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In my paper “BeautifulAgony.com and the Representation of Pleasure,” I examine a website launched in 2004 known as Beautiful Agony: Facettes de la Petite Mort in order to explicate the ways in which orgasm and pleasure are conceived and represented. Beautiful Agony is a subscription-based website featuring downloadable video submissions of both women and men experiencing orgasms. The videos are framed from the shoulders up and contain no nudity; the videos convey sexual pleasure entirely through facial expressions and sound. The creators of the site define it as “hardcore without nudity.”

Using Linda Williams’ work on pornography as a theoretical backdrop and Andy Warhol’s film *Blow Job* as a site of comparison, I argue that Beautiful Agony’s approach, while novel in many respects, fails to challenge the notion that there is a truth of pleasure that can be captured and conveyed. The site postures as a correction to the misrepresentation of pleasure in

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hardcore pornography by eliminating the naked body and the sexual acts that may or may not be occurring. The question of the body is left to the imagination of the viewer—the viewer becomes the agent of symmetry left to suture in a fantasy of the body that could possibly live up to the confession of pleasure presented.

The absence of the naked body allows Beautiful Agony to shift the site of anxiety from the “realness” of the pleasure to an anxiety regarding what is or is not taking place off camera. This is how Beautiful Agony attempts to avoid collapsing under the weight of the impossibility of its promise—that it could guarantee pleasure, that it could represent the truth of pleasure in some way. While Beautiful Agony’s conceptual approach to the question of pleasure is a departure for the online sex industry, I conclude that the site falls into the same traps as more traditional pornography, but does so by avoiding the presumed deceptions of the body altogether. The defining dilemma of hardcore pornography is not that it misrepresents pleasure, but rather that it presumes to be able to capture pleasure in the first place and, through this image, deliver us ourselves in the process.



Anna E. Ward is a third-year Ph.D. student in the Women’s Studies program at UCLA and is a recipient of the Chancellor’s Graduate Fellowship. Her research focuses on representations of pleasure within media culture—particularly the representation of orgasm. She did her undergraduate work at UC Santa Cruz in Politics and Women’s Studies.