



Review of Murat Aydemir, *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxv + 334 pp.

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In her 1985 book *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray called for “reckoning with *sperm-fluid*” (p. 113). Taking this as his cue, Murat Aydemir, an assistant professor of comparative literature and cultural analysis at the University of Amsterdam, engages in what he calls this “long overdue” project (p. xvi). Specifically, Aydemir sets out to investigate how “ejaculation forges narrative” because, as he argues, “[s]emen changes the story” (p. xix). He seeks to demonstrate his thesis by tracing alternative narratives in various contexts, ranging from Aristotle to the contemporary artist Andreas Serrano, from pornography to Proust, and from Lacan to Bataille.

Images of Bliss is divided into five parts. Part One is entitled “History, Art,” and discusses Serrano, Aristotle, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Derrida. Part Two moves on to “Psychoanalysis” before covering “Pornography” in Part Three. Part Four, “Theory” seems somewhat of a superfluous misnomer as both theory and theoretical reflection, with reference to the currently fashionable roll-call of French (and other) thinkers, pervades the whole book, as befitting someone who is a professor of “cultural analysis.” Finally, Part Five, “Literature,” discusses Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. In between the passages of theoretical discursiveness are some very interesting close textual readings of the objects under study, whether art or pornography, and those interested in such areas will find much of use to guide their own work.

In doing so, Aydemir also manages to mention, albeit briefly, female ejaculation, particularly that which is known under the generic heading of “squirting” in hardcore pornography. He contrasts the female and male ejaculations within porn and concludes that “the sense of exhilaration and jubilation that surrounds” the former is “something conspicuously missing” from the latter which can be characterized as “terse, constrained, and deliberate performances” (p. 134). It is an intriguing comment and one worth extrapolating, not least because, as he points out, the female ejaculation is not only encircled by controversy, but also because the implications for the male cum shot, masculinity, and the ability of ejaculation (whether male and/or female) to “forge narrative” (to use Aydemir’s own formulation) are surely worth considering in more detail and depth. Thus, one might ask if the female ejaculation is merely a pornographic construction, or is as jubilant and exhilarating as he suggests, or if the male equivalent is as *forced* as he implies. But, alas, the section is far too short (in fact it constitutes only one tiny paragraph in the whole book), and Aydemir seems content merely to direct readers, by way of a footnote, to an article by hardcore porn actress cum performance artiste Annie Sprinkle.

In contrast, and perhaps somewhat strangely, whilst still on the subject of hardcore pornography, Aydemir considers the implications of the “real” zero-gravity cum shot, as represented in the Private Media film, *The Uranus Experiment* (1999), and in significantly more detail than he does female ejaculation: almost eight pages (pp. 221-228). In particular, he details the somewhat hilarious attempts to “capture” (in all senses of the term) the resulting and disseminating sperm. He likewise spends more time discussing the autoerotic, masturbatory 1998 film *Flyin’ Solo* (pp. 216, 230-232), in particular its conflation of the two senses, in this context at least, of the verb “to shoot.”

Unfortunately, for this reader, however, issues of religion and spirituality in relation to men, masculinity, and the cum shot are not explicitly fore-grounded within this text. There is the odd, scattered reference, such as that on page xxii of his Introduction, where Aydemir cites Julia Kristeva’s observation that sperm, notably unlike menstrual blood, is not considered to be “unclean” within most religious hygiene rules. While I don’t want to criticize the book for being something I would like to have read but which it is not, this would have been, and no pun intended, a very fertile avenue of study. For example, how is this view of purity reconciled with the Talmudic utterance that semen is but “a smelly drop” – hardly a flattering perspective?

Furthermore, on the previous page Aydemir refers to Aristotle’s treatment of semen in his *Generation of Animals*, in which he described semen as the purest of all bodily secretions, to the effect that it serves as the vehicle for the spirit or *psyche* but which is, at the same time, encased in its physical properties of whiteness, heat, shininess, and foaminess. While Aristotle’s text is not explicitly religious, the spiritual possibilities of this notion could have been explored further by Aydemir not least for the influential ways in which Aristotle has influenced so-called “Judeo-Christian” thought. This is a shame for when Aydemir does engage in such critical analysis it is fascinating, as when he explores the story of Noah whereby his sons see and cover their father’s nakedness (pp. 176-180) or Babel (p. 187) or Adam’s Rib (pp. 252-254). These readings, drawing upon the work of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Marcel Proust respectively, provide a dimension not usually learned about in Sunday school, whatever the religion!

Overall, then, the book is too uneven for my tastes. Some of it is overly theoretical and abstract and too absorbed with critical theory at times, while at others it is lucid and engaging in its analysis of cultural artifacts, whether Proust or pornography. Nonetheless, there is much to be gleaned from this intriguing book from which much pleasure, or *jouissance*, can be obtained.

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