

NICHOLAS GAMSO

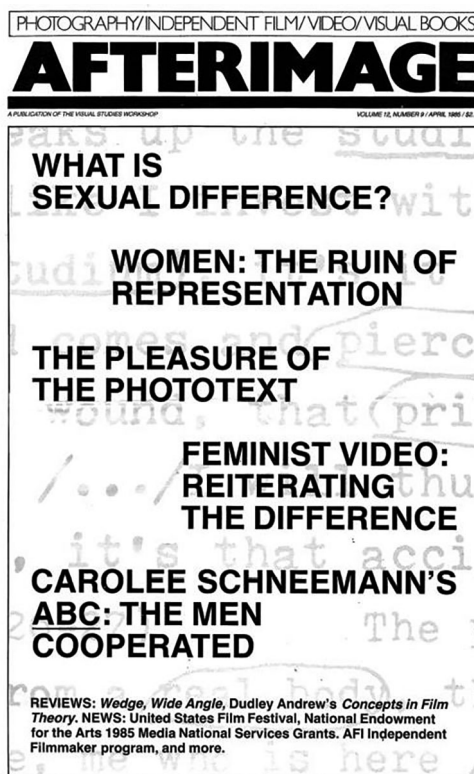
**Pleasure, and the Politics of Writing about It**

Jane Gallop

“The Pleasure of the Phototext”

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Why is pleasure assumed to conflict with radical politics? Why does Roland Barthes’s grumbling remark—that the left obsesses over “knowledge, method, commitment, combat” while the right gets to enjoy “mere delectation”—remain so annoyingly

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resonant?<sup>1</sup> Only a few months ago the literary magazine *The Point* devoted a whole issue to this familiar conceit, proclaiming a new “aesthetic turn” characterized by an emergent “hunger for style, humor, and frivolity”—supposedly a reaction to the “feverish activist critique” of the Trump years.<sup>2</sup> An essay by one of the magazine’s editors, Anastasia Berg, a philosopher, criticizes politically engaged artwork that “ministers to its audience.”<sup>3</sup> Berg echoes novelist Garth Greenwell, who complains that literature is “as moralistic as it has ever been in my lifetime,” and art critic Jason Farago, who recently panned an exhibit for rehashing “the affirmative comforts of social-justice-themed pop culture” (the topic was Picasso’s womanizing and racial fixations).<sup>4</sup> This brand of reactionary humanism appears perennially in the art and publishing worlds, and in academia, too, usually betraying nostalgic and conservative attitudes. Berg’s essay mentions the pat dualities of New Criticism (“beautiful and ugly, good and bad, success and failure”), though she never fully endorses them. Her own view is that pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment compromise individuals’ moral intentions. “Images can feed our narcissism,” she says, “divert our thoughts, seduce us, delude us morally, constrict our imaginations.”<sup>5</sup>

My position is different. I see pleasure not as a personal reverie, but as something that occurs at least half outside of oneself, in feelings of desire and attraction. Communing with an artwork is like yielding to a stranger on the dance floor. You succumb to a sense of intrigue and mutuality—perhaps belonging. Then again, perceptions of what is funny, entertaining, or sexy are always weighted with bias, and prejudice has a way of festering in informal and creative spaces. How best to express this contradiction? Is there an idiom suitable to describing the “sensory community” that artist-activists sometimes invoke? And what about the unhappy relations that also arise in the process of creating, or encountering, art? Making sense of this doubled reality is especially difficult because criticism is most often a performance of a singular intellect—incisive, declarative, issuing judgments, performing analysis. But is this the only way?

The literary critic Jane Gallop, writing in *Afterimage* in 1985, argues that critics *must* account for pleasure, for it represents “what is most narcissistic or most imperialistic in our relations to the world” while at the same time revealing “something that is really out there, independent of our fantasies” (18). The dilemma, she says, is whether to name that exterior, assigning critical language to experiences that are basically ineffable. She makes this point in response to Barthes’s observation, in *Camera Lucida*, that a photograph’s emotional impact confirms the “absolute excellence of a being, body and soul mingled” (qtd. in Gallop, “The Pleasure of the Phototext,” 18). Maybe Barthes is suggesting that

1. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1973/75), 22–23.

2. Anastasia Berg, “On the Aesthetic Turn,” *The Point* 30 (2023), <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/on-the-aesthetic-turn>.

3. Berg, “On the Aesthetic Turn.”

4. Garth Greenwell, “A Moral Education: In praise of filth,” *Yale Review* III, no. 1, <https://yalereview.org/article/garth-greenwell-philip-roth> and Jason Farago, “With Hannah Gadsby’s ‘It’s Pablo-matic,’ the Joke’s on the Brooklyn Museum,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2023, [www.nytimes.com/2023/06/01/arts/design/hannah-gadsby-brooklyn-museum-picasso.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/01/arts/design/hannah-gadsby-brooklyn-museum-picasso.html).

5. Berg, “On the Aesthetic Turn.”

aesthetic experience is never just a lark and can be spiritually ennobling. But Gallop sees his statement as delusory, indeed embarrassing. To worship sublimity in Barthes's manner is almost to presume "what God is, what the real is, what the noumenal world is" (18). Gallop prefers a more oblique and improvisatory approach: eliciting pleasurable sensations out of the process and duration of writing—long contented hours spent paging through old books, bursts of creative energy, notes and correspondence. She makes another crucial amendment to Barthes's work by characterizing these minor pleasures not as asocial but as intensely interactive.

The avowed champions of "post-critique" who edit *The Point* would likely regard Gallop's essay as a relic of the deconstructive 1980s. Its exaltation of discourse seems to imply that even the most immediate sensory experiences, like having sex or swimming in the ocean, can be approached only as referents, or as concept-metaphors. This was my own first impression. The text is dense with wordplay and convoluted arguments. Even its design on the page is "anti-aesthetic"—blocks of minuscule type interspersed with blown-up annotations (Gallop has circled Barthes's double entendres, the "prick" of his punctum, and so on). But I've now had time to learn about Gallop and to sample from her huge oeuvre of writings on feminism, queerness, literature, and "the body." Also to study some of Barthes's late works, among them *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973/75), and to discuss matters of pleasure and plurality with anyone who would listen (a short list that includes my boyfriend and my mother). All of this has led me to accept the idea that criticism's access to emotional life resides in the sense of suspension and entanglement that accompanies intellectual practice. Thinking and writing in the presence of other people can, as Gallop suggests, become a political activity—something for the greater good, divorced from status and profession.

What first drew Gallop to Barthes's work was precisely his ambivalence about the individual as a project of Western thought. In the *Pleasure of the Text* he dispenses with rigor and originality, preferring an "unmotivated" list-like series of anecdotes and asides. The elliptical format is a perfect expression of Barthes's happy temperament, his "unconcern with the *integrity* of the text," his habit of "skimming or skipping certain passages (anticipated as 'boring')." <sup>6</sup> When Barthes turns to photography in *Camera Lucida*, his style is again supple and affective—though what he emotes, in the latter book, is not pleasure but debilitating grief. His mother has recently died, and his sense of loss sweeps over the whole project so that photographs of the late Henriette Barthes are folded into the same generic archive as works by Walker Evans, Robert Mapplethorpe, and James Van Der Zee. The choice to focus on his deceased mother is not exactly deliberate, even if it does affirm Barthes's dictum that the photograph is a technology of "asymbolic Death." <sup>7</sup> What the sad occasion instead shows is that chance occurrence disrupts interpretation, "undercut[ing] any writer's ability to control and dominate his writing." It is proof, Gallop says, that we "live in a nonsensical body which limits the powers of our will and consciousness." <sup>8</sup>

6. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 11–12.

7. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981), 92.

8. Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 19.

Does this mean an affective approach to criticism is one that forfeits a writer's agency, or that refuses action altogether? Certainly, Barthes's work on pleasure marks a break with the more programmatic strain of visual analysis for which he is better known. His earlier, widely read *Mythologies* (1957/1972) and "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1964) sought to generate visual literacy in the context of mass social phenomena, applying semiology to popular everyday objects like advertisements and magazines, so that, in *Mythologies*, Greta Garbo's face becomes the "Platonic Idea of a Human Creature" and the black soldier saluting the French flag on the cover of *Paris Match* makes an assertion that "France is a great empire."<sup>9</sup> Critique of this kind is still popular in visual studies curriculum, but I am not crazy about it. Structuralism tends to mirror its own bad object, as if the purpose were to validate the lies of commercial marketing and propaganda by turning them into a science. More frustrating is the work's tacit approval of a liberal public sphere teeming with bright young subjects eager to turn over stones. The slightly unfocused, by-the-way style of Barthes's later works, by contrast, evades questions of definite meaning and valuation. "If I agree to judge a text according to pleasure," Barthes says, "I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad . . . I cannot apportion, imagine that the text is perfectible, ready to enter into a play of normative predicates: it is too much *this*, and not enough *that* . . ." <sup>10</sup> Put more succinctly: objectivity is overvalued in criticism, and blanket qualitative assessments—"good writing," "bad art"—are seldom more than narcissistic inventions.

Clearly, I am drawn to Barthes's ideas, which come much closer to the experience of thinking and to grappling with aesthetic impressions than anything as confident as a well-constructed argument. And sure, his work could be called political in its rejection of the bullying, autocratic critic (or editor). Yet I am also aware that Barthes's position as a dead white Frenchman has everything to do with his work's lasting appeal, and that even when he was alive his writing disclosed aristocratic (in his words, "mandarinite") motives. According to his memoir, what really gave him pleasure was a withdrawal from the world into privileged domestication—evidently an artifact of his late-in-life fascination with Zen Buddhism. His quest for a "blind spot" within the logorrhea of Western culture draws explicitly on the concepts of *mushotoku*, a sort of fugue, and *satori*, a clearing or awakening. And Gallop? One of the most striking items on her cv is *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (1997), a book-length riposte to complaints about her conduct as a professor. "I sexualize the atmosphere in which I work," she bluntly remarks.<sup>11</sup>

My goal is not to defame Barthes or Gallop, only to say that however transgressive a theory of pleasure may seem, there are often toxic elements about. Some writers will celebrate this irony as proof that moral failure is intrinsic to the human condition.

9. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, [1957] 1972), 57, 112. See also Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, [1964] 1977), 32–51.

10. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 13.

11. Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 11.

They're not wrong. But a considerably more interesting reaction is one that seeks to, in a sense, transform that condition—dismantling myths of intellectual self-sufficiency and related ideas of taste, competition, and professional identity. We might think of critical work as the pursuit of an unalienated kind of pleasure, and thus a reminder of why we commit to politics in the first place. ■

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