

SF/Porn: The Case for The Gas

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SF/Porn: The Case for *The Gas*

1. Check. Once, in my younger days, I attended a major academic sf conference where I got to rub shoulders with some of the most powerful and admired critics in the field. In the course of an otherwise convivial conversation, I revealed my affection for Charles Platt's *The Gas* (1970). A moment of shocked silence followed, then the Olympians declaimed together, "That's not science fiction, that's porn!" This seemed a petty response from such an august group; it also made no sense to me. How could *The Gas* not be sf? What secret quality of its depiction of sexual pleasure and "slapstick sadomasochism" run amok neutralized its science-fictionality?

Here is the plot; you decide. In the near future, a leak at a top secret weapons lab in the west of England releases a massive chemical cloud, a yellow gas that excites uncontrollable sexual impulses in everyone who breathes it. Our hero, Vincent, who has worked at the plant and appears to be the sole character who understands the gas, sets off for London to gather up his wife and two young teenage children before it can reach the city, to escape with them to Scotland, which is presumably protected by the prevailing winds. On his way in a scavenged Rolls, he gallantly picks up a young female hitchhiker, Cathy. The gas catches up with them, and they have mindless sex that drives them off the road. Vincent walks to a nearby village to call his wife, and discovers that the entire community has been swept up in an orgy on the village green. To get medicines for Cathy, whose head was banged up in the car crash, Vincent must resort to violence. He and Cathy then commandeer the car of a passing priest escaping from what are for him scenes of biblical depravity. They drive off together to find an airplane (Vincent was once an RAF pilot). In the backseat Cathy seductively rapes the priest, who is of course unable to resist, and is "converted" from celibacy by the gas. The trio find a plane in a local airport reduced to chaos, and take off for London. They are, however, forced by their own sexual complications and the lack of ground-control guidance to ditch the plane into the sea; but first they parachute into London. (There is fucking in mid-air, as well.) They reach Vincent's home safely, load up, and drive north. On the way, they encounter numerous afflicted people, including orgiastic nuns and armed, frustrated, high-testosterone London policemen about to start a war with the Cambridgeshire constabulary. We learn that, when frustrated, the gas-induced sexual urge turns into sadistic violence. They lay low for a night in Cambridge with Cathy's psycho psychology-student brother Edmond and a series of escalating comic-horror sexual ordeals unfolds. After a grotesque orgy participated in by all—in which Edmond's landlady is literally blown up by his homemade orgasm machine—Edmond abducts Julia, Vincent's wife, on a bicycle to the psychology building, brutal experiments are performed by the hyper-repressed male

engineering and medical students, Vincent's children join a gang of other children in a playground turned sexual gymnasium, and Cathy, gone mad, becomes the leader of a mob of Bacchantes that capture and ritually murder random men on the altar-stage of Kings College Chapel. Vincent is captured by these Furies, but before he can be sacrificed, the priest intervenes with a spectacle of exorcistic self-castration. While the mob of raging women is distracted, Vincent escapes by swinging *à la* Tarzan on a bell-rope. The Chapel is destroyed. Vincent and his family reach Scotland, where they happily enjoy what may well be their new reality of incestuous polymorphous perversity. The end.

If this summary raises sexual images in the reader's mind, that would certainly be natural. But in what way is this not a classical British sf plot? A horrific scientific invention that undermines social stability. Check. The hero strives desperately to collect his family and hasten them to safety in a pristine part of the country. Check. They encounter one instance after another of social derangement produced by the gas. Check. If you prefer: novum→social effects→estrangement of socio-psycho-sexual behaviors in bourgeois society. Check, check, check.

2. Disavowal. The specific disavowal of *The Gas* has been part of a general disavowal of a connection between pornography and sf, at least among those scholars and critics whose job it has been to defend the genre's honor. Denigrated by mainstream criticism as vulgar pulp fiction for much of its existence, sf's advocates probably felt the genre needed to be protected from associations with fiction ranked even lower in the hierarchy of genres. Almost by definition pornography has been a stigmatized outsider to bourgeois aesthetic discourse. In the past long century, it has been demonized for undermining Christian discipline, the chivalric codes of Western civilization, the Anglo-Saxon work ethic, and the health of Western manhood, for opening the backdoor to Communism, for celebrating and perpetuating the exploitation of women, and for stimulating narcissism and anomie among an increasingly *otaku* youth. All the while, porn has grown steadily more popular, accessible, and lucrative. Discourse about pornography today has been complicated by this lag between the tradition of discursive stigmatizing and porn's normalization in postmodern culture—a normalization almost unnoticed in academic theory and curricula, but with dramatic implications for global cultural transformation.

The Clute-Nicholls *Encyclopedia* does not have a pornography entry, and even Platt's own current website does not include *The Gas* among the "Selected Novels," despite it being his best-known work of fiction. This is the case despite the fact that some major sf writers, among them Robert Silverberg, Barry Malzberg, Harlan Ellison, and above all Philip José Farmer, supported themselves at points in their careers by writing porn. These facts are usually acknowledged only in passing when acknowledged at all; there has been little work on how their experiences may have influenced their influential iconoclastic sf. In the early 1970s, during the heroic heyday of the underground publishers, Farmer's wild sex-and-violence phantasmagorias, *Image of the Beast* (1968), *Blown* (1969), and *A Feast Unknown* (1970), were reviewed by the sf rags straightforwardly, and their sexual extravagance was accepted without much fuss. (Let me note that the

Encyclopedia entry on Farmer, co-written by David Pringle and John Clute, reports without prejudice on *A Feast Unknown*'s sexual craziness [418].) Even then, however, some disavowal was required. Theodore Sturgeon's introduction to *A Feast Unknown* rationalizes it as satire: "ultimate sex combined with ultimate violence is ultimate absurdity," while Farmer himself explicitly denies that *The Gas* is pornography in his introduction to the Savoy edition of the book.²

The historical distancing of sf from porn seems somewhat odd in one respect, given sf's historical affinity for mingling with other marginalized genres, from noir fiction to rock and roll. In the sleazeosphere there are countless examples of porn using sf settings. They are primarily parodies—*Lust in Space* (1985; 1998), *Star Trek: The Next Penetration* (a.k.a *Sex Trek*) (1990), *Anal Planet* (1994)—but even in parodies pornographic and science-fictional elements commingle in many different ways.³ *Star Trek* has probably been the most frequently pornographized sf work (and K/S or *Star Trek* "slash" fan fiction is the only kind so far granted an academic imprimatur, via the work of Constance Penley). These parodies have cleaved extraordinarily closely to some of the series's original story-plots, preserving characters, uniforms, and technologies. They demonstrate the powerful attraction of the series as a fetish-collection. They also demonstrate that even porn adaptations often respect the aura of science-fictional authenticity, as if expecting that their audiences will appreciate trek-verité as an intensifying value added to the choreography of sex acts. It is hard to know how many such sci-fi porn parodies have been made and written. The only accessible attempts at bibliographies are unreliable, and most of the texts are hard to locate.⁴ Still, we can assume that there is a wealth of such marginal material that the *Encyclopedia* does not recognize, and yet which displays respect for science-fictionality in diverse ways.

3. The Chastity of Astronauts. Until recently, most sf has been relatively chaste in representing sexual acts, let alone making them the focus of the narrative. Before the 1960s, with few exceptions sf was treated by most of its insiders as the very opposite of porn. For the Gernsback-Campbell axis, juvenile male adventure with a wide-eyed, true-blooded drive for exploration and self-control precluded sex as anything but a distraction. Not only the story, but also the narrative was to be kept pure. Delany speculates that this provided the largely male adolescent audience a certain relief:

The pulp hero, though he may be a renegade, is a guy who doesn't feel. Anything. Ever. And for the adolescent male — pummeled by emotions left and right, whether arising from sexuality or resulting from his necessary encounters with authority — this hero is a blessing, a relief and a release. The world he lives in, where feelings are totally under control, looks to the adolescent boy like heaven! This hero's lack of feeling — like *Star Trek*'s Spock — is what allows him to be a genius, or allows him to shoot the bad guys and/or aliens, without a quiver to his lip. (qtd. Westerfeld)

The Gothic tradition was more complex, but Victorian codes ruled here also. If the other was to be understood in rational terms, and indeed to preserve the dignity of the rational imagination, the narrative could not let the reader stray into

more visceral pleasures. In the British philosophical tradition of sf, this intellectual purity was even more pronounced. I do not mean to imply that sf writers were especially timid in their understanding of sexuality, only that even in their more extravagant détournements of mainstream ideas they addressed petit-bourgeois audiences rather than the underground. Science fiction was rarely an art of subterranean rebels.

This particular form of self-repressive sf sublimation nonetheless clearly evokes sexual fantasizing in diverse ways. As Rob Latham notes in his study of sexuality in the New Wave, “sf, willy-nilly, is always treating sexual topics, perhaps most powerfully when it seems to be primly avoiding them” (53). It works in two ways: a) sublimation—with its complex association of the sublime with Freud’s psychosexual displacement-through-refinement (and we will not forget the chemical phase transition from solid to gas); and b) seductive insinuation. We will have more to say about sublimation. As for insinuation, it is hard to imagine any sf scenario that cannot tickle the sexual imagination. Contacts with aliens, interpersonal connections in the confined spaces of spaceships and space colonies, relationships under total surveillance, orgasmatrons, Gorian master-slave worlds, Amazon planets, technoscientific shape-shifting, scientific ecstasy, the sado-masochistic dynamics of mad science: all call up the erotic Unsaid—the power source that leads fans to write their own pornographic genre-stories from K/S to manga, the myriad *Flash Gordon* to *Star Trek* porn parodies, or simply to imagine what might have happened had the Time Traveler had less pure intentions regarding Weena, had Genly Ai been more curious about Lord Estraven, or had Bowman and Poole experimented more with their copious free time. Other traditions, such as the *bandes dessinées* of French sf, have expected sf to be more explicitly erotic, but it is only in Japanese sf *hentai* that pornographic sf has become an established subgenre.

4. Porn has a purpose? How can we speak critically about porn as a kind of fiction, let alone science fiction? We face three major discursive obstacles: a) a simplistic and repressive conceptual framework that limits what pornographic messages are imagined to be; b) the dominance of photographic visuality and visual media in contemporary critical theorizing about pornography, which largely excludes prose porn from its discourse; and c) the ostensible “graphic simplicity” of pornography, the centrality of explicitly described sexual acts, which supposedly resists reflective language. In view of all this, porn seems to be resistance to reflection embodied in style, focusing on the physical body, inspiring intense feelings, and making fun of sublimation. Porn is distinguished from the “Erotic,” a style that employs complex symbolic insinuations, like Barthes’s striptease. Porn is the hard core uncovered, *dis-covered* in plain sight—“overlit,” Ballard would say—which the “erotic” only suggests. The thing itself. Yeah, right.

It is extremely difficult to write about porn in anything but stigmatizing terms, or alternatively, in the equally simplistic terms defending cultural rebels against the disciplinary regime. This conflict became especially interesting when sex-positive feminist critics argued against the Dworkin-MacKinnon definition of

pornography as actual violence against women, a radical feminist position that coincided with deep-dyed conservative interests. The new terms of discourse introduced the notion that all people had rights to imaginative pleasure, and disputed the putative correspondence of pornography's represented sex with real-world abuse. Further, as in Barbara Creed's formulation, "[p]ornography is one of those rare cultural spaces where it is acceptable for women to voice their own desires" (58). This new line of theory in its turn has coincided with the interests of the growing porn industry.

When porn has been defended by elite male critics, they have used an argument seemingly irrefutable in its simplicity: porn is a genre defined by a single-minded purpose, to arouse the (usually, but not always, male) audience and inspire masturbation:

hard-core pornography ... is orgasmic in intent and untouched by the ulterior motives of traditional art. It has simple and localized purpose, to induce an erection. And the more skillfully the better. Contrary to popular myth, it takes discipline and devotion to be a first-rate pornographer, and only the subtlest command of rhythm and repetition will produce ideal results. These usually take the form of solo masturbation—usually, but not invariably, since vocal excerpts from bawdy books can often by [sic] employed to vary or intensify the customary fun of sexual coupling. In any case, the aim of pornography is physical enjoyment. (Tynan 182)

A pornographic work represents social acts of sex, frequently of a perverse or wholly fantastic nature, often without consulting the limits of physical possibility. Such works encourage solitary fantasy, which is then usually discharged in quite harmless masturbation. A pornographic book, then, is an instrument for procuring a sexual catharsis, but it rarely promotes the desire to achieve this through a social mode, an act of erotic congress: the book is, in a sense, a substitute for a sexual partner. (Anthony Burgess, qtd. Feinberg 130)

If these claims were correct, then there would be no point in writing in literary-critical terms about a work of porn, other than maybe to narrate a narcissistic recap of a masturbation fantasy (porn begets porn), since it has only private significance and no "social" meaning. Such claims also assume that erotic stimulation is not an emotion—more precisely, that it is distinct from whatever emotion might be attached to it. In effect, the reasoning denies that there can be a "hard-core" sexual imagination with complex emotional dimensions; it dismisses the possibility that such sex fantasies can be romantic (so much for sexual love) or political. The case for pornography becomes entirely a matter of the right to privacy (in this case, of private enjoyment), an argument that by its very nature denies the Enlightenment's radical association of pornography and political liberation.

Such narrow arguments have been superceded by sex-positive approaches that treat the sexual imagination as a general human quality that should flourish: to restrict any group—the young, the old, the infirm, the altruistic, anyone—from developing that imagination is to deny their humanity. From this perspective, masturbation fantasies are themselves social, because the very act of masturbation is shared by billions. Once one accepts that pornography and the sexual

imagination are indeed social and involved with liberation projects at least as much as with the exploitation of sex-workers, the critical and aesthetic dimensions of porn grow as well. A pornographic work of art then requires no less attention than any multiply coded, intentionally designed text, i.e., art.

And yet even Delany, who has come closest to integrating pornography in his sf, invokes the simple purpose argument by alluding to Auden's conclusion that "pornography is that which gives me an erection."⁵ Ray Davis critiques this ostensibly naive (for Delany) reference:

Auden's "pornography is that which gives me an erection" ... is about as useful as defining science fiction by sense of wonder. For all practical purposes, porn is defined by its focus on sex. Tumescence and lubrication may help the writer maintain that focus, but what the reader does with that focus is up to the reader. (163)

In fact, Delany's allusion is less naive than strategic; it provides him with a way to demonstrate that his ostensibly pornographic works—*Hogg* [1993] and *The Mad Man* [1994]—are anti- or perhaps "meta"- pornographic because they exceed the functionality of porn.⁶

Following Davis, it makes no more sense to speak of even hard-core porn as merely functional, as if it had a single focus, a single object, and a transparent language, than it does to instill the "sense of wonder" as the simple, single, and transparent function of sf, as if both genres were powerful drugs intended to create specific kinds of buzz. Since they are both forms of fictive discourse, it is absurd to think that their effects can be that simple. Roman Jakobson's well-known distinction between functional and aesthetic language is what we need here. Jakobson proposed a model for distinguishing the discourse of functional communication from language that is aesthetically charged. In the former, words evaporate as soon as a message is understood; in the latter, the words remain in play in memory and consciousness, even after the practical message has ceased to be pertinent (69-71). Applied to porn, one might say (for the sake of argument) that the supposed function, the delivered message, is stimulation and orgasm. But the condition of fictionality, the fact that the "purpose" is realized in a story with images, metaphors, idioms, and other figures that are themselves different from the purpose, and may actually not only exceed them but last after the function has been fulfilled, marks pornographic language as ultimately not merely functional but aesthetic. If the figures remain in memory, even if only to recall the memory of arousal, they exist beyond their supposed purpose.

To take an obvious instance, Peter Michelson in the long outdated *The Aesthetics of Pornography* (1971) states that porn cannot be comic because humor creates a reflective zone that inhibits the fulfillment of porn's purely physical purpose (Farmer inexplicably takes the same tack in his introduction to *The Gas*):

Comedy is especially incapable of being pornography (though it may work its own purposes on erotic materials), because a laugh is a "discharge within the work," not as cause of further intentions to be discharged in "real life acts." The funny bone is not a sex organ. (136)

Nothing could be further from the truth. Pornography has traditionally welcomed humor, from gutter joking to courtly wit, from comic satire to outright sexual comedy, from the classical period to the present. Having fun sex with the wrong people, mistaken identities, physical exaggerations, initiations into pleasure rather than moral constraint, the whole treasury of comic motifs and devices leads quite naturally to sexual pleasure and to festive celebrations (i.e., comic orgies) of wish fulfillment. The possibilities for comedy are enhanced by the way the porn text implicates the reader. If the reader cannot resist the seduction to imaginary pleasure, he or she becomes a virtual subject of satire and comedy that is about the inability to resist seduction. Furthermore, the putative simplicity of sex acts as objects of representation—consisting of just a few organs in billions of similar iterations—places style in the forefront. The gap between physical stimulation and linguistic play tends to be ironic and comic at the very least, but could just as easily also be romantic in tales of sexual love, and in a sexually mature culture might involve tragedy and philosophy.

5. Poor Prose Porn. For the past forty years, most of the sophisticated theoretical reflections about porn have centered on film rather than prose. This has been catalyzed especially by Linda Williams's conception of cinematic porn as "the frenzy of the visible." Williams modifies Laura Mulvey's famous notion that cinema embodies the male gaze, creating voyeuristic-sadistic pleasure in its spectators. In pornographic film, sexual pleasure is no longer displaced and concealed by sublimated repressive codes of masculine purpose; porn film's *raison d'être*, according to Williams, is to make phallocentric sexuality absolutely *visible*—porn film revels in revealing displays of physical build-up and discharge, culminating in the "money shot" that makes ejaculation (the "proof" and "purpose" of male sexuality) fully visible, no longer hidden in a woman's body or serving an ulterior, reproductive purpose. While this is a compelling interpretation of the classical stag/porn tradition of film, it has only limited applicability to written porn. Obviously, the "visibility" of literary sexuality, its "graphic" status, is entirely virtual and metaphorical. The mediation of writing in creating images in the reader's mind depends on discursive traditions and codes of language specifically in the absence of iconic images. The fact that erotic comics and some books include visual images also does not change this situation, since the two modes of representation work in different ways to create diverse effects. Just think about attaching thought balloons to "explicit" photographs, or perhaps subtitles to a fuck film. The two modes stimulate different kinds of imagination.

The difference between the two media reaches nearly ontological dimensions—between the spoken discourse of stimulation and the mimetic visual depiction, between a world constructed out of memory and fantasy and an imaginary voyeuristic "witnessing." This is not a difference limited to pornography: it is central to the difference between literary and cinematic sf, or indeed between writing and film in general. The writing of "graphic" sex does not involve the extremely important questions that photographic pornography does:

about the conditions of production of cinematic porn, the true conditions of the actors who act in such films, the character of the production and distribution system, the connections between the (visual) porn industry and the political economy, etc. A full-fledged theorization of these differences requires much study, and would necessarily have to include comics and animated cartoons, two media that operate within still different aesthetic ontologies (the complexities of which were recently illustrated by the outcome of the Handley case in Iowa in 2008 affirming that a manga with cartoon illustrations of pederasty falls under the category of “child pornography” even if there are no actual children exploited to make them).⁷ Given also that cinema is an inherently much more aggressive medium than writing, since the spectator is expected to keep up with the narrative pace and to absorb the sensory stimuli of sound and light as they are administered simply to stay with the action, we should expect that written pornography also solicits the sexual imagination in an entirely different mode, in which the reader has considerably greater freedom to entwine his or her own associations, memories, and reflections with the words on the page. And these words, because they are part of a story, are making their own associations with other kinds of words.

Of course, “purpose” cannot be ignored in a social medium. Davis’s comparison with sf is suggestive. Can there be sf without a sense of wonder? I have argued elsewhere that sf audiences demand experiences of sublime and grotesque spectacles caused by scientific invention or discovery, senses of wonder that give a particular kind of complex pleasure.⁸ If a text does not deliver these feelings, then an audience might feel as frustrated and deceived as if they had paid money to see a horror film that was not scary, a romance that was cold and unfeeling, or a porn film that did not arouse them. But we consider sf’s sense of wonder to be connected to rational-logical problems, to the experience of living in a technologically determined environment, to future-oriented anxieties and hopes. It would be surprising if pornography’s “purpose” were not similarly connected to a complex of perceptual and sensory experiences of people living in their social-material worlds.

6. The Grand *Petit Apocalypse*. *The Gas* is a cheerful parody of one of the main plots of British sf: the Wellsian *petite apocalypse*, the model for which is *The War of the Worlds* (1898).⁹ A bourgeois male hero with some handiness but no great expertise, such as the journalist in *The War*, is separated from his family and surroundings by a monstrous intrusion into the familiar and predictable daily life of the settled nation. In *The War* it is an alien invasion, but it might be a terrestrial air war, a new technology, or a technologically awakened monster. This novum is in some ways an extrapolation of certain tendencies in contemporary life, and speculation often links the alien back to the familiar—as the Martians are images of where human beings’ reliance on technology will lead their evolution. The protagonist, either seeking to be reunited with his family or, having collected them, escaping with them, encounters representatives of various bourgeois institutions emblematic of social order in crisis. In *The War*, the main encounters are with the clergyman (religion) and the artilleryman (military rationality/the

state). The primary novum causes secondary novums—the tripods, the red weed—each of which presents a distinct ordeal. In the later versions (including those that became known as “cosy catastrophes”), the fleeing new little nucleus must deal with massive social changes following the catastrophe, striving (not always successfully) to maintain the basic decency of the bourgeois order in the midst of collapsing morals and local power struggles.

In *The Gas*, the journalist’s role is taken by Vincent, whose position at the weapons plant is never made clear, but whose powers never surpass those of a middle-class professional with air-force training. Vincent is one of those dignified, competent Wellsian heroes who is forced by events to resort to force, deceit, theft, and even rape (though whether rape even has a meaning in *The Gas* is not clear), to keep his chivalrous civilized purposes alive: to save a young woman from harm (ha!), and to rescue his family. As for the catastrophe itself, instead of a natural disaster, it is, like the Martian invasion, unambiguously social, and the putative natural devolution is entirely forced on people by technoscience. Vincent fights valiantly against the chaos of sexual desire by taking massive amounts of birth-control pills, and he resists using violence as long as he can; when he is forced to, he feels polite remorse. But he has little choice in the matter. After his first sex with Cathy (which is entirely “consensual,” since both are overcome by the gas), he tries to recover his chivalry:

“I hope I didn’t hurt you too much,” he said quietly.

She turned quickly, catching him by surprise, looking him directly in the eyes. “Of course you hurt me.” (21)

Like Wells’s journalist, Vincent and his little band encounter a priest (and nuns to boot) and policemen, all deranged in their struggle with the alien force that is their own impulses released and augmented. As the complications progress, the action moves toward the core problem: the pathologically-repressed drive for power of scientists responsible for conceiving of the sex-weapon in the first place. There are plenty of horrible-funny scenes of sex and violence before Vincent and his band arrive in Cambridge, but it is in that university city (against which the Cambridge-educated Platt seems to have a solid grudge) that the really weird stuff happens. Cathy’s brother, Edmond, a psychology grad student, has constructed a loony fucking machine to which he straps his female victims, and through Rube Goldberg-like mediations he delays his own orgasm while his victim is mechanically raped. Coolly, Edmond explains that his experiment in (his own) delayed gratification is a “pertinent line of enquiry, in view of the situation, don’t you think? We could all control ourselves a little more” (98).

That “self-control” at the expense of experimental victims takes center stage as Vincent searches for the abducted Julia, whom Edmond has whisked away on his bicycle to the Psych lab. Edmond’s attraction to her is suitably calculating: Julia is “an average woman in every way” (146). In the course of his search (aided by a Cambridge rowing team providing its own mathematical permutations), Vincent witnesses brutal tortures of women in the engineering lab:

Vincent felt like an inspector at a Nazi camp. Except that in the engineering lab, the experiments were not being conducted for mere gratification. It had all been

sublimated. The experiments were in the cause of *pure science*. (132; emphasis in original)

The carnival sadism gets worse as he moves on to the Med Building.

"Why," muttered Vincent, as they left the building, having found no trace of Julia.

"Why?"...

"It's just coming out in the open, that's all," said one of the oarsmen.

"Yeah," said another. "The kids've always felt that way about women, underneath." (133)

Vincent himself is soon captured and subjected to murderous, sadistic mind-control experiments by Edmond. But he is finally released with Julia, when Edmond tires of their averageness. For Edmond has higher ambitions:

"Soon I will control Cambridge from this laboratory building. Those amateur sadists.... I will clean out those other laboratories. The whole town will become an experiment. A miniature society, existing entirely in response to the sex gas, and to me." (147)

Here, in its petty way, is the source of the sex gas: scientists' sexual repression leads to its perverse sublimation—from contained body to a gas that releases the body. It may be no more than a joke on Cambridge geeks, but in Platt's world the Cambridge geeks control technoscience. Like one of Sade's protagonists in *120 Days of Sodom* (1785), *The Gas*'s scientist is "lawless and without religion, whom crime amused, and whose only interest lay in his passions ... and had nothing to obey but the imperious decrees of his perfidious lusts" (240)—though in this petit-bourgeois version, he is entirely unaware of it, and hence uses scientific weaponry to extend his displaced desires. Unlike Sade's heroes of sex-crime, Edmond and his ilk use technoscience instead of shackles and whips.

Cathy disappears during the search for Julia, having escaped from Edmond's apartment with Vincent's entire supply of apotropaic birth-control pills. When she reappears, her role and power have grown to enormous proportions (brilliantly captured by the now legendary cover art of the Savoy edition). Cathy is clearly a parody of 1960s feminist rage, ironically resisting not only Edmond's control, but also the author's. *The Gas* is obviously not only critical of its pornography, it also revels in it. Its satire does not work if the reader is not drawn into the stimulation. And in this way Edmond is not only a parody of other Cambridge geeks, but a self-parody, since the author has done the same thing to his readers that Edmond wishes to do with his fictive Cambridge. Cathy is not, however, an innocent victim of Vincent's (and Platt's) sexual aggression, as she believes herself to be; she is not entirely passive, nor is Vincent entirely aggressive. There is the Gas. She is at first a comic archetype, a grotesque slapstick punching bag, always at the receiving end of accidental hard knocks, becoming increasingly deranged by their effects. Then as the leader of the Gas-world Bacchae, she becomes a wholly different archetype, the avenging Fury of sexually victimized young womanhood (no matter that the Gas has turned everyone—including dogs—into sexual aggressors). As if the Gas had split the genders into their archetypes and then filled them with primal powers, Cathy emerges as Edmond's counterpart. Both set out to slaughter their gender-adversaries, Edmond with cold

scientific calculation, Cathy with raging mutilation and cannibalism. Let us note the disparity of their fates: Cathy is most likely crushed by the collapsing Cathedral, while Edmond still seems to have free rein over the town.

In the end, Vincent, Julia, and their kids do manage to escape to Scotland, where they can finally rest, wait for the gas to dissipate, and enjoy a little family orgy in contentment and comfort. The ending brings to mind another touchstone of utopian incest of the period, R. Crumb's panel, "The Family that Lays Together Stays Together." (To avoid the risk of being arrested for contributing to the delinquency of cartoon characters, we will not show the panel; you can search for it on Google.) And indeed it is a pity that Crumb has never drawn *The Gas*.

7. The Airborne Toxic Fuck Gas Accident. Platt's choice of a weaponized sex gas is not absurd in itself. Hamas has accused Israel of smuggling chewing gum laced with aphrodisiacs into Gaza as a weapon for undermining the morals of young people.¹⁰ Closer to home, the Pentagon has revealed that it was recently researching the possibility of a "gay sex bomb"—a weapon that would cause enemy soldiers to become irresistibly attracted to their comrades of the same sex, thus apparently catastrophically undermining morale.¹¹ Stanislaw Lem even entertains the idea of a "reverse sex bomb" as an ideal sf plot (162-64). He imagines that "the use of a certain chemical that separates the sensations of pleasure from sex spreads throughout the Earth" (162). Since sex would no longer give anyone pleasure, humanity faces extinction. Mass-distributed pornography would not help; it would be as effective as trying to inspire a ditch-digger with photographs of shovels. Medals and rewards might work, but commissions would have to be set up to guarantee that the couplings are real.

Lem's story-idea is thoroughly anti-pornographic—the last thing such a story would provide is sexual stimulation. Yet the comic distance Lem imagines brings into relief the inverse advantages of intensifying the sexual provocation of *The Gas*. A similar frame to Platt's was tried in Graham Baker's film *Impulse* (1984), in which a de-inhibiting gas (hinted to be a bio-weapon) is released into the air (or is it the water?) of a small US town. The inhabitants at first display very minor lapses of superego control, which gradually escalate to greater and greater conscienceless violence. Compared with *The Gas*, *Impulse* is in erotic terms quite timid—the main focus is on the release of violent impulses, leading to the ultimately and predictably moralizing point that all loss of impulse control leads to civilizational self-destruction. *The Gas* too leads its protagonists into higher and higher levels of outré violence, culminating in the physical collapse of Kings College Chapel, much like the fall of the House of Usher. But where *Impulse* keeps sex at prudish arm's length, Platt carries the reader into a delirium in which sexual pleasure is both real (remember, porn is about arousal) and also critical. It is the visceral ambivalence that creates the comedy.

The Gas begins with a big technical accident that causes everything that happens in the story, every act of fucking and fighting. It is a strong science-fictional novum. One can imagine a work of fantasy in which something like this happens magically. Perhaps a wizard has lain an indiscriminate fuck-curse on the solid citizens. Perhaps an evil demiurge with a sick sense of humor is playing

games with the human condition. Those might be interesting stories that could reveal things about the imagination and culture. What a material accident contributes specifically is that the orgy of impulse that tears bourgeois society apart and reprograms it is caused in a world like ours, by people like us, through hyper-rational technologies that do not surprise us all that much.

This is at the core of much sf. In order for a story to go into motion, for anything to happen that requires a telling, the equilibrium of a predictable life must be upset. In a fantasy, that disturbance usually has a great will behind it. In an adventure story, some natural challenges impinge on the protagonists. Many sf stories, especially since the 1960s, hinge on some sort of large-scale accident. Often it is an accident of a smoothly operating technology on which humanity massively depends, sending the system out of kilter, requiring the handy protagonists to fix or to adapt to it. Sometimes it is an accidental discovery that changes all relationships. Sometimes it is not the problem but the solution that is provided by an accident, as when the mad scientist or Martian invader's hyper-intelligent plans succumb to unforeseen weak links in their systems. Accidents are required for the technological regime to change, in one way or another.

From this perspective, sf reprises Virilio's concept of the accident as the censored negative dimension of positivist technological progress:

Every technology produces, provokes, and programs a specific accident. For example: when they invented the railroad, what did they invent? An object that allowed you to go fast, which allowed you to progress—a vision *a la* Jules Verne, positivism, evolutionism. But at the same time they invented the railway catastrophe.... I believe that from now on, if we wish to continue with technology ... we must think about both the substance and its accident—substance being both the substance and its accident. The negative side of technology and speed was censored. (32)

Let us linger a bit with this intriguing passage. The railway accident has become something of a primal scene of this essential oneness of the technological "substance" and its inherent accident-waiting-to-happen. Consider Wolfgang Schivelbusch's similar meditations in *The Railway Journey*:

One might ... say that the more civilized the schedule and the more efficient the technology, the more catastrophic its destruction when it collapses. There is an exact ratio between the level of the technology with which nature is controlled, and the degree of severity of its accidents. The pre-industrial era did not know any technological accidents in that sense. In Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, "Accident" is dealt with as a grammatical and philosophical concept, more or less synonymous with coincidence. The pre-industrial catastrophes were natural events, natural accidents. They attacked the objects they destroyed from the outside, as storms, floods, thunderbolts, and hailstones. After the Industrial Revolution, destruction by technological accident came from the inside. The technical apparatuses destroyed themselves by means of their own power. The energies tamed by the steam engine and delivered by it as regulated mechanical performance destroyed that engine itself in the case of an accident. The increasingly rapid vehicles of transportation tended to destroy themselves and each other totally, whenever they collided. The higher the degree of technical intensification (pressure, tension,

velocity, etc.) of a piece of machinery, the more thorough-going was its destruction in the case of dysfunction. (131)

The natural progress of this internal development of the empirical technosphere is toward a point of ultimate “intensification,” nuclear war, which produces the most complete destruction. Science fiction has, of course, imagined far more elegantly intense technologies and more complete catastrophes—arguably, this has been one of its most dependable attractions, attaining what has come to be called “apocalypse porn.” Virilio’s invocation of Verne is richer than he realizes. Much of the Vernean line of positivistic-romantic sf, which is arguably the dominant one until the end of World War II, does seem to thrive in the repression of the technological negative. In psychosexual terms, we might say that this censorship leads to a build-up of frustrated orgasmic energy associated with these gigantic technologies, in which the phallic social identities of modern Western societies have invested so much. It is in the icons of nuclear explosions in the late 1940s and early 1950s that a certain hypostasis, at once horrifying and fascinating, more-real-than-real and hyper-symbolic, of this progress seems to be achieved: the images of fiery mushroom clouds in which the phallus and the orgasm, the tool and the effect, are finally one. With those images, in which the highest achievements of technology manifest as a destructive force that only the gods were imagined to possess in the past, the turn is made, in sf as in empirical experience, away from the positivity of technological progress to the negative immanence of the accident.

The Gothic line, from Mary Shelley through Wells and beyond, had continuously reflected the conservative social fears of technology as a womb of accidents. But even in that tradition, the dangers were perceived mainly in the frailty and weakness of human agents, as if the world-destroying danger of insensate mechanical systems were too ironic to contemplate. With the atomic bomb, the Gothic line becomes the most adequate one to deal with the nuclear sublime, and accidents become central to sf—on a spectrum from unforeseen human or indeed non-human monkey-wrenches in an uptight rational system (*Dr. Strangelove* [1964]; Skynet), to bugs in the system (*The Fly* [1958; 1986]), unintended awakenings of repressed monsters (*Godzilla* [1954]), unpredictable beneficent effects of natural systems (*War of the Worlds*), the accidental emergence of both destroyers and preservers (most comic-book superheroes), and the random discovery of agents of cultural and species survival (*Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* [1985]). Most of all, the catastrophe, which was once the domain of sublime natural forces like comets and volcanoes, is transformed into the secret sharer of technoscience.

Platt wrote *The Gas* as the heyday of the British *petit apocalypse*—typified by the works of John Wyndham and John Christopher, films such as Val Lewton’s *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961), and the simultaneously mythicized and deconstructed versions by J.G. Ballard—was winding down. (The US counterparts were George R. Stewart’s *Earth Abides* (1949), the Lot stories of Ward Moore, and *Panic in Year Zero* [1962].) In the model version of that story, a major catastrophe that is usually ambiguously both natural and social-

technological disrupts the balance between natural and cultural orders, throwing social life in Britain into turmoil. The stories are usually told about people living in the middle middle class, who have sufficient education and wordliness to manage their escape and the reconstitution of some semblance of a petit-bourgeois social order, yet lack the wealth and power to withdraw into enclaves. Platt is uninterested in any larger imperial melancholia. His target is the way the *petite apocalypse* is told—and the disavowed pleasures it provides—and he goes about it with a satirical rigor matched only by Ballard's *Crash* (1973), a work with which it has much in common. As a satire on the *petite apocalypse* plot, *The Gas* is solid enough. Platt was a central figure of New Worlds as an editor and designer and one can feel the withering scorn against conventional British sf. But *The Gas* has more than intra-generic historical significance. It is also a brilliant comic satire of repressive desublimation.

8. From Repressive Desublimation to Comic Resublimation. Let us imagine a pornographic spectrum, from utopian to dystopian. In the utopian, sex acts are free of guilt, shame, and physical obstacles. There is universally reciprocated affection and consent, or at least universal desire to exchange pleasure. Polymorphous attachment and orgasm represent the consummation of human existence, and they are not bound to reproduction and commerce. One can imagine utopian porn plots galore adapted to the communal happy ending required by comedy. At the other pole: dystopian porn, dominated by rage, hatred, cruelty, and shame. Here the purpose is to involve the reader/spectator in perversion—taking pleasure in what the audience and artist all understand to be injurious to others, indeed in the spirit of harm. I do not mean playful bondage and domination fantasies with safe words, but emphatic sadism and self-injury, taking pleasure in—and constructing one's sexual self through—collective and individual self-destruction in sex.

Linda Williams established in *Hard Core* (1999) that most mainstream pornographic films in the 1970s and 1980s had a utopian charge, depicting fantasy worlds in which sex is linked to happiness. Since then, such writers as Annie Sprinkle have consciously developed the rich concept of a "pornotopian" imaginary, which, like most utopian visions, leads quickly to sf:

I have a vision for the future where all the necessary sex education will be available for everyone; there will be no more need for abortion, no more sexually transmitted diseases. No one will ever go hungry for sex because there will be sex kitchens all over town serving sex instead of soup. Sex is a powerful healing tool which will be used regularly in hospitals and psychiatric clinics. We will learn how to use orgasm to prevent and cure disease as some of the ancient tantrics and Taoists did. Sex workers will be highly respected for the important work they do and desire will be decriminalized. Betty Dodson will be able to realize her dream of having orgasms across America on TV. She'll raise enough money to end world hunger. Fetish lingerie and sex toys will be freely distributed to all people. People will be able to make love without touching if they choose. Men will be able to have multiple orgasms without ejaculating so they can maintain erections for as long as they want. Women will ejaculate. It will be possible to make love anywhere in public and not be impolite to watch. No one will care what gender

people have sex with. In the future, everybody will be so sexually satisfied, there'll be an end to violence, rape and war. We will establish contact with extra-terrestrials and they will be very sexy. (qtd. Morris)

We can recognize porno-dystopian visions in such works as *120 Days of Sodom* and *Crash*. Most pornography mixes these extremes, and indeed most porn is closely associated with satire, the genre in which utopian and dystopian visions are most often mixed. No matter how liberated the sexual imagination might be, porn's characters are usually embedded in social worlds rife with taboos of all kinds—so much so that even an artist who wished to depict innocent polymorphous perversity would soon enough run up against social authorities and norms whose very existence depends on sexual repression. And if not the characters, then the audiences. So the more concrete the depiction of a world, the more obstacles there are to imaginary sexual happiness.

The Gas is indisputably a satire. At first it appears to target sf's cozy catastrophes. *The Gas* jokes about the archetypal motifs of escape, the quest for a safe haven, protecting the family and young womanhood, preserving virtue under trial. Over all is the basic science-fictional curse: a technology that compels people to do things they do not want to do.

But wait... there's the rub. After a while, under the influence of the Gas, people do in fact want to have orgasms with others, and our protagonists are less afraid of fucking inappropriate others, or even of strangers fucking their loved ones, than they are being separated from them, or prevented from fucking.¹² If porn is truly about private fantasies, it is notable that in *The Gas* the technologically-induced compulsion to have sex leads people to come together into larger and larger groups, into communities of sex, however dysfunctional they may be. The novel will not tell us whether they become destructive because uninhibited sexual desire is inherently destructive, or because of the speed and the intensity of their artificial induction. But we have intimations.

In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), Henri Bergson notes that a typical move of the comic is to have characters focus their attention not on an idea, but on a literal-physical embodiment of it:

"We laugh if our attention is diverted to the physical in a person when it is the moral that is in question," is a law we laid down in the first part of this work. Let us apply it to language. Most words might be said to have a PHYSICAL and a MORAL meaning, according as they are interpreted literally or figuratively. Every word, indeed, begins by denoting a concrete object or a material action; but by degrees the meaning of the word is refined into an abstract relation or a pure idea. If, then, the above law holds good here, it should be stated as follows: "A comic effect is obtained whenever we pretend to take literally an expression which was used figuratively"; or, "Once our attention is fixed on the material aspect of a metaphor, the idea expressed becomes comic." (106)

The locus classicus of this law is in the concluding scene of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (411 BCE), when the goddess Peace appears on stage to emblematize the political peace agreement the Greek women have managed to extract from their sex-starved men. The symbolic goddess manifests physically as a beautiful

naked woman, and the warriors distractedly agree to the principle she represents as they ogle her sexy body. This is the principle behind all such comic episodes in which the physical ritual is mistaken for the idea or emotion it represents—a funeral for grieving, a wedding for marriage, a graduation for maturation, a honeymoon for licensed sex, etc. The same principle holds for most satire, and represents the zone where comedy and satire generally overlap. It is the principle of literalization of metaphor, long considered also one of the characteristic moves of science fiction. And when the principle is applied to the metaphorical power of sexuality in culture and science, pornography is a suitable style—maybe even the most appropriate one—of satiric-comic literalization.

The gas of the *The Gas* is precisely such a satiric-comic literalized metaphor, on a grand scale. It is the sublimated, purified essence of technoscience and sf. With *The Gas*, the putative secret dimension of sf and technoscience—its symbolic dimension of displacement and sublimation—is comically replaced by its literalization: sf that is about sex and violence caused by science, rather than sublimated by it. If sf is supposed to be an institution of displacement/sublimation, the comedy comes when it mistakes its purpose by looking straight at the presublimated cause-and-effect: sex and violence.

That is not as simple an operation as it sounds. After all, Platt's novel is itself an sf novel, which is supposedly a bona-fide form of sublimation. How does this work: a sublimation that reveals by desublimating? To approach this, we must read *The Gas* as a bold work of its own time, the late 1960s and the cultural transition from the Protestant ethic of capitalism to what Herbert Marcuse termed the regime of repressive desublimation.

Marcuse argued in *One Dimensional Man* (1964) that in a confidently administered capitalism the requirements of the Protestant ethic no longer served the purposes of the hyper-producing mode of production. To discourage excessive saving (of energies and money), the ruling order had to lessen libidinal constraints to inspire people to spend (energy and money). Actually acquiring the objects that gave personal pleasure was to be encouraged in individuals, in order to prevent the consolidation of resistant social energies that might lead to revolutionary replacement of the ruling order with one that satisfies higher, collective utopian desires. Marcuse called this process “repressive desublimation”—the release of pleasure in a manageable way in order to maintain more secure control over the people's consciousness. Arguably, one of the most prominent examples of it was the sudden semi-respectability of porn, along with strategic uses of “sexual liberation.”

Marcuse's theory is similar to Freud's theory of jokes—a little bit of the id is intentionally vented, like a gas, to release pressure on the ego, and then the lid on the unconscious container is quickly replaced. Thus repressive desublimation and jokes simultaneously acknowledge the pressures and disavow them. Artists who have relied on various kinds of sublimation, and hence a certain puritanical economy in the expression of sex, find themselves in a paradoxical situation. Without the cultural taboos restricting the overt expression of sexual drives, they can lose the entire repressed dimension to which all formal and figural techniques of art refer indirectly. Sexual activity—from empirical seduction to fucking—

would then, arguably, replace art as a source of pleasure, on the principle that folks would always prefer an orgasm to an afternoon decoding *Ulysses*. Although pornography is not the only artistic form favored by repressive desublimation (Marcuse was more worried about countercultural practices that distracted people from higher emancipatory goals), it is not unreasonable to see the conversion of all art into porn as the strategy's desired horizon.

Artists might try to counter this by affirming the value of some kinds of repression over others, essentially moralizing in the interests of art. But such asceticism can only speak to a small coterie when the world offers immediate pleasures. Platt takes an original and contrary tack: comic resublimation. *The Gas*'s sex and violence are not displaced or sublimated; by comparison, even *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and *Crash* are prissy. And yet, for a reader of sf or even of comic satire, the generic forms are unavoidable sublimations.

She was screaming, he was shouting, they were both coming, the car was a rocketship aimed at the stars, all the jets were firing, colours flashed in front of his eyes. (Platt 29)

It does not stop there. In *The Gas*, sexual pleasure is forced on everyone affected; and as the story develops, sexual violence takes over—but for the reader all is contained in a comic display. In Platt's world, the reader can have cake and eat it too—desublimated sex and “the old ultra-violence,” in the containing form of a finely crafted comic satire. Comedy is in control, and a new, utterly uninhibited, polymorphously perverse utopian society, yet one still based on a petit-bourgeois nuclear family (of course!) is introduced. Pornography becomes the pretext of visionary satirical comedy.

This is a form of cognitive estrangement. It is probably not the one Suvinians have in mind, for not only are the conditions of the world (i.e., that technoscience is based on displaced sexual repression and aggression) estranged, but so are the media that do the estranging, namely, pornography and sf. *The Gas* cannot actually conclude beyond its R. Crumb-like ending if it is to avoid the containment and moralizing so characteristic of conventional sf. So it must, like its namesake, leave us to wonder whether it has dissipated or changed the world.

NOTES

1. This is attributed to Platt by Loompanics online publicity material.
2. This is noted on the *AllExperts* webpage devoted to *A Feast Unknown* (online).
3. *Anal Planet* is apparently a parody of *Forbidden Planet*; there are several films titled *Lust in Space*, one of which is apparently a *Dr. Who* parody; the number of *Star Trek* porn parodies staggers the imagination. From all accounts the *Star Trek* franchise managers have adopted a laissez-faire policy regarding copyright infringement, hence the many explicit invocations of the series title. For a taste, see *io9*'s “To Boldly Go There: A History of Star Trek Porn, With Clips” (online).
4. The only attempt at a serious bibliography that I have been able to find has been compiled by Kenneth R. Johnson (see his “SF Pornography” website). Johnson's list is unreliable, since it includes only publications by houses identified exclusively with pornographic materials. To quote Johnson:

In compiling this bibliography the determination to include or exclude a book was not made on the basis of its sexual content, but on the basis of who the publisher was. A book was only

included if it was determined that its publisher was one who specialized in sex books and published little else. To make this determination required a broad examination of any given publisher's output, coupled with a detailed knowledge of the history and development of the modern paperback book, and an awareness of their distribution patterns. (Johnson, online)

The method is reasonable, but clearly profoundly limited.

5. The exact passage apparently reads: "There's only one good test of pornography. Get twelve normal men to read the book, and then ask them, 'Did you get an erection?' If the answer is 'Yes' from a majority of the twelve, then the book is pornographic" (Auden, *The Table Talk of W.H. Auden*, "March 17, 1947"). See "Quotations from W.H. Auden."

6. Delany's ambiguous approach allows "straightforward" pornography to be treated simultaneously as a legitimate style, and also as subliterary. Delany strategically accepts (perhaps "entertains" is more accurate) the Auden-Tynan-Burgess notion of pornography as being purely functional (i.e., masturbatory), so that any surplus meaning pornographic writing might convey would be considered *excessive*. This excess essentially *queers* the porn into aesthetic discourse: "If we shift attention to the aesthetic excess produced at the margins of ... sexual encounters ... we find comments on, and models for, new subjectivities beyond the immediate pleasures of reading them" (Melzer 162). I am suspicious of this formulation, since I consider the model of purely functional porn writing spurious. That model seems to imply that only *perverse* porn is aesthetic.

7. See Kravets, Waddington.

8. See Csicsery-Ronay, 146-47.

9. I have coined this expansion of Brian Aldiss's famous sneering term "cosy catastrophe" not only because many critics have shown that many of these novels are not particularly "cosy," but also to intimate that their agents and points of view represent specifically those of the post-imperial British petit bourgeoisie.

10. See "Report."

11. See "Pentagon reveals rejected chemical weapons" and "US military pondered love not war." This consummately comical project would, if it could be achieved, prove that homosexuality is biologically distinct from heterosexuality, and would consequently undermine almost every argument of the religious right against homosexuality. From the other end, the notion of a gay combat army might not sound like a bad idea to students of *The Iliad*.

12. It is interesting to speculate what the philosophical consequences would have been, had the Machines of *The Matrix* produced a matrix-world of humano-bonobo utopian fucking, the "coppertops" programmed with functionally inexhaustible horniness and affection for each other.

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ABSTRACT

Charles Platt's pornographic fantasy *The Gas* (1970) is not only a bona fide work of sf, but also a significant work in the genre. By obscenely parodying the well-established British subgenre of the petit apocalypse, *The Gas* satirizes both the sublimation strategies of sf and the repressive desublimation of post-1960s pornography.