

Creating a Peeping Tom

Pornography and Visuality in Lars Ramslie's *Fatso*

Hvordan skape en «Peeping Tom»

Pornografi og visualitet i *Fatso* av Lars Ramslie

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ABSTRACT

Taking *Fatso* (2003) as an example, this article explores how cultural emphasis on the visual influences the thematics and aesthetics of the contemporary novel. Theories of masculinity and the gaze inform this critical reading of Norwegian author Lars Ramslie's thematization of the relationship between looking, (lack of) sex, and gender in modern (Western) society. In addition, the article shows how narrative strategies and techniques also found in pornography and porn movies stress visuality in the text and create a specific role and experience for readers, namely the Peeping Tom who «sees all».

SAMMENDRAG

Denne artikkelen undersøker – med utgangspunkt i *Fatso* (2003) – hvordan vår kulturelle vektlegging av det visuelle former tematikken og estetikken i samtidsromanen. Teorier om maskulinitet og «the gaze» underbygger denne kritiske lesningen av forfatter Lars Ramslies tematisering av forholdet mellom det å se, (mangel på) sex, og kjønn i det moderne vestlige samfunnet. Videre viser artikkelen hvordan narrative strategier og teknikker også brukt i pornografi og pornofilmer, understreker visualitet i teksten og skaper en spesifikk rolle og opplevelse for leseren, det vil si voyeuren eller «Peeping Tom» som «ser alt».

Keywords

Lars Ramslie, Visual Culture, Pornography, Gaze, Masculinity, Aesthetics

Nøkkelord

Lars Ramslie, visuell kultur, pornografi, blikket, maskulinitet, estetikk

The status of the picture, the dominance of images, and the emphasis on visual representation and experience in contemporary Western culture prompted the ‘pictorial turn’, which, in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell (1994, 418), «has implications for the fate of reading, literature, and literacy». Put differently, the conditions and assumptions of visual culture influence not only the thematics, but also the aesthetics of the contemporary novel.¹ In the following, I explore how cultural emphasis on the visual, understood as a «place where meanings are created and contested» (Mirzoeff 1999, 6), shapes the Norwegian novel *Fatso* (2003a). In this critical reading, theories of masculinity and the gaze inform my examination of author Lars Ramsli’s thematization of the relationship between looking, (lack of) sex, and gender in modern (Western) society. Furthermore, I explore how narrative strategies and techniques also found in pornography and porn movies stress visuality in the text and create a specific role and experience for readers, namely the Peeping Tom who «sees all».²

FATSO

The protagonist in *Fatso* is Rino Hanssen, a single thirty-four-year-old who lives alone in an apartment owned by his father. Hampered by low self-esteem and a poor self-image, Rino is convinced that he is fat and boring, and that «no one» is interested in him. Because he is also obsessed with sex – and the fact that he isn’t having any – Rino spends much of his spare time watching porn movies and masturbating. Then his father rents out a room in the apartment and Maria moves in, bringing new ideas and people into his life. As the narrative progresses, Rino gradually develops a friendship with Maria and is accepted into her circle of friends. Simultaneously, he begins to take an interest in his appearance, and eventually sees the need for a «make-over». He starts jogging, watches his diet, takes up smoking, cuts his hair, exchanges (old, unfashionable) glasses for contacts, and buys new clothes. During this process, he moves from the position of outsider and outcast to insider and integrated.

Fatso is divided into five parts (entitled «Single», «Party», «The Creep», «Trust» and «Love») with a total of 174 titled chapters or «episodes» ranging from two lines to single paragraphs and texts of a maximum of seven pages. These occasionally take the form of a questionnaire, or a dialogue from a TV show, and can be read independently as separate pieces of episodic or scenic short prose. Each «episode» is set off from the preceding and subsequent chapters by ellipses as well as by titles, but, read chronologically and in relation to each other, they form a narrative structure that is fragmented or «clipped». While the novel is not as experimental as film or text montage, this way of writing is reminiscent of genres that create a staccato form through breaks and fragmentation, requiring readers or film viewers to «paste» shorter pieces together in order to create a larger, meaningful unity.

Rino’s sexual, emotional, and physical hunger is described in a language that can be characterized as suggestive, vivid, concentrated, and fragmented. It is the oral, everyday language

1. Several intertextual and inter- or transmedial strategies can be found in the novel. For example, the lyrics of Nick Cave also influence the text (Malvik 2004).
2. See, for example, Hawthorn (2014) for an informed discussion of the term «reader». I enlarge on my use of the term later in this article, but I use «readers» to refer both to the implied reader role and actual readers who are offered this role by the text. The plural form underlines this duality and points to the variety of factors such as gender, race, cultural background, and sexual orientation that shape the reading experience of actual readers.

of Rino's generation, peppered with English loans, slang expressions, and swearing. The prevalent use of incomplete sentences, the common absence of sentence subjects, and the predominant use of commas rather than conjunctions to connect sentences result in a staccato-like syntax that represents an inner stress, aggression, and sexual tension. Critics such as Alex Meehan (2007) have commented on the graphic quality of the language: «Gritty is certainly a word that could be used to describe *Fatso*, and certainly if your [sic] easily offended, this is probably a book to avoid. The sexual references are extremely graphic and while *Fatso* is very well written, it's ultimately hard to figure out why Ramslie bothered». ³ I will return to this.

As the language underlines, Rino is the center of perception and focalization throughout the narrative. The first-person narration and internal focalization create the illusion of closeness, construct a reader role in which the fictional world is seen through Rino's eyes, and prompt actual readers' identification with him. ⁴ This «intimacy» makes it easy for actual readers to be «taken in» by Rino's worldview, self-pity, and self-image as isolated and lonely «fatso». However, Rino is unreliable: There is no indication that others find him as disgusting as he finds himself. For instance, Maria finds him «cute» (Ramslie 2006, 85) and «so calm and safe» (152) rather than repulsive, and Maria's friend Lara tells Rino that he is «so big and gorgeous» (156). ⁵

While Maria's social skills and network help Rino «move forward», she is attracted to him for characteristics such as stability and strength. So, when she suspects that her drink has been drugged and she needs to be rescued from a bar, she calls Rino to ask for help. Needing comfort afterwards, Maria asks to sleep with him in his bed, but ironically, he rapes her while she is sleeping. Her subsequent pregnancy – presumably the result of Rino's action – is therefore incomprehensible to her: «Jeg har ikke ligget med en kjefst siden sist jeg hadde mensen, jeg skjønner virkelig ikke en dritt» (330). [‘I haven't slept with a living soul since I had my last period! I really don't understand shit.’ (324)] Pregnancy forces Maria to change her plans, and so she spends more time hanging out in the apartment, watching TV, and eating. In the final scene, Maria kisses and snuggles with Rino before initiating a move to the bedroom:

– Er det noe? spør hun.
Jeg vet ikke hva jeg skal gjøre, jeg har aldri gjort dette før, ikke slik.
– Neida, ingenting, hvisker jeg og forsøker å gjøre meg klar til å reise meg.
– Kom igjen, smiler hun, – det er bare sex. (345)

[‘Is there something wrong?’ she asks.
I don't know what to do. I've never done this before, not like this.
‘No, nothing,’ I whisper, trying to gather myself.
‘Come on,’ she says, smiling, ‘it's only sex.’ (338)]

3. See Malvik (2004) and Grøneng (2006) for discussions of the reception of *Fatso*.

4. Critics such as Terje Stemland (2003) have commented in their reviews on the feeling of «språklig nærhet og nærvær» [linguistic intimacy and presence] that the novel gives him. See also Meehan 2007.

5. All quotes in Norwegian are taken from the original publication from 2003 (Ramslie 2003a) and all English quotes are taken from the 2006 English translation of the original. All subsequent references to the novel and its English translation only include page numbers. English translations are placed in brackets immediately following quotes from the Norwegian original.

The issue is clearly sex, not love, but what is «only sex» to Maria is a momentous occasion for Rino. Although this is an open ending, the implication is, of course, that he will finally «get it on» with a woman and have his desire fulfilled.

FATSO AND PORNOGRAPHY

Ramslie (2003b) claims that he has not written about body culture or pornography or the male role, but about falling outside of what is deemed to be normal, about being successful or not.⁶ It is, however, precisely those aspects downplayed by Ramslie – and pornography in particular – that are fundamental to a discussion of the novel in the context of visual culture.⁷ Defined as the «representation of sexual behaviour in books, pictures, statues, motion pictures, and other media that is intended to cause sexual excitement», pornography is not a love story.⁸ In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the «Frenzy of the Visible»* Linda Williams notes that «narrative equilibrium does not necessarily lie in the permanent union of the couple» (1999, 151). Rather, hard core «consists of sexual action in, and as, narrative», set in motion by the «eruption» of sexual desire (121).⁹ The narrative development follows desire's path toward fulfillment with various hindrances along the way. In other words, hard core porn films can be characterized as «films that work toward [...] the solution to the problem of sex through the performance of sex» (147). Differences in desire and sexual tastes can be seen as the source of the «problem of sex», and so an important feature of the genre is the range of sexual numbers that appeals to a wide variety of sexual desires and tastes.¹⁰ The placement of these «numbers» is crucial to their function, and in one category of hard core porn videos, the «numbers» of various kinds of sexual activity move the action from «bad» (unsatisfying) sex to «better» sex, and, finally, «good» (satisfying) sex.

Williams' insights are based on her study of the porn film during what she sees as the first two of three stages of pornographic spectatorship. While pornography has changed a great deal from the days of stag films shown to all male audiences and the «classical era» of porn movies in public theaters, Williams' study still provides fruitful perspectives on literature such as *Fatso* because it focuses on the narrative strategies of the porn film.¹¹ Her epilogue in the 1999 expanded version of *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the «Frenzy of the Visible»* also provides a historic overview of the genre as well as insight into the contempo-

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6. In Ramslie's own words: «Jeg tror ikke jeg prøver å si så mye om kroppskultur eller porno eller mansrollen. [...] [Romanen handler om] å havne utafor det folk ser på som normalt. Om å være vellykka og mislykka.»
 7. *Fatso* has been adapted to film. The movie *Fatso*, directed by Arild Fröhlich, had its premiere in October 2008 with Nils Jørgen Kaalstad in the leading role as Rino. Interestingly, the pornographic strategies function differently in the movie than in the novel, but such a comparison goes beyond the scope of this article.
 8. *Britannica Academic*, s.v. «Pornography,» accessed February 15, 2016, <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/60885>.
 9. Susan Sontag (1991, 66) also notes that pornography is not about the formation of a couple, but that «[a]ll action is conceived of as a set of sexual exchanges», and she defines books «generally called pornographic [as] those whose primary, exclusive, and overriding preoccupation is with the depiction of sexual 'intentions' and 'activities'» and notes that «everything must bear upon the erotic situation».
 10. These differences reflect male and female sexual difference *and* different attitudes toward the performance of sex.
 11. See, for example, Attwood and Smith (2014), Kipnis (1996; 2000), Kolnar (2011), Lehman (1995) and Williams (2004) for additional perspectives on, and insights into, pornography.

rary stage of «electronic on/scenities» of pornographic spectatorship.¹² In my perspective, many of Williams' insights are applicable to *Fatso*, whose final words explicitly underline that the sexual union initiated by Maria is about sex, not love.

The plot of the novel is arguably constructed around two «projects». One of these is what I call the «porn project», which follows the plot of the hard core pornography film. Rino's sexual desire sets the narrative in motion and his quest for sexual fulfillment drives it forward. So, the narrative works toward a «solution to the problem of sex through the performance of sex» with the progression from «bad» to «better» to «good» sex.

«Bad» sex is depicted in the chapter entitled «Artificial Desire»:

Helgen gjennom sitter jeg foran skjermen med de nye filmene mens osmosen får hendene mine til å stinke kjønn. Spytt. Pikk. Huden rynker seg på fingrene, jeg ronker filmene ferdig fra scene til scene, tørker meg, spiser, fortsetter. Håndflatene blir tørre og glatte. Glattbarberte negresser med innoljete rompeballer, hofter, lår, hvite fotsåler, brede lepper og hvite tenner. [...] Lørdag ettermiddag sitter jeg på gulvet foran fjernsynet med en halvtom flaske Finlandia mellom beina. Fjernkontroll. *Pule deg. This is dick. You like dick? You want dick? Huh!?* (24)

[The whole weekend I sit in front of the screen with my new films, as osmosis makes my hands reek of genitals. Spit. Dick. The skin on my fingers starts wrinkling. I wank each film to its conclusion, from one scene to the next, wipe myself, eat, continue. The palm of my hand grows smooth and dry. Smooth-shaven black babes, with oiled butts, hips, thighs, white-soled feet, thick lips and white teeth. [...] Come Saturday afternoon I sit on the floor in front of the TV, a half-empty bottle of Finlandia between my legs. And the remote. *Shag you. This is dick. You like dick? You want dick? Huh?* (18)]

The porn video shown in the privacy of the home is a typical viewing situation of the «electronic on/scenities» of today. We note that Rino is not concerned with the plot of the movies, but with the visual stimuli of the oiled bodies of the «smooth-shaven black babes» that he consumes. Pornography functions here as it often does, as a basis for masturbation. It has been suggested, though, that pornography may be about the consumption of time rather than sex, and that it depicts an abundance of sex for this reason (Ullén 2005, 27). Indeed, Rino's new porn films allow him to consume time for an entire weekend. The half empty bottle of vodka implies that he has entered a state of timelessness and forgetfulness in which his reality merges with the mediated reality he is watching. The italicized statements and questions that «end» the quoted episode, or «number», can be understood as lines from the porn movie and/or Rino's (inner) monologue directed at the girls on the screen. This strategy is repeated numerous times throughout the narrative, creating an ambiguity that indicates and emphasizes the lack of distinction and unclear relationship between mediated realities and the diegetic reality of *Fatso* in Rino's perception of the world.

Rino's pleasure in this situation could be said to be a «pleasure of the interface» between viewer, technology of vision, and the object viewed (Springer 1991, 306). The sight of the

12. On/scenity is defined by Williams as the «gesture by which a culture brings on to the public scene the very organs, acts, 'bodies and pleasures' that have heretofore been designated ob-off-scene, that is, as needing to be kept out of view» (1999, 282).

moving images of female bodies causes his arousal and interactive engagement. While masturbation relieves Rino of sexual tension, he is left unsatisfied, alone with mediated images on the screen. In the depiction of his quest for better sex that *is* satisfying, the narration increasingly focuses on how Rino combines masturbation with sexual fantasies involving women he encounters in «real life» and in public. Initially, his fantasies revolve around strangers – the check-out girl at the supermarket, the girl who delivers pizza, waitresses, and girls at a bus stop. Progressively, they involve women who are «friends» and «close» to Rino, namely his high school girlfriend, Maria's friend Lara, and, most importantly, Maria herself. Each of these fantasies can be understood as a different sexual «number» (masturbation, *ménage à trios*, lesbianism) that he explores. Seen in succession, they represent a development toward physical contact and «intimacy», even «better» sex, and more sexual satisfaction.

Like much pornography, *Fatso* depicts a situation in which the woman's body is «solicited, questioned, and probed for secrets that are best revealed when she herself is not in control» (Williams 1999, 51). Here, Rino rapes Maria and then expresses satisfaction in the chapter entitled «Pussy» (quoted in its entirety):

Om jeg må forklare meg i morgen, vet jeg ikke om hun [Maria] vil forstå. Det lukter av henne, fra pikken og opp mot magen står det en fuktig, glatt stripe av henne og det smaker av henne når jeg putter fingrene i munnen: jeg står inne på badet med pikken rettet mot sluket i vasken og alt jeg egentlig tenker er at jeg har fitte på pikken, fitte på pikken, fitte på pikken, *fitte på pikken*. (321)

[If I have to explain my actions tomorrow, I don't know if she'll [Maria] understand. It smells of her, from my dick and up to my stomach there's a moist, smooth stripe of her. And it tastes of her when I put my fingers in my mouth: I stand in the bathroom with my dick pointed at the plughole in the sink, and all I'm really thinking is that I've got cunt on my dick, cunt on my dick, cunt on my dick, *cunt on my dick*. (316)]

The possibility of a sexual union initiated by Maria, and implicitly motivated by her desire, offers Rino the opportunity for «good sex» and sexual fulfillment. Thus, the narrative reaches equilibrium.

VISUALITY AND THE MALE BODY

Closely connected with the «porn project» that structures *Fatso* is a «male gender project» or project of male gender normalization. Masculinity is arguably based on muscle forms, ways of moving and acting, and possibilities in sex (cf. Connell 1995), and modern masculinity defines itself through an ideal of manly beauty based on appearance, physical posture, and demeanor (cf. Mosse 1996). In other words, the visual appearance of the male body is not only a key to being «a man», but this ideal is based on visibility, on being seen *by others*. In *Fatso*, Rino ultimately performs the male gender according to socially acceptable norms, becoming «hard» and seemingly more disciplined.

In her book *The Male Body* (1999), Susan Bordo argues that physical bodies are seen to reflect emotional states of restraint, discipline, and self-esteem.¹³ Dieting and body-building or other exercise are therefore not just about «looking good», but also about developing a body that makes one feel safe, respected, and in control (Bordo 1999, 57). In other words, the hard body that imbues toughness, the «take no shit body», is connected with feeling attractive and powerful (57):

Increasingly, the size and shape of the body have come to operate as a market of personal, internal order (or disorder) – as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual (193).
[...]

No longer signifying inferior status [...], the firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct attitude; it means one ‘cares’ about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to ‘shape your life’. (195)

Seen in light of these perspectives, Rino’s physical appearance at the outset of the novel can be connected to a less-than-ideal or even deviant life style and moral attitude. He is «fat» and «out of control»: His messy apartment is littered with paper towels covered with the consequences of hours of masturbation. The text also emphasizes how Rino’s body «overflows» with bodily fluids and waste in the forms of sweat, ejaculate, urine, and upchuck. In addition, his body indicates his level of (inner) stress, aggressiveness, and need to «let off steam» through itching, farting, nose picking, masturbating, and the like.

Fatso shows how changes in Rino’s physique and physical fitness are connected to a greater degree of self-control and self-esteem: «Jeg vet ikke. Det føles som om jeg har forandret meg: nå kan jeg løpe tre kvarter i ett strekk hvis jeg vil, jeg kan ta hundreogfemti situps og i hvert fall førti armhevninger. Det er kanskje ikke så ille. Jeg har mage, fettett mitt er der, men mer som fast spekk. Jeg har uansett ikke valker» (284). [I don’t know. I feel I’ve changed: I can run for three-quarters of an hour non-stop now if I want, I can do a hundred and fifty sit-ups and at least forty push-ups. That’s not bad, really. I’ve got a belly, my fat’s there, but it’s a firm fat. At least I haven’t got any spare tires. (278)]¹⁴ Rino’s «gender project» shows the relevance of Michel Foucault’s notion of the body as an area of social control that we as individuals (learn to) discipline in order to conform to the norm or regime (cf. Foucault 1984). Implicitly, the text reminds us that the body is understood as an object that we «work on» through sports, diets, plastic surgery, that is imposed to discipline and control in the regime of modern Western society. It also reminds us that neither the body nor gender is an essence or natural, but performative, continually evolving in a process involving the repeated citation of norms over time. As Judith Butler writes:

13. George Mosse (1996) also shows that the ideal male body has traditionally symbolized virtue with self control, cleanliness, and physical strength connoting the moral position, inner harmony, and power of the good citizen.

14. Rino’s transformation from a «fat slob» to a slimmer and more disciplined «hunk» is contrasted with the opposite change in Maria. She gains weight, becomes more of a «slob» who is more relaxed about her appearance, and who gradually has less control over her bodily functions. As Rino and Maria «mirror» each other to an increasingly greater degree, the text implies that each is (becoming) an appropriate (sexual) partner for the other. Likewise, Rino’s gradual «coming out» (as he leaves the confines of his apartment and becomes more physically and socially active) is contrasted by Maria’s «development». A sexually liberated woman who can be characterized as a social butterfly on the go, Maria seems to be less active and more «at home» in a monogamous «relationship» with Rino as the narration draws to a close.

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. [...] That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (1990, 43–44, 173)

Rino changes his performance of gender and, in doing so, his body reflects that he can exercise (some) discipline and control. The narrative reaches its climax in the chapter entitled «Wild» where Rino experiences a sense of belonging, with the implication being that he also feels seen, attractive, and powerful: «*Det er sånn livet burde være, og det er sånn det er akkurat nå, tenker jeg for meg selv. Jeg jubler*» (293). [*That's how life should be, and right now that's how it is, I think to myself. I'm exultant.* (287)]

Rino's revised gender performance might indicate a change in attitude. Yet, the text is ambiguous as to the extent of his self-discipline and to whether or not there is an actual change in Rino's gaze, his perspective on women, or his attitude. Indeed, his rape of Maria indicates at the very least that he has difficulty exercising restraint and control. Periodically, he has a bad conscience, admitting to himself that there is no way he can «make good again»: «*Det jeg gjorde med Maria den natten er det mest sinnsyke, desperate jeg har gjort. En ting er å fantasere om det. En annen er å prøve*» (325). [*What I did to Maria that night is the most insane, desperate thing I've done. It's one thing to fantasize about it. Another to try.* (319)]

This ambiguity leads scholars such as Jørgen Lorentzen (2004, 173) to emphasize growth and development in Rino's character:

Han har foretatt en dobbel bevegelse i løpet av fortellingens tid. På den ene siden har han begynt å avgrense kroppen, slik at den ikke lenger flyter utover alle grenser og skaper uklarhet mellom jeget og omverden. Viktigere enn dette er at han på den andre siden begynner å se den andre som et reelt menneske og ikke som en forlenget fantasi, og dermed er i stand til å åpne opp for den andres perspektiv.

[He has made a double movement during the course of the story time. Firstly, he has begun to limit his body so that it no longer overflows all boundaries and creates a lack of clarity between the self and the surroundings. It is even more important, though, that he secondly begins to see the other as a real human being and not as an extended fantasy, and that he therefore is capable of being receptive to the other's perspective.]¹⁵

Rino has clearly begun to limit his body, but is the result greater clarity between Rino and his surroundings? Does Rino undergo the inner development that Lorentzen postulates? Or does Rino's rape of Maria reflect a continuation of his initial outlook on and fetishizing of women rather than a break from it? Seen in light of the porn video, this action is integral to Rino's «porn project» with its goal being the experience of «good sex» and sexual fulfillment. This project involves «getting Maria» (to stay).

It is telling that Rino justifies his action and sees it as a «sign» that he is «on his way up again»: «*Hun lider ikke under det. Hun får jo ingen varige mén så lenge ingen sier noe*»; «*Faktisk øyner jeg en mulighet for at opplevelsen med Maria kan fungere som et opprykk*» (325). [*She's not suffering as a result. She'll have no lasting effects, so long as nobody says*

15. My translation.

anything; In fact, I have a notion that my experience with Maria might represent some sort of move forwards (319)]. The novel implies that Rino's process from «fatso» to «hard» is not an inner development from a less-than-ideal state to a position of greater integrity, judgement, and morality (symbolized by his «hard» body), but the superficial «make-over» needed to help him «fit in» and «get some». Such an understanding of Rino is in keeping with the fact that pornographic characters often are «flat» and do not develop (cf. Williams 1999; Sontag 1991).¹⁶

The novel is critical of today's contemporary, superficial, youth-oriented consumer culture in which sex is emphasized over love. In the context of the social criticism and irony in the text, Rino's «development» is hardly a positive one. In addition to raping Maria, he turns his back on his only friend, Phillip, because he is ashamed of him, and because Phillip doesn't fit in with the new crowd Rino hangs with. He also abuses Maria's friend Lara, whom he is attracted to, by terrorizing her with disturbing phone calls.¹⁷ These examples indicate that Rino's initial attitude and behavior are strengthened – if anything – rather than weakened as his body becomes «harder».

PORNOGRAPHY, THE GAZE, AND THE PEEPING TOM

We have seen how pornography thematically and structurally informs (the depiction of) Rino's «porn project». This «porn project» is linked to Rino's «gender project» through narrative strategies underlining the pornographic focus on visuality and the body. In porn videos, «voyeurism, narcissism/self-looking, display, denial of looking, [are] a series of entertaining plays on what is at the heart of porn: looking, showing, being looked at» (Dyer 1998, 512). Looking is also the pivotal issue in *Fatso*, where the motifs of the (male) voyeur and Peeping Tom emphasize the connection between looking, sexual arousal, and sexual satisfaction.¹⁸

16. Williams points out that hard core has «habitually resisted narrative elaboration, complex plots, character development, and so forth», and that it has remained a «relatively episodic form» (1999, 50). Contemporary pornography may deviate from this description, which in my perspective fits *Fatso* as well.

17. Rino is also the object of abuse: Maria and Lara «check out» the size of Rino's penis after he passes out in the shower. The culmination of this invasion of privacy and sexual abuse is that Rino comes, as Maria tells him later (in a textual representation of the money shot):

Så vi legger deg ned på senga og kler av deg resten for du er jo søkkvåt. Hun [Lara] æ'kke snau, så tar hun tak i pikken din, hun sier hun bare må kjenne på den. Hun har aldri sett en så stor pikk før [...]. Da setter du deg plutselig opp, og så griper du henne i skulderen og mumler noe i ørska. Lara skvetter, men istedenfor å slippe, så tviholder hun på den, kanskje fordi hun blir så redd. Og så kommer det bare. Masse. [...] det var *overalt*... Oppover armene. På kjolen. Jeg visste nesten ikke at det var mulig med så mye. (333–334)

[Well, we lie you on your bed and take all the rest of your clothes off, because you're soaking wet. She's [Lara] totally off the wall, so she takes grabs hold of your willy. She says she's *got* to have a feel. She's never seen such a huge willy before. [...] Then all of a sudden you sit up, and you grab her by the shoulder and mumble something totally incomprehensible. Lara's in shock, sort of, but instead of letting go, she holds on even tighter. Maybe because she's scared. And then it just cums. Masses of it. [...] I don't know, but it was *everywhere*... Over her arms. Her dress. I hardly knew it was possible for there to be so much. (327)]

18. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the term «Peeping Tom» «derives from the legendary Peeping Tom, a prying tailor who was struck blind (in some accounts, struck dead) for opening his window and watching Lady Godiva as she rode naked through Coventry to demonstrate against heavy taxes on the town» (*Britannica Academic*, s.v. «Peeping tom», accessed February 15, 2016, <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/58950>).

Rino is the man who «cops a glance» or «steals a look» whenever he can – not only while watching porn movies or surfing porn sites on the web, but also through the keyhole or window, or at the store or mall:

Etter en stund blir jeg gående og bare kikke. Jeg tar rulletrappene opp, blar i olabukser ikke så langt fra omkleddningsrommene: nakne smale legger og tynne sokker med en svak, svak nyanse av blått eller rosa. Romper så godt som nakne bortsett fra det tynne buksesstoffet. Bløt hud. Bikinistriper. Jevn brun bløt hud. Små vietnamesere, mørke latinobabes med mørke sorte øyne som sveiper over hele rommet. Blondiner med legger som holder på å knekke. Frodige brunetter. Kløfter med hud så myk at det ser ut som om man kan stikke en skje i det bløte kjøttet og fettene og bare suge det i seg. Bitte små jenter med tykke lepper. Stringtruser som stikker opp og går i bue akkurat under valkene over hoftene. Hendene gjemt inne i lange ermer. Plastposer. Ryggsekker. Håndledd myke av lotion. Det er som om jeg blir tvangsføret, som om det stappes ned i halsen på meg fra alle kanter: fra monitorene i tv-butikkene, plakatene i parfymeriene og klesforretningene, flokk på flokk med kropp som enten kjører opp og [sic] ned rulletrappene, vrir seg som i bol, innoljet. En jevn rus fra tærne og opp til hodet, i fingrene. Som å stikke hodet i en bløt ferskenpai: alt jeg behøver er å åpne munnen og bevege haken. Om jeg var attraktiv, ville jeg aldri klart å velge: det er kvinner overalt. Deilige kvinner, jenter, kropper, hud. Smak. Lukt. Kjøtt. (59)

[I walk around again, just watching. I take the escalator up, browse through the jeans not far from the changing rooms: slender, bare calves and thin socks with a soft, gentle touch of pink or blue. Asses as good as naked apart from thin summer fabrics. Soft skin. Bikini stripes. Smooth, bronzed skin. Small Vietnamese girls, dark Latino babes with dark, black eyes that sweep the entire room. Blondes with stick-thin legs. Buxom brunettes. Cleavages so soft they look like you could stick a spoon in their creamy flesh and sup it up. Tiny girls with thick lips. G-strings that show, forming an arc just under their love handles. Hands hidden in long sleeves. Plastic bags. Rucksacks. Wrists softened with lotion. It's like I'm being force-fed, like I'm having it shoved down my throat from every direction: from the screens in the TV stops, the posters in the perfume departments and clothes shops, flock after flock, bodies either going up or down the escalators, as if writhing in one great hive, oiled. An ecstasy thrilling from my head to my toes, into my fingers. Like sticking your head in a soft peach pie: all I have to do is open my mouth and move my jaw. If I was attractive, I'd never be able to choose. There are women everywhere. Gorgeous women, girls, bodies, skin. Taste. Smells. Flesh. (53)]

In the first two parts of *Fatso*, Rino is repeatedly depicted – as he is here – in situations where he secretly watches women and finds (sexual) pleasure in doing so. This kind of voyeurism, emphasizing the sexual aspect of the act of looking, is in keeping with the dictionary definition: «the practice of obtaining sexual gratification by looking at sexual objects or acts, esp. secretly».¹⁹ In this passage, Rino's (heterosexual white male) voyeuristic gaze consumes the female objects of his desire. Incomplete sentences and sentence fragments can be understood to represent individual «peeps» at or «close shots» of concrete, specific (female) body parts that are enumerated and objectified as a fetish commodity.

The visual stimuli and mediated representations of women connected with the sale and consumption of goods are described in a way that calls Laura Mulvey's famous essay from

19. Webster's *Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (New Revised Edition, 1994).

1975 to mind. These women are «simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*» (Mulvey 1989, 19). The representation of the sexualized female bodies of different shapes, sizes, and color in the quoted passage above slows down the tempo of the narrative. As in hard core porn movies, it is «as if the spectacle of the naked or nearly naked body, male or female, retards any possible forward narrative drive» (Williams 1999, 71).

Although Rino is repeatedly absorbed by the spectacle of female bodies on the diegetic level, the depiction of Rino's voyeuristic and sexual activity is arguably for the *readers'* benefit. The unusual combination of two different pictures on the covers of the original publication underlines this point: The paper jacket cover shows (a photograph of) pale pink rose buds as they are coming into full bloom. However, when one removes the paper jacket, the hard cover of the book shows an orgy of (beautiful) naked women obviously «on display». ²⁰ Some of these women are performing forms of sexual activity atop platforms or large tables draped in pink sheets and decorated with garlands of pink roses. Others are on the «floor». The orgy is thus obviously «staged» with the intention of giving (male) viewers (visual) pleasure. The scene is reminiscent of the genre of *Stilleben*, understood as «a closely cropped and focused arrangement of objects on a table» (Rowell 1997, 51). The women in the picture on the cover of *Fatso* are, like objects in a *Stilleben*, arranged in an aesthetically pleasing way as objects of the (male) gaze. Actual readers who un-cover the pornographic image that initially is hidden or «under cover» (physically under the paper jacket or metaphorically) unsuspectingly become Peeping Toms who may then indulge in voyeuristic tendencies or experience discomfort in their position.

Likewise, the novel's narrative project is directed at the extra-diegetic level. The detailed, graphic language slows down the tempo of the action and creates «spectacles» that prompt *readers* to «see» (visualize) in the mind's eye. ²¹ Thus far, I have used the term «readers» to refer to the textual strategy of the implied reader that indicates an observer role and a gaze aligned with Rino's. In addition, my use of the term has included empirical or actual readers who, in the act of reading, take the role of voyeur, «seeing» the objects of Rino's gaze from his perspective. However, because implied and actual readers of contemporary novels such as *Fatso*, which emphasize the visual and visualization, can be said to be spectators, consumers, and (to varying degrees) connoisseurs of visual media, I prefer the term *reader-viewers* and will use it hereafter. I find the term «reader-viewers» more adequately able to denote reading positions that assume familiarity with image conventions and genres, and that entail the process of visualization, of «re-creating» previously mediated images (cf. Paulson and Gjelsvik 2009).

Throughout the novel, (representations of) «close ups» are predominant, also in those passages where Rino is not present in the role of voyeur or Peeping Tom:

Huden min er som en galtes, hvit som skummet melk med rødlig, nesten gult hår, skjegg og øyenbryn. Jeg er ikke engang feit nok: jeg er overvektig, men ikke nok, ikke slik at trekkene mine blir

20. Ramsle has downloaded this picture from the internet (cf. Ramsle 2003b).

21. I have elsewhere referred to this activity as the «visual event of the contemporary novel» (cf. Paulson 2016).

runde og myke som noe du skulle ønske å kjæle med. I stedet er flesket mitt grotesk fast, som om jeg skulle ha smurt silikon eller noe lignende over muskulaturen. (12)

[My skin's like a hog's, white as skimmed milk with reddish, almost golden hair, beard and eye-brows. I'm not even really fat enough: I'm overweight, but not enough; not so my features are round and soft so you'd want to cuddle me. Instead my fat is grotesquely firm, like I've smeared silicone or something all over my body. (6)]

Through imagery (i.e. skin white as skimmed milk), word choice and detail (i.e. fat is grotesquely firm; like I've smeared silicone), the graphic language creates a representation of Rino's body, putting it «on display» so that reader-viewers «see» this young man who perceives of himself as an invisible, fat loser.

Pornography, it is said, «finder sted for øjet» [takes place for the eye] (Gade 2005, 6), and is a drive for knowledge (in Foucault's sense) where the stimulus is in the looking (cf. Koch 1990). Pornography, it is also suggested, is motivated by a desire to make visible as much as possible of the experience of sex, especially that which is not normally seen by someone engaged in having sex. Williams (1999) refers to this as «the principle of maximum visibility» and notes the lengths to which pornography goes to show sexual organs and actions, privileging close-ups of body parts over other shots. Hard core attempts «to 'represent' the physical pleasure of the male by showing erection and ejaculation» and to seek knowledge of the hidden (i.e. invisible) «secrets» of female orgasm and pleasure. In the development of the porn film, there has therefore been an emphasis on «the pleasure of seeing previously hidden parts, or motions, of the woman's body» (Williams 1999, 49, 53).

In *Fatso*, there are also numerous descriptions of «previously hidden» or «almost visible» parts of the female body such as in the following passage:

Fra telefonkiosken har jeg utsikt til fotballbanen gjennom en glippe i skogholtet. Jeg stikker telefonkortet inn i automaten, drar opp gylfen og trekker ut pikken, luften er kald inne i telefonkiosken, det er som om noen trær et kaldt, tynt stoff over den varme pikken og lysken.

[...]

Mens treneren setter opp hvite og røde kjegler på banen, varmer fotballaget opp. En jente med korte, strake bein og en bukse av tynt kunststoff lener seg frem og setter hendene i bakken, tøyer. Overallen sklir ned. Hun står med rompa i været, *rompa i været klar til å bli tatt*, og naken mage, undersiden av brystene fremme. Sports-behå. En annen jente ligger utover gresset med sprikenne bein, lent fremover med hendene rundt den ene ankelen, innsiden av lårene, lysken så vidt synlig under shortsene. (65–66)

[From inside the phone box I've got a view of the football pitch through a gap in the shrubs. I stick my phone card in the slot, open my flies and whip my dick out. The air in the phone box is cold, like someone's trailing a chill, delicate fabric over my warm dick and groin.

[...]

As the team coach sets out red and white striped cones on the field, the football team warms up. A girl with short, straight legs and tracksuit bottoms made of thin, artificial fabric bends forward, touching the ground with her hands, stretching. Her top slides forward. She stands with her ass in the air, *ass in the air ready to be taken*, her midriff bare, the underside of her boobs

visible. Sports bra. Another girl lies on the grass, legs sprawled, leaning forward with her hands around one of her ankles, her inside thighs, her groin almost showing under her shorts. (59–61)]

Here, reader-viewers are positioned as voyeurs, both «looking» at the girls *with* Rino and «looking» *at* Rino, whose pleasure and sexual arousal is expressed by the italicized «*ass in the air ready to be taken*» and focus on his phallus.²² Tellingly, the narration (and the «gaze» of the reader-viewers) returns again and again to (descriptions of) Rino's sexual organ and its size:

Pikken min er svær. Det er jo et pluss. Jeg har en svær pikk. Akkurat dét tror jeg en dame kunne ha likt ved meg. Jeg hadde faktisk den største pikken på ungdomsskolen, og på videregående også. Jeg kan banne på at om jeg skulle måle pikk med noen her inne [en tex-mex restaurant], selv på en fullstappet dag, ville min vært størst. Det ligger til familien. (43)

[My dick's huge. That's got to be a plus. I have a huge dick. Just that alone could be reason enough for a woman to like me. In fact, I had the biggest dick at school, and college too. I'd swear that if I measured my dick against anyone else's in here [at the tex-mex restaurant], even on a day when it was really packed out, mine would be biggest. It runs in the family. (36–37)]

In passages like this, the status of the phallus is underlined as a cultural sign of strength and enduring symbol of power. Descriptions of this kind that focus on Rino's body or his phallus «up close» call to mind the «principle of maximum visibility» found in hard core porn films. These representations can be seen in connection with the contemporary male-oriented economy of sexual pleasure, but they are arguably also versions of the explicit representation in pornography of «(not just ordinary but quite spectacular) penises» (Williams 1999, 266).

PORNOGRAPHY, THE PEEPING TOM, AND READER-VIEWERS

We have seen how the figure of the voyeur helps to align reader-viewers' «look» with Rino's in the first couple of parts of the novel as he spies on women at the shopping mall or girls on the soccer field. After this, the focus of the narration shifts. Rino is no longer repeatedly depicted in the spectating position of the Peeping Tom, but is put «on display», as in the following example:

Dotten III

Døra lukkes. Maria setter på cd. Det siver røyklukt inn på rommet mitt. De [Maria og kjæreste] forlater leiligheten. Jeg klemmer kusehårene til Maria rundt pikken like før det går for meg: jeg drar hånden over bildet av Kobé Tai, soper sammen hårene og legger dem rundt roten på pikken, der hvor fitta ville ha lukket seg om pikken. (92)

22. This scene is parallel to the one in which Rino masturbates as he watches porn videos. In both instances, readers «see» with Rino and simultaneously «look at» Rino. However, the objects of Rino's gaze are mediated images on a screen on the one hand and «live» bodies on the other. In this way, the text indirectly points out how mediated images form how we see (ourselves and others), and shows how pornography is «a form of mythmaking – a way of doing something to the world, of acting symbolically upon it» (Williams 1999, 128).

[Fluff III]

The door closes. Maria puts a CD on. The smell of cigarette smoke creeps into my room. They [Maria and her boyfriend] leave the flat. I squeeze Maria's pubic hairs around my dick just before I cum: I stroke my hand across Kobé Tai's picture, scoop the hairs together and arrange them around the base of my dick, where her cunt would have closed itself around my dick. (86)]

Representations of «close ups» of Rino's phallus in scenes such as this can be seen as versions of the «money shot», the close up in porn movies where viewers see that which symbolizes the culmination of sexual satisfaction, male ejaculation. «Graphic» and «gritty» details are predominant, prompting reader-viewers' visualization of the scene in the mind's eye. In the chapter entitled «Arnold Lane» (107–108) we find a parallel scene:

Dotten IV

Inne på rommet legger jeg dotten inn i trusa til Maria, etter å ha luktet. Det luktet nesten litt for mye, mer enn først antatt, og det var et hvitt belegg der, men det har gitt meg skikkelig ståpikk. Jeg legger stoffet i en løkke rundt pikken, strammer, drar til, det dingler over pungen. Jeg stopper, lytter etter skritt i oppgangen, noen låser seg inn i underetasjen, jeg fortsetter.

Knulle deg, knulle deg så hardt. (114)

[In my room I lay the cluster of hairs in Maria's knickers, having smelled them first. Their smell was almost too strong, more than I'd expected at first, and there was some white stuff, but it's given me a really big hard on. I wrap the material in a loop around my dick, tighten it, pull on it, it dangles over my scrotum. I stop, listening for steps on the stairwell. Someone lets themselves in downstairs. I go on.

Fuck you, fuck you so hard. (108)]

With Rino at close proximity, reader-viewers again take the role of the Peeping Tom focused on Rino's arousal and sexual activity. Through repeated use of the rhetorical figure of the apostrophe throughout the text, the narrator addresses an absent «you» whose identity is ambiguous. Given that Maria's underwear is a prop and catalyst for this sexual «number», the statement of desire to «*fuck you*» may refer to her, but may also be directed at «any» or «every» woman.²³

Attention to the pornographic strategies in *Fatso* shows the reading process to be a voyeuristic experience in which visualization is an integral part and reveals that the novel follows a certain form of the logic of desire found in pornography. In this way, Ramsllie positions the written word as a visual pornographic medium. Because representations of the «money shot» are most often absent or implied in scenes depicting sexual activity, the narrative strategies underline arousal rather than satisfaction. I would argue, then, that Ramsllie plays with reader-viewers' arousal. This aspect is essential to the narrative project of creating a Peeping Tom.²⁴

23. In their reviews, several Norwegian critics comment that Rino's aggressive sexual fantasies and vulgarities catch readers off guard or take readers by surprise (see, for instance, Stemland 2003 and Tangen 2003). Terje Stemland (2003) calls the language in the novel's prologue «så rått og usminket at man ingeni lunde trenger å være noen sart sjel for å få bakoversveis» [so raw and lacking make-up that one in no way needs to be of delicate nature in order to be taken aback].

24. See Hawthorn (2014) for an interesting and insightful discussion of nonreciprocal gazing, including spying, surveillance, voyeurism, and gender and racially based objectification, on both thematic and formal levels in narrative fiction and film.

It is tempting to compare *Fatso* with the stag film, where voyeur characters play a key role. In this genre of hard core, male subjectivity is dominant and women are always viewed from the point of view of the phallus. The function of this form of hard core is primarily to arouse, and so stag films incorporate «voyeurism into their narratives as strategies both for arousing their characters and for matching the character's 'look' with that of the spectator in their beginning sequences» (Williams 1999, 68). As we have seen, this is the case in *Fatso* as well. In both early hard core and Ramsli's novel, voyeurism is the device that gets everyone involved.

The images in (film) pornography have an appeal to the body and share an apparent intent to arouse viewers. Indeed, Williams points out that the experience of arousal itself is an important aspect of the contemporary experience of «on/scenity». As a written medium, pornography also has a «definite, aggressive impact» on readers (Sontag 1991, 47) and one intension, namely to move viewers in the direction of action. As a result, a parallel has been drawn between pornography and advertising,²⁵ both of which focus on «[...] selling and persuading to 'spend'. Both forms might also be said to be promiscuous in their address, in their desire to attract and excite with their images as wide a public as possible» (Nead 1998, 487).

In film, spectators can «get into» the spatial and temporal fictions of the narrative in many ways, for instance by identifying with the look of the camera and the logic that pieces together isolated fragments of space and time into narrative sequence and diegetic unity. One of the strategies that functions in this way in literature is the predominant use of the present tense.²⁶ When the present tense dominates as it does in *Fatso*, it makes events «live», creating the illusion that the narrative is occurring simultaneously with the narration. Even so, this present is «not a 'true' present that refers to the speaker's present moment, but a narrative present [that] evokes the past as though it were present» (Cohn 1978, 157).

In *Fatso*, the use of this «evocative present» creates the illusion of proximity and closeness to the protagonist and the events «taking place». In this way, the meta-level creates a parallel to the diegetic level with reader-viewers functioning as Rino's counterpart in the role of Peeping Tom. Likewise, the reading process can be seen to parallel Rino's blurring of the boundaries between mediated reality and his «reality». Understood as a political – and politically correct – project, the novel is a satire, an ironical commentary on our contemporary superficial and sex-fixated society in which no one, not even the reader-viewers, escapes the text's critique. Pornographic strategies are integral to this social criticism that also seems to target our increasingly voyeuristic society where there are «new, more intense, and even more intrusive forms of voyeurism than at any time in history» (Calvert 2000, 10). At the same time, the pornographic strategies (re)produce an ideology in *Fatso* in which the male gaze is dominant.

Pornography aims to sexually arouse and move in the direction of action, and so claims Williams, it «wants» to be about sex, but always proves to be more about gender (1999, 267). Sex, of course, is never «natural». Rather, it always occurs within a discourse that eschews a

25. See, for example, Marcus (1966).

26. Flashbacks and summaries are narrated in the past tense (predominantly in part three), marking ellipses in the narrative and the passing of time.

certain view of the world. Placed within the context of pornography, sex is «seen» and mediated in certain gendered ways. This insight has also been formulated more generally in the context of the study of visual culture: «Spectatorship as an investigative field understands that what the eye purportedly ‘sees’ is dictated to it by an entire set of beliefs and desires and by a set of coded languages and generic apparatuses» (Rogoff 1998, 22).

By asking questions about spectatorship, about who sees and what or who is seen, and about the «images» that inform representations of the gaze, fantasies, and desires, we can gain insight into both contemporary literature and visual culture, as well as the relationship between them. Because of their use of strategies that enhance the visual and visualization, we find that contemporary novels such as *Fatso* are perhaps first and foremost meant to elicit certain responses. Here, pornographic strategies are integral to what we might call Ramsli's aesthetics of affect. As a tool for cultural analysis, *Fatso* shows how pornography in a wide sense can be said to «help define the forms of the exciting and desirable available in a given society at a given time» (Dyer 1998, 504). We also find that Ramsli's suggestive, subversive, and provocative narrative about modern (Western) society is ultimately less about loneliness than the male gaze, less about sex than gender, and less about love than power.

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