

PhD proposal in Creative Writing

From Transgression to Banality:
The Evolution of Contemporary Literary Representations of Eroticism.

This is a critical and creative inquiry into the impact of the ubiquity of mediated, marketised representations of sex on literary representations of the erotic. The critical portion of this project explores how and why contemporary literary fiction has abandoned attempts to engage the reader erotically. The creative portion confronts what may be a primary cause of this abandonment: the difficulties of distinguishing between mediated and embodied experiences of human sexuality and erotic desire.

Proposed Creative Project

Introduction

I have been a writer of erotic fiction for the last eight years. That is to say, I write fictional stories about humans and I focus, sometimes explicitly and sometimes not, on the way their erotic desires expose not only their physical drives, but also acts as a lens through which to explore how their identities are constructed, how they perceive other and how desire shapes perceptions of reality.

Although erotic fiction differs in significant ways from textual pornography, the terms are often used interchangeably. The basis for their distinction lies at the heart of the art vs pornography debate (McNair, 1996). For the purposes of this proposal, I offer this distinction: erotic fiction contains sexually explicit situations and strongly erotic imagery, but also includes multi-dimensional characters, believable conflict and strong plot elements that contextualize the eroticism in a larger world than pornography offers (Ullén, 2009).

One aspect of my development as a writer has been a growing awareness of common perceptions as to how readers react to erotic passages in fiction. Erotic arousal is almost always presented as an all-consuming state that renders people, especially men, absolutely incapable of critical or rational thought. There is an interesting convergence of views here from the radical feminism of Andrea Dworkin on the one side and the extremes of moral conservatism on the other (West, 1987). Both present erotic arousal as dangerous, blinding, and intellectually debilitating. Yet the majority of humans negotiate even extreme levels of arousal without resorting to behavior that is illegal or culturally unacceptable. In reality, there is a scale of arousal and most people negotiate it on a daily basis without losing their ability to reason.

Fiction with strong erotic elements, I believe, can provide the reader with opportunities to consider social realities, paradoxes, moral/ethical ambiguities, and self-reflective practices all in the presence of erotic arousal. To do so offers an interesting and challenging possibility for the interplay between critical thought and physical arousal in the reader, grounding ideas in the body.

As I've developed as a writer, I have also become more and more intrigued by the phenomenology of reading and reader-response theory (Iser, 1980). If one aspect of a fruitful literary experience is to elicit a resonance between the text and the reader's own lived experience, then this must also hold true for erotic writing. And yet readers today

are so immersed in a culture of marketised, commodified and remediated sexual imagery, that erotic writing may well elicit memories of mediated experience rather than embodied ones. Is it possible to attempt to interfere with this paradigm and trigger lived-experience resonances with the reader?

The distinction between triggering mediated and lived-experience resonances in the reader may lie in the realm of poetics. This is where the relationship between the critical and creative components of my research lies: in considering the poetics of my own writing in light of the critical research I conduct.

Form, Subject and Genre

I propose to write a collection of 10 short stories that explore the conflicts that arise at the intersection between embodied and mediated experiences of sex. In the story plot, narrative structure and through language, I will explore questions of subjectivity, identity and authenticity and the how the barrage of media images of sexuality present in our everyday world inform, accord, interfere, conflict or complicate the interior world of the characters.

The genre of the creative work is erotic fiction.

Proposed Critical Analysis

Introduction

In the 20th Century, writers such as D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Anais Nin, Gene Genet, Marguerite Duras, Vladimir Nabokov, Angela Carter and others, who have now become part of the literary canon, sought to complete reflections of the human condition by including the explicit erotic experiences of their characters in their works. These were, according to Barthes, transgressive acts in the context of a culture that seldom dealt openly or honestly with human sexuality (Barthes, 1975). Now, at the dawn of the 21th Century, when overt sexuality has become a ubiquitous part of mainstream cultural discourse, many literary writers purposefully avoid writing anything that might be perceived as arousing (Akbar, 2012). Certainly, they may write sex scenes in excruciating detail, but they are often deliberate in their detachment, remarkable for their emotional disengagement and decontextualized. Often the scenes are banal, mechanistic, eschewing emotional engagement, emphasizing the meaninglessness of sex, its pointlessness, or its hidden dangers (Abecassis, 2000). For all our frankness, we are still not dealing honestly or openly with human sexuality in literature. We have exchanged silence for parody, repression for commodification. The postmodern approach of detached and disinterested obscenity or the valorization of pornography as contemporary sexual reality is just as much an avoidance of the reality of the human sexual experience as the 19th Century 'medicalization of sexuality' described so eloquently by Foucault (Foucault, 1978).

My goal is to chart the evolution of literary representations of the erotic from Henry Miller to Michel Houellebecq to see if this assertion holds true. And, if it is indeed true, to explore the reasons why this might have occurred. Both Foucault and Baudrillard predicted that the more we spoke about sex, the less real it would be, and the less meaning it would have for us (Foucault, 1980, Baudrillard, 1991). Has the sexual revolution brought about a new literary Puritanism?

I propose that one of the main problems is the limitation of language to distinguish between the lived experience and the mediated, between the authentic and the commodified. Some cultural theorists maintain that pornography has always sought to reach the vanishing point between the real and the mediated and that, with the advent of cheap technology and amateur porn, it has now achieved indistinction (Attwood, 2009). Reality no longer informs the mediated spectacle of sex. Now, the mediated spectacle informs the real.

Has the ubiquity of explicit sexual imagery in the mainstream made it impossible to write compellingly and authentically about the erotic experience? Although there have been a number of extensive studies done of the social impact of these changes (Attwood, 2009, Gill, 2007, McNair, 1996), I have yet to find any study on how it has impacted fictive sex in literature.

Methodology

My goal is to document the changes in the way eroticism has been written in literary fiction from the mid 1950's and the heady days of Henry Miller to the present. This covers a considerable period of time and thousands of novels, and so the study would be limited to award-winning pieces of literary fiction with explicit descriptions of sex over the period.

It is my intention to perform an interpretive research of the texts, using literary textual analysis, paying close attention to whether the sex is portrayed as an erotic experience or not. Strategies for ascertaining the levels of intentional eroticism may include:

- Identifying the narrative voice and perspective. Is used to either invite the reader into an immersive experience or keep them distanced from the fictive sex (McKee, 2003).
- A comparative analysis of the poetics of explicit passages in the text (Sheppard, 2007).
- Assessing whether the scene simply describes a series of actions and events or includes descriptions of what the characters are feeling.
- Taking note of the language and especially the imagery used in the texts (Birch, 1989).

These anticipated changes would be charted against a timeline of increasingly explicit representations of sex in mainstream media, referencing recent cultural studies on this subject.

This thesis would seek to expose a co-relation between the rise of explicit representation of sex in mainstream culture and the disappearance of erotic representations of sex and desire in literary fiction. It would also seek to propose some possible explanations as to why this has occurred.

As to a theoretical perspective, feminist and queer theory approaches have played major roles in critical studies of erotic writing and must inform any serious investigation of the topic. There is some evidence to suggest that female-authored and queer novels have not suffered from the same rejection of eroticism (Woodhouse, 2000).

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