer. Group shots of multiple women depict lighthearted scenes of suggestively homoerotic play. In the more hardcore tradition, heterosexual couples engage in sex acts in front of the camera, including sexual intercourse and fellatio, usually emphasizing the bodily contours and nude form of the female subject, and going far further in portraying explicit acts than other visual media of the period such as postcards.
As the trade in obscene materials boomed, however, so did efforts to eliminate it, as the newfound possibility that “anything at all might be shown to anybody” invoked the need for more comprehensive censoring of pornographic material. Concerned authorities from the National Vigilance Association to the police to the Postal Service rose up to crack down on the spread of pornography. In 1871, the President of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, an institution dedicated to upholding public morality, remarked on the contribution of photography to the troubles of anti-obscenity organizations in a statement to *The Times*:

> Our difficulties have been greatly increased by the application of photography, multiplying at an insignificant cost filthy representations from living models, and the improvement in the postal service has further introduced facilities for secret trading which were previously unknown.

Moral panic around the rise of obscenity, then, was seen as related to the advent of new technologies capable of spreading pornography more quickly than it could be contained. Furthermore, the belief that photographic depictions were truer to life and thus closer at hand than, say, a risqué painting or sculpture, only heightened the perceived threat of visual pornography. Stereoscopic depictions of nudity and sex, then, were in some ways the most threatening depictions imaginable, as they doubled down on the reality effects of photography by adding a third dimension.

Legal forces and social purity organizations alike justified their persecution of pornography as an effort to protect the most vulnerable members of society (women, children, and the lower classes) from the deleterious mental and physical effects of pornography and sexual excitement discussed in the previous chapter. This was a notable shift in rhetorical strategy from previous efforts at sexual censorship. From medieval times through the seventeenth century, regulation of pornography was undertaken on the basis of religion and politics, rather than for the sake of secular morality or decency. In this way, the nineteenth
century was distinct not only in the type of pornography it produced but in the particular ways that pornography was condemned and subsequently regulated, reinforcing porn scholar Lynn Hunt’s idea that “pornography has always been defined in part by the efforts undertaken to regulate it.”\(^85\) Importantly, as both Lisa Sigel and Judith Rowbotham note in their own work on Victorian pornography, the urge to protect women and the lower classes from increased access to obscenity was borne more out of a fear of these groups exercising sexual agency than a genuine urge to protect them. As Rowbotham et al. put it:

> The main spur to action by the Victorian legal regime, it seems, was not the existence or consumption of obscene materials *per se*. Rather, it was the fact that salacious materials were becoming increasingly available to a much wider reading and viewing public. More they were becoming available in *public space*. In short obscenity had become democratised and publicized.\(^86\)

As an enormously lucrative markets for the production and distribution of pornographic stereocards erupted in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, corresponding legal and police structures arose to fight back.\(^87\) In France, models, photographers, and distributors of obscénités (obscene materials) could be prosecuted under charges of “outrage against public morals.”\(^88\) Photographing nude or semi-nude bodies, many of them engaged in explicitly sexual acts, was considered to be an attack on the morals of polite society itself, as this practice and its products “[allowed] the presence of certain themes, materials, and desires that were excluded, suppressed, distorted, and demonized” in Victorian society.\(^89\) In England, the pornography trade was demonized so far as to be conceived of as the source of all other social evils, as is reflected in a quote from the National Vigilance Association:

> The trade in obscenity has so easily attained the formidable proportions which disturb consciences and seriously menace morals. This is undoubtedly the place to strike: of all methods used in the corruption of youth this is certainly one of the most serious and may be truly said to be the source of all others, and were it only possible to get the better of this evil it would greatly enable the special legislations in each country to combat the other evils.\(^90\)
In much the same way that masturbation was thought to be a gateway to a host of other moral and social ills, pornography was characterized as capable of cultivating social evils. However, while official forces cracked down on the spread of stereoscopic pornography, everyday viewers continued to enjoy all the pleasures a three-dimensional pornographic viewing medium had to offer, bolstering scholar Lisa Sigel’s claim of a “rift in perceptions between the authorities and the audience” of late-nineteenth century pornography. People of all sorts began publicly purchasing sexualized visual objects—not just stereoscopes but erotic postcards and mutoscopes as well—alongside non-sexual ephemera, often amassing large collections. Interestingly, mere possession of obscene materials was not considered a crime, but magistrates held the power to grant a search and seizure warrant to police for any materials thought to be obscene and held for the purpose of publication. A raid conducted in 1874 at the residence of Henry Hayler, a street pornographer, resulted in the seizure of 130, 248 obscene photographs and 5,000 obscene slides, while another at the premises of William Dugdale in 1868 required over a day’s work by police to unfold and burn all of the offending material.

Frequently, vendors butted heads with authorities, insisting that the materials they sold conformed to standards of public morality, often citing the commonplaceness of nude images in high art and public galleries as admonishment for their apparent crimes. Indeed, when an image of an unclothed woman appeared in sculpted form in a gallery, this was generally no cause for uproar from legal authorities. However, when that same sculpture was reproduced as a postcard or stereograph, it lost its status as high art and became obscene. Once again, the judgment of what kinds of images could be considered acceptable lay less in subject matter than it did in audience and setting.
What made erotic stereographs, along with other risqué visual material, so unacceptable to Victorian society on an official level then was not the mere suggestion of sexuality, but rather a confluence of factors. Ideas from Victorian psychology and medicine which indicated that women and the lower classes could fall victim to their own sexual whims more easily than could upper class men compounded with the increased availability of cheap, visual pornographic material that made highly realistic and immersive pornography accessible to these same groups incited outrage among powerful actors who saw the sexual agency of these groups as a blatant threat. Simultaneously, the inherently obscene nature of the stereoscope itself, coupled with the ability of this new technology to invoke the sense of touch, added to the mix myriad fears relating to shifts in regimes of spectatorship and new technological advances. The stereoscope resided at the intersection of these sexual and visual anxieties, experiencing condemnation from multiple camps due to its obscene nature and indicating to us “how deeply intertwined are discourses of knowledge, power, and pleasure in a changing field of the visual.”

Simultaneously, the device and the pornographic images created to reside in front of its lenses induced great allure through their very positioning within this matrix of taboo and desire.

* * *

Look But Don’t Touch: Viewing Pornographic Stereocards

A woman lounges on a cloth-covered sofa with her back to us, her arm propping her up and her legs bent at angle which pushes her rear end out into the image’s foreground, maximizing the depth effects of this reversed reclining nude (fig. 20). She is soaked with shadows, every value from deepest black to whitest highlight covering her skin. Where hip meets waist, her flesh bunches into two folds, lines which call us into this image, wishing to touch her, wanting her to turn round and face us.
The Victorians were not keen to leave behind written accounts of how pornographic stereocards were utilized in the private space of the home. Though we know that stereoscopes were used in parlors and bedchambers, by individuals and groups intent on sharing their viewing experience, when it comes to the most risqué images, we can only make educated guesses as to when, where, and how pornographic stereocards were viewed. Still, echoing Linda Williams, I wish to make no mistake about the stakes underlying these images, whose subject matter defied accepted standards of decency and morality of the time and whose medium implicated an embodied mode of viewing in such a palpable way: when it comes to these images and their viewership, “physical sexual arousal and satisfaction are at issue.”

The suitability of pornography to the stereoscope was to many viewers undeniable. A medium already so closely tied to the obscene would seem to perfectly complement subject matter which based itself in the unashamedly erotic. In her work on Victorian erotic photographs, Rachel Teukolsky writes that stereographs “[enhanced] [the] titillating effects” of erotic and pornographic subjects, “given that they created pleasurable depth effects grounded in bodily sensations.” The stereoscope allowed viewers to explore a private pornographic world, taking pleasure in all that lay before their eyes with all distractions comfortably out of view. Additionally, the heightened sense of reality that existed in stereoviews was, for most viewers, utterly astonishing and unlike anything they had ever seen before. The illusion of depth in the stereograph created the impression of a scene that lay right in front of the viewer’s eyes, one that they could very nearly reach out and touch, or even enter.

Erotic stereography tended to make use of the same features which made non-erotic stereoscopic photographs so desirable. They implicated multiple registers of depth, often utilizing mirrors to offer the viewer more than one view of the bodies depicted, enhancing the
depth effect of the image and inviting the viewer in to look around as they please. They utilized various texture and surfaces, inviting the viewer to feel through the different veneers of the image. Above all, they implicated the sense of touch. A stereoview made by Bruno Braquehais in 1852 shows a seated nude woman surrounded by medieval armor and weaponry (fig. 20). While these objects may be a pretext to justify the nude image, they also display the same kind of textural variety that made non-erotic stereoviews so haptically engaging. The metallic inflexibility of armor contrasts with the plump softness of the woman’s breasts, arms, and stomach, enticing the viewer to imagine what her skin might feel like. In an 1854 stereograph by F. Jacques Moulin, a woman with her back to the camera grips a full-length mirror, angling it down toward her torso to engage the kind of depth effects in which stereography takes such pleasure (fig. 21). Though she only shows her body to the viewer from behind, the inclusion of the mirror allows a nearly 360-degree view of her physique, allowing a glimpse of her breasts and the suggestion of her genitals.

Along with increased visual access to bodies, however, came a simultaneous frustration of the sense of touch. As we have already seen, the early-nineteenth century marked a shift toward increasingly embodied forms of spectatorship, which primed viewers to approach images with a keen awareness of bodily sensation and tactility. Due to the material appearance but virtual reality of stereoscopic images, viewers experienced a constant flux between the promise of proximity and the denial of tactility. Miriam Ross terms this a “‘tease’ structure [between viewer and image] in which sexual gratification is constantly delayed.”

Bodies that appear fleshy and corporeal in stereoscopic three-dimension, seemingly able to be touched and interacted with, are at once viscerally realistic and blatantly illusionistic. Appearing in three dimensions only through illusion and entirely lacking the dimension of time, these still images
exist as form divorced from matter (to again quote Holmes), perpetually out of reach of a viewer who, though they might imbue them with all the qualities of a sexual scenario unfolding in real time, could no more enter the stereoscopic scene than they could a painting. Thus, along with a heightened use of the senses came a corresponding sensorial frustration, with eyes unable to glimpse more than was shown in the dual image of the stereograph, hands unable to touch what lay beyond the camera’s lens, and the other senses denied a role in participating. The viewer immersed in a stereoscopic world entered a space full of tactile cues yet was cut off from a fulfillment of this tactility.

Despite this perpetual delay of tactile gratification, engagement with stereographs was not without reward. Because the three-dimensional effects of the stereoscope come into play only through the viewer’s engagement (the focusing of the eyes, the shifting of the gaze, the searching throughout the image for additional depth cues), the viewer is rewarded through their visual work by the seeming movement of the image’s subject out toward them. Journalist Earnest Lacan describes this very promise in his description of a stereograph of a dancing woman in the 1850s, inviting his reader and the image’s viewer to

\[\text{Stretch out your hand and touch her silky dress... And what about the lace whose transparent folds provide a glimpse of her rounded arm, does it not seem as if you are about to crush it beneath your fingers? And can you not see the daylight passing between the pearls of her necklace and the delicate skin of her neck? And what about the shadow of her lashes over her clear blue eyes, and the faint smile hovering about her lips? And can you not see the blood moving beneath her downy cheeks, the force which brings her soft, translucent skin to life?}\]

The inability of the viewer to physically touch the subject of the stereograph does not render its effects null. If anything, it yields a constant participation, a “what-if” which enacts the same type of fantasy Jonathan Potter identified with regards to non-erotic images, a daydream structure in which the viewer keeps looking to continue the illusion of three-dimensionality, presence, and
touch, allowing their own fantasies to interact and overlap with the still image before them. In the quotation above, Lacan suggests to his reader that the illusion of the possibility of touch is the most exciting aspect of the stereograph. Echoing Holmes’s call to his reader to “feel round” the image, Lacan insists that the seeming ability of viewer to haptically engage with the stereograph, to “touch her silky dress” and “crush [lace] beneath [one’s] fingers,” is the most fulfilling part of the experience. As much as stereographs denied to their viewers in the way of tactility and the fulfillment of an embodied viewing experience, they kept viewers coming back again and again, ready to construct for themselves a tactile stereoscopic world which they were well aware they would never physically reach. Though the viewer’s physical tactile engagement with the stereoscope was limited to the hands holding the scope’s body or handle and the lenses meeting the brow and cheekbones, visual tactile engagement could be unlimited, with the eyes doing the work of feeling, reaching, stroking, and otherwise plunging into the depths of an image that felt readily present.

Viewers came to the stereoscope with certain conceptions of photography, pornography, and their own bodies in relation to the photographed image, and particularly the stereoscopic one. Erotic stereoviews existed in the context of semi-public and private viewership spaces, in which they were returned to again and again as part of a viewing routine that was temporally situated, but which lacked in temporal or tactile fulfillment from the photographic material itself. To view these images would have been a never-ending project of immersing oneself in a three-dimensional world which could not ever be fully entered, a virtual space which lacked the substance of physical form, even while it so convincingly mimicked reality. Nonetheless, reality was present in contemporary viewers’ experience of pornography, as viewers brought with them to the stereoscope all the associated fears and anxieties of a new technological and viewing
regime, the fraught nature of erotic depiction, and the complicated positioning of sexuality itself. Within this web of fears, however, lust, pleasure, and fantasy lurked as well. To truly regard the erotic stereograph is to confront it in all of its contradictions—as artwork and as pornographic material, as obscene and acceptable, as alluring and unsatisfying, as an object imbued with tactility, always embodied, but just out of reach.
Conclusion

When Holmes wrote his love letter to the stereograph in 1859, he imagined a future filled to the brim with stereoscopic imagery:

We have got the fruit of creation now, and need not trouble ourselves with the core. Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth.102

Holmes pictured enormous collections of stereographic skins housed in vast libraries where a man could enter and check out the form of any object he wished, be it natural or artificial. He believed that the stereograph heralded a “new epoch in the history of human progress,” one which would allow form to be divorced from matter, with the technologies of photography and the stereoscope ushering in a new relationship to materiality itself. Holmes was not alone in this view, as many of his contemporaries similarly believed that the stereoscope would bring about new developments in every field of life, from art to science to entertainment to everyday viewership. And yet, the popularity of the stereograph, so heralded in its early days, largely dried up by the early years of the twentieth century, with the second world war officially dealing its death blow.103

Scholars give various explanations for the downfall of the stereoscope as a popular viewing medium. Some cite its strong associations with obscenity, arguing that sales of stereoscopes dwindled around the turn of the century as the device became increasingly associated with pornography over other mediums such as landscape.104 Others attribute its demise to the rise of new viewing media which outpaced it in dominating the visual field, with film offering especially fierce competition.105 Jonathan Crary suggests that the stereoscope’s true undoing lay in its inability to fully conceal its process of production.106 In other words, over time, the obviousness of the “trick” of the stereoscope, its mechanical production of depth that
was at its core only illusionistic, became increasingly undesirable to viewers. Though nineteenth century viewership rooted itself in the notion of the fully embodied viewer, modernity eventually came to prefer a rhetoric of the denial of the body in spectatorship. This denial was one that the stereoscope could never accommodate due its reliance on a functional interaction between body and machine.¹⁰⁷ And so the stereoscope dwindled and then disappeared, with the pornographic images that had long been its purview largely forgotten as pornographic film replaced still images, shifting the consumption of porn from the private realm of the home into public cinemas as the twentieth century progressed.

That the stereoscope’s hold over the Victorian gaze came to an end, however, should not be taken as an indication of the instrument’s failure to captivate a rapturous viewing audience. The “consummate Victorian amusement,” the stereoscope acted for over half a century as not only a source of lighthearted entertainment for its viewers, but as the impetus for a new kind of relationship on the part of many viewers with technology, vision, and eroticism.¹⁰⁸ Pornographic stereoviews, rather than being an anecdote in the history of the stereoscope or a humorous exception to its tremendous impacts on the Victorian viewing imaginary can instead be seen to epitomize the triumphs of the stereoscope—its ability to prompt haptic engagement with imagery, its successful flux between the promise of materiality and the denial of tactility, and its disclosing of a depth of visual access which rivaled that offered by the naked eye.

Though the stereoscope’s heyday is long behind us now, the ability to empathize with its effects are not far out of our reach. In yet another age of rapid technological change, the fear and excitement of new technologies and new mediums is close at hand. We are well acquainted with the worry that new virtual distractions will arise to keep us from the material world around us, viscerally sympathetic with the positionality of a viewer incapable of physically interacting with
what appears to be right in front of their eyes, shielded by screen or lens. Twenty-first century engagement with pornography, too, comes closer to the Victorian experience of private and virtual engagement with erotica than did much of the pornography of the twentieth century. Today, camming, virtual reality (VR) pornography, and other forms of virtual erotica can be mapped closely onto the experience of the stereoscope, even if these viewing mediums are not descendants of the device in the technological sense.

Perhaps most pertinently, regarding the history of the stereoscope with an eye toward contradiction—the melding of desires and taboos, fears and fantasies, pleasure and the impossibility of its fulfillment—allows us to imagine the Victorians with the same kind of complexity with which we imagine ourselves, riddled with inconsistencies, contradictions, and disagreements as we are. Considering the stereoscope with the kind of awe and complexity with which the Victorians would have encountered it reminds us that history is not actually so distant, that the sensory and the sensual are in many ways timeless, and that it is not only possible but intensely valuable to view the past as multi-dimensional.
Notes

1 Michael Baxandall referred to this as the period eye, arguing that each viewer processes visual information differently as a result of a combination of innate skills and culturally determined experience. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

2 Jonathan Crary notes as much in *Techniques of the Observer*, arguing that no scholar is capable of writing about stereography with complete accuracy because 1) it is impossible to reproduce stereoscopic effects on the printed page, and 2) we will never know exactly what a stereoscopic image looked like to a contemporary observer. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 124.


4 The term “stereograph” was coined by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1859 and is synonymous with stereocard or stereoview. Throughout this project, I use the three terms interchangeably. Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” *The Atlantic*, June 1859, 5; Note, “Obscene Scene/Seen.”


11 In “Motion and e-motion: lust and the frenzy of the Visible,” Linda Williams defines obscene (or ob/scene, as she prefers it) as “literally meaning that which should be kept off/scene” or off-stage. Here, following Williams, I use the term not as a value judgment, but as an indication of the types of materials that legal and moral authorities would prefer to be kept out of the public eye. Linda Williams, “Motion and e-Motion: Lust and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible,’” *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, 1 (2019): 98.

Lisa Sigel in particular has conducted extensive research on Victorian pornographic postcards and the expansion of pornography in Britain in the late nineteenth century. Sigel, "Filth in the Wrong People's Hands": 859-85.


One project this thesis is not taking on is any attempt at making claims about the objectification or lack thereof of the figures who appear in the photographs I bring up. Much of the existing scholarship on stereoscopic pornography attempts to answer questions of objectification in one way or another, not to mention the immense amount of writing in porn studies more generally that tackles this issue. What is more interesting to me than imposing on objects from the past a modern view of what might be objectifying is asking how these images actually functioned in the contemporary world in which they circulated. I do not say this to minimize the possible misogyny or objectification these (largely) female models may have experienced, nor to downplay the importance of feminist historical accounts that uncover injustice long past, but rather to acknowledge that that when it comes to debates about pornography, the question of objectification versus empowerment is often the only one on the table. Constructing an argument that casts as objects women whose likenesses reside on literal objects to be bought and sold for the pleasure of an audience largely thought of as male is easy, especially when so little is known about the models themselves. What is more difficult is taking these visual artifacts seriously as images that resided in complex positions in the lives of those who produced, appeared in, and viewed them. Additionally, there is some question about whether the primary audience of Victorian pornography can be thought of as majority male in the first place. This has been the subject of debate between various feminist scholars of film and pornography. Linda Williams and Rachel Teukolsky have both theorized a female viewer of erotic photographs, arguing that the very panics which attempted to control the gaze of female viewers imply that this viewership was a real subject of concern for Victorian society. Linda Williams, “Motion and e-Motion: Lust and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible,’” Journal of Visual Culture 18, 1 (2019); Rachel Teukolsky, “Victorian Erotic Photographs and the Intimate Public Sphere,” Nineteenth-Century Contexts (2020).


Wheatstone, "Contributions to the Physiology of Vision": 375.

Wheatstone, "Contributions to the Physiology of Vision": 376.
22 Zone, Stereoscopic Cinema, 7.


24 Brewster, The Stereoscope, 3-4.

25 Zone, Stereoscopic Cinema, 14.

26 Zone, Stereoscopic Cinema, 11.

27 Hankins and Silverman, Instruments and the Imagination, 153.


29 Zone, Stereoscopic Cinema, 11.

30 Quoted in Hankins and Silverman, Instruments and the Imagination, 148-149.

31 Jonathan Potter, Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Seeing, Thinking, Writing (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 146.

32 Hankins and Silverman, Instruments and the Imagination, 149.

33 These locations were, of course, by no means treated equally in their depiction. While British and American landscapes displayed Sublime natural beauty, stereographs from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia were much more concerned with the colonial mission to “domesticate all Earth,” allowing European and American audiences access to a whole stereoscopic world of exotic imagery and nonwhite subjects. Hankins and Silverman, Instruments and the Imagination, 175.


35 In 1861, Holmes even invented his own handheld version of the stereoscope, which was popularly known as the “American stereoscope.” Hankins and Silverman, Instruments and the Imagination, 155.


38 “Obscenity” is sometimes alternately translated as “pornography.” As it is unclear whether Baudelaire was actually referring to literal pornography in his critique, I avoid the term here so as to not rouse confusion over the subject matter at hand in this project.

Important to note here is that the stereoscope itself did not usher in this embodied or tactile mode of viewing, though its invention was in every way enabled by the optical debates raging at the beginning of the century. Rather, the stereoscope was successful primarily because it emerged at a time at which viewers were already predisposed to a multisensory mode of viewing. Though the stereoscope may have exacerbated this mode of viewing and offered contemporaries more language to express their touch-oriented experience of looking, the stereoscope and the particular haptic experience it produced in viewers was itself a product of much longer trends in the history of vision. In “‘Feeling Seeing’: Touch, Vision and the Stereoscope,” John Plunkett elaborates on the idea of the stereoscope as a viewing technology not of rupture, but of continuity with themes in optical debates already in play by the early nineteenth century. He criticizes Crary for ignoring these conflicting debates in favor of collapsing them into one view to be overthrown by the onset of haptic viewing. Setting up two conflicting interpretations of binocular vision and spatial perception, Plunkett argues that the pleasure and success of the stereoscope resulted not from a break with the viewing regime of the past, but by the confluence of debates in the field of optics. John Plunkett, “‘Feeling Seeing’: Touch, Vision and the Stereoscope,” History of Photography, 37, no. 4 (2013): 390-395.
Ellman 49


56 Furneaux, "Victorian Sexualities": 769.

57 The following material detailing Victorian medical and psychological views on masturbation draws extensively from a tutorial paper I wrote in fall of 2021 on child-rearing and childhood sexuality in Victorian society in Professor Kohut’s class, Victorian Psychology: From the Phrenologists to Freud.


59 Nicholas Francis Cooke, *Satan in Society* (Cincinnati: Edward F. Hovey, 1881), 91.


67 The following content on the Unconscious is indebted heavily to conversations with Lucy Walker and Thomas Kohut in Professor Kohut’s Fall 2021 tutorial, Victorian Psychology.


71 Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious Vol. II*, 41.

72 Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious Vol. II*, 43.

73 Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands”: 865.

74 Enough can be said about these “lesbian” images that they can and should be the subject of the text of their own. While an in-depth analysis of this genre is unfortunately beyond the scope of
my project, I encourage future scholars to take up this work and to challenge the notion that these images existed solely to fulfill a male fantasy of sapphic female play.

75 Scenes of male homosexuality appear to be completely absent from the genre of stereoscopic pornography, likely because of the immense stigma attached to male homosexuality during this period.

76 Another factor that needs to be considered here is the differential sentencing of male and female models for "outrage against public morals." Male models would typically be punished more harshly than female models, which may also contribute to the preponderance of women in Victorian pornographic images. David Ogawa, "Arresting Nudes in Second Empire Paris," *History of Photography* 31, no. 4 (January 9, 2008): 332, 340.

77 Serge Nazarieff and Jacques Cellard, *Der Akte in Der Photographie/The Stereoscopic Nude/Le Nu Stéréoscopique, 1850-1930* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1993).

78 Here, as in the early history of pornography, "hardcore" is used to indicate the depiction of explicit sex acts.


82 Sigel, "Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands": 859.


86 Rowbotham and Stevenson, "Legislating Morality": 153.


88 Williams, “Motion and e-Motion”: 97.

89 Williams, “Motion and e-Motion”: 97.

91 Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands”: 860.

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94 Rowbotham and Stevenson, "Legislating Morality”: 144.

95 Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands”: 875.

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103 Nazarieff and Cellard, The Stereoscopic Nude, 16.

104 Crary, Techniques of the Observer, 127.

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106 Crary, Techniques of the Observer, 132-133.

107 Crary, Techniques of the Observer, 132-133.

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Fig. 1. Unknown photographer, *The Fresh View Agent Soliciting*, c. 1860s. Stereoscopic daguerreotype. From *Stereoscopes in Use*.

Fig. 2. Wheatstone Stereoscope Frontal View. From Sir Charles Wheatstone, "Contributions to the Physiology of Vision—Part the First. On Some Remarkable, and Hitherto Unobserved, Phenomena of Binocular Vision," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 128, 2 (1838): 371.

Fig. 4. David Brewster's Lenticular Stereoscope, 1851. From David Brewster, *The Stereoscope; Its History, Theory, and Construction* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1856), 67.
Fig. 5. “American Fall From Canada,” c. 1875. Albumen on stereograph mount. (Library Company of Philadelphia.)

Fig. 6. “Stupendous interior of the Colosseum – Dens beneath the arena and sweep of arcades – Rome, Italy.” Photographic print on stereocard. New York: Underwood & Underwood, c. 1904. (Library of Congress.)
Fig. 7. "The Great pyramid of Gizeh, a tomb of 5,000 years ago, from S.E. Egypt." Stereograph. New York: Underwood & Underwood, 1908. (Rice University.)

Fig. 8. Anonymous, “So Like Matrimony,” *Vanity Fair*, 7 July 1860, 18.

Fig. 10. Jacob Spoel, *Group of Women Looking at Stereoscope Photographs*, c. 1868. Oil on panel. 41.5 x 48.8 cm. (Rijksmuseum.)
Fig. 11. F. Jacques Moulin, Untitled stereograph, c. 1860. Printed in Serge Nazarieff and Jacques Cellard, Der Akte in Der Photographie/The Stereoscopic Nude/Le Nú Stéréoscopique, 1850-1930 (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1993), 106.

Fig. 12. “Representing the debilitated [sic.] state of the body from the effects of Onanism or Self-pollution.” From R. J. Brodie, The Secret Companion: A Medical Work on Onanism or Self-Pollution (London: R.J. Brodie & Co., 1845), 20.
Fig. 13. “Representing the last stage of mental & bodily exhaustion from Onanism or Self-pollution.” From R. J. Brodie, The Secret Companion: A Medical Work on Onanism or Self-Pollution (London: R.J. Brodie & Co., 1845), 22.

Fig. 14. Unknown photographer, Woman Revealing Her Legs, undated (19th century). Stereograph. (University of California, San Diego.)

Fig. 16. Unknown photographer, *Untitled*, undated (19th century). Stereoscopic daguerreotype. (University of California, San Diego.)
Fig. 17. Louis-Camille d’Olivier, Untitled stereograph, c. 1855-1856. Printed in Serge Nazarieff and Jacques Cellard, *Der Akte in Der Photographie/The Stereoscopic Nude/Le Nú Stéréoscopique, 1850-1930* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1993), 101.

Fig. 19. Unknown photographer, Couple with Chair and Mirror, undated (nineteenth century). Stereograph. (Bibliothèque National de France.)
