

Pornographesis: Sex, Media and Gay Culture

by

John Paul Stadler

Graduate Program in Literature  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
N. Katherine Hayles, Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Robyn Wiegman

\_\_\_\_\_  
Priscilla Wald

\_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Garréta

\_\_\_\_\_  
Antonio Viego

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Literature in the Graduate School  
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ABSTRACT

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## Abstract

How does gay pornography inscribe gay identity, and what might that inscription reveal? *Pornographesis* asks how gay pornography has come to organize the feelings, desires, pleasures, memories, attachments, and identifications of the male homosexual subject. LGBTQ scholarship tends to forego a rigorous study of gay erotic media altogether in favor of less sexualized, more recuperable objects. As a result, the representational histories and media cultures of gay pornography remain largely obscured from contemporary discourse. This dissertation examines regimes of gay pornography that make visible its shifting contours. Unlike other studies that take pornography as their subject, mine does not aim to reduce pornography's meaning to monolithic postures of either pleasure or harm, but rather locates the possibility for vexed in-betweens, discontinuities, and ruptures. The central question of *Pornographesis* is not just how gay pornography inscribes gay identity, but how that inscription changes over time and according to circumstance. Across four sequential eras, I examine notable shifts in the narrative structures, cultural position, and reception practices of gay pornography. I link these shifts to changes in media, from 8 and 16mm film to video, print, telephonic, theatrical, and digital technologies.

Situated as an Americanist project, *Pornographesis* engages the historical materialism, media shifts, and narrative dynamisms that attend its development from

the 1960s to today. Following Laura Kipnis's notion that pornography is one of culture's honored sites for working through social problems, I approach gay pornography as an engagement with the "problem" that homosexuality has been thought to constitute. In each era, gay pornography inscribes identity around a different set of relations to produce figures that range from necessarily clandestine, to defiantly perverse; from obsessively technophilic, to exploitatively entrepreneurial. Moreover, each era reveals the many and changing demands that the producers and viewers alike place on pornography: that it be beautiful, liberated, narrative, risky, safe, carnal, political, elegiac, honest, authentic, masculine, interactive, and so forth. As such, this dissertation argues that there is not just one uniform gay pornographic culture, but many. The mercurial quality of gay pornography delivers not just pleasure, but critical intervention in political crises, alternate imaginings of social structures, and valuable contestation of the rigid demands of heteronormative masculinity. *Pornographesis* makes the case that the study of gay male pornography is not merely instructive, but is in fact crucial for comprehending modern gay identity.

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## Preface

The genesis for this dissertation came about amidst the pursuit of a different project, but its germination could be found right from the start of my graduate career at Duke University. In a class by Rey Chow titled “Theories of Mimesis,” I wrote a seminar paper on a genre of pornography I had found perplexing: gay-for-pay. In that paper, I sought to understand how pornography that I assumed was made for gay men could possibly claim its performers as straight, and what that straightness could possibly mean in the context of sex acts that are routinely taken to codify one’s homosexuality. Was this some sort of imitative act, and if so, who was imitating whom? Slowly, but surely, that little paper morphed into something more: a workshop paper, a conference presentation, and eventually an article. Simultaneously, I began work on my dissertation, which focused on experimental forms of conceptual poetry, something much more in line with the kind of scholar I thought I would become.

While at my first film conference in Seattle, an impromptu meeting at a local bar with Robyn Wiegman altered the course of my academic career and convinced me that I had already found my object of study in gay pornography. Could I complete a project on such a topic? Would I ever find a job? How would it be received by academia? These were not small questions, and there were no simple answers. I had little idea what kind of journey I was undertaking, but the community of likeminded thinkers I found at that conference and the encouragement Professor Wiegman gave me in that moment

convinced me that not only was it possible, but that it was the kind of critically challenging project I had come to Duke to pursue. Something about this project *wanted* to be written. It spoke to me on a level that conceptual poetics could never hope to; it connected me with my past, and it felt urgent to the moment.

The writing came slowly, but little by little I began piecing together this dissertation's shape. During a research trip in the fall of 2016 to the New York Public Library to peruse their impressive collection of gay magazines from the 1970s, I received a distressing phone call from my mother. I was standing in Bryant Park in New York City on a crisp autumn afternoon. The trees were dropping speckled orange and crimson leaves. The moment felt and still feels vaguely cinematic. In the course of our conversation, my mother—distraught from the recent death of her brother—revealed to me a somber secret: “John, I wish you didn’t sleep with men.” This wish caught me off guard. I had come out to my family well over a decade preceding this call, also on the phone, following the suicide of my first boyfriend. At the time, my mother had been compassionate and accepting. While her religious friends convinced her that I needed reparative therapy, we eventually settled into semi-comfortable forms of avoidance or silence. The emergence of her wish broke this silence. I’ve puzzled a good deal over its meaning ever since.

At first, I interpreted my mother’s wish as a veiled disdain for gay sex. I read her message “I wish you didn’t sleep with men” as “I wish you didn’t have sex with men.”

In the days that followed the phone call, I would imagine myself indignantly responding to her, naming the prohibition for what I thought it concealed: “Listen, mom, we don’t do much sleeping. We’re too busy having sex.” I had interpreted “sleep” as a cypher for “sex,” the word my mother would not—indeed, could not—dare utter.

This interpretation made a certain kind of sense. We often speak in tongues to one another, but with more distance, I came to find another meaning in her confession: “I wish you didn’t sleep with men.” Sleeping with men: could that somehow be more abhorrent to her than “the act” I had for so long assumed profaned against her beliefs—the fact that I might share intimacy with another man such that I would share a bed with him and lie in repose in the most vulnerable of states: that of the unconscious? To sleep with men is to move beyond the sex to the states that follow it, from the refractory period to countless other reveries: an embrace, a conversation, a cigarette, a late night snack, a television show to fall asleep to. To move into the wake of sex’s end toward sleep would mean that a way of life had sprung from such intimacy. If it were simply about the sex, that would be one thing.<sup>1</sup> But the bigger worry, the forever mourned fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault writes, “One of the concessions one makes to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure, of two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other’s asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease, and for two reasons: it responds to a reassuring canon of beauty, and it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that’s what makes homosexuality ‘disturbing’: the homosexual mode of life, much more than

was that I would want to sleep with the men I have sex with. Sex had blinded me to the numerous meanings that reside within, beside, and beyond it.

My mother's wish that I not sleep with men reminded me that I had once harbored a similar wish. Growing up in a wholesome suburb in the heartland of America, the Internet and pornography taught me to name my desires, but also to wish to be rid of them. Initially, what I wanted was a certain kind of sex, and not its attendant identity structure. It is not uncommon for minority groups to locate and make sense of themselves not from within, but without, from the media around us. Watching gay pornography routed my desires; it gave me the language and carnal knowledge to make sense of my nagging longings. It helped me to put words to desires, even if they were desires I had longed to shake off, be rid of, and leave behind. Eventually, these desires were ones I came to find comfort in. Pornography inscribed in me an identity steeped in strange and beguiling pleasures, at a time when the only language I had been given to understand them were shame, or worse: nonexistent. Its role in my life has continued to hold meaning for me as a facet of my sexuality, even if I thought its role in my life was prelude.

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the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another—there's the problem." Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow; trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: New Press, 1997): 136-137.

While gay pornography served a pedagogic significance in my life as a form of queer tutelage, what can be said of the study of pornography as a critical endeavor? Within the context of cultural studies, resistance to pornography studies makes little sense: pornography is one of the most popular forms of popular culture; its prevalence and dissemination in our society are unquestionable, and to foreclose an epistemological project to understand it better would be, if nothing else, irresponsible. Within film studies, the question of how to attend to new media that reimagine and reassemble moving images has been a contentious, but productive debate. Pornography offers a unique point of entry into the very question of new media's emergence and flourishing, since it has always been an early adopter and driver of cutting edge technologies (the VCR, Internet, smart phone, etc.). This symbiosis suggests the desire to innovate and produce new forms of the moving image has always, in some form, linked to an erotic drive. Thirdly, to queer studies, a close attention to gay pornography in particular reveals the manner in which such representations hold deep and abiding social, historical and cultural meanings for sexual minorities as a form of cultural representation. The surfeit of other niche pornographies that circulate in our digital world also points to the fact that pornography is not a monolithic category, but rather must be understood as a shifting category with a host of counter-pornographies, each with a multitude of stories to tell.

In what follows, I take gay pornography seriously as an object that can not only enrich queer studies, film and media studies, and cultural studies, but that can also serve as an intervention into and challenge to their underlying assumptions. As pornography is taboo, so too is pornography studies in many domains of academic life. Pornography has always been a *making explicit* of sex, but its presumptive goal to arouse and produce pleasure has been met with deep suspicion, and often rightly so. But that is only one part of the story. One might ask why this is almost always the case, given other current trends of making explicit what was once unspeakable. Recently, popular dialogue about forced sexual encounter—known colloquially as the “#metoo” movement—has hastened a shift in the ways we speak about sex; it has been a *making explicit* of that which has been previously occluded as unsayable and a *rending of power* away from those who have historically wielded it in cases of sexual misconduct. Following the shift toward a deeper analysis of the abuses of power in sexual relations, as well as the nuance and ambiguity that many such relations reveal, my project seeks to offer a mode of reading gay pornography that opens us up to the ambiguity and nuance of this popular cultural form if we attend to it historically, discursively, and closely.

The impulse to return pornography to the realm of the unsayable, the disparaged, or the culpable is always—like the many-headed hydra—poised to return. Just days after the mass shooting at Douglas High school in Parkland, Florida, the Florida state legislature declared pornography a health crisis while refusing to hear

arguments on a proposed assault rifle ban.<sup>2</sup> Pornography and video games often come under fire as origin stories we can tell ourselves — what gets termed in academia as the “media effects” debates — to explain socially deviant behaviors, but this linkage has been attenuated, if not wholly discredited, by numerous social scientists. The moment seems right to think about pornography in less dichotomous terms, and to reimagine the questions we might ask of it. *Pornographesis* invites us to examine gay pornography from multiple angles across time, to query its media ecology, and to locate not just the denotative obviousness — here is sex — but also its connotative richness.

Consider what follows a rerouting of pleasure away from watching pornography and toward a close reading of it. Pleasure and violence have been the dominant stories well tell about pornography, but the chapters I offer consider the other uses and meanings that resonate across gay pornographic production, including liberation and shame, elegy and remembrance, activism and dissent, danger and safety, intimacy and estrangement, authenticity and imitation. Advocating that pornography is also within the purview of critical hermeneutics resists pornography’s denotative force as the whole story. In other words, *Pornographesis* offers a model of porn literacy that places curiosity and inquisitiveness at its center, and which can help to further enrich the debates that have so productively shifted the popular discourse in recent memory.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/02/21/florida-house-refuses-to-debate-guns-but-declares-porn-dangerous/?utm\\_term=.cd69f128cb0a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/02/21/florida-house-refuses-to-debate-guns-but-declares-porn-dangerous/?utm_term=.cd69f128cb0a)

Of course, it is challenging for pornography to shake off its conventional status as a tabooed representation. As a teenager, this was a sensation I felt acutely: to watch pornography was to hold a secret, a knowledge I sensed I should not have, another thing to be hidden from the world, alongside my attraction to men. But it was also the secretive nature of pornography that made me feel understood, that we were both illegitimate, inappropriate, and outcast. That was something to take solace in. It seems important not to let go entirely of the status of pornography as an agitative form of knowledge, and equally, within the field of queer studies, to consider more acutely the connections that this disseminator of sexual fantasies may hold with understandings of queerness. Gay pornography did not inscribe in me a neat and singular identity, nor is it an origin of my sexual behavior; it shifts its tones, its structures, its meanings. It more often than not leaves a remainder, something I have come to call its connotations, and it is this vexed quality that makes gay pornography such a potent historical and critical object of study. *Pornographesis* hopes to show that you *don't* actually know pornography when you see it, that its inscriptions are multiple and often deeply layered, and its meanings can come in waves, sometimes much later than at the point of viewing. To know pornography, you truly have to read it.

# 1. Introduction: Inscribing Gay Pornography

## 1.1 Pornographesis

Perhaps the most salient index to male homosexuality, socially speaking, consists precisely in how a man looks at other men.

-D.A. Miller<sup>1</sup>

“It is possible to insist upon the connection in the modern West between (primarily male) homosexuality and the cinema as an institution,” Lee Edelman writes in *Homographesis*.<sup>2</sup> This connection binds cinema’s “decisive relation to the power of the gaze”<sup>3</sup> with a particular way that men who are gay look at one another. Edelman continues:

This association of the male homosexual with the aggressive deployment of vision, on the one hand (i.e., in his “habit’ of gazing at ... male partners”), and with his passive susceptibility to visualization or perceptual recognition on the other (i.e., as the object of the cultural enterprise that seeks to render the gay body legible) makes the cinema a particularly important institution within which to consider the function and effect of gay inscription or homographesis.<sup>4</sup>

The use of the word “aggressive” is telling: this is a look that hopes to pierce the exterior of its objects and to locate within some kind of authentic, but hidden—if not authentic *because* hidden—essence. In his articulation, not only does the male homosexual aggressively look for the signals that inscribe an other’s gayness, but also the male

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Miller “Anal Rope,” *Representations* 32 (Fall 1990): 124.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in gay literary and cultural theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 200.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

homosexual aggressively avoids the same structure of vision (he calls this a simultaneous *de*-scribing, akin to an erasure) of that piercing look by others who would seek access to the very same knowledge. This look structures and delimits the homosexual male as, generically, a clandestine and secretive figure. Edelman's analysis of the male homosexual gaze leads him to a new concept, *homographesis*, which he defines as follows: "Like writing, then, homographesis would name a double operation: one serving the ideological purposes of a conservative social order intent on codifying identities in its labor of disciplinary inscription, and the other resistant to that categorization, intent on *de*-scribing the identities that order has so oppressively *inscribed*."<sup>5</sup>

The idea of *homographesis* informs the following project immeasurably, as the title *Pornographesis* signals in its repetition with a difference. What follows is a project indebted to and yet revisionist of Edelman's concept, which assays its meaning when read through hard core. Edelman develops the cinematic case for homographesis with a close reading of Otto Preminger's classic film noir *Laura* (1944), a case informed and circumscribed—if not co-written—by the prescriptive demands of the Production Code.<sup>6</sup> His study of *Laura* concerns a "mediated or veiled" representation, whose depictions

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> The Motion Picture Production Code was a set of industry moral guidelines that was applied to most United States motion pictures released by major studios from 1930 to 1968.

intended “to shore up the integrity of those very sexual categories that the *explicit* depiction of homosexuality as such was thought to subvert.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, Edelman embarks on a project of connotation.

Connotation has a long tradition within gay scholarship. D.A. Miller writes about it at length in his essay “Anal Rope,” from which this introduction takes its epigraph. For Miller, connotation, borrowing from Roland Barthes’s understanding of the term, occupies a secondary position to denotation.<sup>8</sup> Noting the manner in which François Truffaut offhandedly refers to the protagonists in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Rope* (1948) as “two homosexuals,” a designation the film never gives explicitly, Miller asks, “How do we think we know?”<sup>9</sup> Truffaut’s assuredness is a curiosity, given the film’s refusal to name its characters as such. Miller presses upon *Rope* for all of its connotative richness to locate just how we think we know, and in the process, gives insight into the complex demands we make of connotation.

Indeed, Miller finds connotation always provides an excess of meaning that impedes certainty, because the connotative inquiry never ceases to proliferate; and yet, paradoxically, it is precisely its intended purpose to provide confirmation. Intriguingly, Miller links the project of connotation to “the dominant signifying practice of

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<sup>7</sup> Lee Edelman, *Homographesis*, 201.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), 7.

<sup>9</sup> D.A. Miller “Anal Rope,” 118.

homophobia," which seeks to root the homosexual out of the closet.<sup>10</sup> In other words, this desire for *connotation* to speak the truth of one's sexuality elevates *denotation* as its ultimate purpose, or, as we see here, desire:

Connotation, we said, excites the desire for proof, a desire that, so long as it develops within the connotative register, tends to draft every signifier into what nonetheless remains a hopeless task. Hence, the desire assumes another, complementary form in the dream (impossible to realize, but impossible not to entertain) that connotation would quit its dusky existence for fluorescent literality, *would become denotation*.<sup>11</sup>

If denotations are given, connotations are taken (and often taken too far). Can the hope that connotation might become denotation ever be satisfied?

I suggest the representation of gay sex in pornography offers us the most denotative transformation of the connotative desire. In "Anal Rope," Miller searches for gay sex, only to locate such an insinuation in the barely perceptible sutures of the film's minimal blackouts.<sup>12</sup> But what might homographesis reveal once the insinuation of homosexuality recedes, and in its place explicit representation delivers us into the realm

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>12</sup> Miller's interpretation is more complicated than I can do justice to in this space. As a technical challenge to himself, Hitchcock had set out to film *Rope* as though it were a single shot. Due to the limitations of film stock at the time, which could not record more than ten minutes of footage at a time, Hitchcock could not achieve this effect, in practice. To give the semblance of a single shot, however, he concealed the inevitable edits he had to make by moving the camera into strategically placed shadows. Hidden within these fleeting shadows—which often fell on the backside of our protagonists—were his cuts. It is within the darkness of these cuts on the backside of these protagonists that Miller locates the connotation for an anality that cannot be shown and to the very sex that cannot denotatively be called forth. He goes on to associate the connotation of the cut and anality to a castration anxiety first encountered in the primal scene. Ibid., 126-128.

of the denotative?<sup>13</sup> Curiously, not many media scholars have sought to answer this question, choosing instead to recuperate connotation in the hopes of approaching a denotative destination.<sup>14</sup> I, on the other hand, am embarking on a reverse journey to show that denotations of what comes to be called “gay sex” never cease producing connotations, nor should we presume they ever could. As a technology of vision first and foremost, pornography is typically cast as a purely denotative genre. Eugenie Brinkema critiques the supposed immediacy and uncomplicated apparency afforded to pornography that would seem to require nothing more than a surface reading, stating quite to the contrary that it demands a radical formalism.<sup>15</sup> What Brinkema refers to as pornographic obviousness, I refer to as pornography’s denotative quality, or its

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<sup>13</sup> One attempt at an answer—and certainly a more capacious and expansive account—can be seen in Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet*, but this history, steeped in journalistic and activist discursiveness, also must exert the majority of its study on veiled depictions of gayness. It is only in the final chapter of *The Celluloid Closet* (1981, revised edition: 1987) that Russo turns to the cinematic representation of “out” gay characters, and even then, the depictions in question are far and few between, and disappointingly flat, villainous, depressive. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Alexander Doty’s early queer media scholarship, while interested in this very question, continues to locate queerness within mainstream texts. He goes on to write, “it often seemed that the most dramatic and effective way to overturn cultural and critical conventions that construct queerness as connotation was to argue that what had been (or could be) seen as ‘just reading (queerness) into things’ was actually revealing what was there in the text.” In other words, Doty seeks to make the connotation denotative. See Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xii.

<sup>15</sup> Eugenie Brinkema writes, “My aim [...] is to disqualify these appraisements for textual apparency and to suggest that pornography, in particular in its extremest forms, is the site at which criticism most vividly encounters what Althusser dubbed in *Reading Capital* ‘the illusion of immediate reading,’ the myth of ‘an innocent reading,’ and the impasse of calls for a reading without distance, without dislocation, with transparency and accuracy. Pornographic obviousness, in fact, is the terrain where the larger task of reading for form is most urgent and where critical claims for description (in the name of the self-evident, the obvious, the apparent, and the surface) are shown to be unable to produce a reading at all.” See “Irrumation, the Interrogative: Extreme Porn and the Crisis of Reading,” *Polygraph* 26 (December 2017): 149.

“already-all-thereness.” And while pornography *may all be there*, I argue that just as connotation cannot cease speaking, denotation is never the whole story, nor always the story we want. For instance, Miller asserts denotation may not provide the liberation we presume it holds, writing that, even post-Stonewall, “the cultural surround of legal, social, psychic, and aesthetic practices (the last including those of spectatorship) [...] tolerate homosexuality only on condition that it be kept out of sight”<sup>16</sup> If that is the case, then the explicit denotation of gay sexuality—precisely the fulfillment of the anal images that Miller connotatively sees hidden deep in *Rope’s* five “black outs,”—suggests gayness may never escape its connotative readings.

What would a study into *pornographesis* make legible that *homographesis* cannot? The supposition that we already know what pornography can and does show forgets that connotations continue to proliferate, unbidden. In other words, while denotation is the first reading, it is rarely the last, and while the denotation may appear uncomplicated and fully formed, connotations continue to inflect its meaning, produce instabilities, and deny closure. At the moment when pornography arrives on scene in the early 1970s and seems to give the gay man denoted denuded desire, how does this arrival distract us from seeing the connotative richness that for so long had whispered sex’s insinuation? Connotation defies easy capture, but its pursuit rewards the reader in

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<sup>16</sup> D.A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” 118.

unexpected ways. The desire for a pure and unsullied denotation seems motivated by the idea that connotation occupies the logic of the closet, homophobia, and oppression—and their attendant practices of hiding, outing, beating. But what if the closet never leaves the gay man, or sublimates in various ways? What would banishing the closet from speaking do for an understanding of gay identity over time? The inscribing of homosexuality comes with a *de*-scribing, Edelman tells us, and gay pornography offers a unique site to track both.

The word “pornography” etymologically breaks down to “the writing of prostitutes,” making inscription a critical feature of its understanding. Similarly, the “graphesis” of Edelman’s *Homographesis* is meant to invoke an inscriptive quality. The “graphesis” of *Pornographesis* gestures to the same “inscription” in both, but also to the visual register of the “graphic,” as in a maximal vision, not an occluded one. It is in the slippage between a certain type of vision (all-seeking, all-knowing) and language (descriptive, deconstructive, defamiliarizing) that this project “graphs” the male homosexual figure across his pornographic manifestations.<sup>17</sup> The descriptions that follow aim not only to describe pornographic texts in depth through close reading

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<sup>17</sup> While *Homopornographesis* might more aptly define the proper object of this project, the cumbersomeness of such a compound noun dissuaded me from the impulse to over-describe. I rely instead on the reference to Edelman’s *Homographesis* to signal this project’s investment in male homosexual subject matter. In fact, the supplanting of “homo” by “porno” asks that we read the two together, and against.

practices, but also to *de*-scribe—as in, challenge, undo—the “already-all-there-ness” that constitutes the inscriptive force of pornography.

## **1.2 A Counterpornography, a Counterhistory**

From the beginning of Gay Liberation in the late 1960s through the contemporary moment, there has been explicit gay pornography, but prior to the 1960s, largely only soft-core homoeroticism. Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo note the serendipity of—and meaningful connection between—the arrival of the newly “out” gay man and hard core’s arrival into theaters: “When thinking specifically about gay pornography, one cannot help but be struck by a particular historical ‘coincidence.’ The emergence of feature-length hard core pornography in the United States occurred in the relatively fresh wake of the Stonewall rebellion.”<sup>18</sup> Moving-image pornography in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a burgeoning form that sought to make sex maximally visible, and hard core’s “coming on scene” in the early 1970s shared homologous relations to gay men’s “coming out” of the closet to seek their own increased visibility and recognition. It is important to consider to what degree these processes reflect and inform one other, as well as to ask to what degree their parallelism masks more concealed particularities.

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<sup>18</sup> Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, “The Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities of All-male Moving-Image Pornography,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 144.

But how did gay pornography emerge, and what, if any, is its relation to the broader category of hard core? I argue that gay pornography holds a distinct and separate history from mainstream pornography, which typically foregoes the modifier “heterosexual,” assumed already to be an essential quality. This statement may seem obvious, but as Mandy Merck points out, “In the long-running debate on sexual representation, gay men’s pornography has proved as controversial as its heterosexual counterpart, if only because the two have so often been equated.”<sup>19</sup> I propose that, following Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s notion of the *counterpublic*,<sup>20</sup> gay pornography may be thought of as a *counterpornography*, that is, as an alternate form of pornography that serves a world-building function for its viewers . By turning attention to the complexity of its separate tradition, I seek to make legible the cultural narratives that coalesce around its formation but which lack adequate attention. In other words, *Pornographesis* reads the history of gayness through its own pornography, and the story that emerges deviates from the mainstream story of heterosexual hard core in important ways.

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<sup>19</sup> Mandy Merck, *Perversions: Deviant Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 217.

<sup>20</sup> In defining the counterpublic, Berlant and Warner acknowledge their desire, “We are trying to promote this world-making project, and a first step in doing so is to recognize that queer culture constitutes itself in many ways other than through the official publics of opinion culture and the state, or through the privatized forms normally associated with sexuality.” Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Winter, 1998): 559.

Situated within an American context, this dissertation tracks the dynamic shifts and re-articulations of regimes of gay pornography over approximately the last half century to make visible and examine their vexed inscriptions of gay desire. It is my contention that grand narratives of gay history — that gay liberation was founded upon increased visibility, that the AIDS epidemic popularized safe sex via condom usage, that the neoliberal gay subject maintains a coherent sexual identity and empowered individualism — gain nuance and complexity when read against the pornography of their respective eras.

Productive lines of thought emerge when gay pornography is thought of as a counterpornography. To begin, its distinction from mainstream pornography insists upon an account of the historical, media, and narrative forces that make legible the category of “gay pornography” in any given moment. Second, how that triangulation changes over time reveals the dynamic nature and slipperiness of the category, as well as the multiple stakes that come to inflect it. Third, gay pornography’s inscriptive force, which is to say, how it writes upon and delimits the imagined bounds of gay subjectivity, will tell different stories at different eras, and I try to identify and give shape to those narratives. These considerations circle around a central problem: if gay pornography is a counterpornography, what worlds does it imagine, make possible, or seek to produce?

Gay pornography has long stood in the shadow of—and, as a result, been folded into the cultural logic of—mainstream pornography. Cindy Patton, in fact, noted their similarity back in 1996, “Gay and straight porn now looks remarkably similar, not least because many companies produce both using the same actors. Both rely heavily on a narrow range of sexual activities—mainly oral sex and fucking—and close-ups of intercourse interrupted (completed?) by copious come shot.”<sup>21</sup> *Pornographesis* seeks to combat that trend by disarticulating the two, even if such a task does not come easily. Mainstream pornography has not always been heterosexual in content (think, for instance, of the usurpation of lesbian sex acts within numerous ‘straight’ pornos<sup>22</sup>), but it has, with few exceptions, been made for an imagined straight male viewer. Furthermore, mainstream pornography has overwhelmingly participated in patriarchal,

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<sup>21</sup> Cindy Patton, *Fatal Advice: How Safe-Sex Education Went Wrong* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 168.

<sup>22</sup> The invocation of all-women sex acts (or “lesbian sex,” with heavy emphasis on the quotation marks) within heterosexual pornography is a common one, which is largely seen as constructed by and for the pleasure of a male heterosexual. Lynn Hunt writes of this trope’s existence as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when “Men wrote about sex for other male readers. For their own sexual arousal, men read about women having sex with other women or with multiple partners. The new fraternity created by these complex intersections of voyeurism and objectification may have been democratic in the sense of social leveling for men.” Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone, 1993), 44. A lesbian pornographic filmmaking tradition does not appear to exist in the “golden age of pornography,” which Heather Butler notes carries forward the same trope Hunt marked several centuries before, stating, “There is no shortage of woman-to-woman sex scenes in mainstream heterosexual pornography (or what I like to call the ‘lesbo-jelly’ in the hetero-donut). Typically, the ‘lesbian’ number serves as a warm-up for the ‘real’ thing, that is, sex with a penis that will eventually ejaculate.” Heather Butler, “What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers? The Development of Lesbian and Dyke Pornography,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 173.

heteronormative,<sup>23</sup> and unabashedly consumerist ideologies, with which gay pornography on the whole has held a more contrary, although at times fraught, relationship. By conceptualizing it as a counterpornography, the epistemological intrigue of gay pornography comes to reside in its specificity and dynamism, rather than in a supposed essentialism. This counterpornographic recognition minimizes this dissertation's interest in the debates of deleterious or beneficial media effects, or rather, shows the binary way of posing the question to be contingent upon the given moment. And while gay pornography has been received among some non-male gay audiences through cross- and disidentificatory<sup>24</sup> processes,<sup>25</sup> *Pornographesis* narrows its focus to ask how gay male viewers have been interpellated and inscribed by their consumption of such media. My focus on the implications that this counterpornography holds for "inscribing gayness" does not, however, seek to delimit or deny what those inscriptions

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<sup>23</sup> There are exceptions to this observation. Zebedy Colt gives one example of putatively mainstream heterosexual porn that smuggles in moments of queerness. See Whitney Strub, "Sex Wishes and Virgin Dreams: Zebedy Colt's Reactionary Queer Heterosmut and the Elusive Porn Archive," *GLQ* 23.3 (2017): 359-390. For a second, see Jake Gerli, "The Gay Sex Clerk: Chuck Vincent's Straight Pornography," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 198-220.

<sup>24</sup> Here I refer to José Esteban Muñoz notion of *disidentification*, which describes an act of transgression and creation wherein the minority subject comes to partially identify with and transform a representation that is not meant for them, or which is yet another other. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Here I am referring anecdotally to the viewing practice of lesbians who watch gay male pornography. There are also the traditions of slash fiction and boys' love manga, which are created by women and feature homosexual male sex acts.

might be at the outset. I am open to the possibility of vexed meanings, contradictions, and confusions.

I have alluded to the idea that the legibility and uses of gay pornography have changed drastically across eras, leading to yet another tenet that I hold to be axiomatic: pornography is not monolithic. In 1980, John Ellis contested the supposed coherence and knowability of pornography, stating:

They all assume that 'pornography' is an inherent attribute of certain representations. This is an untenable assumption: 'pornography' is rather a designation given to a class of representations which is defined by particular ideological currents active in our society. These ideological currents are crystalized into particular political groupings which produce their own definitions of 'pornography' and propagate them through various kinds of actions against particular representations. Different criteria are used, so that the definition of 'pornography', its supposed effects, and methods of limiting them, are areas of struggle between differing positions.<sup>26</sup>

Ellis suggests that there is not one pornography but many contingent pornographies, which negotiate forces, vectors, positions, and power structures. In other words, pornography comes to name a complex and changing relation to society and appears more like an argument than a discrete thing.<sup>27</sup> Incorporating this logic into my own project, it would follow that there are then multiple gay pornographies, which are

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<sup>26</sup> John Ellis, "Photography / Pornography / Art / Pornography," *Screen* 21.1 (1980): 81-108.

<sup>27</sup> This assertion is not a novel one. Walter Kendrick tells us that pornography emerges as a category only once the upper class began to limit the lower class and women from accessing an archive of obscene materials within museums. See *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Lynn Hunt notes, "pornography as a regulatory category was invented in response to the perceived menace of the democratization of culture." Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity*, 12-13.

themselves multiple gay arguments. This dissertation, while not exhaustive, tracks particular historical constellations—what I am calling regimes<sup>28</sup>—that emerge and recede in gay pornographic production from the 1970s onward. Within these regimes, I isolate texts that speak to growing trends, emergent patterns, and popular iconographies that I then read closely for their anxieties, tensions, and resolutions. If Laura Kipnis is correct that pornography serves as a site where society works out some of its most pressing social anxieties, then there is no better place to understand the ‘problem’ of homosexuality than from within its very self-styled pornography.<sup>29</sup>

### **1.3 Beyond Exceptionalism**

Pornography’s ubiquity in the contemporary moment<sup>30</sup> has lent it two divergent meanings: so common as to become *everyday* and innocuous; so pervasive as to become *exceptional* and impossible to ignore. What I am calling the exceptional position has been

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<sup>28</sup> These regimes cohere loosely around particular decades and dominant media forms. For instance, the first chapter concerns the 1970s hard core era of all-male pornography alongside 16mm film, while the second chapter analyzes 1980s gay pornography through its mediation in theatre, the telephone, and the home VHS market. The third chapter covers the 1990s, the emerging realms of cyberporn, and the continued dominance of video. The fourth chapter looks to the millennial era of gay pornography as it has been altered through the rise of online amateurism via a dispersed panoply of digital apparatus.

<sup>29</sup> She contends, “Culture—including pornography—is a place where problematic social issues get expressed and negotiated,” rendering it as a “particular kind of problem-solving.” Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>30</sup> This ubiquity has come to be named a “pornification” and “pornographication” of culture by many. See Feona Attwood, *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014); Susanna Paasonen, Kaarina Nikunen, and Laura Saarenmaa, *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007); Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Times Books, 2005); Clarissa Smith, “Pornographication: A Discourse for All Seasons,” *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 6.1 (2010): 103-108.

the favored one among critics of pornography, but one that holds multiple inflections. For instance, the supposed exceptionality of pornography can often seem to be an unofficial reason for its study,<sup>31</sup> as in a kind of satisfaction for having chosen a *bad object choice*.<sup>32</sup> This exceptionalism basks in its perceived transgressiveness, similar to the “so bad, it’s good” mantra associated with camp and cult films. An exceptional estimation of pornography can also take the form of a surplus to or excess of the normative capacity for representations, which often appears when pornography is deemed a limit case for [insert claim here], which is to say, any assortment of claims. As a result, pornography gets positioned as the prime site from which to think a set of questions that is inherently bound up in an initial overvaluation.<sup>33</sup> The feminist pornography debates of the 1980s<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In the introductory issue of *Porn Studies*, co-editors Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith open with a humble brag: “Academic journals don’t usually grab popular media attention” (1). They go on to explain that the launch of their journal, however, had achieved just that. One cannot deny the flurry of media scrutiny concerning the launch of a journal devoted solely to the study of pornography, but there does emerge the impression that the study of pornography holds itself in high esteem precisely for being something that we don’t typically consider as needing study. Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, “Porn Studies: An Introduction,” *Porn Studies*, 1.1-2 (2014): 1.

<sup>32</sup> This recalls *Bad Object-Choices*, the editorial collective whose name is playfully aware of the “low” status their objects of inquiry typically receive. See their anthology: *How do I Look?: Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Those questions are often meta-discursive ones. Thomas Waugh, donning the hat of apologist, reveals here the lengthy preamble one must perform to enter into a discussion of pornography that is not solely exceptional: “How then am I to express my solidarity in words and actions with women’s rightful denunciation of pornography as an instrument of antifeminist backlash, of the usurpation by industrial capitalism of the private sexual sphere, of the merchandizing and degradation of women’s bodies, of the incitement of rape and violence against women? Can I do so without aping the standard liberal male guilt-trip or its “we’re oppressed and alienated too” refrain? without echoing the occasional anti-feminist tirades in the gay press by beleaguered men who think they see women lining up alongside the cops? Can I do so while insisting that sexual liberation is still an essential component of political liberation and that erotica has a rightful, even indispensable, place in the culture and politics of sexual liberation — gay, lesbian, feminist,

offer a third mode of exceptional thinking. Here, exceptionalism points to an exemplary quality, which rather than denoting excess, gives just the right amount, but is in fact so indicative, so illustrative, that no other example could suffice (this exceptionalism is slightly at odds with itself, for an *example* would seem to suggest a commonplace and average quality, while its prime quality suggests something altogether above average). To illustrate the third mode of exceptional thinking, the debates Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin popularized in the 1980s presented pornography as the *sine qua non* of women's exploitation in a sexist society; no other example better illustrated the patriarchy. These versions of exceptionalism — transgressive, excessive, and exemplary — dominate and circumscribe pornography criticism of both the anti-censorship and anti-pornography camps.<sup>35</sup>

So often have these discussions dominated pornography's consideration for the last quarter century that leading figures in pornography studies often begin their works

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and yes, straight-male?" Thomas Waugh, "Men's pornography: gay vs. straight," *Jump Cut*, no. 30 (March 1985): 30-35. Future references to this text will not be able to attribute a page number, as the online version does not retain these from the original publication.

<sup>34</sup> One of the best synopses of the complexity of the feminist pornography debates, and the many nuanced positions, can be found by Jennifer Nash, "Introduction: Reading Race, Reading Pornography," in *The Black Body in Ecstasy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 9-21.

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, the position that comes to defend pornography is couched not in terms of pro-pornography, but rather in anti-censorship. This recalls the rhetoric surrounding abortion that maintains no anti- position, but rather pro-choice and pro-life. The terms of debate around pornography, on the other hand, always remain in a negative valence. Nobody, it would seem, wants to be labeled pro-pornography.

with an outright refusal, and yet the recurring rhetorical tendency to gesture to it—I myself have fallen prey to this tendency here—suggests there is more at work in our assertions that we *will not be discussing* pornography in exceptional terms. For example, while the editors of Routledge’s journal *Porn Studies* were keen to highlight the notoriety bestowed upon them by the press as a badge of honor, they also christened their journal with a set of interdictions: “we are not interested in work that is either antagonistic or celebratory; in assumptions about porn as essentially oppressive or corrupting, liberatory, subversive, conservative, empowering, harmful or dangerous.”<sup>36</sup> These prohibitions appear aimed at staving off the continuation of the exceptional position, but their censorship-like quality, even if meant to encourage more complex considerations, seems at odds with a productive examination into pornography in all its complexity. In the same issue, Linda Williams writes that, in regards to *Hard Core*, she “(had) wanted to avoid entanglement in the still-raging debates about the supposed harm or value of pornography.”<sup>37</sup> The language of refusal and avoidance begs the question whether one can willfully avoid these kinds of debates or if the attempt to do so reveals to the contrary a subtle longing to return to the wound that initially structured its inquiry.

Gay pornography has also been implicated in these debates. As I have already noted, gay hard core was not thought of as separate cultural phenomenon from straight

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<sup>36</sup> Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith. “Porn Studies: An Introduction,” 4.

<sup>37</sup> Linda Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field.” *Porn Studies* 1.1-2 (2014): 25.

hard core, but rather, the two came to live under the undifferentiated sign of “pornography.” Indeed, Linda Williams argues in *Hard Core* that “minority pornographies” *should not* be differentiated:

Minority pornographies should not be bracketed as utterly separate and distinct. While they are different from heterosexual pornography, they nevertheless belong to the overall ‘speaking sex’ phenomenon in modern Western societies. To consider these pornographies as separate and distinct is only to reproduce within the study of pornography the same effect as occurs when pornography is set off from other, more accepted or ‘normal’ forms of speech. Richard Dyer (1984, 1985) and Tom Waugh (1985) have already begun to investigate gay pornography from this perspective.<sup>38</sup>

Williams does not maintain this insistence in her later work; for example, in *Screening Sex*, she goes on to specify the unique particularities of gay pornography through Wakefield Poole’s 1971 film *Boys In the Sand*,<sup>39</sup> but it is telling that here she wants to keep pornography *coherent* and *singular*, rather than *heterogeneous*. I locate in Williams’s unifying proscription an anxiety that, if viewed as a separate tradition from minority pornographies, straight pornography *would always* be deemed the *most irreconcilable* mode of pornography, an anxiety that is not without warrant.<sup>40</sup> Regardless, early scholarship on gay pornography was in fact deeply committed to articulating the

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<sup>38</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>39</sup> Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008): 143-154.

<sup>40</sup> This anxiety is informed by positions that distinguished good sexual media (erotica) from bad (pornography). See Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” *Partisan Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1967): 181-212; Gloria Steinem, “Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference,” in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1983), 35-39; *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography*, directed by Bonnie Sherr Klein (1981; Ontario: Studio D, 2009), DVD.

specificity of gay pornography, while also attending to the exceptional position that served, at least partially, to shroud that very specificity.

Thomas Waugh's article "Men's Pornography: Gay vs. Straight" most ardently disrupts this prevailing conflation.<sup>41</sup> In his essay, which appears in *Jump Cut* in 1985, Waugh dispels the notion that gay pornography recapitulated all of the most demeaning and misogynistic features of heterosexual pornography, as well as the accusation of additionally promoting homophobia.<sup>42</sup> Waugh's essay not only disarticulates gay pornography from straight, but furthermore performs a Marxist deconstruction of both forms of "men's pornography" into their constitutive modes: production, exhibition, consumption and representation. This approach simultaneously lent more complexity to pornography than it had often been given credit for, as well as revealed the particularity and contingency of the pornographic media landscape, denying it a sense of coherency and transcendence.

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Waugh's work has been indispensable to the critical study of gay (pornographic) cultures in their historical contexts. For an in-depth exploration into the pre-Stonewall photographic and filmic eroticism of male-male desire and, which laid the groundwork for gay hard core's eventual study, see Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>42</sup> John Stoltenberg of the organization "Men Against Pornography" makes this very claim, which takes its primary argument that heterosexual pornography promotes misogyny from "Women Against Pornography." See John Stoltenberg, "Gays and the Pro-pornography Movement: Having the Hots for Sex Discrimination," in *Men Confront Pornography*, ed. by Michael S. Kimmel (New York: Crown Publishers, 1990), 248-262.

Waugh's analysis not only directly engaged anti-pornography feminism — or what Nadine Strossen calls "MacDworkinism"<sup>43</sup> — but also reframed some of its central tenets. The latter approach will prove formative to my own criticism. Specifically, Waugh challenges the dictum that penetration equals violation in all pornography, stating:

A man or woman portrayed as getting fucked cannot automatically be seen as victim. Gay porn in particular, and of course gay sexuality in general, undermines the widespread assumption in the porn debate that penetration in itself is an act of political oppression. A sexual act or representation acquires ideological tenor only through its personal, social, narrative, iconographic, or larger political context.<sup>44</sup>

Waugh is not simply combative, though, against anti-pornography feminism. On the contrary, one of the contexts he explores is patriarchal privilege, which Waugh acknowledges "gay pornography profits from and aspires to the institutionalized presence of patriarchal power built on the absence / silence of women, and is thus complicit in the oppression of women."<sup>45</sup> If straight pornography demeaned women through explicit subjugation, gay pornography benefited from this system tacitly in women's omission, both of which rely upon an erasure of agency.

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<sup>43</sup> Nadine Strossen, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Waugh, "Men's Pornography, Gay vs. Straight."

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Waugh's conscription of gay pornography to such a vexed position signals that its value as an object cannot be couched in either absolutes: it is neither entirely deleterious nor absolved of questions of power. What Waugh drives home is that the stakes of the debate are not properly articulated, and it is not the job of the scholar to reinstate the false binary, but to break it open.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, Waugh sees in gay pornography a capacity to foster a gay imaginary (rife with contradictions), and as he notes in a particularly salient pronouncement, to transform previously rigid and unyielding political spaces:

Pornography has become one of our privileged cultural forms, the expression of that quality for which we are stigmatized, queer-bashed, fired, evicted, jailed, hospitalized, electroshocked, disinherited, raped in prison, refused at the U.S. border, silenced, and ghettoized—that quality being our sexuality. Our pornography is shaped both by the oppression told by my long chain of participles and by our conditioning as men in patriarchy. We must direct our claims to our pornographic culture, not towards occupying our share of patriarchal space, but towards shattering that space, transforming it.<sup>47</sup>

This defense for gay pornography as integrally informed by and influential over gay men's lives deserves note, not only for its reclamation, but moreover, because it reveals a central tension within gay pornography as it negotiates both homosexual oppression

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<sup>46</sup> Waugh writes that "the interests of gay men and feminists on these issues [feminism, liberation] are not necessarily irreconcilable. The so-called choice between censorship and pornography, art and life, is falsely formulated. Women's right to defend themselves against patriarchal violence and the right of women and sexual minorities to full cultural, sexual, and political expression, are allied rights, both threatened in the current conjecture." *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

and the question of patriarchal complicity. It is Waugh's refusal to arbitrate a final and neat resolution to this tension that this study borrows heavily from, a willingness to let the often messy, complicated power struggles of pornographic cultures remain in their state of frisson.<sup>48</sup>

In the same issue of *Jump Cut*, Richard Dyer's essay "Male Gay Porn: Coming to Terms" appeared.<sup>49</sup> Like Waugh's essay, Dyer takes up the project of distinguishing between gay and heterosexual pornographies, but with noted differences. Dyer's foundational claim contends that "the narrative structure of gay porn is analogous to aspects of the social construction of both male sexuality in general and gay male sexual practice in particular."<sup>50</sup> In classifying the form of that narrative structure, Dyer develops a working definition of pornography as a *body genre*, and as such, claims it as a marginalized and experiential genre that opposes more reputable (and cerebral) genres. Dyer locates in pornography an undervalued and misunderstood experiential

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<sup>48</sup> In a 30-year retrospective of this essay, Waugh would be slightly less diplomatic, stating, "We won the porn wars." (132) Waugh's revisit strikingly gestures to what he sees as the essay's primary interventions, namely: its conceptualization of men's pornography as existing on a continuum; its defensive posture; its refusal to participate in the pornography/erotica semantic logjam; its acknowledgment of the primary masturbatory function of pornography; and its archiving of the sex wars. Thomas Waugh, "'Men's Pornography, Gay vs. Straight': a personal revisit," *Porn Studies*, 4:2 (2017): 131-138.

<sup>49</sup> Dyer's other work would not significantly focus on gay pornography, although he does make critical contributions to the question of race in film and queer representation. His essay "Idol Thoughts: orgasm and self-reflexivity in gay pornography" would be his last explicitly concerned with the topic. His work *Now You See It* would pay fleeting attention to gay pornography.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Dyer, "Male gay porn: Coming to terms," *Jump Cut*, no. 30, (March 1985): 27-29. Future references to this text will not be able to attribute a page number, as the online version does not retain these from the original publication.

knowledge. How Dyer “comes to terms” with gay pornography is by positioning it as a site where viewing subjects “re-educate desire.”<sup>51</sup> That is, for Dyer, gay pornography’s knowledge offers a radical, political, and constitutive site for the cultivation of desire, as well as hope:

Homosexual desire has been constructed as perverse and unspeakable; gay porn does speak / show gay sex. Gay porn asserts homosexual desire, it turns the definition of homosexual desire on its head, says bad is good, sick is healthy and so on. It thus defends the universal human practice of same-sex physical contact (which our society constructs as homosexual). It has made life bearable for countless millions of gays.<sup>52</sup>

Dyer resituates gay pornography, discerning in its representation the capacity for life-affirming and world-building practices.

This impulse might be read as idealistic or utterly utopian, but Dyer—like Waugh—complicates his reading of gay pornography by assigning it a complicity with heterosexual pornography. Most pronounced is the shared narrative drive toward visual climax, which cuts across both modes of pornography, a structure Dyer sees unified under the “norms of male sexuality.”<sup>53</sup> In contrast to Waugh’s reclamation of depictions of pleasure for the receptive sex position, Dyer argues the narrative is never organized around the receptive position, or, colloquially, “the bottom.” Rather, he argues the pleasure of the ejaculator reigns supreme, rendering the penetrator as the visualized

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<sup>51</sup> Dyer pulls this idea from Mick Carter, “The Re-education of Desire: Some Thoughts on Current Erotic Visual Practices,” *Art and Text* No. 4 (1981), 20-38.

<sup>52</sup> Dyer, “Coming to terms.”

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

focal point just as this figure operates in heterosexual pornography.<sup>54</sup> Having conceded this structural synonym, Dyer offers ambiguity as the complication to gay pornography's complicity with patriarchal power:

Like male homosexuality itself, gay porn is always in this very ambiguous relationship to male power and privilege, neither fully within it nor fully outside it. But that ambiguity is a contradiction that can be exploited. In so far as porn is part of the experimental education of the body, it has contributed to and legitimized the masculine model of gay sexuality, a model that always implies the subordination of women.<sup>55</sup>

In this manner, Dyer argues that gay pornography may connote the subordination of women by rendering her absent figure through the gay bottom, whose pleasure is never prioritized. The ambiguity of this connotation, though, suggests Dyer considers the other features and functions of gay pornography to perhaps speak more prominently.<sup>56</sup>

Given Waugh and Dyer's foundational work in navigating the claims of anti-pornography feminism, it is all the more curious that Williams in *Hard Core* goes on to claim gay pornography always held a distance from these debates, stating:

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<sup>54</sup> A number of scholars, following Dyer, will come to think through the question of the power structures that attend to the passive receptive sexual position. See Leo Bersani, Richard Fung, Nguyen Tan Hoang, among others.

<sup>55</sup> Dyer, "Coming to Terms."

<sup>56</sup> It is striking that scholars of gay pornography first turned their attention to the question of misogyny, rather than to what in hindsight might have been a more pressing question for the moment in addressing how gay pornographic cultures engaged with or remarked upon the AIDS epidemic. Dyer positions gay pornography as a refuge for gay men amidst the backdrop of homophobia and the AIDS epidemic and bestows what until then are uncommon features upon it: ameliorative and pedagogical qualities. Waugh only references AIDS in passing, which he explains in his retrospective was due to having written the bulk of the essay in 1981, four years before it went to print. Thomas Waugh, "'Men's Pornography, Gay vs. Straight:' a personal revisit," 133.

Unlike the feminists, however, this group has not needed to be defensive about its interest in pornography for the simple reason that since women are not represented in this particular 'pornutopia' the usual concerns about the abuse of women fall away. With no anti-porn feminists breathing down their necks, and with a whole culture and history to reclaim, gay historians and critics have engaged in a much more celebratory form of criticism and have written about the genre with both eloquence and passion.<sup>57</sup>

As I have shown in their works, early scholars of gay pornography were not removed from these debates, and often took complex, ambiguous, and indeed implicated positions with regards to patriarchal power. One of the results of the avowed complicity, though, does follow from Williams in the form of a counterbalance, whereby reclamatory, affirmational, or utopic interpretations intervene; this kind of corrective still registers as an exceptionalism, albeit attenuated. If exceptionalism takes the superlative form—the best—then this attenuation looks more akin to the comparative form—better. Going forward, *Pornographesis* refuses to overstate gay pornography's virtues but rather seeks to allow for more vexed in-betweens and ambiguities.

By the 1990s, a respectable size of scholarship on gay pornography had emerged in essay and chapter form,<sup>58</sup> and yet only one scholarly monograph to this date has taken

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<sup>57</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, x-xi.

<sup>58</sup> This list includes: Richard Fung, "Looking for my Penis: The Eroticised Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *How Do I look?*, eds. Bad Object Choices, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991); Richard Fung, "Shortcomings: questions about pornography as pedagogy," in *Queer looks: Perspectives on lesbian and gay film and video*, (New York: Routledge, 1993): 355-67; Earl Jackson Jr., "Graphic Specularity," in *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Kobena Mercer, "Imaging the Black Man's Sex," in *Photography/Politics: Two*, (1987): 97-164; Kobena Mercer, "Skin head sex thing: Racial difference and the homoerotic imaginary," in *How Do I look?*, eds. Bad Object Choices, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991): 169-210; Cindy Patton, "Visualizing safe sex: When pedagogy and pornography collide," in *Inside/out: Lesbian*

up the question of gay moving-image pornography in a direct and sustained manner.<sup>59</sup>

John Champagne's "'Stop Reading Films!': Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay

Pornography" stands out in its own attempt to try to negotiate these exceptional

positions. He writes: "I want to suggest polemically the absurdity and perhaps even

perniciousness of submitting gay porno films in particular to close textual analysis."<sup>60</sup>

Champagne's objections to close analysis are multiple: it diminishes our attention to

social and historical conditions; it feigns a sense of objectivity that cannot be sustained; it

fetishizes the text; its hyper attentiveness to details distorts the text's lived experience;

and its reliance on heteronormative hermeneutics no longer suits the gay form.

Champagne's criticisms largely hinge on the discourse of film studies, which he argues

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*theories, gay theories* (1991): 373-86; Cindy Patton, "Safe Sex and the Pornographic Vernacular," in *How Do I look?*, eds. Bad Object Choices, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991); David Pendleton, "Obscene Allegories: Narrative, representation, pornography," *Discourse* 15, no. 1 (1992): 154-168; Todd D. Smith, "Gay male pornography and the East: Re-orienting the orient," *History of Photography* 18, no. 1 (1994): 13-21; Scott Tucker, "Gender, Fucking, and Utopia: An Essay in Response to John Stoltenberg's *Refusing to Be a Man*," *Social Text* 27 (1990): 3-34.

<sup>59</sup> John R. Burger's pulished revision of his MA Thesis in Performance Studies from New York University arrived in 1995. In it, Burger's text treats gay male video pornography—focused on the 1980s and early 1990s—as a critical site for understanding the cultural heritage and popular memory of gay men. Like Dyer and Waugh, he is careful to separate gay pornography from straight, but he also acknowledges the internalized homophobia and negative images that can reside within some instances. His contribution can be seen in his declaration of gay pornography as not simply fantasy-based, but as also aspirational, and as such, he lends a political valence to gay pornography that he hopes can serve as "an effective method for getting us up, getting us off, and getting us through socially imposed barriers." John R. Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995), 103.

<sup>60</sup> John Champagne, "'Stop Reading Films!': Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 76.

uses close analysis as a way of dealing with the outlaw nature—or what I have called its exceptional position—of pornography, in a kind of taming. He writes:

Faced with the challenge of coping with these forbidden texts, film studies in the heteronormative academy relies on the practice of close analysis to contain the threat and promise—for both men and women, straight and gay—of gay pornography and the porno arcade. In its psychoanalytically inflected variant in particular, it uses close analysis to diagnose the desire of (homo)sexualized spectators, a desire it thinks it already knows and can recognize.<sup>61</sup>

It is interesting to note that the language Champagne deploys to write about close analysis is the language of contagion—“coping with,” “contain the threat”—perhaps not surprisingly since this was a dominant way of speaking about the AIDS epidemic. The arrival of queer theory as an alternative rubric also seems to inflect Champagne’s disdain for and desire to replace “heterocentric” forms of knowledge.

Rather than be rid of close analysis altogether, I borrow from Champagne’s polemic a renewed attentiveness to the exhibition practices and reception histories that offer insight into how gay porno films were actually experienced, and seek to locate precisely the experiential knowledge Dyer writes about before him. It is hard to know if Champagne champions the wholesale abandonment of the practice of close reading or merely some attenuation. Influenced by queer theory, Champagne locates in the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 77.

methodology of close reading a discursive alliance to mainstream academia,<sup>62</sup> which he finds constitutively at odds with gay pornography's evasion of heteronormativity. His recommendation held its own urgency, as Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* makes all too apparent, because the porno theaters and arcades in the 1990s were quickly disappearing, closing as a result of new zoning laws and increased stigmatization amidst the backdrop of the continued AIDS panic, the Neoliberal gentrification of urban spaces, and the flourishing of the VHS pornographic market. Champagne's insistence that scholars of gay pornography "stop reading films" must itself be read in its own historical light against the impending loss of these forms of reception. Champagne's response to the exceptional quality that attended gay porn's study was to locate and scrutinize the structural, social, receptive, and contextual forces that attended to such an experiential and everyday phenomenon in the first place.

I take from Champagne's argument an invitation to ask what counts as history, but in the process, I challenge his notion that non-textual hermeneutics provide any more reliable objectivity. Champagne elevates historical reception as the prized objective of gay pornographic scholarship, but he overlooks the capacity for representation to

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<sup>62</sup> Champagne primarily goes after David Bordwell and Judith Mayne as the advocates of close reading films. Mayne in *Cinema and Spectatorship* notes that "textual analysis is less a matter of exhaustiveness than of strategy—the recognition, say, that a detail which might initially appear insignificant provides a perspective from which seemingly insignificant details suddenly emerge in another kind of coherence." This elevating of insignificance into significance is one that Champagne feels ultimately misreads a text or treats it ahistorically. The other assumption that Champagne works under is the idea that filmgoers didn't spend much time actually watching the gay pornos in question, and so scholars over-value the text that ultimately was only one portion of an erotic experience.

inscribe history, suggesting that it is entirely and a-historically fabricated via the scholar's imagination.<sup>63</sup> What Champagne's position elides is the creative component inherent to ethnography, the bias that informs even the most seemingly objective of methods, or put otherwise, the fantasy of objectivity that itself serves a legitimizing function in the call to stop reading films. In my own project, close reading remains integral not because I have ignored Champagne, but because the connotative meanings that he derides as un-objective actually lend critical insight, complexity, and weight to those very histories. I have taken his call to heart despite continuing to read films, but in addition, I scrutinize the weight afforded to arguments made in and through one text, and instead seek to locate trends across texts, which we can think of as constellations or regimes of gay pornography. As such, I "read closely, but transitively." I contextualize with whatever sources are available and take into account exhibition, but do not elevate it above all other modes of producing knowledge. In this manner, *this project* seeks to minimize the exceptionalism that seems ever poised to attach itself to pornography and instead searches to develop the everyday and experiential knowledges of gay pornography.

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<sup>63</sup> Moreover, history is not devoid of fantasy, and attending to the fantasies that seek to make sense of history seems to this scholar not ill-advised use of one's time.

## 1.4 Media Inscriptions of Pornography

Pornography's inscription—that is, how it inscribes, what it inscribes upon, and to what effect—grounds *Pornographesis's* theoretical intervention. To apprehend pornography in its medium specificity is imperative, because media carry particular affordances and limitations; as a result, different media deliver messages *differently*, a simple enough axiom that is not always accounted for.<sup>64</sup> Understanding pornography's media archaeology is crucial to studying its reception. The following point bears repeating: there is not one pornography, but many, and the shifts in pornographic representations are highly contingent upon their mediation.

Media and pornography have always been informing of one another, a mutuality that has been well-established. In 1980, G.N. Gordon first made the link between emergent technologies and pornography pronounced, noting: "Each and every instrument of communication that has been devised to date by man

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<sup>64</sup> In the 1980s, for instance, one method for spurring discussion on pornography involved slideshows that culled volatile snapshots from longer pornographic films, refashioning these films into static montages that purveyed iconographies of relentless brutality. The fact that the representation here took moving-images and remixed them as single frames temporally misattributes the nature of this kind of pornography (as well as aurally muting them), all the while suggesting that by lingering on these images, we reveal some essential truth to the image that we could not see in its moving-image format. These slide shows actually transform the representations into a wholly new text that claims coherency as a rhetorical rebuke. Indeed, such willfully transformative remixes fail to treat pornography as medium-specific representations at all, but rather hope to bring to the fore the supposed vile patriarchal essence inherent within pornography. See Gail Dines, Linda Thompson, and Rebecca Whisnant, with Karen Boyle, "Arresting Images: Anti-pornography slide shows, Activism, and the Academy," *Everyday Pornography* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 17-33.

(including television) has been almost immediately turned to the service of what the culture in which it was invented called 'pornography.'" <sup>65</sup> The connection between pornography and the arrival of a new medium has been well-observed,<sup>66</sup> but in Gordon's assessment, a new kind of common wisdom emerges: pornography does not merely coincide, but actually spurs the adoption of new media, and indeed, plays a pivotal role in determining which technologies thrive and which technologies recede into obscurity.<sup>67</sup> Gordon does not nuance his argument to consider the manner in which the pornographic representation in question alters as a result of the medium, but this relation can be productively imagined as a reciprocal feedback loop: pornography's uses, narratives, registers, and addresses are shaped by technology, and, in turn, they reshape technology.

Jonathan Coopersmith extends Gordon's insights to emphasize technology's effects on pornography's consumption practices. He points to four shifts across pornography's mediation: a movement toward democratization, a rise of amateurism,

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<sup>65</sup> G.N. Gordon, *Erotic Communications: Studies in Sex, Sin, and Censorship* (New York: Hastings House, 1980), 33.

<sup>66</sup> Lynn Hunt reminds us that pornography first emerged as a category when the new technology of print became widely available, stating, "It was only when print culture opened the possibility of the masses gaining access to writing and pictures that pornography began to emerge as a separate genre of representation." Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> A popular example concerns the videotape format war. During the early years of the VCR's emergence, pornography was integral in the adoption of Video Home System (VHS) over Betamax, in part because more pornography was recorded and sold through the prior while the two were vying for dominance. Other considerations at the time included the cost (VHS was cheaper), recording time (VHS could record for twice as long at four hours), and quality of sound and image (Betamax was superior).

an increase in usage, and a growth of specialization.<sup>68</sup> Coopersmith's interpretation is illustrative, but like Gordon before him, his analysis falls short of clarifying the reciprocal inscription to the pornographic representation itself, which remains obscured by the technology in question.<sup>69</sup> Both Gordon and Coopersmith provide necessary steps that *Pornographesis* contributes to by making evident the quality of a feedback loop that informs not just the rise of various new communication technologies, but also the manner in which those technologies shift the kinds of pornographic narratives that get inscribed.

From instant photography's popularity in the form of the Polaroid to the digital camera as well as the advancement of the moving image from Super 8 to 16 mm film to video to the now outdated-sounding "Information Superhighway" to smart phones, technologies foster at each juncture new pleasures that increasingly reorganize what has come to be thought of as the category of gay pornography. My analysis integrates media studies and reception studies and close readings to constellate a more robust understanding of their interactions with one another. What is considered erotic in one

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<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Coopersmith, "Pornography, Technology and Progress," *Icon*, Vol. 4 (1998): 94-96.

<sup>69</sup> Linda Williams seconds the call to think more furthively the connection here, writing that, "another part of the field that needs further cultivation is the absolutely essential connection between new technologies and the pornographies that often enable them. Here I do not mean the kind of hysterical reaction so typical of studies of internet pornography, but historical/theoretical studies of the intersection of public policy, new technology, and embodies life" Linda Williams, "Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field," 29.

era may become offensive or passé in another, and new iterations of pornography arrive all the time with the advent of new technologies.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, the medium also shapes the inscription's legibility *as pornography*, or whether it merely attains the status of *the pornographic*. In *Caught Looking*, editors Kate Ellis, Barbara O'Dair and Abby Tallmer illustrate this telling semantic distinction when they propose that "Any of the following, with sufficiently sexually explicit content, can be (and has been) considered *pornographic*: poetry, performance art, novels, TV shows, plays, photographs, even comic books." Pornography's iterations, though, are more intuitively circumscribed: "Pornography can come in many forms—including drawings, photography, poems, 60-second peep show loops, full-length feature films, videos, novellas, skin magazines, magazines catering to particular fetishes."<sup>71</sup> While there is overlap across the two lists, what becomes evident is that "the pornographic" and "pornography" occupy separate positions, with the category of "the pornographic" in the secondary position of the imitative, the cypher, the adjunct. To be pornographic suggests an illegibility from pornography, but also an irregular medium, whereas, to be pornography, one "knows it when they see it."

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<sup>70</sup> For instance, revenge porn as a genre is one that could not have existed even ten years ago, spurred into existence as it has been by the mutual arrival of smart phone technology in tandem with the popularization of tumblr websites on which to distribute them.

<sup>71</sup> *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography & Censorship*, Eds. Kate Ellis, Barbara O'Dair and Abby Tallmer (New York: Real Comet Press, 1986), 4.

*Pornographesis* does not pretend to exhaustively read across (as in, distant or machine reading)<sup>72</sup> all media forms of pornography; nor does it singularly canonize the representations it includes as exceptional.<sup>73</sup> Rather, it seeks to redress the paucity of media analysis within pornography studies more broadly and the misattributed, misunderstood, or misstated connotations across a wide media expanse, more specifically. With that in mind, this project deploys a series of close readings that also take into account medium specificity, cultural discourses, and historical events. It is in this combination of the broad view alongside the particular that *Pornographesis* offers a more complex and measured approach.

## **1.5 Chapter Outlines**

Chapter 1 excavates the spatial representations in early 1970s gay porno chic films<sup>74</sup> to test the project of visibility putatively championed by Gay Liberation. If the process of

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<sup>72</sup> For more on this hermeneutics, see N. Katherine Hayles, "How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine," *ADE Bulletin* 150 (2010): 62-79; Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> To this problem, which in many instances is the problem of the porn archive, Linda Williams writes, "Many of the titles I analyzed in *Hard Core* in an attempt to characterize the genre as a whole have been taken by others to be canonical, but in fact they are simply the examples I chose that were then available to me either in the Kinsey Institute for the stag era or through rentals in my local video stores." Linda Williams, "Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field," 31.

<sup>74</sup> Ralph Blumenthal in 1973 coined the phrase "porno chic" to name the phenomenon of hard core's growing visibility and mainstream popularity. While his article spends most of its time covering the success of *Deep Throat*, it does include one parenthetical that gestures to "gay porno chic," a term he does not deploy, but which I find useful: "(Except for gay porno films—a flourishing subcategory—male homosexual contact seems to be taboo in hard-core and soft-core films. Lesbian scenes, on the other hand, are common, but for the titillation of men, not women.)" "Porno Chic: 'Hard-Core' Grows Fashionable—And Very Profitable," *New York Times*, Jan 21, 1973: E28, E30.

“coming out” was presented as *the* political act of the era—and importantly, the very idiomatic meaning of “coming out” was shifting from an indication of one’s first sexual encounter to a political self-proclamation of gay identity<sup>75</sup>—then how did the very earliest gay hard core films respond to or nuance this call for greater recognition and an end to closets? What, in other words, did Gay Liberation demand of gay pornography, and how did the gay pornographic idiom respond? Since pornography largely occupies the realm of fantasy and the ideational space of an as-of-yet unrealized world, in what ways might the productions of gay pornography from the early American 1970s era offer an aspirational, or even alternative view of liberation than the one that advances toward ever-increasing visibility? Rather than increased recognition and accession into the body politic, the spatial representations of many gay porno chic films inscribe their

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<sup>75</sup> Samuel Delany writes of its earlier meaning, “I learned that ‘coming out’ meant having your first homosexual experience. And what you came out into, of course, was homosexual society. Until you had a major homosexual experience, you could be—as many younger, older, straight, gay, male or female folk have always been—a kind of mascot to homosexual society. But it took some major form of the sexual act itself to achieve ‘coming out.’” If Delany considers this the earlier meaning of “coming out” that predates its political inflection as a process of gaining visibility in society at large, I want to posit an even earlier and more primal mode of coming out than the first site of sexual congress: that is, coming out to oneself. Prior to any person’s entry into sexual expression, there is inevitably the moment—or moments—in which one recognizes non-belonging, or misalignment from the desires and scripts that construct heterosexuality. This sense of non-belonging does not gain greater legibility until named, and one of the manners in which that naming can occur is through the consumption of sexual media, like gay pornography. In this sense, long before one has sex with another person (what Delany calls this earlier mode of “coming out”), gay pornography can for many become the site of naming oneself as gay, or the facilitator of an even earlier mode of “coming out.” In this sense, not only do I suggest, following Delany, that one never ceases to come out (to society), but that there are a number of different addressees that one “comes out” to, not the least of which is *the self*. See “Coming / Out,” in *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 76.

gay subjects as hidden, discrete, and suspicious—depictions of liminality and subterfuge.

I have presented visibility and “coming out” as problems of space, a circumscription that holds critical sway with other scholars, and as such, it is to the representational spaces within pornography and their activation of gay characters’ desire that this chapter focuses. I invert the figure-ground hierarchy that dominates western art up until Modernism, looking to the ground to situate or interpellate the figure. In this chapter I draw heavily from exegeses of Wakefield Poole’s second pornographic feature, the critically lauded *Bijou*, as well as to Peter de Rome’s popular short film *Underground*. In both of these films, the process of navigating one’s relationship to space dominates the narrative drive and requires nontrivial effort.

Cruising—the sexual strategy that would be demonized by the decade’s end through the William Friedkin’s film of the same title<sup>76</sup> preoccupies these pornographic films in a way that is less overt (and vexing) for its heterosexual hard core.<sup>77</sup> Most spaces in 1971 and 1972 still impeded the homosexual encounter, and yet the guiding principle of pornotopia—summarized as the drive to multiply the number of sexual encounters

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<sup>76</sup> *Cruising*, directed by William Friedkin (1980; Los Angeles: Lorimar, 2007), DVD.

<sup>77</sup> For a good overview of the controversy surrounding Friedkin’s film *Cruising*, see Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 259-262.

ad infinitum — still rules these films, and sex eventually does find a way.<sup>78</sup> It is precisely the quest of the men in these films to find interstitial spaces to be with one another and the socio-political valences of those spaces wherein sexuality can be expressed that this chapter elaborates upon. Troubled are the notions of inside and outside, public and private, which do not always map onto each other in neat or conventional ways. As a result, the concept of the heterotopia<sup>79</sup> proves useful as a shifting space that resists rigid sedimentation, and it is in just such a designation that much of the sex in these films takes place. Spaces that are temporally bound, that are happened upon by chance, that require an invitation of sorts for entry, that are quite literally in motion, that cannot be found easily, or that trouble the notion of inner and outer, prove hospitable to the gay rendezvous in gay pornography from this era. How, then, can we make sense of the vexed status of such spaces that inscribe its gay subjects as phantoms who are not as much *out* as *in-between*?

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<sup>78</sup> Stephen Marcus' coined the neologism "pornotopia" and defined it as the phenomenon in pornography that envisions all sexual dilemmas as both originating from and finding their resolution in the production of more sex. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 266-286.

<sup>79</sup> Michel Foucault presents "heterotopias" as a concept in opposition to utopias, which he notes, "are sites with no real place. [...] They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces" The heterotopia, by contrast, "makes this place that I occupy [...] at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there." See "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics*, trans. Jay Miskowiec, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986): 24.

While spatiality preoccupies the ideological concerns of this chapter, media necessarily inflects its construction. The 16mm film gauge so common to 1970s porn uniquely situates space, especially through its deployment of the codes of *cinéma vérité*. 16mm film gauge attained popularity for its ease of use, as evidenced in the boom in 16mm home movies at the time, but any pejorative associations tied to its amateurism were tempered by the air of legitimacy that art practitioners, countercultural movements, and newsreels lent the form.<sup>80</sup> The result was not just an expansion of who could become a pornographic filmmaker, but also the conferment of a sense of immediacy and authenticity upon the images that it captured. Early gay pornography was filmed on 8 and 16mm. In the early 1970s, these lower film gauges could not easily accommodate a synchronous sound strip for recording.<sup>81</sup> As a result, the films I analyze divest themselves of excessive dialogue (if speech is included at all) and minimize the illusion of diegetic sound. In spirit, many of the gay pornos of this era are more akin to the silent era of film or art cinema than to its contemporary mainstream cinema.

Filmmakers ultimately focused attention to the visual editing and *mise en scene* to fill in

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<sup>80</sup> Eric Schaefer, "Gauging a Revolution: 16 mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), 3-26

<sup>81</sup> In 1973, Kodak finally introduced a super 8 film that gained a strip of magnetic oxide for sound recording. Before that, the only way to include sound in Super 8 recording was through modifying a Minolta D 10 camera or to deploy a double-recording system with a tape recorder, both of which introduced complications to synchronous sound. This challenge resulted in early porno films that often did not attempt synchronous sound, which informs my focus on space, as traditional narrative features like dialogue and plot were less prominently featured. See Lenny Lipton, *The Super 8 Book* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1975), 113.

the deficit left by the inattentiveness to language, lending the spaces in question a potency and richness that is further accentuated by the non-diegetic sound designs, which resulted in a further diminishment of immersive realism and recognition of its very status as mediation. While not a rule, 16mm films often heavily curated their spaces, and it is to this construction and its related conjuring of the subjects within them that this chapter turns its attention.

Chapter 2 asks how the AIDS epidemic rearticulated the narratives and uses of gay pornography in the 1980s beyond the pedagogic purveyor of safe(r) sex practices, and in turn, this chapter highlights political and memorial dimensions that accrue in this era's pornographesis. Pleasure—that foregone conclusion to the gay pornography of the previous decade—may still reside here, but pleasure must now reckon with the threat of the epidemic and as such is often treated with suspicion. The pornographic consumption of the 1980s shifted spectatorship back to the private realm with the rising popularity of VHS,<sup>82</sup> and pornographic companies standardized the structure of commercial gay pornography for the home viewing market, almost exclusively featuring an onslaught of cloned, sex-heavy, narrative-light films.

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<sup>82</sup> See Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016). Interestingly, pornography also receded into the home as a result of cable porn's rising popularity, although this phenomenon overwhelmingly featured heterosexual pornography. See Luke Stadel, "Cable, Pornography, and the Reinvention of Television, 1982-1989," *Cinema Journal*, 53, no. 3 (2014): 52-75.

In much of the early 1980s, AIDS does not figure in the gay pornographic imaginary. It is surprisingly the peripheral media that uniquely harnessed pornographic discourses to address, combat, and redress the sexual panic, uncertainty, and abdication that attended much of the early AIDS epidemic. Because gay video pornography largely concerned itself with the production of fantasy, it is unsurprising that commercialized video representations were reticent to puncture the hermetic world of unbridled and uncomplicated pleasures by introducing destabilizing threat of AIDS. By the late 1980s, commercial gay hard core and AIDS activists alike would endeavor to create pornography verging on the educational and safe sex tutorials verging on the pornographic by placing condom usage at the foreground of representation, but this reaction to the crisis was lethargic at best. While some videos did narrativize the arrival of safe(r) sex practices,<sup>83</sup> many chose not to, avoiding any depiction that would draw attention away from the economy of pleasure.

Theater, however, operated as one of the first cultural forms to respond to the AIDS crisis, and in real time. While the theater did not take “getting its patrons off” as a primary objective, sex did feature in numerous gay-centered theatrical productions at the time. What is striking, though, is how pornographic discourse begins to develop

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<sup>83</sup> Cindy Patton has written most comprehensively on this topic, offering close analysis of some of the major touchstones of this genre within a genre. Notable gay porn videos that either promote or visualize safe sex include *Play Safely* (1986), *Turbo Charge* (1987), *Top Man* (1988), *The Gay Men's Health Crisis Safer Sex Shorts* (1989), *Something Fierce* (1989), *Midnight Snack* (1989), *Car Service* (1989). Patton, *Fatal Advice*, 133-137.

within and inflect live performance. In this chapter, I take Robert Chesley's largely forgotten play *Jerker or The Helping Hand*<sup>84</sup> as a case study that integrates a pornographic vernacular into its narrative to facilitate pleasure while also serving as a defiant oral history. The invocation of pornography serves to recognize and make bearable the longing, loss, and isolation that psychically plagued members of the gay community during the health crisis. *Jerker* weaves across two body genres, the erotic and the melodramatic, bringing forth a flurry of carnal pleasures, but tear-jerking, as well.

As a form, *Jerker* defies both the conventions of theater—in its portrayal of effectively immobilized actors, cordoned off in separate playing spaces, whose only engagement is dictated through the telephone—and the conventions of gay pornography. *Jerker* displaces the locus of pornography's pleasure away from "the frenzy of the visible"<sup>85</sup> and reroutes it through what I call the "nostalgia of the audible," transforming the theater-goers' attention away from the denotative force of a phallic visuality and toward the connotative suggestiveness of the disembodied voice. No

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<sup>84</sup> Chesley's comically elliptical and slightly redundant title for this play was: *Jerker or The Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty*, collected in *Hard Plays, Stiff Parts* (San Francisco, Alamo Square Press, 1990).

<sup>85</sup> Linda Williams famously popularizes the notion of the "frenzy of the visible" in *Hard Core*, which comes to describe pornography's preoccupation with maximum sight of the carnal act as a guarantor of pleasure, most typically emblemized in the trope of the "money shot." Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*, 6. Williams borrows this term from Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 122.

physical contact is ever made, save for a single fantasy sequence in a penultimate scene; the gulf between them speaks to the very real fear of transmission at the time: the safest sex, it would seem, is phone sex. Furthermore, the fantasy, co-inscribed on either receiving end, develops with reciprocity into a mixture of sentimental banter, erotic reminiscences and roleplay that broaches social taboos of incest and the sado-masochism. The improvisational co-creation of their emergent fantasy resuscitates an intimacy that is strengthened, in a seeming contradiction, by its anonymity. This contradiction can be seen reflected in other structures, as well, such as the subtitle: a pornographic elegy, which dares to entwine erotics and pathos.

The telephone, then, becomes a remarkably potent *and* prophylactic medium for transmitting longing and desire, caring and concern, without physical contact. The telephone is not typically thought of as a pornographic medium, and yet, its capacity to bring another to climax would seem to grant it just such a status. The pornographesis it inscribes, though, looks very different from that of the dominant mode, video porn: it is non-mimetic, highly narrativized, live, extemporaneous, spatially disarticulated, and aural. Moreover, the cultural memory of AIDS that this pornographic discourse invokes defies the stigma and victimization of the disease, preserving instead a willful defiance that locates pleasure amidst suffering, memory among the forgotten, and community

through anonymity. In an era when “silence equals death” it is striking that the voice fights not just for survival, but also to keep pleasure alive.

Chapter 3 brings us into the 1990s, where I seek to locate the seemingly irretrievable gay cyberporn of the day. This task proves difficult, though—if not impossible—given the lack of an archive for early online queer “smut.” By performing a media archaeology that queries the gay pornographic magazine *Manshots* (1988-2001), however, I am able to locate not just a sense for how cyberporn was understood during this era, but also for how the still hegemonic gay video industry imagined this digital encroachment. Furthermore, *Manshots* helps to articulate pornographic trends in the gay 1990s, and indexes pornographic videos that then narrativized the burgeoning World Wide Web within their pornographic diegeses. While the gay cyberporn of the 1990s may be irretrievable, I am able, through a remediated—or perhaps it is closer to the truth to say “pre-mediated”—extrapolation, to read the fantasy of the cybersex of the future that gay video porn of the past imagined. In this sense, the cybersex I locate was irretrievable to the moment of the 1990s, as well, which imagined a version of cybersex that the Internet itself could not yet offer.

Beyond the question of which media format will win out in a given period, technology becomes a source of growing anxiety for the gay pornography industry during the 1990s because it threatens—or promises, depending on one’s outlook—to

organize the consumer's perception of space, time, leisure, subjectivity, desire, and pleasure differently, depending on the format. What my inquiry into *Manshots* reveals, intriguingly, is an industry that is not just suspicious of new technologies, though (including handheld camcorders, VCR machines, and the Internet—each of which poses a unique threat), but which actively narrativizes these technologies within video porn to circumscribe our expectations and understandings of them. And if this anxiety of “the new” were not enough, the very same industry also holds contempt for its own hegemonic form: video porn. In editorials and articles across *Manshots*, a doubled critique emerges: disfavor for commercial gay porn's endlessly iterable and indistinguishable non-narrative sexvids,<sup>86</sup> and a suspicion of new technologies that might offer an alternative. This chapter, then, asks, how the anxiety and demands of gay pornography's mediation came to alter the kinds of narratives that gay pornography told, which increasingly featured stories of dissatisfaction, panic, obsession, and inauthenticity.

Chapter 4 asks how web 2.0 cultures challenge gay identity's supposed coherence through the popular class of online pornography known as “gay-for-pay.” Through a genre analysis, I explore the manner in which DIY technologies exacerbate

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<sup>86</sup> Peter Alilunas writes of video pornography's adoption of a “compilation” format that largely evacuated narrative scenes, focusing primarily on the sexual performances. Interestingly, he does not view this as a diminishment of the form, but rather, a return to an older tradition, the “loop” format that was standard practice in pornography arcades. Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies*, 26-27.

the tension between universalizing / minoritizing positions that have long structured modern understandings of gay identity.<sup>87</sup> This chapter suggests the pursuit of authenticity that online pornography offers in general and gay-for-pay pornography embellishes in particular makes visible a displacement of the denoted sex act by the connotation (and conferment) of a hidden “true” sexual identity. If the neoliberal gay subject had gained a newfound sense of self-determination and coherence through homonormative campaigns like gay marriage that relied upon universalizing postures (we are all the same and deserve equal rights), here I speculate that online gay-for-pay pornography gains popularity through its disciplinary will to deconstruct the coherence of heterosexual identity. In the same spirit as Michel Foucault’s challenge of the repressive hypothesis, which observed quite to the contrary the regulatory demand that sex “speak,” the self-identifying straight subject is incited into discourse via the protocols of the Internet. He adopts a universalizing view of male-male acts while denying the minoritizing view that those acts codify him as homosexual. I suggest that

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<sup>87</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, “Most moderately to well-educated Western people in this century seem to share a similar understanding of homosexual definition, independent of whether they themselves are gay or straight, homophobic or antihomophobic. [...] It holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons who ‘really are’ gay; at the same time, it holds the universalizing views that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities; that apparently heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires, and vice versa for apparently homosexual ones; and that at least male heterosexual identity and modern masculinist culture may require for their maintenance the scapegoating crystallization of same-sex male desire that is widespread and in the first place internal.” In summation, Sedgwick places acts under universalizing views and persons under minoritizing views. *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), 85.

viewers of gay-for-pay derive pleasure most notably from the very arbitration of such an incitement and its related project of making the connotative gayness “hidden” within him denotatively legible. Or, to put it otherwise, gay-for-pay pornography rests upon the fantasy of bringing the closet back into the bedroom and enacting its disciplinary gaze upon straight men.<sup>88</sup>

Like 16 mm film in Chapter 1 or the telephone in Chapter 2, or video and the nascent internet in Chapter 3, in Chapter 4 the second “generation” of the Internet—christened as “Web 2.0”<sup>89</sup>—circumscribes the pornography in question through the logic of social media. Resulting from the Internet’s surveilling affordances, the division between private and public becomes an increasingly permeable boundary that gay pornography of this era incorporates into its organization. Gay-for-pay pornography, while having forebears within the gay pornographic tradition as well as in social practices,<sup>90</sup> holds newfound resonance in its post Web 2.0 era, which also happens to

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<sup>88</sup> This metaphor is slightly mixed, insofar as gay-for-pay pornography demands the constant possibility for its putatively straight actors to be “outed” as “actually gay.” Even still, the deferral of an actual outing suggests that it is the specter of the closet that haunts this mode of pornography.

<sup>89</sup> The impulse to serialize is strong in our culture. The problem with such a naming, beyond simply sounding slightly silly (or as though it were a sequel), is that it reproduces the idea of a “progress narrative” to the Internet, while also suggesting some kind of distinct boundary. This, in turn, masks the much more messy and multivalent adaptation of the Internet over time, as well as the many ways in which the nascent Internet was also one of interactivity.

<sup>90</sup> I am thinking here of the practice of “(rough) trade,” which has existed for a much longer time than this mode of pornography has, or for what is termed being “on the down low,” an idiom used often by men of color. These social practices signal sex between two men, at least one of whom does not identify as gay, and in the case of the prior, often involve an exchange for money. For more on this fascinating phenomenon, see: Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

align with the post-recession era. This genre complicates its economy of pleasure by promoting the deconstruction of identity which can be thought of as another form of the self-dissolution that sex so often promises. In other words, a doubled ontology (the diegesis of the porn in question, the diegesis of the world outside of the porn in question) and complex negotiation between sex act and sexual identity takes place. Gay-for-pay imagines itself somewhere between reality and representation, with a permeable skein that the viewer can travel between.

Chapter 4 also asks how digital inscriptions of amateurism, protocols of surveillance and authenticity, the rise of fan cultures, the popularity of pornographic tube sites, and the great recession coalesce to rewrite this era's pornographesis. In the digital era where pornography can account for nearly all sexual minorities and positions, complex pleasure emerge that center upon a refusal of identification, giving instead a constant oscillation between states. But this oscillation, or "homoflexibility," only goes so far. In addition to the marriage of disgust and boredom with arousal in this genre, its purportedly straight performers of gay-for-pay ultimately seek confirmation of their heterosexual identity through the careful curation of their Internet histories. This chapter argues it is actually heterosexuality—more than homosexuality—that this genre foregrounds as performance, an irony lost on many of its critics. What gay-for-pay gestures toward, ultimately, is a near-constant deconstruction and recombination of

identities, leaving us, with an increasingly complex manifestation of what Foucauldian proposed as bodies and pleasures.<sup>91</sup>

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Film and media studies has dominated the study of pornography in recent memory, and while this project builds upon that legacy, *Pornographesis* also hopes to reveal the need for a more interdisciplinary approach, one which might produce a more nuanced and heterogeneous study. *Pornographesis* attempts to enact just that, moving us from pornography with a capital “P” to minor pornographies,<sup>92</sup> or, to an increasingly dispersed and expansive multiplicity. In examining this pornographic expanse, I challenge the primacy of the moving image, the dominant representational form, but also strives to defamiliarize pornography in order to see how it has traversed less commonly considered sign systems. Pornography’s production under capitalism has often been rendered monolithic. By insisting on pornography’s particularity, this dissertation agitates against an essentialist view. As I have also argued, the debates surrounding the supposed exceptionalism have long attended the study of pornography, resulting in both paranoid and reparative readings.

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<sup>91</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 159.

<sup>92</sup> Alexander Halavais refers to the specialization of pornography as “small pornographies,” a kind of organization into niche sexual communities. I have used the term “minor” to evoke a similar meaning, but also to gesture to Deleuze and Guatarri’s work on Kafka. Alexander Halavais, “Small Pornographies,” *SIGGROUP Bulletin: Virtual Communities*, Vol. 25, Issue 2 (February 2005): 19-22.

My method is neither solely reparative nor solely paranoid; rather, I read for filth. “Reading for filth” is an idiom owing its origin to gay drag communities. It commonly refers to a kind of thorough and eviscerating insult, or “reading,” of another drag queen that highlights—unexpectedly, but with insightfulness—something about them that they would not want to ever admit themselves. While I do not borrow this idiom to mean *Pornographesis* will pursue an the act of comedy roasting, I do want several valences of the original idiom to signify. For one, referring to gay pornography as “filth” shows simultaneously a playfulness, but also an acknowledgment that pornography maintains low cultural status, which is not something I intend to contest. Secondly, “to read for filth” suggests a multi-pronged and capacious critique. And while I would not classify the following project as comprehensive, I do hope to give more consideration to gay pornography’s complexity than is commonly asked of it, most notably through a deeper consideration of its media imbrications. To read for filth, then, is not to read pornography as waste or as unwanted (as the word filth traditionally denotes), but to suggest that pornography—filth—is something that is used all the time. Filth leaves a residue. It may be thrown away (often, it simply remains), but filth tends to leave a stain, an odor, a trace. This project looks for that trace wherever it can sniff it out, and reads the remainder for all its social and cultural worth.

While Williams has rightly noted that, “Of all the subfields of the academic study of pornography, this queer and ‘queering’ approach has perhaps flourished the most, although this is much more true for the male side of queer pornography than the female side,”<sup>93</sup> one should not fall under the impression that the subfield to which Williams referred has exhausted its own study. For instance, no comprehensive work of scholarship has been written on the history of gay pornography, to date. *Pornographesis* does not imagine itself capable of giving the whole story, but I note the absence of such a project to indicate the state of the field. And while gay pornography has been prodded to speak at length, the kinds of questions that have been posed to gay pornography remain narrow, and usually isolated to the field of film and media studies.

*Pornographesis* contends that we could ask much more of gay pornography, and, indeed, must ask more if we hope to lend complexity to the history of homosexuality. The robust category of gay pornography that this project turns its attention to remains distinct among representational media for its capacity to facilitate an unparalleled level of expression that newly (and now, not so newly) out gay men would use to fantasize, reconfigure, and delimit pleasures, but also to inscribe greater meaning to gay culture, sociality, and politics. *Pornographesis* moves beyond the debates of exceptionalism to

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<sup>93</sup> Linda Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” 26.

locate the multivalent inscriptions of gay pornography that still connote, even when denotation would seem to have already given us all we could ever have wanted.

## 2. The Spatial Erotics of Gay Porno Chic

...the people who move through the streets are all strangers. At each encounter, they imagine a thousand things about one another; meetings which could take place between them, conversations, surprises, caresses, bites. But no one greets anyone; eyes lock for a second, then dart away, seeking other eyes, never stopping.

— Italo Calvino<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 *Open All Night*

John Rechy's novels<sup>2</sup> are best known for their sexual explicitness and semi-autobiographical invocations. They are also noteworthy for their insight into depictions of pre-Stonewall gay life. Rechy's novel *Numbers* (1967) depicts protagonist Johnny Rio as he journeys back to Los Angeles, three years after leaving the city and his hustling days behind him. Upon his return, Johnny begins cruising for sex in the city, but this time, not for fast cash: he is on a mission to test his desirability. In the following section, I explore Johnny's navigation of an all-night movie theater to locate the particular spatial cues that attend to scenes of gay cruising prior to Gay Liberation, and in particular its complex portrait of vision and visibility. This perspective, then, grants relief to the spatial erotics that inform the gay porno chic era that would directly follow it, which I argue holds a complicated relation to Gay Liberation, in that it is both aspirational and

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<sup>1</sup> He goes on, "And thus, when some people happen to find themselves together, taking shelter from the rain under an arcade, or crowding beneath an awning of the bazaar, or stopping to listen to the band in the square, meetings, seductions, copulations, orgies are consummated among them without a word exchanged, without a finger touching anything, almost without an eye raised." Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando: A Harvest Book, 1974), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Rechy is perhaps best known for his novel *City of Night* (1963) and his non-fiction *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977).

regressive, sensual and gritty, neither fully out, nor fully closeted. In the following scene, Johnny Rio happens upon the movie theater:

Lights scurrying like electrified mice, a bright movie marquee proclaims that the theater is:

\* O \*

\* P \*

\* E \*

\* N \*

ALL NIGHT \*\*\* ALL NIGHT \*\*\* ALL NIGHT \*\*\*

Two Technicolor hits. And Smoking In the Balcony. It's open all night, and there's a balcony. Johnny knows—just as anyone who has hung out in gay bars knows—what that means. The hunting shadows in the dark . . . the frantic moving in and out of the toilet.<sup>3</sup>

The typographic flourish of the asterisk-hugging vertically centered “OPEN” renders the word doubly legible: first, as language that signifies access to a space, and second, as a visual homologue to the theater's marquee sign that Johnny sees before him. The asterisks here defy grammatical sense—for the glyph “\*” does not indicate, as in its common function, a linguistic correction or addition—and instead shine upon the marquee sign like the “little stars” that the word etymologically invokes. It is, in other words, symbol and icon.

Johnny Rio's foray into the all night cinema begins a mission to prove his mettle, three years after he had left Los Angeles. Is he still attractive, he wonders? Has time's slow assault dulled his once handsome features and the desire others felt for him? Can he, over the course of ten days, have sex with thirty men? In what follows, I argue that

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<sup>3</sup> John Rechy, *Numbers* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 39-40.

Rechy's pre-Stonewall representation of the space of cruising reveals a particular hierarchy of control that is delimited through vision.

Upon entering the theater, Johnny does not go up to the mysterious balcony—a space, we are led to believe, where furtive encounters might take place. Rather he sits down in the main atrium to watch the film that plays: “On the screen a loony woman is offering to pray for everyone’s soul. [...] A man is getting beaten up severely. [...] A ball of fire is cascading down a hill toward what must be a used-car cemetery”<sup>4</sup> A series of images—spiritual, violent, cataclysmic—suggests the film in question is likely not a hard core film (Since this film was made in the 1960s, it could *only* ever have been soft-core, at its most extreme. Hard core representations did not arrive until the early 1970s). The film Johnny watches is more probably an exploitation film, a work of relative lowbrow esteem, that centered on and fetishized social or moral dilemmas.<sup>5</sup> Eric Schaefer writes

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Schaefer is careful to note that exploitation cinema has often been misapprehended. He writes, “In the past, critics and historians often lumped exploitation films with Hollywood's B movies and low-budget genre pictures made by Poverty Row outfits. Yet exploitation films were quite different from the movies cranked out by the major's B units or the companies that crowded Gower Gulch.” He goes on to cite an interview with David F. Friedman that becomes the base definition in his revealing study of the genre: “Exploitation pictures are as old as film itself, although they really began to flourish during the height of the original Motion Picture Code. The roadshowmen, the exploiteers, weren't subscribers to the Hays Office Code; they were itinerant carnival people. The essence of exploitation was any subject that was forbidden: miscegenation, abortion, unwed motherhood, venereal disease.... All those subjects were fair game for the exploiteer—as long as it was in bad taste! The technical definition of exploitation movies is cheaply made pictures distributed by roadshowmen or by local independents called states'-righters.” Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 2-3; David Chute, “Wages of Sin: An Interview with David F. Friedman,” *Film Comment* (July-August 1986): 35.

that simulation films—one subset of the exploitation genre—held a deeply entwined role in the rise of hard core cinema, specifically in its 16 mm film format:

The 16mm simulation films married the narratives of sexploitation films, loose as they were at times, with the increased explicitness of plotless beavers. Much like the gravitation toward narrative in the early days of cinema, the addition of narrative to the 16mm film served to stabilize production and enabled producers and exhibitors more clearly to differentiate their films by title from shorts and loops, most of which did not have titles.<sup>6</sup>

I draw out this point to suggest that, while we cannot know precisely what films Rechy refers to here—if they even have real-world referents—their loose sketch fits within the broader history of hard core's rise.

In both this encounter and the one to follow, Johnny navigates a space mediated by light (both in the flickering image on screen and in the distribution of light throughout the atrium) as he searches for his “prey”: “The hunting shadows in the dark . . . the frantic moving in and out of the toilet.”<sup>7</sup> The curious film on screen counters Johnny's behaviors, suggesting a consciously dialogic cinema. That is, the film directly speaks to and provides checks upon Johnny's actions: “A man is getting beaten up severely” and “[a] loony woman is offering to pray for everyone's soul”<sup>8</sup> serve as warnings to behave. After witnessing these disjointed scenes from the unnamed film,

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Schaefer, “Gauging a Revolution: 16 mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Rechy, *Numbers*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

Johnny enters the theater's fluorescent restroom, where two men follow him. As Johnny concentrates at the urinal, he imagines one of the two men holding his penis in his hand and offering him a blowjob. The thought—surprisingly, given his intentions—startles him. Johnny senses the heavy looks of the two strangers and begins to button up his pants, as he is unable to urinate. In a hurry, he exits the theater and reenters the bright outside, much to the protestations of the other two patrons (“‘Why-don’t-you-let-him-suck-you?’ the second man says to Johnny, ‘I’ll-watch-for-you.’”<sup>9</sup>). So goes the first of many encounters in which Johnny Rio solicits, teases, sometimes permits, but often rejects the sexual advances of his male suitors. A day later he will try again, but this time he will take his chances in the balcony.

On his return to the theater the next day, Johnny ascends the stairway to the forbidden zone that is the balcony. Upon reaching the landing, he takes in the space before him, which seems impossibly expansive:

He stands at the upstairs landing and looks at this balcony for the first time, as though it were a foreign country that must be conquered. It's an enormous cavern of dark at first—so enormous that he can't tell how far up it goes, nor how wide its last rows stretch at the top. The dark becomes heavier, thicker, gathering clouds of cigarette smoke as the rows of seats ascend—until, toward the vanishing top, the blackness, erasing everything, swallowing itself, could go on forever.<sup>10</sup>

The space is marked by an unknowability and depth that looks immeasurable. It could, Johnny tells us, “go on forever.” What is striking in this description is the impulse to

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 74.

colonize, to tame, and to conquer that unknowability. What would conquering such a space mean? Does conquering mean illuminating the space, deciphering its boundaries, mapping it haptically, or learning where its illegibility might cloak him in the shadows? Furthermore, what are the implications of rendering this act of navigation in the language of colonialism? It would seem Johnny wants an absolute control of the space, but the balcony seems to have its own designs.

The word “swallowing” repeats often in reference to the balcony and grants it a throatlike quality. Like the serpentine Ouroboros, the darkness of this space appears to swallow itself in a kind of autoerotic, masochistic, annihilative consumption. Or does it? It appears that the patrons are the ones the darkness consumes. Rechy goes on to describe how the distribution of light confers vision to some (out of the darkness) and visibility to others (from the light): “This is the boundary, the division—an invisible separation tacitly accepted. Beyond that boundary is the deep, dark throat of the balcony.”<sup>11</sup> Again, Rechy describes the balcony as a throat<sup>12</sup> that consumes, but this spatial description only becomes more complicated: “Johnny welcomes those lights (from the projection booth). He knows that when he finally moves up and his eyes adjust, he’ll see perfectly in this balcony. Its top rows will be just dark enough to be obscured from the sight of the people sitting in the lower rows, and light enough, within

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>12</sup> For a more in-depth look at the relationship of throatiness and homosexuality, see Wayne Koestenbaum, “The Queen’s Throat: (Homo)Sexuality and the Art of Singing,” in *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York, Routledge, 1991), 205-234.

the uppermost area, for him to be seen clearly. He will not be—he would not want to be—a shadow.”<sup>13</sup> There is, then, a seemingly contradictory position of vision and visibility to be had in the darkness that Johnny wants: to see all, to be seen by some, and to be unseen by others. It is from this vexed spatial position that Johnny hunts the men who desire him and arbitrates which of their desires to accommodate.

Rechy does not describe the balcony as a space of unbridled fantasy and fulfillment, though; danger and rejection also comprise its structure. Johnny tames the space, transforming it to his whims. In the passage that follows, we see Johnny remap the space through a series of gestures and looks, which regulates the movement of cruisers seeking permission to pleasure Johnny, many of whom he refuses:

Others here have witnessed this scene—a scene not rare but not common even in such a balcony, where the groping is usually done as an end in itself or as an invitation for completion in the restroom. Now, as if Johnny’s sexual release has made them restless, there’s a silent moving among those others—as if they’re playing a game of musical chairs without music. They move in the smoky darkness as if in a dream. The imitation of a dream.<sup>14</sup>

The darkness of the balcony—with its modulating incursions of light from the projection booth behind it and the screen before it—facilitates invitation, flirtation, and communion, but it also engenders rejection, confusion, and misunderstanding. The balcony typically initiates a deferred assignation; the sexual encounter requires a more enclosed space—the restroom, for instance—or somewhere beyond the theater for

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<sup>13</sup> Rechy, *Numbers*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

completion, but in a forecast of the behavior that would follow in the 1970s, Rechy transforms the theater balcony into a space where male-male eroticism can manifest if it abides by the unwritten spatial codes.

This vignette from Rechy's novel *Numbers* offers a pre-Stonewall account of all male cruising in the all-night theater (among a number of other locations) that we will see looks surprisingly similar to those from *post*-Stonewall gay porno chic films. In a sense, it depicts one of the founding myths around the gay subject:

These myths of gay male culture have a similar structure: like the fantasy, they do not and cannot finally represent any truth of the subject, even as they come to structure the subject's existence. It goes without saying, of course, that the mythological movement of gay men from the country to the city, from 'repression' to 'liberation' does not simply and accurately portray anyone's 'real' experience: it's always more complicated than that. And in the text, despite whatever geographical and epistemological movement Rechy's characters undertake, this never causes any of them to come out or articulate a properly gay identity.<sup>15</sup>

Rechy weaves the cinema, space, and sex together at a time when this combination was prohibited, and it is to the very same matrix that this chapter concerns itself. In what follows, I turn to the gay hard core cinematic depictions of cruising in the 1970s to ask how "gay porno chic" — that is, gay pornography that is "liberated," just as the gay man would seem to be — imagines its *mise en scène* and *diegesis* as vexed space that both challenge and inform its erotic economy.

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<sup>15</sup> Kevin Arnold, "'Male and Male and Male': John Rechy and the Scene of Representation," *The Arizona Quarterly* Vol. 67 (Spring, 2011), 117.

## 2.2 Space: *The First Frontier*

One need not inquire very far to find sufficient reasons for pornography's indifference to place: in the kind of boundless, featureless freedom that most pornographic fantasies require for their action, such details are regarded as restrictions, limitations, distractions, or encumbrances.

- —Steven Marcus<sup>16</sup>

Making private acts public—that is, granting more visibility to them—is precisely the task of pornography. That said, the spatial arrangements within pornography rarely demand the viewer's attention. The fact that bodies and their pleasures give index to a physical surrounding seems, on the one hand, an obvious fact, and on the other, irrelevant. By the late 1970s, when the literal book on how to make pornography was being written—Steven Ziplow's *The Film Maker's Guide to Pornography* (1977)—the setting of a pornographic film was treated as nothing more than the inevitable result of a film's budgetary constraints. Have a higher budget, and one might be able to shoot in a studio. Have a shoestring budget, and one might implore friends to borrow their apartment for a weekend shoot. Ziplow recognized that the right setting and props could “add class” to a pornographic feature, but ultimately, he treats its consideration as secondary to the event, as something that could be borrowed in a pinch, cobbled together, and manipulated through a series of filmic tricks. If, for example, one could only afford a studio apartment, Ziplow has a creative solution:

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 269.

All you have to do is bring along two different sets of covers, matching pillowcases, and an extra blanket. A bed can be anywhere — change its look and no one will be the wiser. Change the pictures on the wall if there are any and rearrange the furniture. Add a couple of personal items that are large enough to be notice, and, most of all, do not film your scene with the same camera angles that you used the first time. If you make these adjustments, you can use the room two or even three times without anyone ever guessing that it is the same room.<sup>17</sup>

But before we abandon wholesale the consideration of pornographic space, consider, too, the subtle argument buried in this “how-to” guide: one must change the perceived setting alongside the sexual event. No two sex acts should occur in the same diegetic space. A feature length pornographic film will have numerous sex acts and so should have numerous settings. But why, we might ask, must the space in which sex occurs change? And what, precisely, does that suggest for the relationship between space and sexuality?

As I will examine later in more detail, issues of *Playboy* from this era envision heterosexual men in trendy bachelor pads and other spaces oriented toward leisure. These “new spaces” for men to occupy harkened a new imagination of heterosexual masculinity. But how does space shape the historical articulation of masculinity for gay men? What stage, if any, did they play upon, and how did that space negotiate power dynamics? If Hefner’s idea of masculinity aspired to the James Bond figure of the spy — a man of intrigue and decadent pleasures — what figuration did spatial organizations afford gay masculinity? Would he be the double-agent, or still the villain, the clown, or

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Ziplow, *The Film Maker’s Guide to Pornography* (New York: Drake Publishers, 1977), 38.

the sissy? Or would his symbolic figuration even find representation in any singular, legible form?

Pornography makes visible gay men's evolving relation to masculinity in a way that few other media do. John R. Burger notes the historical valence of gay pornography to record popular memory:

What are some of the ways, then, in which gay men in America construct a sense of their past? Such means include autobiographies, personal letters, quilting, guerrilla art, specialized and narrowly distributed academic texts, public access cable television, and pornography. Although each of these means is an important purveyor of gay male histories and truths, pornography [...] is a most underestimated and misunderstood manifestation of gay popular memory.<sup>18</sup>

The idea that gay pornography is often underestimated and misunderstood suggests new approaches to the topic might be necessary. My attention to the spatiality of pornography gains resonance against the question of the newly liberated gay sexuality and hopes to lend an off-kilter view, one that decenters and defamiliarizes what we might presume to already know about gay pornography. Additionally, this methodological rerouting through space alerts our attention to the other intersections of power, sociality, borders of public/ private, and historical problems that otherwise would already be relegated to the sidelines.

Burger, like many theorists, presents Stonewall as a fulcrum that ushered in the era of gay liberation—built upon a credo of visibility and coming out—which this

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<sup>18</sup> John R. Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995), 3.

chapter seeks to understand in more granularity. But what did Gay Liberation seek to achieve? “A Gay Manifesto” by Carl Wittman lends insight into one version of its many aspirations and contradictions. Wittman writes that “our first job is to free ourselves; that means clearing our heads of the garbage that’s been poured into them.”<sup>19</sup> This tenet is fairly straightforward and to be expected. In regards to sexuality, though, “A Gay Manifesto” exhibits decidedly more complicated positions than merely to love one another. For instance, Wittman writes that sex is best when it is both a creative expression and a form of communication. He elevates reciprocity above static sexual roles. Certain “perversions” — as he classes them — Wittman outright rejects as anti-gay: gay men who desire sex with straight men; straight men who desire sex with other men; men who exclusively choose to penetrate (tops); and men who refuse to kiss during sex. When it comes to more socially legible perversions, though, Wittman leaves room for the possibility that some might be recuperated for spiritual reasons, such as bestiality as a form of intra-species communication.<sup>20</sup> One aspect, however, remains clear, “sexual objectification is a focus of our quest for freedom,” he writes, and “objectification of sex for us is something we choose to do among ourselves, while for women it is imposed by their oppressors.”<sup>21</sup> This brief portrait is intended to give evidence to the complex desires that circulate within just one tract, published within the Gay Liberation Front.

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<sup>19</sup> Carl Wittman, “A Gay Manifesto,” *Gay Flames Pamphlet* No. 9 (New York: Gay Liberation Front, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Linda Williams has written that “[o]ne simple way of looking at the emergence of gay pornography is to see it as an outgrowth of liberation: the throwing off of repression.”<sup>22</sup> As I have just shown, though, even liberation itself has a vexed set of meanings. Simplifying gay pornography and gay liberation to a mere shedding of repression limits the insightfulness of both, which Williams herself recognizes and goes on to complicate: “the rise of graphic sex as a public spectator sport [...] cannot fully be understood as a simple lifting of repression that finally permitted more natural expressions.”<sup>23</sup> In hoping to find nuance in this connection, I ask what counts as “gay” once gay was “out” and capable of being represented in pornography, and how the male-to-male pleasure seeker navigates space?

Pornographic filmmaker Wakefield Poole cites the demeaning portrayal of gay men in hard core films as the impetus for his decision to become a pornographer, which he decided to pursue on a lark. This decision, of course, was facilitated by the ease with which he could access a camera and shoot on 16 mm film gauge, as well as the newfound ability to get one’s film processed so long as it was “sandwiched” on either end by non-explicit material—to thwart content checkers. Poole reveals the offending film in question was *Highway Hustler*, which was playing at the Park Miller Theater in 1970. He recalls, “After about twenty minutes of loops, the main feature, *Highway*

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<sup>22</sup> Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

*Hustler*, came on. At one point the star of the movie is picked up, taken to a motel, and sodomized while a knife is held to his throat. It was not very erotic, to say the least. [...] Later, we were all asking the same question, ‘Why can’t someone make a good porno film that’s not degrading?’<sup>24</sup> This was the question that would spur gay pornography’s rapid rise. Poole’s films, he hoped, would reflect a more inclusive and celebratory portrait of gay sexuality, rather than the violent example of “rough trade” from *Highway Hustler*. But was such reclamation possible, and what does the fantasy of a gay pornography that is equally “liberated” elide? Pornography’s version of the Gay Liberation-inflected gay man may have shifted us away from the doomed figure, but could the spaces that contained all-male sex ever be fully free of the residue of degradation and power disequilibrium? Situating this analysis in the grammar of space, I am left with a misleadingly simple question: Where does sex occur, and how is it instigated?

The tentative answer is that gay pornography of this era overwhelmingly makes use of heterotopic spaces, which muddle or blur the distinction between inside and outside, or which propose the capacity to transcend such binaries. Foucault defines the heterotopia as follows:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places — places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the

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<sup>24</sup> Wakefield Poole, *Dirty Poole: The Autobiography of a Gay Porn Pioneer* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2000), 141.

real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.<sup>25</sup>

Foucault goes on to subdivide this idea into the heterotopia of deviation, “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons.”<sup>26</sup>

In this sense, the heterotopia can be seen to serve a disciplinary function, which in fact helps to create a norm through its very division. But Foucault’s understanding of the heterotopia seems at times melancholic for their loss. For example, he continuously bemoans the loss of brothels, which he suggests may now have been replaced by the seedy motel.<sup>27</sup> Following Foucault, I trace the heterotopic relations of gay porno chic spatiality, especially in its rejection of inside-outside / private-public binaries, to see how they “expose real space [...] as still more illusory” and “create a space that is other.”<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to Marcus and Ziplow’s dismissal of pornographic space as inconsequential, in 1971, Saul Shiffrin (then president of the film distribution company Sherpix) remarked, “We believe that ‘Pornography is Geography,’ which means giving

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics*, trans. Jay Miskowiec, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986): 24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

people what they want at the proper geographical locations”<sup>29</sup> Shiffrin suggests that geography organizes erotic desires, and while he was referring to a model of marketing pornography that accounted for socio-cultural distinctions of particular regions, I intend to test this hypothesis against the *representation* of geographies.

Sustained attention to the early era of gay porno chic<sup>30</sup> is rapidly expanding,<sup>31</sup> in part due to the recent transfer and release of important pornographic films from their original 8mm and 16mm into digital formats and DVD.<sup>32</sup> The study of this era of early popular all-male pornography is also faced with an exigent situation as the last of the notable practitioners of its form are beginning to pass away. Wakefield Poole and Peter de Rome’s filmmaking would come to define the golden era of gay American

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<sup>29</sup> I came to find this compelling quotation from Eric Schaefer’s essay, “Gauging a Revolution: 16 mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), 18. For the original, see Scott Macdonough, “The Story of *Sherpix*: Soft-Core, Hard-Core, Encore,” *Show* (July 1971): 20.

<sup>30</sup> “Porno chic” designates what many consider the golden era of American pornographic production. Ralph Blumenthal coined the phrase in a *New York Times* article in 1973; he exemplifies the phenomenon with the media fanfare (but also litigation) surrounding the infamous heterosexual pornographic feature *Deep Throat*. Blumenthal contrasts “porno chic” against its pornographic precursors, which he characterizes unfavorably: “the genre’s ordinary offering [...] all too often betrays the film maker’s contempt for his audience: The sound is warped, the color thin and faded and grainy. And the story, well, there is really no story, just coupling—exhaustive, boring, mechanical, relentless minute-after-minute of poker-faced fornication in ‘loops,’ so-named for the splicing of the film into 10-minute repeating cycles” (29). Blumenthal’s “porno chic” signals other shifts, as well: from amateur to semi-professionalism, from private to public, from occlusion to visibility. His characterization, however, fails to give more than a passing reference to the simultaneously emergent “gay porno chic,” a term I use to describe the less mainstream but nonetheless burgeoning narrative gay pornography of the early 1970s.

<sup>31</sup> Examples include Linda Williams extensive reading of *Boys in the Sand* in *Screening Sex* and Cindy Patton’s diptych study of the same film alongside *L.A. Plays Itself* in the queer film classics series, *L.A. Plays Itself /Boys in the Sand*.

<sup>32</sup> Although almost all of these films were already transferred to VHS, their additional transfer to DVD was a necessary step for their continued preservation, as the VCR has long ago fallen out of favor. In the coming years, the DVD player will likely befall the same fate and digital cloud storage will likely overtake it as the preferred manner of archiving. For more rigorous thoughts concerning pornography’s preservation, see Tim Dean’s introduction to the recent anthology *The Porn Archives*.

pornography in the early 1970s. Poole is largely credited with making the first blockbuster<sup>33</sup> of gay pornography—*Boys in the Sand*—whereas the recently deceased Peter de Rome has been referred to by the moniker “the grandfather of gay porn.”<sup>34</sup> Taken together, Poole and de Rome’s films showcased New York City as more than a mere backdrop<sup>35</sup> to a sexual awakening. I undertake close readings of two lesser known films, Poole’s *Bijou* (1972) and de Rome’s *Underground* (1972), to argue the literal and figurative post-Stonewall landscape of New York was still being negotiated in these nascent depictions of all-male pleasure. These films’ settings are gritty and cruel, places of poverty and crime and deprivation, and spaces in which anonymity, rather than identity, offers the possibility for brief respite and pleasure. At times fostering pockets for such pleasure, while at other times enforcing its denial or transference into something else, the representational space of the city as a geography of desire presents neither a strictly utopian nor dystopian space, but rather a heterotopic space of struggle and possibility.

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<sup>33</sup> I use the term “blockbuster” slightly anachronistically. *Jaws* in 1975 is largely considered the first blockbuster film, and *Boys in the Sand* had nowhere near its popular draw.

<sup>34</sup> This is, in fact, the subtitle to the 2014 documentary on Peter de Rome’s life.

<sup>35</sup> Concerning pornography, queer cultural theorists Cante and Restivo write, “When the action is male-male sex, the spaces in which it transpires can never constitute neutral backdrops” Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, “The Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities of All-male Moving-Image Pornography,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 142.

This dyadic portrait of New York<sup>36</sup> offers insight into the nascent gay porno chic industry's earliest attempts at orienting the metropolitan as a site of longing itself. Deciphering the ground's relationship to a figure — whether we call the ground *space*, *mise en scène*, or *setting* and the figure a gay man or the less codified *male-male pleasure seeker*<sup>37</sup> — defamiliarizes the following pornographic analysis by not presuming to know already its inscription of gay subjectivity. It is important to note that gay porno chic invokes multiple spaces, including, but not limited to, urban, pastoral, tourist, institutional — each of which produces a different set of relations for the possibility of pleasure as well as displeasure in all-male pornography of this era. While this chapter looks primarily to the urban, it lays the groundwork for further geographic engagements of gay pornography that could extend beyond this particular space and this particular time.

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<sup>36</sup> New York City was the center of porno chic in the 1970s, but it was not the only locale in America producing hard core cinema. A more exhaustive study than mine would want to account for the gay pornography coming out of Los Angeles and San Francisco at the time, and in particular, Fred Halsted, whose film *LA Plays Itself*, would be especially germane to the questions of spatiality. See, for instance, Whitney Strub, "Mondo Rocco: Mapping Gay Los Angeles Sexual Geography in the Late 1960s Films of Pat Rocco," *Radical History Review* Vol. 2012, Issue 113 (Spring 2012): 13-34; William E. Jones, *Halsted Plays Himself* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011); Cindy Patton *L.A. Plays Itself / Boys in the Sand* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> This term deserves a brief explanation, especially given its popularity and meaning at the time. Many early gay pornographic films were at pains to publicize themselves. The term "gay" itself was only just then coming into popularity as a positive means of self-identifying, but the term "homosexual" would have been more readily available. However, publicity for pornographic films was a fraught situation, and, for instance, when Wakefield Poole tried to advertise his first film *Boys in the Sand* in the very same *New York Times* that would christen the era "porno chic," the descriptor "gay" was disallowed (until 1987) and "homosexual" infrequently permitted. The substitute term often settled upon was the euphemistic "all-male revues." (Patton 95). This likely is not the entire history of the "all male" etymology, but it is suggestive of a genealogy still felt today among gay culture in gay-for-pay pornography that continues to eroticize male bodies in pleasure, divested of homosexual identity. For more, see chapter 5.

Not unlike the John Rechy selection that opens this chapter, Samuel Delany's *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue* provides a queer geographic analysis, a pornographic reception study, and a theoretical treatise into a mode of cruising he terms "contact." Delany nostalgically looks back to the inter-class connections between patrons of predominantly at straight<sup>38</sup> porno theaters, spending little time interpreting the pornographic loops that were showing on screen. Instead, he reads the sociological and anthropological sexual interactions of subjects who frequented such theaters. While this approach positions his project as a reception study—in much the same way that Champagne advocates scholars "stop reading (gay pornographic) films"—Delany's concept of inter-class "contact" and its pleasures (Delany preferred the adjective "pleasant") can also be put to use assessing the representational diegeses of gay pornographic films from the early 1970s. In these films, too, the sex that ensues largely follow the model of "contact."

To clarify the idea behind what he calls "contact," Delany provides the following list of examples:

Contact is the conversation that starts in the line at the grocery counter with the person behind you while the clerk is changing the paper roll in the cash register. It is the pleasantries exchanged with a neighbor who has brought her chair out to take some air on the stoop. It is the discussion that begins with the person next to you at the bar. It can be the conversation that starts with any number of

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<sup>38</sup> Because Delany is a gay man himself and because most of the encounters that he describes are legible as gay sex acts, this point can often be glossed over. I highlight it because a later chapter of mine will examine the disarticulation of sex acts from sexual identities, but also to distinguish my own interest in this chapter as attending to gay pornographic representations screened within gay porno theaters.

semiofficials or service persons—mailman, policeman, librarian, store clerk or counter person. As well, it can be two men watching each other masturbating together in adjacent urinals of a public john—an encounter that, later, may or may not become a conversation. Very importantly, contact is also the intercourse—physical and conversational—that blooms in and as ‘casual sex’ in public rest rooms, sex movies, public parks, singles bars, and sex clubs, on street corners with heavy hustling traffic, and in the adjoining motels or the apartments of one or another participant, from which nonsexual friendships and/or acquaintances lasting for decades or a lifetime may spring [...].<sup>39</sup>

Delany troubles the notion that urban spaces are dangerous and rural spaces safe. In fact, Delany reverses this axiom, pointing to how rural spaces produce a greater threat to safety precisely for their paucity of “contact”—which would typically foster inter-class connections. If there is danger to be found in the city, Delany characterizes it as highly randomized and notes that the presence of porno theaters and prostitutes within Times Square did not render these spaces any less safe than other parts of the city. In fact, because these areas of the city fostered inter-class contact, he contends, in many instances they decreased the threat of directed violence.<sup>40</sup> While Delany’s points are convincing, the early gay pornographic films of the 1970s largely propelled the spatial threat of—if not physical violence itself, then censure, arrest, shame, and rejection—being “caught” in some manner. But spatial threats are not encoded solely in the logic of pleasure’s disallowance, by which I mean danger is not always consonant with

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<sup>39</sup> Delany draws the concept of contact (and networking) from Jane Jacob’s 1961 study *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. See Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York University Press: New York, 1999), 123, 126.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

displeasure. Here, I seek to complicate precisely the threat that representations of space within gay porno chic pose to queer desire.

In contrast to Delany, Jack Halberstam's *In A Queer Time and Place* complicates the sedimentation of queer stereotypes around the urban/rural divide, and offers a more film-centered analysis. Halberstam's work largely centers on in the tragic death of the young transgender man Brandon Teena in Nebraska in 1993, the semi-biographical film *Boys Don't Cry*<sup>41</sup> that depicted Teena's brief life, and to the ways in which rural space has been viewed as inhospitable to queer and trans bodies. Halberstam writes, "While there is plenty of truth to this division between urban and small-town life, between hetero-familial cultures and queer creative and sexual cultures, the division also occludes the lives of nonurban queers. *In a Queer Time and Place* both confirms that queer subcultures thrive in urban areas *and* contests the essential characterization of queer life as urban."<sup>42</sup> Both Halberstam and Delany find dissatisfaction within the prescriptiveness of a rightful or essential space for queers, in particular for the way in which the production of such "safe havens" can nefariously shift blame onto the queer subject who becomes a victim, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time—as I will shortly show played out in films like *Boys Beware*. As a result, both authors strive to unmoor the rigid determinations of space, deconstructing binaries and complicating what we mean by

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<sup>41</sup> *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Pierce (1999; New York: IFC Films and Killer Films, 2009), DVD.

<sup>42</sup> Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 15.

saying a space is safe or dangerous. This chapter engages the city itself, in its representational form from the 1970s, specifically because this was the moment when gay pornography was still finding its grammar. While both Delany and Halberstam's projects make use of representations as one manner through which to understand lived experiences of queers in space, their works are more ethnographic and sociological in their undertaking. My project derives first and foremost from a commitment to filmic and narratological hermeneutics. In this regard, I am invested in what representations can tell us about this historical moment. In my indebtedness to Delany and Halberstam, though, my analysis finds representations of the city as neither a beacon of safety, nor a source of peril, but something in-between.

Halberstam critiques queer geography because it often "tends to focus on gay men, and it is often comparative only to the extent that it takes white gay male sexual communities as a highly evolved model that other sexual cultures try to imitate and reproduce."<sup>43</sup> This critique is valid, and this chapter does not pretend to be universal. Indeed, one of the challenges to much early gay pornography was its promulgation of whiteness as the natural and desirable state. In striving to not recapitulate well-trod and often myopic critiques, I trouble the common understanding of "gay" at the time, situate the admittedly minimal role of women within its erotic logic (another notable absence from queer geography), and highlight the inter-class contact that informs early gay

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

pornography of this era. Rather than revel in or elevate the pornographic examples hereunder as exemplary of gay liberation politics, or even suggest that gay liberation politics was itself uniform, this chapter reads for the discrepancies, disruptions, and troubling stereotypes that are themselves very much in play in the emerging grammar of gay porno chic. Too much scholarship treats gay pornography of the 1970s as simply liberatory and utopian; this study does not don rose tinted glasses but hopes to locate the complexity that resides within it.

### **2.3 The Architectonics of Masculinity**

The surface tensions of pornography—the will to arouse, the drive to climax, the frenzy of the visible, etc.—are often its most pronounced features, shouting sex for all to hear. Even something as ubiquitous as Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy*, though, offers a compelling case for how the background plays a constitutive role in pornographic organization. By briefly examining *Playboy*, I give evidence to how the spatial parameters of pornography can come to hold pronounced meanings, which will then inform my own readings of gay porno chic films hereafter.

Indeed, *Playboy* reveals how pornography engaged with and cultivated new spatial arrangements for its heterosexual male readers to inhabit, and in the process facilitated the production of a new kind of masculinity. In fact, *Playboy* offers a roadmap for my own analysis of gay pornographic spatiality and reveals the fraught relationship

that underwrites the distinction between gay and straight understandings of masculinity.

Paul Preciado illustrates the capacity for space to shape the practices of gender and sexuality within the *Playboy* empire in their provocative exploration into what they call “the first ‘pornotopia’ of the mass media age.”<sup>44</sup> In the spaces of the magazine, or more precisely, in the spaces envisioned within the magazine, Preciado maps a divergent masculinity that breaks from the then historical norm. Noting a curious trend within *Playboy* toward architectural plenitude, Preciado demonstrates the resonance between the domains of the spatial and the erotic. In its spatial preoccupation, *Playboy* builds the scaffolding for a new heterosexual masculinity to emerge. *Playboy*’s careful curation of bachelor pads as well as its devotion to an ethos of urban living, delivered first through the magazine and secondarily through its special TV programming, instantiates a topography upon which desire could unfold. According to Preciado:

[Hefner] had somehow understood that in order to sculpt a new masculine subjectivity, one had to design a habitat: to create a space and invent a series of practices and uses of the domestic that could function as technohabits of the male body. Transforming the American heterosexual man into a playboy meant also inventing a new erotic topos as an alternative to the suburban family home that was the dominant heterosexual space in postwar North American culture.<sup>45</sup>

Preciado argues that the scripts, codes, and practices that cohere around the idea of a normative heterosexual male identity in the Cold War era enlivened and sustained the

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<sup>44</sup> Beatriz (Paul) Preciado, *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy’s Architecture and Biopolitics* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 17.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

figure of the soldier/husband who had gone off to war—brave and duty-bound—and returned home to embark on the American Dream, a fantasy reliant upon the nuclear family and the wife's return to female domesticity.

In contrast, the figure of masculinity Hefner advanced rejected the soldier/husband fantasy in favor of a figure more closely resembling the spy/lover, which symbolically elevated qualities like sophistication and seduction while downplaying ideas of monogamy and the nuclear family.<sup>46</sup> This new masculinity—which Preciado notes overwhelmingly coheres around white middle class heterosexuality—emerges alongside a reclamation of interior spaces that were previously deemed feminine. This remapping comes at a cost, though, as the deviation in the coded spatial-gender matrix risks association with homosexuality, a threat that required careful management. To avail the new urban masculinity of this conflation, *Playboy* minimized depictions of male camaraderie, sport, and outdoor leisure—any instance of homosociality that could be misconstrued as homoerotic. The new figure of masculinity, thereafter, spent his time indoors, enjoying drink, sophistication, and libidinal exploits with sexually liberated women. In the world envisioned by *Playboy*, women became the central object of desire. The new urban masculinity and its advancement into feminized domestic spaces bore striking resemblance to that of the dandy, absent the dandy's homosexual connotation. *Playboy's* spatially-incarnated

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 35.

masculinity insisted upon a constant negotiation and displacement from the threat of homosexuality.

Following Preciado's argument, I extend the study of pornographic spatiality to account for the inscription of gay masculinity, as well as his attendant desires. What spaces were gay men permitted to occupy and find sexual fulfillment in the 1970s, an era of masculinity in flux? Spaces are not unbiased; rather, they reflect uses that are sanctioned and encouraged around an interpellated subject. Joel Sanders writes of the reciprocity between spatiality and sexuality, illustrating their discursive connections:

In one of modern intellectual history's stranger alliances, contemporary cultural theorists have recently borrowed from architectural discourse the language of 'construction' to *denaturalize* sexual identity. Arguing that identity is 'constructed' rather than natural, 'mapped' rather than given, these theorists draw on the popular perception of architecture as manmade precisely in order to de-essentialize gender. But in the process of erecting an argument about gender, cultural theory draws on a view of architecture—architecture as human artifice—that the discipline itself has, throughout its long history, sought either implicitly to camouflage or emphatically to deny.<sup>47</sup>

Sanders contends that while feminist discourses benefited from the language of architecture to conceive of gender as a social construct, architectural discourses ironically sought to naturalize them. That architectural thought relies upon constructivist methodologies that have migrated to and become foundational within feminist and queer discourses, while still remaining attached to the fantasy of its own

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<sup>47</sup> Joel Sanders, "Introduction," *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, ed. Joel Sanders, 1st ed (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 12.

supposed impartiality presents the opportunity to cross-examine both in more depth.

Elizabeth Grosz performs just this doubled critique and recursive reinscription, stating:

Moreover, the city is, of course, also the site for the body's cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media, and the arts—the place where the body is representationally re-explored, transformed, contested, reinscribed. In turn, the body (as cultural product) transforms, reinscribes the urban landscape according to its changing (demographic, economic, and psychological) needs, extending the limits of the city, of the sub-urban, ever towards the countryside which borders it.<sup>48</sup>

Even as the two work to produce the other, Grosz highlights the city as the “key tool”<sup>49</sup> for understanding the body, an emphasis that in queer studies has not gone unnoticed or uncontested. In other words, not only does space inform gender's operation; gender also reveals space's dynamism.

Historian George Chauncey, however, insists a more unilateral direction: there is no such thing as a queer space, but rather “only spaces used by queers or put to queer use.”<sup>50</sup> This assertion would seem to diminish that power of spaces to circumscribe and interpellate subjects, rendering space as pliant and yielding to the queer subject's desires. This conclusion, though, fails to see for Chauncey's broader point. Chauncey recognizes that the ability to shape a space's meaning is not evenly accessible or easily accomplished. After all, a space rewards hegemonic uses insofar as it makes such acts appear natural—the path of least resistance. Chauncey is interested in tactics that

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<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies-Cities,” in *Sexuality & Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 249.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>50</sup> George Chauncey, “‘Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public’: Gay Uses of the Streets,” in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, ed. Joel Sanders, 1st ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 224.

disrupt, confound, or oppose hegemonic spatial functions, but he does not view that disruption as capable of transforming the space on a whole. He gives a historically rich account of the methods gay men utilized to survive in everyday spaces of New York City from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up through the 1950s, mapping where gay men would congregate, socialize, and cruise one another.

Specifically, Chauncey locates gay encounters *on the streets*, as well as in *other public venues* like parks, theaters, and subway restrooms. This historical analysis corroborates Preciado's representational study of the *Playboy's* reconfigured heterosexual masculinity that retreated into private spaces. In fact, crowded spaces of an often working-class nature were the dominant ones in which where gay men could find one another, specifically and counter-intuitively, because this hyper-public sphere provided a kind of privacy. The world Chauncey writes about locates a hidden place within plain sight, "a gay city in the midst of, yet invisible to, the dominant city,"<sup>51</sup> if one knows where to look and what to look for. The effect of this plain-sighted secrecy renders the figure the gay man as far more spy-like than heterosexual men could ever hope to be. It is this counterintuitive understanding of space and queer uses of it that proves illustrative, as well as challenging to the Gay Liberationist call to "come out."

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 225.

## 2.4 Cinema's Invisible Homosexual



**Figure 1: One of the purported homosexuals in *Boys Beware* is on the prowl.**

Indeed, one of the first explicit representations of homosexuality in cinematic history, well before gay porno chic arrived, was an educational film *Boys Beware* (1961),<sup>52</sup> which sought to teach young boys to stay vigilant against the threat of associating with known homosexuals. The question it posed, though, was epistemological: how exactly did one *know* who was a homosexual. **(See Figure 1)** While the Hays Code precluded the direct representation of the homosexual up through 1968, as Edelman and Miller's connotative readings of homosexuality revealed in the introduction, filmmakers could gesture to the gay man's presence in veiled and signaled ways. Viewers could read the particular demeanor, comportment, and narrative arcs of a character to symbolically "out" the

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<sup>52</sup> *Boys Beware* was a ten-minute anti-gay propaganda film produced in conjunction with the Inglewood, California police department and the Inglewood Unified School District. The discourses of law and education, as well as an invocation of the medical discipline, together formed a disciplinary archipelago that sought to authorize the film's message. *Boys Beware*, directed by Sid Davis (1960; Inglewood, CA: Sid Davis Productions, Prelinger Archives, 2013), Streaming.

homosexual. Among of the many coded representational strategies are the sissy, the dandy, the camp queen; sibilant speech, limp-wristedness, glamorous attire, bitchiness, and effete villainy, all of which serve to connote homosexuality.<sup>53</sup> These complicated representations conferred tragic significance upon the homosexual, as well, who was more often than not consigned to a demise that Vito Russo emblemized in the conclusion of *The Celluloid Closet* in an extensive cinematic necrology report.<sup>54</sup> *Boys Beware*, by contrast, hoped to make legible the homosexual figure, precisely because he occupied such a vexed position in space, as Chauncey articulated.

The forebodingly titled instructional film *Boys Beware*<sup>55</sup> largely flew under the radar of the Hay's Code's strict prohibitions on account of its pedagogical function to

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<sup>53</sup> For a broader consideration of homosexuality in cinema, see: Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row: 1981); Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993); Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Image: Essays on Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993); Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002); Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (London: Routledge, 2003); Thomas Waugh, *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writing on Queer Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Larry Gross, *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Eds. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Harry M. Benshoff, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Steven Paul Davies, *Out At The Movies: A History of Gay Cinema* (Harpendem: Kamera Books, 2008); B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Karl Schoonover, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>54</sup> Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 347-349.

<sup>55</sup> Considered by many to be a work of unintentional high camp, *Boys Beware* was one among several educational cautionary movies that Sid Davis made from the 1950s through the 1960s. In addition to homosexuality, Davis' works warned against the use of marijuana, juvenile delinquency, flying kites in rainstorms and other heedless acts, sex, barbituates, and general depravity. Davis died at age 90 in 2006. The film was remade as *Boys Aware* in 1973 using the same voiceover and script with new footage. Dir. Sid Davis, *Boys Beware*, Sid Davis Productions, Prelinger Archives (1961).

help young boys learn how to avoid the “spread” of homosexuality. This pathological understanding of homosexuality as transmittable follows in the sex education mental hygiene tradition of the day, which often relied on disease as a deterrent for any form of sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage. For instance, the projected fear of contracting syphilis became the primary disease of choice for such films to inhibit teen sexual behaviors.<sup>56</sup> Nearly a decade after *Boys Beware*, an article from the inaugural issue of *GAY* newspaper (1969) out of New York mockingly invoked this paranoia over the transferability of homosexuality from one person to another (“Is Homosexuality Catching?”). Author Robert Amsel bemusedly asks how such a foolish anxiety over homosexual communicability could have formed and blames Hugh Hefner, in part, for not correcting young heterosexual men: “Hugh Hefner, what have you done to America? While you sit in that big Chicago mansion of yours surrounded by Bunnies and truck drivers, what have you done? These frat types, the youth of America, look up to you for advice, and you leave them flat.”<sup>57</sup> Given Preciado’s study into *Playboy’s* homosexual-adjacent cultivation of heterosexual masculinity, perhaps we should not read this as a joke.

*Boys Beware* can certainly seem like a joke from a modern perspective, or like a work of high camp. Its self-serious tone and hyperbolic scenarios attempt to make

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<sup>56</sup> Ken Smith, *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films 1945-1970* (New York: Blast Books, 1999), 68-69.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Amsel, “Is Homosexuality Catching?” *Gay* 1.1, New York (December 1, 1969): 7.

legible the hidden homosexual who seeks to either commit pederasty or murder, but he remains evasive. Rather than provide contours to and elaborate on this previously abstruse figure, *Boys Beware* relies heavily on relations of spatiality to give a rough approximation of the homosexual figure, leaving his psychology, sociality, and subjectivity as uncharted territories. The homosexual's natural habitat, because the film ascribes to fear-mongering, comes to be located anywhere that young boys and teenagers congregate. Those locations included the park, the playground, the public restroom, the boardwalk, and the street. The homosexual figure is also tied intimately with the automobile, a primary tool he wields for ensnaring boys. Notably, the homosexual exists in public spaces, and more specifically, in civic spaces. These are locations where the citizen is encouraged to congregate, to relax, and to engage in leisure. *Boys Beware* cannot fathom the homosexual existing in a private space—nor does it attempt such a representation—and indeed, if one is in a private space with the homosexual, it is already “too late.” In one scene, a boy enters the motel room of the older man, and once he crosses the threshold from the public to the private, the narrator solemnly declares, “He probably never realized until too late that he was riding in the shadow of death. But sometime that evening, Mike Merrick traded his life for a newspaper headline.”<sup>58</sup> Private spaces in *Boys Beware* might as well be the space of the pornographic.

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<sup>58</sup> *Boys Beware*. Dir. Sid Davis. Sid Davis Productions, 1961. Film.

*Boys Beware* understands a homosexual as one who “demands an intimate relationship with members of their own sex,”<sup>59</sup> which marks homosexuality as always already an act of coercion. At the film’s conclusion, the young boy taking the shortcut senses a danger—a middle-aged man following shortly behind him—and runs back to his friends who he had earlier abandoned. The narrator tells us the boy will now take the well-travelled way home, which we can read as a spatialized metaphor of the heterosexual / homosexual divide. Short-cuts are the preferred pathway of the homosexual, whose refusal to tread the well-worn road that society has laid out before him defines his spatial being.

Indeed, in *Boys Beware*, it is *space* that one must be wary of, for space makes possible the homosexual’s unexpected, lascivious, and demented desires. Paranoia offers the antidote. The threat of gay transmission in a pre-AIDS era—that is, of “catching homosexual”—finds its resolution in a spatial awareness that is defined through choice.

The final lines of the film draw this point home:

The decision is always yours, and your whole future may depend on making the right one. So no matter where you meet a stranger, be careful if they are too friendly, if they try to win your confidence too quickly, and if they become overly personal. One never knows when the homosexual is about. He may appear normal, and it may be too late when you discover he is mentally ill. So keep with your group and don’t go off alone with strangers, unless you have the permission of your parent or teacher.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

*Boys Beware* could not fathom the sexual acts that take place in private spaces — and as such, transformed any insinuation of them into brutal scenes of crime. Borrowing from Chauncey, while no space is inherently homosexual, *Boys Beware* suggests civic spaces offer a form of privacy-in-public that homosexuals take advantage of to go about their pursuits unnoticed. It is precisely the homosexual's chameleonic nature, then, his capacity to traverse space unnoticed, that renders him so dangerous.

## **2.5 Bijou**

In writing on gay pornography from the 1970s, Whitney Strub observes, "Though a place of possibility, the city is never a place of complete liberation."<sup>61</sup> The danger of spaces — that is, the possibility for violence's irruption in spaces — can improbably instantiate and sustain queer pleasures. It is to this less-than-tidy equation that I wrestle with to arrive at an understanding of pleasure's complicated inscription within 1970s gay porno chic.

I now turn my attention to Poole's second feature-length film, *Bijou* (1972).<sup>62</sup> *Bijou's* three distinct spatial environments both police and engender pleasure: the street, dominated by the automobile, minimizes cruising yet instigates the film's somewhat meandering sexual odyssey; the apartment, whose privacy should accommodate onanistic eroticism but here does not; and the film's eponymous Bijou club, an interior

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<sup>61</sup> Whitney Strub, "From Porno Chic to Porno Bleak: Representing the Urban Crisis in 1970s American Pornography," in *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representations in the 1970s*, eds. Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 45.

<sup>62</sup> *Bijou*, directed by Wakefield Poole (1972; New York: Poolemar; Vinegar Syndrome, 2014), DVD.

space whose phantasmagoric lack of referentiality complicates Cartesian space and becomes its honored site of homoeroticism. I contend that the public spaces of the city are only available for cruising by the savviest of men, and are underwritten by the near-constant threat of retribution; rather than the streets, all-male pleasures take place in hidden pockets of the city – which sometimes emerge randomly, sometimes after much effort, and almost always in heterotopic ways. These chimerical spaces synecdochelly advocate attendance in porn theaters as a substitution for more public forms of cruising.

Before jumping into an exegetic reading of the film itself, though, I want to orient my analysis of *Bijou* by briefly contrasting it to its more famous sibling predecessor, *Boys in the Sand*. Poole's first porno film, *Boys in the Sand* (1971)<sup>63</sup> usually garners more critical attention than *Bijou*, given that it brought hard core to the mainstream.<sup>64</sup> The film sets its sexual escapades against the idyllic beachside community Fire Island, a gay enclave separated from New York City by two hours. In the film's first vignette, "Bayside," a

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<sup>63</sup> *Boys in the Sand* was inspired, in different ways, by three films. The first was Mart Crowley's *Boys in the Band*, the play-turned-film (William Friedkin, 1970) that depicted the New York gay scene in what some view in a negative light through camp bitchiness, drunken misbehavior, and volatile in-fighting. The second inspiration was Andy Warhol's *My Hustler* (1965) which presented an un-idealized vision of gay life on Fire Island, with most characters vying for the attention of one particularly handsome hustler, Paul America. The third film was the previously mentioned *Highway Hustler*, in which a kidnapped hitchhiker is sodomized at knifepoint. See Edward D. Miller, "Clean Feet and Dirty Dancing: The Erotic *Pas de Deux* and *Boys in the Sand*," in *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*, ed. Hans Maes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 217.

<sup>64</sup> Most pornographic scholarship will give this honor to Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* (1972), but Poole's film helped paved the way for the public consumption of hard core films. In an interview, Poole was asked "How do you feel for not getting credit for what you did for the sex film industry?" to which he later reminisced, "They were alluding to the fact that *Boys in the Sand* was released before *Deep Throat*, which came out one year later, insinuating [*Deep Throat*'s producers] couldn't have made their movie without mine." Matthew Hays, *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007), 205, 215-216, 218.

lonesome man lounges on the beach, when inexplicably the mirage of a naked man — played by Casey Donavon — materializes from out of the ocean. The two men have sex in the shade of the pines, after which the lonesome man walks into the breakers and disappears, a reversal of Donavon’s materialization. Two more vignettes follow — “Poolside” and “Inside” — both featuring Donavon and other sexual suitors, which continue the motif of fantasy made manifest. The spatial backdrop of Fire Island<sup>65</sup> as a wealthy gay vacation town for New Yorkers articulates same-sex pleasures as highly classed, but also elides any challenges that would normally circumscribe cruising, or the act of looking for sex.

The sex that takes place in *Boys in the Sand*, while always at least partially veiled in some manner (in the heavily shaded pines beside the beach, behind the fence of a pool’s patio, or within the confines of a beach house) finds social recognition through both the ease with which sex is initiated and in its public scenes’ relatively lax attitude toward homosocial behaviors (men walk naked on the beach, hold hands on the boardwalk, and exchange knowing glances from residence windows to perambulating street passersby). Indeed, Edward D. Miller notes, “Gay men are seemingly drawn to beaches, islands, peninsulas and coastal cities for socio-geographical reasons. Such locations both reinforce epithelization and permit expressions of freedom and social

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<sup>65</sup> In his autobiography, Poole highlights the importance of the setting for *Boys in the Sand*’s creation, stating, “it probably was the island, along with the ever-present sexual tension, that gave me an idea for a little film.” *Dirty Poole*, 143; Peter de Rome will later provide an alternative explanation for Poole’s film.

acceptance.”<sup>66</sup> The only indication of social unrest comes in the form of a newspaper headline from *GAY*, a Gay Liberationist weekly newspaper, that Donavon’s character carries in one scene (rather than focus on this article, though, he turns to the personal ads). The headline to the newspaper alerts viewers to police brutality against men gathering at a gay bar *in the city*, which rather overtly invokes the riots at Stonewall. As the only incursion into an otherwise hermetic world where gay desire can flourish, *Boys in the Sand* largely suggests that—on Fire Island, at least—what gay men wanted, they could find. There is no fear of retribution. These are scenes less of cruising than of wish fulfillment.



**Figure 2: Unnamed protagonist Bill Harrison walks down the street in *Bijou*.**

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<sup>66</sup> Edward D. Miller, “Clean Feet and Dirty Dancing: The Erotic *Pas de Deux* and *Boys in the Sand*,” 217.

One year later, *Bijou* drastically returns us to the city that *Boys* escaped.<sup>67</sup>

Whereas *Boys in the Sand* reveled in beauty and leisure, which Fire Island plays an important role in safeguarding,<sup>68</sup> *Bijou* resituates pleasure within the capitalist world of the dilapidated city (**See Figure 2**) and its exploited labor, for which pleasure is always in excess. In fact, *Boys in the Sand* can appear somewhat idealistic when paired next to *Bijou*, which despite lacking as much scholarly interest, is often considered Poole's masterpiece.<sup>69</sup> In *Bijou*, the city organizes the narrative: men find sex with each other only after a complex navigation of space. The fantasy that emerges finds its enactment within an indeterminate space—the titular *Bijou*—which etymologically means “prized jewel.” I would be remiss not to recount Foucault's invocation of Diderot's *Les Bijoux indiscrets* in *History of Sexuality*, where he contends his mission is to transcribe this fable of the indiscrete jewels into history and in so doing reveal the repressive hypothesis' contradiction: “One day a certain mechanism, which was so elfin-like that it could make

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<sup>67</sup> The two films are materially linked, as well. The financial success of *Boys in the Sand* was such that Poole was able to purchase a top-of-the-line Beaulieu 16mm camera, which was an upgrade from the hand-cranked 16mm camera he used to shoot the first film. The literal image of *Bijou* could not have existed without *Boys in the Sand*. See Daniel A. Brown, “Hardcore Focus: Wakefield Poole and the Experimental Edge of Gay Cinema,” *Folio Film*, 16 March 2016: <http://folioweekly.com/HARDCORE-FOCUS,14919>

<sup>68</sup> Part of the success of *Boys in the Sand* can be attributed to its elision of the grittiness and urban decay that *Bijou* would come to depict. This can be seen echoed in Poole's handling of the 55<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse in New York, where *Boys in the Sand* premiered. He reportedly selected the theater for its distance from the seedier porno theaters and then proceeded to re-paint its interiors and have the atrium cleaned, in addition to attaching a non-pornographic short film on Andy Warhol to the beginning. All of these endeavors reveal Poole's desire to legitimize the film largely through spatial cues. See Matt Connolly, “Solidification and Flux on the ‘Gay White Way’: Gay Porn Theaters in Post-Stonewall New York City,” *Spectator* 37.1 (Spring 2017): 34.

<sup>69</sup> Al Goldstein of *Screw* magazine is quoted on advertisements for *Bijou* as saying, “Best Picture of the Year! Tops ‘Throat’,” which refers to the famous heterosexual hard core film *Deep Throat*.

itself invisible, captured this sex and, in a game that combined pleasure with compulsion, and consent with inquisition, made it tell the truth about itself and others as well.”<sup>70</sup> What for Diderot is a magic ring that compels women’s genitals to speak is here a purse that holds a ticket to a mysterious space, wherein the protagonist may “speak sex.”<sup>71</sup> But what kind of space is Bijou, this “prized jewel”? It has been referred to as a “club,”<sup>72</sup> “bathhouse,”<sup>73</sup> and “psychedelic trance.”<sup>74</sup> I offer another, meta-discursive understanding of the space as the pornographic theater itself. I argue that Poole’s film offers us a meditation on the mediation of pornography and therefore gives us its spatiality as a canvas on top of which various desires can be projected. It is in the spectatorial potential of this heterotopic space where modern living and the wandering gay man find their escape, in the starkest distinction from Fire Island.

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<sup>70</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 77.

<sup>71</sup> Linda Williams takes Diderot’s tale as the opening illustration for *Hard Core*, revealing by its conclusion that, “In contrast to Foucault’s use of the fable to invoke the general compulsion to confess sexual truths, I have used it to symbolize special solicitation of the truth of the *female* body. My point has been that although cinema, and later video, seem to enable direct knowledge of pleasure, their confessional magic is like that produced by the sultan’s magic ring given him by his genie—nothing more than a male fiction about loose-lipped women.” *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989), 277.

<sup>72</sup> This designation is the most common, and is the one Poole himself uses to refer to the Bijou in his autobiography: “I’d been kicking around another movie idea about a club called *Bijou*, a place of sexual freedom with a mystical, almost religious atmosphere.” See *Dirty Poole*, 166.

<sup>73</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, “Sex in the Seventies: Gay Porn Cinema as an Archive for the History of American Sexuality,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (January 2017): 92.

<sup>74</sup> Ryan Powell very compellingly writes of *Bijou* as following in the tradition of postwar underground trance films, which he notes requires a careful “choreography of space,” and which I might add, would suggest the film occurs in the hallucinogenic space of the mind. “Bijou,” *Porn Studies* 4:3 (2017): 281.

*Bijou's* temporality further distinguishes it from *Boys in the Sand*. In *Bijou*, the storyline features a linear plot wherein a central protagonist embarks on a sexual odyssey. In *Boys in the Sand*, three vignettes grant a triptych-like quality that lacks linearity, despite each starring Casey Donavon. *Bijou* focuses instead on the spatial trek that the protagonist Bill Harrison takes from the anonymous streets into the cavernous non-space of the *Bijou*, where a psychosexual and kaleidoscopic frenzy awaits him.

If linearity suggests a causal logic, then it should come as no surprise that *Bijou's* utmost concern is the journey Harrison takes. *Bijou* depicts New York City as an obstacle to gay desire, requiring nontrivial effort to overcome. Fantasy does not merely materialize as in *Boys*; pleasure has to be sought out and enacted through chance, secrecy, and subterfuge. The importance of spatiality—and its creation—is established in the first shot of the film, with a construction site undergoing an excavation in preparation for laying a building's foundation. The film's protagonist is a construction worker, and in this capacity holds significance to the city as a literal producer of its spaces. Strub notes the importance of this detail as well, suggesting, "*Bijou* [...] reflects awareness of a city in flux whose redevelopment plays out not just infrastructurally but also sexually in a dialectic [...]. Just as the worker constructs the city, it in turn constructs his sexuality with its web of possibilities."<sup>75</sup> His profession also plays into the

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<sup>75</sup> Whitney Strub, "From Porno Chic to Porno Bleak: Representing the Urban Crisis in 1970s American Pornography," 42.

stereotypes of a hyper masculinity<sup>76</sup>— as a construction worker, his body and his labor are his primary sources of value—and the film revels in objectifying him, and, because he is male, this objectification works against the script of the male gaze.



**Figure 3: The Mercedes driver cruises the streets.**

On his way home from work, Harrison witnesses a bizarre scene: an automobile hits a beautiful woman (Cassandra Hart) who is crossing the street.<sup>77</sup> A frenetic

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<sup>76</sup> Ryan Powell suggests this hyper-machismo may help to build a crossover appeal for the film, beyond gay viewers, but this hyper-masculinity could also gesture toward what John Mercer calls pornography's capacity to forward gay prototypes, such as "soldiers, sailors, construction workers, body builders, a veritable cornucopia of types that act as exemplars of strident masculinity," which continue to proliferate throughout the 1980s and beyond in the so-called "clone," known for his generic hyper-masculinity. See "Bijou:" 283; John Mercer, "Homosexual Prototypes: Repetition and the Construction of the Generic in the Iconography of Gay Pornography," *Paragraph*, Volume 26, Issue 1-2 (January 2008): 287.

<sup>77</sup> This violent incident might seem a perplexing impetus for a pornographic film, but it comes with some precedent. Writing in *Playboy* in 1967, co-authors Arthur Knight and Louis Alper state, "The beginning of countless stag reels concerns a female who becomes stimulated sexually by reading an erotic book, masturbating, dreaming, watching a nude male, watching horses have sex, watching donkeys have sex, watching people have sex, *hearing* people have sex, taking a shower, sunning herself, doing housework, listening to the radio—or even being hit by a car." In this explanation, being hit by a car is just one of many explanations for why a woman might become aroused, and serves as the harbinger for sex. That the film

montage<sup>78</sup> precedes the moment of impact: the film cuts between the woman in question strutting down the street in her fur coat, Harrison leaving his construction site for home, and a mysterious bald man driving a Mercedes-Benz through the city, whose eyes dart in search of something unknown. The older gentleman provides a crucial insight to the film, for in the moments preceding the car accident, he distractedly peers out of his Mercedes-Benz at something or someone (**See Figure 3**), which the film reveals for the briefest flash to be a young man wearing purple pants, leaning against the railing of a YMCA. The moment passes in the blink of the eye, but the distraction is unmistakable. The old man is cruising for sex. Shortly after taking his eyes off of the handsome pedestrian, he hits the young woman with his car.

Were this film not pornographic, one might interpret this moment differently, but as it stands, this connotative reading of cruising makes sense within its overall structure. *Bijou* does not dwell on this moment, nor do we stay with the car driver or the fallen woman for long. In the city, the film suggests, accidents like this happen all the

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*Bijou* follows this script, only to deviate immediately from the sex one might expect with the female victim suggests a knowing wink between Poole and the filmgoers of the time. Arthur Knight and Louis Alper, "The History of Sex in Cinema," *Playboy* (1967): 158.

<sup>78</sup> Wakefield Poole makes two noteworthy claims about *Bijou*. First, in his director's commentary on the re-released DVD of the film, he notes his intention in the opening montage to pay homage to Alfred Hitchcock, and second, he hopes his film will be read ambiguously and endlessly interpretable. In short, he longs for *Bijou* to be rich in connotations. In the case of Hitchcock, suspense becomes the driving force of the film's first act. In the case of the latter aspiration, multiple moments in this film elude obvious catharsis or discernible motivation. Actors can appear more as puppets, and actions more like choreography, but without the naturalism or payoff that we typically expect of narrative works. In this regard, Poole may well have created one of the first pornographic Rorschach tests.

time. The film subtly polices against men cruising for other men in public and makes literal its disavowal of women. The consequence for cruising proves not only physically injurious to this woman (possibly lethal) but also presents an injunction to discretion to gay men: this act, the film suggests, is the wrong way to seek pleasure, and the city punishes the wealthy driver and unwitting woman for it.



**Figure 4: The distracted Mercedes driver hits the woman crossing the street in *Bijou*.**

The protagonist Harrison, however, finds reward through the car accident. The construction worker witnesses the scene of the accident (See Figure 4), but does nothing to assist, either. Rather, he watches like a passive spectator as the tragedy unfolds. In the moment of impact, the young woman's purse jettisons through the air, landing at Harrison's feet. Harrison looks to the purse, then to the victim and driver; the driver returns the young man's gaze. Unexpectedly, Harrison pockets the purse, crosses the street, and heads to the subway entrance. Not only does this scene challenge the

viewer's identification with Harrison by presenting him as callous, the film rewards Harrison's anti-sociality and theft without explanation. His motivations defy any easy or Aristotelian logic; chance becomes the arbiter of his sexual navigation. The dispensed woman's sexual agency and Harrison's trajectory are reinscribed through the purse he now retains.<sup>79</sup>

In the second scene, we move from the streets to the domicile, a space reserved for erotic fulfillment and yet, here it fails just such a purpose. Harrison takes the subway home and begins to unwind from his day. The news plays on the radio, with reports coming in about Vietnam. He switches the station, and Led Zeppelin's "Dazed and Confused" begins to wail on the radio, followed by "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You." If on the streets he exudes the demeanor of a macho construction worker—implying he is either a heterosexual or a clone—then within his small apartment Harrison's sexuality is marked as the prior. The walls are plastered in *Playboy* centerfolds, which, invoking Preciado, quite literally become part of the spatial arrangement. Harrison's turns to the purse, which operates not unlike the trope of the MacGuffin<sup>80</sup> in that it sets in motion the

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<sup>79</sup> There is a long history in Alfred Hitchcock's cinematic oeuvre of presenting the woman's purse or handbag as a stand-in for her genitals. Because Poole largely structures the opening of this film as homage to Hitchcock, such an interpretation continues in that tradition.

<sup>80</sup> The idea of the MacGuffin, like the tropic use of the purse, again returns us to Hitchcock. Hitchcock, while not inventing the MacGuffin—at least not in its narratological function—certainly popularized its use under this name in his films. In an interview, he describes it as follows:

It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?"  
And the other answers, "Oh, that's a MacGuffin."  
The first one asks, "What's a MacGuffin?"

film's journey but is largely forgotten by its conclusion. Rifling through it, he finds a number of items: a rosary, a notebook, lipstick, and a single ticket to the mysterious *Bijou*, with an address and time: 7pm. He dismisses the rosary but fondles and tastes the lipstick, treating it as a phallic object. The ticket intrigues him, but provides little information as to what kind of a space or experience it represents, and so he casts it aside.

The camera lingers on the scantily appointed apartment<sup>81</sup> and Harrison grows aroused. A scene of masturbation follows, which keeps us in the claustrophobic, gloomy apartment. Moving the scene of action into the shower, Harrison tries to get off but fails: the women he imagines while masturbating—whom we see intercut in quick succession—are overshadowed by the car accident victim, whose image accosts him. In most pornography, masturbation would serve as the precursor to the main act, coitus, but here it becomes a form of erotic failure, and the first incident to cast doubt on Harrison's suggested heterosexuality. Harrison cannot stop seeing the fallen woman,

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"Well," the other man says, "it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands." The first man says, "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands," and the other one answers, "Well then, that's no MacGuffin!" So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.

See François Trauffoult, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon, 1983), 138.

<sup>81</sup> Poole reveals this apartment to have been a friend's, Joe Allen's, apartment. He writes, "It had been vacant for years and was just unkempt enough to work for me. It was so perfect that it took us no time to clean and dress the set." Poole, *Dirty Poole*, 170.

and soon he gives up on his erection. Having failed to get off, he grabs the mysterious ticket from the purse and heads back out to the city in search of the Bijou.

Given his apartment's location, the time on the clock reading 6:40pm, the 7pm deadline stamped on the ticket, and the address for the Bijou, Harrison would have to hurry to make it downtown in time, but the film resolves this dilemma with a simple cut. The viewer can track the spatial cues of the film to see where Harrison is at all times within the metropolitan, should we be perceptive—or obsessive—enough to want to know. The accident takes place right beside the Lincoln Center; Harrison's apartment moves us south to midtown; and the Bijou exists in lower Manhattan.

Of the three locations, only the last will host a sexual encounter that is carried out to completion. After walking up a pair of dilapidated stairs to the Bijou's ally entryway, Harrison presents his ticket to the second woman of the film, a disinterested employee who reads a wrestling magazine. Carnival music, screams, and mysterious cracking whips can be heard in the lobby space; Harrison seems no more aware of what is in store inside the Bijou's inner sanctum than the viewers are. Entering its confines, Harrison finds himself in a no-man's land, an ungrounded geography, reminiscent of how Rechy described the balcony in *Numbers*. What to call this space is an open question: Is it utopian,<sup>82</sup> dystopian, or carnivalesque? Entry requires a series of liminal transitions:

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<sup>82</sup> Linda Williams, following Steven Marcus's idea that all pornography is utopian (a phenomenon he coins as "pornotopia"), extends this idea and contends that "all-male gay pornography is inherently *more* utopian, if only because the taboos that must be overcome to stage its pleasures are greater." (emphasis mine)

Harrison moves from one chamber to another in procession, heeding different directions in each in order to continue. A flashing sign informs him to remove his shoes, then his clothes, and soon the sense of scale changes: Harrison's form appears shrunken by comparison to the objects he passes. When the mirrors, cellophane, and smoke recede, we see the space itself is veiled in a rich, encompassing blackness.<sup>83</sup> Occasionally the darkness is punctured by a burst of lights (notably a red, yellow and green stop sign, which recalls the accident at the traffic signal) and a surrealist sculpture of pink hands (See Figure 5), fruit, and shells pass by, none of which lend the architectural space a



**Figure 5: Harrison wanders through the surreal landscape inside the Bijou.**

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*Screening Sex*, 150. I am not convinced that this is actually the case, or that additional taboos necessarily result in "more utopia." What this analysis hopes to do is *untidy* the simple (perhaps simplistic) equation that gay pornography and gay liberation are both merely shedding off repression.

<sup>83</sup> Poole reveals "The Bijou interiors were shot entirely in my living room. We covered all the walls and floors with black felt and built a platform in the center, which we covered in black velvet." *Dirty Poole*, 171.

sense of grounding.<sup>84</sup> One might surmise that the Bijou refuses the possibility of naming its space, and as such, refuses the naming of its subjects—but given the presence of beauty, rarity, and art within it, connotations proliferate.

Once Harrison enters the main arena of the Bijou, a young man appears before him, laying prostrate with his posterior pressed upward. Without hesitation, Harrison mounts the young man, whose long hair initially conceals his gender; the two men have anal intercourse. Following their passionate exchange, a meta-filmic interlude interrupts the action, further confounding the already abstracted space. Poole writes in his autobiography: “A multimedia, split-image film within a film begins. Our hero is introduced to all the men who will presently service him. They all undress seductively, and simultaneously, and all five images have orgasms. The show ends, and the mood changes. One by one, the men enter the room, and a ritualistic orgy ensues.”<sup>85</sup> Poole reveals that these individual scenes of masturbation were initially shot as test footage, but then combined and projected simultaneously to give a grid-like effect. What Poole fails to mention in the above description is his own appearance as the cameraman peering through the lens. The film imagines not only the space of spectatorship, but the space of filming, presenting both ends of the spectrum. This gesture speaks to the

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<sup>84</sup> Many of these objects were collectible art pieces, which lends this space a peculiarly upper-class status, one that Harrison the construction worker would not likely have been acquainted with, given what little we know about him and the scant décor in his apartment. The invocation of art works, though, should not be surprising, given the fact that one of Wakefield Poole’s aspirations was to elevate hard core pornography to the status of an art form.

<sup>85</sup> Poole, *Dirty Poole*, 167.

transformative power of pornography to move viewers into imagined spaces, but also into real spaces of desire. After the multi-media show, Harrison falls asleep momentarily, and when he awakens, the orgy ensues. In this manner, Poole calls into question the ontology yet again by allowing for the possibility that the media show has planted a sex dream in his head.



**Figure 6: The mysterious space of the Bijou, where the orgy takes place.**

The throng of men in the Bijou engage in a series of creative, permutative sex acts, with most of the attention centered around protagonist Harrison (**See Figure 6**). Poole writes, “In the orgy scene I wanted to portray as many types of lust as I could,”<sup>86</sup> which suggests an attempt to multiply the kinds of pleasure thought possible. Even so, with a cast of all-white, youthful, muscular actors, that multiplicity may fail to register across the homogenous group. If there are indeed multiple forms of lust on display,

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 171.

Harrison as the protagonist should be central, and yet the indication of his pleasure remains opaque. Throughout the orgy, Harrison hides his face<sup>87</sup> from the camera's gaze, and when it is shown, keeps his eyes clinched shut. It is as though Harrison cannot bear to look at the sex he is having, or that he is himself astonished to see (and so will not look) precisely what it is he is doing. This trend continues until the final seconds of the film, once Harrison has finished, put his clothes back on, and exited the Bijou back into the New York City alleyway. Here, he lights up a cigarette. Taking a drag, Harrison breaks the fourth wall, looks into the camera, and smiles, eyes wide open, as the shot freezes and the credits roll. It is, without question, the most effusive and discernible look of pleasure that we have seen yet on our protagonist's face, a demonstrable change from his demeanor within this kaleidoscopic phantasmagoria.

This scene recalls an interview with Foucault, wherein he describes, counter-intuitively, the delay with which pleasure sometimes arrives: "the best moment of love is likely to be when the lover leaves in the taxi. It is when the act is over and the guy is gone that one begins to dream about the warmth of his body, the quality of his smile, the

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<sup>87</sup> Here it is important to note that I focus on Harrison's face as a prime indication of his pleasure against the common practice invoked by Linda Williams in *Hard Core* and other pornography scholars elsewhere to locate the representation of a man's pleasure solely in his penis and the expected money shot. While Harrison's penis and its money shot are both present, because Harrison becomes the literal substitution for the woman—recall the victim of the accident had been the intended visitor to the Bijou that night—and because Williams' locates the pornographic guarantor of woman's pleasure as largely located in her facial expressions (and audio), I here consider the question by a kind of transposition. If I insist too stridently that Harrison's pleasure should be located in his facial expression and not in his penis, it is perhaps because Harrison's face is so often occluded and his eyes shut, that I belabor the point. Is the protagonist in the throes of pleasure? We receive mixed signals.

tone of his voice. It is the recollection rather than the anticipation of the act that assumes a primary importance in homosexual relations.”<sup>88</sup> If Harrison could not experience his pleasure in the moment (or in the space of the Bijou), he almost certainly could not have anticipated it, except that gay pornography is always—at least for its viewers—a process of anticipating the eventual sex: not *if* it will take place, but *when*? But Harrison does not know he resides within a pornographic film.

It is only after leaving the space of the Bijou that he comes to reinscribe these memories with anything we might approximate as pleasure. This is noteworthy, given the near-total absence of the money shot (there is a paltry one) from the film, which Poole remarks elsewhere had frustrated audiences.<sup>89</sup> That pleasure comes to be expressed not through the money shot, but through the face, recalls the problem Williams writes about at length in *Hard Core*: the seeming impossibility of the genre to represent female pleasure. What, then, to make of *Bijou*'s remapping of the same problem and solution in rendering that pleasure on Harrison's face? There is also the sticky matter of space. The streets of New York City—this narrow alleyway that he is frozen in as the credits roll—reconstitute him into a legible form of masculinity, the macho construction worker. This is not to say that he did not experience pleasure when

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<sup>88</sup> Michel Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rainbow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1982-1983; 1997), 150.

<sup>89</sup> Kenneth Turan and Stephen F. Zito, "'I make 'Em All for Me,' An Interview with Wakefield Poole," *Sinema* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 202-203.

he was vulnerable, naked, erect, caressed, held, sucked and kissed by multiple men whose bodies began to lose differentiation, but that the city makes sense of his body in a way that the Bijou could not organize him. He returns, in the streets, to the heteronormative order, whether he identifies with it, or not. The return to the cityscape from the heterotopia of the Bijou allows him to pass once again, freely and without suspicion of any untoward desire.

I have focused on *Bijou's* spaces in part because they are so enigmatic, but also because the medium of the film rewards such a reading. Shot on 16mm film gauge, *Bijou* did not, as with its predecessor, use synced sound, except for one line spoken by the ticket taker, who asks Harrison if he wants his stub back. Instead, both Poole's first and second pornographic features incorporated sweeping orchestral scores in the absence of spoken word; in an odd anachronism, this muted feature returns Poole's films to the era of silent filmmaking and what Tom Gunning refers to as the "cinema of attractions."<sup>90</sup>

Poole explains this decision as follows:

[I]t (*Boys in the Sand*) was to be silent, because, like *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond, Poole says, 'I don't like talking. As long as the situation can be explained with cinematic terms, you don't need the words.' Remembering again *Highway Hustler*, where the character's exaggerated swishy accent 'blew the whole movie,' he felt that if *Boys* was silent, 'there was a little ambiguity to it, and the person watching it [...] could see Casey's face and look at the glint in his eye and could imagine him saying whatever he wanted.'<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Gunning's term refers to cinema's solicitation of the audience's awareness through an engagement with images that compel curiosity and refers to early cinematic experiments. See "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8.3-4 (1986): 63-70.

<sup>91</sup> Turan and Zito, *Sinema*, 199.

After offering a romantic explanation for the lack of sound, Poole gives a second, more uncomfortable reason, revealing the effeminate sound of a character's voice in the porno *Highway Hustler* had soured his viewing experience (despite what he claims elsewhere was its violence). The "swishy accent" in turn disinclined him from using sound in his early pornographic films. There is yet another explanation, though, to the silence. 16 mm film, despite being a gauge that was intended for amateurs use,<sup>92</sup> was hard to shoot synchronous sound with, so eliding diegetic sound served a number of aims: narrative, spectatorial, and technical. To Poole's mind, the result was heightened ambiguity, or what I have been arguing throughout is the sense of connotative meaning. In fact, the absence of sound reminds the viewer just how commanding sound is to the experience of pornography to begin with. To *not* hear the moaning, sighing, slapping, gasping exclamatory vocalizations of performers is an odd experience, especially to modern viewers of pornography. While Williams has famously written of the hegemonic "frenzy of the visible," it seems that the power of the audible has often been left underexplored. In the absence of diegetic sound, visuality and space necessarily gain prominence.

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<sup>92</sup> Eric Schaefer notes the shifting cultural perceptions (and uses) of the 16mm gauge, which was initially thought of as amateur stock, before gaining some sense of semi-professionalism after the arrival of 8mm film gauge as the new amateur format. Simultaneously, 16mm began to gain legitimacy by way of its use in combat and newsreel footage during World War II as well as artists who used it in universities. See "Gauging a Revolution: 16 mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), 7.

## 2.6 Underground

Like *Bijou*, Peter de Rome's *Underground* was filmed in 1972.<sup>93</sup> Also like Poole, De Rome got into pornography unexpectedly after experimenting with a Super 8 camera that he used to film some of his own sexual rendezvous.<sup>94</sup> Jack Deveau compiled De Rome's *Underground* in 1973 into a collection of his short films called *The Erotic Films of Peter de Rome*, but even before that, De Rome would show it to friends in private viewings.<sup>95</sup> The compilation format included eight shorts in total, which was not an uncommon bundling practice at the time, but of the eight, *Underground* garnered the most attention.<sup>96</sup> Terse, gritty, and frenetic, *Underground* takes us into the recesses of New York City's metropolitan subway to a scene of cruising. Rather than transport us to a mythical or fantastical space, the film integrates sex into an everyday location and does so with a cinema vérité style that resembles the first act of *Bijou*, prior to its trek into the eponymous non-space.

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<sup>93</sup> *Underground*, directed by Peter de Rome, collected in *The Erotic Films of Peter de Rome* (1973; New York: Hand-in-Hand Films, BFI, 2012), DVD.

<sup>94</sup> Ryan Powell, "Liberation in Motion," *The Erotic Films of Peter de Rome* Illustrated Booklet (London: BFI Archive, 2012), 1.

<sup>95</sup> Peter de Rome and Wakefield Poole were no strangers. The two had an uneasy relationship. In his autobiography, de Rome writes, "Another short film I made on Fire Island led to probably the first case of porn plagiarism. [...] I was invited to show some of my films [...] to a group of people, and this one called *Double Exposure* was among them. Another guest there was very complimentary and mentioned that he was planning to make a gay film himself. Sometime later I was amazed to see that not only had he used the same house, but also 'borrowed' the same theme for his plot, except that he had used two people instead of one and introduced hardcore sex. Apart from the obvious impropriety, it seemed a sad lack of imagination to say the least." While De Rome does not name Poole, it is obvious that he refers here to Poole. Peter de Rome, *The Erotic World of Peter de Rome* (London: GMP Publishers Ltd., 1984), 142-143.

<sup>96</sup> De Rome remarks, "*Underground* has come to be perhaps my best-known film. [...] It was a truly exciting moment at the first private screening when it was greeted with a spontaneous round of applause." *Ibid.*, 148-149.



**Figure 7: The businessman at the start of his subway ride in *Underground*.**

When *The Erotic Films of Peter de Rome* was reviewed, Stuart Byron drew stark divisions between De Rome's work and another camp of gay pornographic filmmaking that included Poole:

What distinguishes the best gay porn –what de Rome has in common with Halsted and van Itallie—is its recognition of the particular conditions of gay life. Bad gay porn simply pretends that (for example) sex objectivism doesn't exist while exploiting that objectivism; the good stuff may celebrate it, but recognize it. And here's the funny thing: Only a mind instinctually or consciously attuned to the issues of gay oppression and liberation can produce a truly erotic film; people like Rocco and Poole make unsexy exercises in tedium in which the actors come off as impersonal machines because there is no intelligence at work in their films.<sup>97</sup>

I take this review with a grain of salt. Even still, Byron's commentary is fascinating, especially given the relatively brief tenure of gay pornography at this moment, but what

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<sup>97</sup> De Rome quotes this in his autobiography as a review by Stuart Byron from *The Real Paper* in Boston, which I have been unable to track down. *Ibid.*, 149-150.

seems most prominent here is the notion that De Rome does not elide oppression from his films, and, in fact, the acknowledgement and inclusion of it makes his film more erotic.

At the heart of de Rome's film is a scene of cruising among a crowded New York City subway train (See Figure 7), which presents a heavily policed version of gay visibility. Whitney Strub writes, "Nothing better symbolized the urban crisis than the New York City subway train, rickety, often graffiti-scarred, and—if movies like *Death Wish*; *The French Connection* (1971); *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974); and even Woody Allen's *Bananas* (1971) were to be believed—lawless."<sup>98</sup> If that was the case—that the subway was a "mobile metonym for the much bemoaned urban crisis of the 1970s"<sup>99</sup>—then why set a gay porno there? Foucault writes that the train is "an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by."<sup>100</sup> *Cruising* while cruising in a subway deserves consideration against the punitive street cruising in *Bijou*, for while *Underground's* cruising may be policed, it is nonetheless fostered in this heterotopia. *Bijou* pushed all-male sex into a phantasmagoric space that could not be easily found, keeping it off the streets. Its space offered no tangible answer to its contemporary viewer who might have

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<sup>98</sup> Whitney Strub, "From Porno Chic to Porno Bleak: Representing the Urban Crisis in 1970s American Pornography," 27.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 23-24.

wanted to know, “How does one find their own Bijou?” except to say, “Go to the porno theaters.”

*Underground*, by contrast, gives an actual, albeit fraught, answer to such a longing.<sup>101</sup> In *Underground*, pleasures exist in plain sight, but risk always attends to them. If one knows *how* to look, *Underground* suggests, one can see same-sex attraction circulating throughout public spaces and can follow that desire to its erotic conclusion, but the social codes that would normally constrain its enactment here incite it. In this distinction, then, a stark contrast appears from *Bijou*’s punishment of the cruising Mercedes-Benz driver and the rewarded cruisers in *Underground*. Rebuke is not absent from *Underground*, but risk figures into the calculation of desire. As a result, a knowledgeable spatial navigation again becomes a potent source of pleasure.

*Underground* differs from *Bijou* in a number of other ways. For one, its scale is much smaller; it runs for a mere ten-minutes, as opposed to *Bijou*’s feature length. The plot of *Underground* has no room to linger. Rather, its narrative is taut: a businessman enters the subway train. Shortly thereafter, a hippie<sup>102</sup> enters the same car and begins

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<sup>101</sup> Although one might convincingly argue that *Bijou*’s protagonist *Harrison* doesn’t know what his desires are until they locate him.

<sup>102</sup> “Hippie” and “businessman” are not value judgments on my behalf, but rather are how the film curators and preservationists from the British Film Institute have classified the film’s narrative. Visually, the businessman is denoted by his shorter hair, striped button-up shirt, necktie, and newspaper. The hippie character has long, unkempt hair, a necklace, and baggy jeans with patches and paint stains on them.



**Figure 8: The hippie gropes himself to signal interest in the businessman.**

fondling himself. The two men exchange knowing glances, grope themselves to signal interest (See Figure 8), and the hippie leads the businessman back through a series of subway cars to the last one, where the two engage in public oral and anal sex. Their sex is cut short when they see a police officer in the adjacent car. In a panic, the businessman exits the subway at the next stop, while the hippie sits down and pretends to have been reading a newspaper. The film ends.

Swaying patrons in the cars, as well as those who hold onto poles and straps to brace themselves, also signal movement. Forces within *Underground* move people in unexpected and sometimes unintentional ways; people are brought into contact with others who they would never associate with, if given the choice. The inter-class and inter-racial contact that subways facilitate is part of this matrix. The assemblage of riders we see—all of whom are *actual* riders of the subway, not paid extras—cross racial, class,

creed, and gender lines. Riders come and go, sit and stand, keep to themselves, and listen to the performing saxophonist. *Underground* instantiates its journey at the 96<sup>th</sup> Street Station and comes to pass Pennsylvania Station, which suggests we are riding in a southbound C train. But even before we enter the train, we see streaks of light rapidly fling to the outer edges of the frame in a vortex-like pattern—think, the visual equivalent to the Doppler effect. These streaks of light serve to remind the viewer that we are situated in a space that is itself in motion, which is to say, in the contradictory space that both bounds its inhabitants at the same time that it disperses them. The vortex of light is a familiar visual cue—science fiction often uses it to indicate intergalactic travel—and it is hard not to see why: there is an otherworldly quality to the abstract lines of light as they scurry past. Amidst the flurry of everyday life, two men in the crowd signal through their stares and subtle gropings that they long for one another. Foucault remarks on the unique language gay men had cultivated at the time, noting “the wink on the street, the split-second decision to get it on, the speed with which homosexual relations are consummated.”<sup>103</sup> These two speak the same visual language but their communication remains largely hidden to the other subway riders.

*Underground* announces its cinéma vérité quality in every frame. De Rome shot the film in 8mm on the actual New York City subway, long before DIY technologies and the Internet made amateur viral videos commonplace. The reactions from patrons are

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<sup>103</sup> Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” 150.

not staged, but captured. A palpable sense of danger permeates the film. Having caught each other's attention, the hippie leads, and the businessman follows, from one train to the next, through the throngs of unknown people. Finally they reach a nearly empty car at the back, where only an elderly man remains, reclined and asleep, with a hat covering his face. This space is the best they can do, given the circumstances,<sup>104</sup> but at any moment someone else could enter the car, or the sleeping man could wake. The hippie takes his penis out of his pants and begins to stroke it, and the businessman moves quickly to fellate him; they don't have much time. Here, in the most isolated train,



**Figure 9: The two men in *Underground* find a nearly-empty subway car to have sex in.**

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<sup>104</sup> One question to ponder is, "Why not simply agree to meet up elsewhere?" Take, for instance, the gay pornographic film *The Back Row* from the same year (1972), which depicts Casey Donavon on a subway train in one scene. He and George Payne eye one another over and begin to fondle themselves. When the subway reaches a Christopher Street exit, they leave and continue their flirtation. Presumably, by entering the gay-friendly part of town, their assignation could continue quite easily. Such an alternative presents a more obviously liberationist message. Dir. Jerry Douglas, *The Back Row* (1972).

beside a man who could awake at any moment, they have their tryst (**See Figure 9**).

There is only the subterranean in *Underground*. We never escape to the surface of New York, and so de Rome reminds us that his film is always figuratively beholden to hidden desires and practices. Residing within the space of public transportation, de Rome juxtaposes scenes of grittiness, homelessness, and weariness with queer desire. *Underground* reorganizes the social order, too. The hippie calls the shots and dominates the businessman, who is only too eager to please him. But it is not some kind of retributive punishment or righting of the capitalist order. There is nothing exceptional about the scene of sex, except for the threat of being caught. Once they turn from oral to anal sex, the motions become rhythmic; the forms are clouded in shadows, and any sense of distinction begins to blur; the two become interchangeable. It happens around us all the time, if we know where to look. For a brief moment, the hippie and the businessman take pleasure in one another in a space that does not intend to permit such rendezvous.

The danger and risk of being caught is always there, but it does not diminish desire; rather, it propels it. That is, of course, until the danger becomes so pronounced that it overwhelms the pleasure. The chickens do come home to roost in *Underground*. In the midst of their tryst, the businessman and the hippie catch a glimpse of a patrolling police officer who makes his way down the subway cars. In a panic, they scurry to put

on their clothes. The subway makes a serendipitous stop, and the tryst comes to an abrupt halt.

Both *Underground* and *Bijou* feature class difference and the concept of “contact,” or, the pleasant interaction forged through an unexpected encounter. The construction worker and the hippie are both marked by their lower socio-economic associations. These figures find distinction against the Mercedes-Benz driver and the businessman, respectively. Here, then, we see an example of the kind of pleasantries that Delany calls “contact,” which takes place across lines of class, although these incidents are not absent of displeasures, too. They reside uncomfortably (and frenetically) beside the vexing car accident, on the one hand, and the patrolling police officer, on the other. In both instances, sex brings together disparate social systems, but also different worlds that New York City spatially designates.

Pressing further on the class distinctions, we see different articulations of pleasure arise. Whereas *Bijou* takes the construction worker and gives him an orgy of sex that is hermetic and otherworldly, *Underground* takes a businessman<sup>105</sup> and gives him exhibitionistic sex rife with uncertainty. It is interesting to note that in *Underground* the hippie remains in the cruising space, seemingly calm and composed, after the businessman has left in a panic. He sits down and reads a newspaper that had been

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<sup>105</sup> I presume the businessman to be the protagonist of *Underground* because he enters the subway first, and because he is the one who reacts to forces around him. The hippie enters the train after him and instigates, then leads, the tryst. He is the agent of change.

discarded by the businessman in his frenzied exit. The camera fixes a tight shot on the newspaper, which frames an op-ed at the top with the editorializing title “Is There No Sense of Decency?” After some searching, I discovered that the article—which I am reading as a paratext that supplements the film—concerned the Nixon administration’s mistreatment of a woman whose husband was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. She refused to stand for the president at a speech he gave to other wives of prisoners of war, and she would not clap when his speech was over. Afterward, the woman was followed by the Secret Service. The author of the *Times* article decries the lack of decency of “this city” (referring to Washington DC), stating “the atmosphere of this city: It is ugly. It is shameless.”<sup>106</sup> Just as the figure of the woman haunts *Bijou*, the POW’s wife similarly haunts *Underground*, albeit with significantly less emphasis. De Rome remarks that this was a headline from the newspaper from the day of shooting, which pokes fun at the idea of decency. The atmospheric exhaustion of Vietnam interestingly encroaches—albeit in minor moments—upon both pornographic films, presenting the displacing force of the war as another haunting, another space that the characters within these worlds would prefer to escape. This op-ed offers further compelling questions to this chapter: What *is* decency? What *is* shamelessness? How do we measure the atmosphere of a city? Can we measure it through its pornography?

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<sup>106</sup> Anthony Lewis, “Is There No Sense of Decency?” *The New York Times* (Monday, October 23, 1972): 31.

Both *Bijou* and *Underground* splice open the gritty New York City landscape — a landscape riven with violence, social unrest, and detritus — to create queer spaces of pleasure. These spaces are fleeting, though, and neither film ends without complication, suggesting the emergent gay porno chic was still coming to terms with how gay sexuality fit into the social body of the metropolitan. Harrison is still a thief. The woman who was struck by the car is still injured, or worse. The businessman has fled in a panic. The hippie is trying to elude arrest. Is the city a friend or foe to the gay man in the time just following Stonewall? Has Wakefield Poole really bestowed dignity upon his protagonist or rebuked the violence of rough trade? It should be noted that the hippie and businessman in *Underground* and the construction worker in *Bijou* all wear what appear to be wedding bands, suggesting each is in a heterosexual marriage. The closet was still very much a formulation in developing an all-male erotics and advancing the liberationist project of “coming out.” Gay porno chic in this stage was still finding its vocabulary and the spatial dynamics that could support same-sex attraction. The points of contact in both of these films suggest that anonymity in the city, while in some instances isolating, can also offer the possibility of pleasures: complex pleasures, pleasures of chance and of risk, but pleasures, nonetheless. That these pleasures manifested across a backdrop of dangerous, hidden, labyrinthine and rough spaces suggests the liberated gay man may still retain residual and by some standards

retrograde affinity to the unliberated, or the closeted, gay man.<sup>107</sup> Whether we read this retrograde depiction as resistance, defiance, or mutually inscriptive, though, remains an open question.

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<sup>107</sup> Strub goes so far as to suggest gay liberation would not have been possible in a city like New York without the urban crisis and its subsequent decline of the city. "From Porno Chic to Porno Bleak: Representing the Urban Crisis in 1970s American Pornography," 47

### **3. How To Have Pornography in an Epidemic**

#### ***3.1 PreLewd***

The devastation of the AIDS epidemic forced many gay men to reconsider the ways in which they came to live and identify, demanding a reconceptualization of the sexual contract through the emergent discourse of safe(r) sex, as well as the development of efficacious medical and political forms of crisis management and activism, and the production of cultural forms of memorialization. Pornography—and more broadly, pornographic discourse—can make visible precisely the ways in which these demands were met, serving as a lens through which to view these negotiations. In turn, the pandemic instilled new uses and meanings to gay pornographic representation. With this in mind, in this chapter I trace the dialectic relationship between gay pornography and AIDS in the 1980s, focusing attention in particular to how pornography became a tool for negotiating the meanings of the pandemic.

The study of gay pornography and AIDS has its own critical lineage, but seldom are the two approached as mutually-informing of the other, nor does their intersection often move beyond the discourse of safety and the condom. Having now gained some distance from the era, the moment seems right to reconsider both. The volatile political climate of the 1980s meant that to discuss pornography was necessarily to court scandal and required a defensive approach to the question of pathology, a discourse that also attended the discussion of AIDS. If both pornography and AIDS in this era were

circumscribed by the metanarrative of social—or, indeed, bodily—blight, then to speak the two together would seem doubly doomed. Against this common wisdom, Cindy Patten devoted much of her scholarly and activist career to the promotion of safer sex practices through gay pornography,<sup>1</sup> and in the process, refused the double pathologization that might render AIDS and pornography taboo.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, work on AIDS and pornography is more commonly spoken of through the rubric of “barebacking” and “bug chasing”—that is, unprotected sex that disregards the threat of HIV transmission or indeed welcomes it, in the case of the latter. This scholarship breaks from earlier approaches to AIDS, which is no longer viewed as a death sentence. Tim Dean’s *Unlimited Intimacy* traces this phenomenon largely through *Treasure Island Media*, a gay pornography studio that exclusively filmed its scenes without condoms (long before the advent of the anti-retroviral drug PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis)). Dean’s work makes the case that “the subculture of bareback promiscuity, far from being ethically irresponsible, may be ethically exemplary.”<sup>2</sup> His argument of an “ethic of openness to alterity” complements Gregory Tomso’s work on barebacking and bug chasing, which too illustrates the shift in discourse analysis and calls for a different approach: “As the social and cultural moorings of science become more widely accepted, we might concentrate less on the politics of exposure than on a consideration

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<sup>1</sup> See: Cindy Patton, “Visualizing Safe Sex: When Pedagogy and Pornography Collide,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 373-386.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), 176.

of ethics: on a consideration of how one might *best* speak of and to the Other when all acts of speech seem destined to end in violence, and yet when speech is essential for care and for survival.”<sup>3</sup> In Tomso, pornography does not figure, while in Dean, it is often treated indistinguishably from the practice of bareback sex,<sup>4</sup> and yet both Tomso and Dean call us find alternative approaches to AIDS scholarship. In response to this call, the following chapter explores pornographic discourse—and the representation of desire during the epidemic—as a critical lens for apprehending and challenging the renewed sex panic of this era. Additionally, I read the invocation of gay pornography in the 1980s as participating in projects that extend beyond the promotion of safe sex, including fierce calls to activism, pedagogy, and remembrance. In what follows, I will examine the ethical dimension of gay pornography during the AIDS epidemic and its elegiac, nostalgic, and life affirming qualities in an age of imminent death.

### **3.2 Plagueboy and the AIDS Photograph**

Australian artist David McDiarmid worked in the United States from 1979-1987.<sup>5</sup> Much of the artwork he produced from the mid-1980s until his death in 1995 directly

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Tomso, “Bug Chasing, Barebacking, and the Risks of Care,” *Literature and Medicine* 23.1 (Spring 2004): 107.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Williams writes “while Dean’s book sometimes tends to read pornography as if it alone could offer the authentic ethnography of a subculture, it is nevertheless a stunningly original contribution from a mostly sociological perspective.” Linda Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” *Porn Studies* 1.1-2 (2014): 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> McDiarmid is remembered as the leading gay artist of Australia, but is largely occluded from American art scholarship. Even so, his art has been widely collected, including National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Powerhouse Museum, Sydney; State Library of NSW, Sydney; British Museum,

responded to the AIDS crisis. Perhaps his best-known work was his series “Rainbow Aphorisms” (1992-1995), which offered up acerbic slogans against backdrops of effervescent rainbow bursts. Of this series, McDiarmid said, “I wanted to express myself and I wanted to respond to what was going on and I wanted to reach a gay male audience. I wanted to express very complex emotions and I didn’t know how to do it... I was in a bit of a dilemma.”<sup>6</sup> The vibrant colors from these prints accost the viewer just as much as the glib messages, which can’t shake off the sense of impending doom. Some gems include “THE FAMILY TREE STOPS HERE DARLING,” “IT’S MY PARTY, AND I’LL DIE IF I WANT TO, SUGAR,”<sup>7</sup> and “POSITIVE QUEEN FEELS NEGATIVE GOES SHOPPING.” (See **Figure 10**) McDiarmid’s acerbic aphorisms pair whimsy with despondency, creating a frenetic encounter of joy and dread, of the monumental and the trivial. This cocktail of anti-sociality and jubilation permeates almost all of McDiarmid’s work. Confirming this thematic, Sally Gray calls McDiarmid a proto-queer artist, who

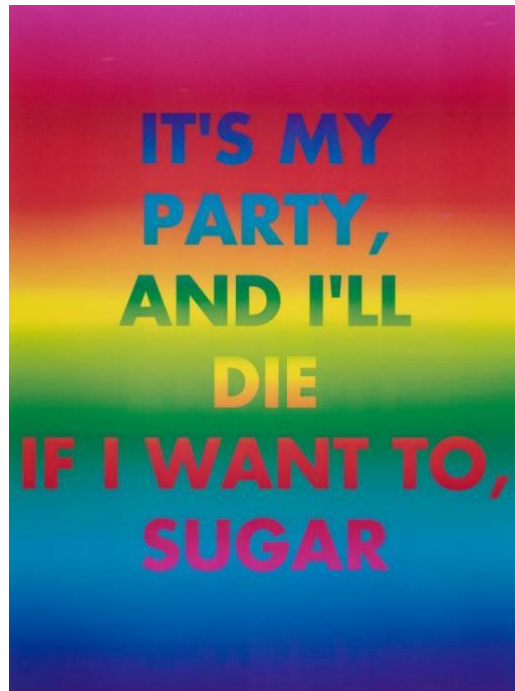
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London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo; Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat; Queensland State Library, Brisbane; University of Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; Private collections in Australia, USA, Europe, Japan and Britain. See Sally Gray, *The Full Spectrum: David McDiarmid’s Rainbow Aphorisms* (Ashfield: Project Sisu Publications, 2012), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from an interview by Carmela Baranowska in 1992. *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> This title alone is multi-referential. It gestures to Lesley Gore’s 1963 pop song “It’s my party, and I’ll cry if I want to,” as well as to Robert Patrick’s play *Pouf Positive* (1987), which features the line “It’s my party and I’ll die if I want to.” This reference continues to appear in cultural texts after McDiarmid, as seen by Randal Kleiser’s film *It’s My Party* (1996) about an AIDS-related suicide. See David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 145.

often critiqued the so-called stability of gay identity and notes, of his later work, “he engaged [...] in a vibrant and uncompromising cultural politics of AIDS.”<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 10: A digital print from David McDiarmid's "Rainbow Aphorisms" series.**

In another provocation that extends from the “Rainbow Aphorism” series in its tone and structuring, McDiarmid creates the faux cover to an imagined periodical, which bears witness to the AIDS crisis through pornographic citationality<sup>9</sup>: McDiarmid’s magazine cover models itself on the eponymous pornographic magazine *Playboy*—here

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<sup>8</sup> Sally Gray, “‘I’m Here Girlfriend What’s New?’ Art, Dress, and the Queer Performative Subject: The Case of David McDiarmid,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 12, Issue 3 (2008): 294, 308.

<sup>9</sup> David M. Halperin counts McDiarmid among a vocal group of gay artists working during the AIDS epidemic to create “a deliberate *anti-social* aesthetic intervention,” and, in particular, one that directly violated “the generic boundary between tragedy and comedy.” It is noteworthy that, while Halperin references McDiarmid’s *Plagueboy* as an example of this tradition, he does not elaborate upon gay artists who blurred the distinction between tragedy and eros. Halperin, *How to Be Gay*, 143-146.

transmogrified into *Plagueboy*. On the cover to *Plagueboy*<sup>10</sup>—the title of which announces itself in a blood red banner—a shirtless mustachioed man sits in repose. The image is made all the more stark through its black-and-white composition. Without the title and accompanying copy, the somber looking man would likely not receive a pornographic interpretation, and might in fact elicit a far more subdued or somber reception, but it is precisely in the engagement of his image with language that the cover’s composition enters into discourse with sexual objectification. The gaunt man sits in a position usually reserved for the Playboy Bunny of the Month. His arm—which in another context we might read simply as thin—reaches out to a raised knee; his extremities, including his head, are cut-off by the margins. He is drained of color; his body is broken up by grids that splice him into even smaller rectangular quadrants. His eyelids hang heavy and strain to stay open as he looks off to the somewhere beyond. If this is his “come hither” face, it fails to live up to the expectations of the Playboy bunny, but if this is the pornographication of the AIDS photograph to outrage, shock, and discomfit its viewers, then it is a hell of a look. The composition is, after all, parodic, if not parasitic; the pornographic discourse transfers outrage and obscenity away from the libidinal—which here is not yet fully realized, presumably to be revealed in an imaginary centerfold—and

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<sup>10</sup> David McDiarmid created this image in 1994, a year before his death. David McDiarmid, “Cover of *Plagueboy* Magazine, December, 1994,” (1994).

virally attaches these affects to the public management of the AIDS epidemic, as if to say, it is not homosexual desire that is obscene but American culture and society.

Interestingly, *Plagueboy* achieves its pornographic virtue not solely through image, but rather through language and its interplay with the image; the article titles modify the male figure into a symbol that alternates back and forth between eroticism and AIDS. In the case of McDiarmid, the *Plagueboy* cover borrows a page from his rainbow aphorisms series in its juxtaposition of dissonant semiotic structures. The copy on *Plagueboy* ranges in tone from despairing to scintillating to flippant, to somewhere in-between. They include: “Disinfected Dish for the Disaffected and the Diseased,” “Tips on Remembering Your Own Name,” “Sex and the Single T-Cell,” “Forty-ish, Fabulous & Full-Blown,” “Lifetimes are Not What They Used to Be,” “Things to Do While You’re Waiting to Die,” and “Half-Dead and Hot.” Underneath these imagined article titles, there is a tagline that spans the bottom field of the cover: “I Want A Future That Lives Up to My Past.”

In situating the figure of the Person with AIDS (henceforth PWA) within the linguistic and imagistic syntax of Playboy — the exemplar of mainstream and heteronormative pornographic magazines — McDiarmid replaces the female pin-up, whose body is objectified and fetishized, with the queer figure of death — queer because this is the kind of body traditionally kept out of sight and absented from desire (**See Figure 11**). In this transposition, there is an implication of kinship between the power

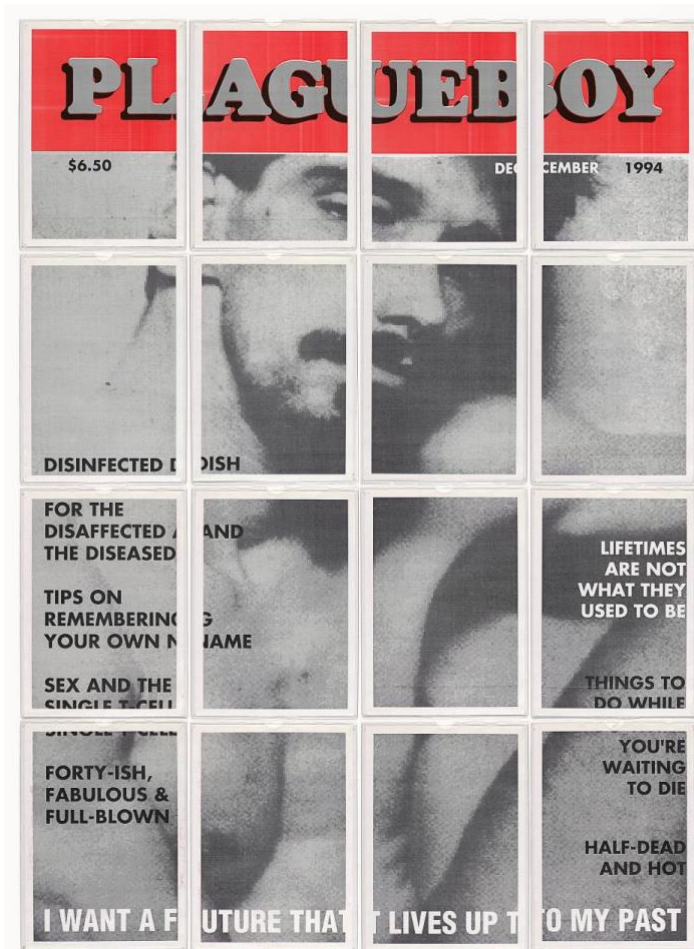


Figure 11: David McDiarmid's "Plagueboy" eroticizes the PWA.

structures of sexism (or misogyny) and homophobia, but there is also a subversive addition of eros to the PWA. *Plagueboy* renders AIDS through a pornographic lens, asking not just where desire and pleasure reside for the PWA—to many, an offensive question—but also how pornography makes legible the terms of his battle?

If we look to McDiarmid's citation, *Playboy* makes an interesting pairing—not just for its decidedly heterosexual content—for its attempt to elevate pornographic content—or to curate the pornographic alongside the non-pornographic—by pairing

provocative centerfolds alongside prestige journalism, political editorials, and self-help and lifestyle features.<sup>11</sup> Borrowing the logic of Playboy, McDiarmid's *Plagueboy* invokes and appropriates its pornographic forebear's longstanding codes to speak for a population of gay men who would never have been hailed by Playboy to begin with. The viewer is compelled to make sense of the eroticization of one of the least desirable social positions one could occupy: the PWA. What would an article about sex and the single T-cell reveal to its readers, in coupling precarity and passion? Would such an article caution the PWA against sex, telling him to conserve his energy or to give up on sex altogether; or, would it offer sundry sex tips, an assortment of positions to try, and anecdotes from practitioners, despite what we would presume from the juridical or medical gazes? That the proposition for the latter seems so striking and unfathomable points to the blockage to thought that the pornographic imaginary is often thought to pose, but it is precisely at that intersection that this chapter seeks to understand better what unexpected roles pornography played in attending to the AIDS emergency.

Contrasting McDiarmid's image of the pallid man to a more famous AIDS portrait from the 1980s can illustrate how McDiarmid's subverts the deathbed photograph. AIDS photography would largely serve as memorial and call to action to a

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<sup>11</sup> Beatriz (Paul) Preciado writes at length about the manner in which *Playboy* can be said to have sculpted a "new masculine soul" in America by intercepting traditional reading practices. *Playboy* "combined into a single medium the practices of reading texts and images, and masturbation. It made sexual desire extend indiscriminately from jazz to the Formica panels used in the office desks advertised in its pages" Beatriz (Paul) Preciado, *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014), 27.

public that had all too easily looked away from the epidemic; the trauma of such photography produced what Susan Sontag calls “event,” or that which is worth photographing, a category that ideology determines.<sup>12</sup> Famously, the photograph of the heartbroken family cradling their dying son comes to mind. The image of David Kirby on his deathbed was taken by photographer Therese Frare and appeared in the November 1990 issue of LIFE magazine (**See Figure 12**). It was thought to have played a large role in shifting the American public’s opinion about AIDS away from passivity.<sup>13</sup> This particular image amplified trauma in its most visceral and unrelenting form; the suffering on display oppresses the viewer, demanding s/he bear witness to the unmitigating torment of that suffering, and in that mutual suffering, share in the pain of the PWA and his family. We are led to believe that photographs of this nature awaken consciousness, which Sontag puts in direct opposition to photographs that abets desire. Desire, Sontag writes in the same breath, “has no history,” while photographs that awaken consciousness are directly linked to history.<sup>14</sup> McDiarmid, though, demands we hold historical consciousness and desire within the same frame. Whether the desire that McDiarmid invokes produces or challenges desire in the viewer I will defer from answering, leaving this tension unresolved.

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” in *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Theres Frare, “David Kirby on His Deathbed, Ohio, 1990,” *LIFE Magazine* (November, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” 16-17.



**Figure 12: Therese Frare's photograph "David Kirby on His Deathbed" from LIFE Magazine (1990).**

Roland Barthes' thinking on photography presents another limit to pornography that can be helpful for unpacking McDiarmid's playful use of language and gesture. For Barthes, a series of dualities inform both the reception of the photograph and the desiring image. He situates these dualities in relation to what is not shown, or put otherwise, to what is withheld. He writes:

The presence (the dynamics) of this blind field is, I believe, what distinguishes the erotic photograph from the pornographic photograph. Pornography ordinarily represents the sexual organs, making them into a motionless object (a fetish), flattered like an idol that does not leave its niche; for me, there is no punctum in the pornographic image; at most it amuses me (and even then, boredom follows quickly). The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is

there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. The punctum, then, is a kind of subtle beyond.<sup>15</sup>

Barthes distinguishes the erotic image (animating) from the pornographic image (initially amusing, eventually boring); this constitutes a first duality.<sup>16</sup> The second and more integral duality in *Camera Lucida* is the duality between the “studium” and the “punctum,” —concepts Barthes develops to explain one’s reaction to any given photograph. The studium stands for intentionality, for history, for culture; it is the extant meaning that the image readily relays to the viewer. In pornography, the studium is quite simply the will to arousal. The punctum, on the other hand, goes beyond the studium, offering a detail unique to the viewer that is partial or unknown. It reveals an unconscious facet that pierces the viewer. Pornography for Barthes is defined in its explicitness—it shows us everything—and in that regard, fails to offer a punctum to Barthes. By contrast, Barthes lauds Mapplethorpe’s self-image “Young Man with Arm Extended,” precisely for its incompleteness and, relatedly, its concealment of the subject’s genitals. Barthes hierarchizes the modes of desire into what he calls a “heavy” desire of pornography and a “light” desire of eroticism, which he parenthetically calls “good.”<sup>17</sup> One might be curious to know what Barthes would make of Mapplethorpe’s numerous other phallogocentric photographs, which by this definition would be constituted as

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<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 57-59.

<sup>16</sup> Many have made a similar distinction between erotica (good) and pornography (bad). See, for instance, Susan Sontag’s “The Pornographic Imagination” in *Partisan Review* (Spring 1967): 181-212.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 59.

pornography. By Barthes' standards, McDiarmid does not give us the pornographic image but the erotic one, withholding the genitals from sight, but I contend McDiarmid's gestural invocation of the *Playboy* bunny and linguistic reference to a pornographic interiority (within the faux magazine) trouble Barthes's understanding of what exactly constitutes pornography. This chapter in many ways seeks to reveal the many punctums that exist for pornography that Barthes has failed to imagine, punctums that extend beyond, but also in concert with, the will to arousal.

Yet Barthes did provide the caveat of "for me" to his analysis: the punctum is precisely that which the viewer brings to his interpretation, but one that cannot be known from the outset. It is curious that Barthes develops these insights into the pornographic photograph directly after analyzing the possibility of the underside of Queen Victoria's skirt becoming exposed in a photograph from 1863.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps Barthes reveals nothing more than his own Victorian imagination, whereby concealment arouses excitement more than revelation ever could. But following Foucault, the so-called Victorian repressiveness can actually be read as an expansion and proliferation of discourses to prod sex into speaking. Additionally, by placing such value in the role of stasis, visibility, and genital exposure, Barthes provides a roadmap for how we might expand the understanding of pornography, which had never truly been Barthes' primary concern, at any rate. If we were to study the pornographic image that

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 57.

diminished the role of visibility, normalized its genital explicitness, or annexed other modes of signification, what then would become of the pornographic? What if language were allowed to speak as the most potent force in arousing pornographic desire? Could something like the punctum pierce us then? I want to propose that AIDS becomes the punctum — which is to say, its connotative, often unspoken meaning — to pornography in this era, which manifests in obvious and counterintuitive ways.

To understand how AIDS became the unseen force that pierced all of the gay pornography of this age, I turn first to the notion of epidemiological logic. For both homosexuality and AIDS, the pursuit of an etiology dominated much of their early scholarship, respectively. The epidemiological logic of AIDS can be seen to regulate gayness, which remains troubled by the question of its source, cause, or explanation. Behind this observation is the supposition that etiology's quest for an origin betrays a simultaneous interest in termination. Eve Sedgwick writes about this very predicament at length in an attempt to replace essentialist / constructivist debates about homosexuality with the concepts of "minoritizing" / "universalizing." She sees the essentialist / constructivist debate as producing a conflation of phylogeny and ontogeny, and writes "my fear is that there currently exists no framework in which to ask about the origins or development of individual gay identity that is not already structured by an

implicit, trans-individual Western project or fantasy of eradicating that identity.”<sup>19</sup> One does not seek a source for something without also considering the possibility for that something’s termination, which is why we never seek to understand the origins of heterosexuality. If “homosexual sex” was largely treated as a scapegoat to the AIDS epidemic, which in turn became the just punishment for the perceived act against nature—as Reagan conservatism insisted—then McDiarmid’s refusal to give up on it defied a stance not just from the far right but also one that many sex educators and AIDS activists had begun to marshal. Gay sex in the age of AIDS was largely eschewed, replaced by calls for celibacy and monogamy; if people did talk about gay sex, it was only under the most prescriptive and pedagogical banner of “safe(r)” sex. Casual sex was seen as the equivalent to a death wish and any sex that was allowed to speak came with its own cavalcade of caveats and cautionary protocols. After a decade of so-called Gay Liberation, sex had become obscene again, even, pernicious, among those who fought for the rights of homosexuals during the darkest years of the AIDS emergency. McDiarmid’s *Plagueboy* lodged its argumentative weight in the capacity for pornographic invocation to incite strong feelings.

Precisely in its non-mimeticism, its parodic nature, and its citationality McDiarmid aped the conventional pornographic semiotics of the time, refusing to let image reign supreme, and turned to an integrated linguistic register to offer us

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<sup>19</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 40-41.

uncomfortable pleasures that compelled one to ask: Can disturbance and pleasure co-exist? Can we be pleased by disturbance, or disturbed by pleasure? If AIDS is trauma and a stark reality, and pornography is desire and a fiction, then their combination would seem as likely as matter and anti-matter coming together and not destroying each other.

By 1994 when *Plagueboy* first appeared, an HIV diagnosis was just on the cusp of losing its mortal threat as effective antiretrovirals began to commute what had been a lethal sentence into a chronic disease, but during the 1980s, to be an advocate for promiscuous gay sex was to be seen as a co-conspirator with the AIDS pandemic, and that thread of activism and cultural production largely lost footing to the neoliberal respectability politics of the gay rights movement that would champion marriage equality and the eventual repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. It is gay pornographic discursive treatments of AIDS in the mid-1980s that I examine hereafter, at a time when uncertainty and despair had taken ahold of the gay imaginary and when "no future" could be seen on the horizon. In such a place and time, the promise of gay pornography could be seen as especially obscene and out of touch, but to many, it was precisely the antidote homosexuals had been looking for.

### **3.3 Cultural Transmissions**

Robert Chesley's death in 1990 fails to explain fully the minor position his work has held within the canon of AIDS theater, but it certainly contributed to the minimization of his

strand of queer activism. A playwright like Larry Kramer, on the other hand, survived the epidemic and has been a strong advocate for his own work. Today, Kramer stands as a paragon of AIDS activism and theater, and with the renewed interest in recent AIDS documentaries<sup>20</sup> and the subsequent HBO adaptation of his play, *A Normal Heart* has been enshrined in modern gay consciousness as an “historical document” of fundamental value, whereas Chesley remains all but forgotten.

Interestingly, in the early 1980s, just as the health crisis was beginning to gain notice, these two playwrights publicly engaged in acrimonious dispatches in the pages of the *New York Native*. The polarizing manner in which *Jerker* and *The Normal Heart* would eventually come to frame the AIDS epidemic can be seen precipitating in these tit-for-tats. In one particularly scathing critique, Chesley implores his reader:

Read anything by Kramer closely. I think you’ll find that the subtext is always the wages of gay sin are death. I ask you to look closely at Kramer’s writing because I think it’s important for gay people to know whether or not they agree with him. I am not downplaying the seriousness of Kaposi’s sarcoma. But something else is happening here, which is also serious: gay homophobia and anti-eroticism. (qtd. in Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust*).<sup>21</sup>

Chesley’s insistence that we read Kramer closely refers not to *A Normal Heart*, which had not yet been written, but to Kramer’s pre-AIDS novel *Faggots*, which carried its own pornographic inflection, notoriously via its inclusion of graphic fisting scenes. *Faggots*

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<sup>20</sup> Here I am primarily referring to *How to Survive a Plague*, directed by David France, (2013; New York: Sundance Selects: MPI Media Group, 2013), DVD.

<sup>21</sup> Larry Kramer, *Reports From the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 16.

received an overwhelmingly negative reception at its time of publication (1978) from gay liberationists for its polemic against promiscuity. Kramer positioned the protagonist Fred Lemish—who, as with most of his writing, is often read as a close stand-in for himself—as a hopeless romantic seeking “true love,” but whose goal is thwarted by what Kramer saw as the injunction from within the gay community to fuck wantonly. It is this unchecked drive to promiscuity that Kramer views as the definitive gay character flaw. Once the AIDS epidemic arrived, Kramer’s stance on anti-promiscuity, previously derided by liberationists, began to be adopted more regularly and was, in effect, rehabilitated. Chesley viewed this rehabilitation cynically and challenged his readers to reject its internalized homophobia, stating:

the concealed meaning in Kramer’s emotionalism is the triumph of guilt: that gay men *deserve* to die for their promiscuity. [...] It’s easy to become frightened that Kramer’s *real* emotion is a sense of having been vindicated, though tragically: he told us so, but we didn’t listen to him; nooo—we had to learn the hard way, and now we’re dying.” (qtd. in Larry Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*).<sup>22</sup>

Chesley’s own plays attempt something bold at the very moment when the pendulum was swinging back toward caution and containment logic: they seek to defend the hard-fought right to depict gay eroticism without shame, even in the face of AIDS. Furthermore, the promiscuity that Kramer denounced so vehemently Chesley argued *was* in fact a form of love, a form of care, and a vital social structure. Sex was not the villain in Chesley’s view, but rather, it was “sexual prudery [that] kills.”

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 16.

Foregrounding eroticism to cultivate safety contravened the common wisdom that the mechanisms of safety must be prioritized and pleasure mapped onto them as an afterthought. Initially, activism in the 1980s worked to disseminate prophylactic protocols and risk assessments that either did not account for pleasure or treated pleasure as a hindrance to safety; pleasure became a reward that was reserved only for certain subjects. In explicit and implicit ways, these discourses privileged the couple-form, monogamy, and love; any erotic organization outside of these formations was treated as always already diseased. For instance, one of the earliest safe-sex manuals, “How to Have Sex in an Epidemic,” enumerated sex acts one-by-one, assigning a degree of risk and actionable modification to reduce the likelihood of CMV contraction (then thought to be the trigger for AIDS, prior to the nomenclature of HIV). Despite its pragmatism and good intentions, “How to Have Sex in An Epidemic” grounded itself in the language of homonormativity. From an early section of the pamphlet, we can see an illustrative example:

But for two people who meet and want to become lovers and who wish to ensure that they are healthy from the beginning of their relationship, this battery of CMV tests (in addition to routine VD and amoeba testing) would be a good investment. Once both partners are assured that each is free from CMV and other infections, they need not take most of the precautions that we will outline in this pamphlet since these precautions were (sic) designed to interrupt the transmission of CMV and other infections. (qtd. in *Stayin' Alive*)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Berkowitz, *Stayin' Alive: The Invention of Safe Sex, a Personal History* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2003), 198.

This advice dresses up precaution in the language of capital, declaring the pre-sexual testing (and its continued upkeep) a “good investment” that will, counterintuitively, reward its practitioners with the freedom to ignore the remainder of the pamphlet. Their investment returns them with unlimited pleasure (here, following the metaphor, an echo for profit). This advice demands monogamy to be effective and positions anyone who would choose otherwise as “bad investors” in their own lives: they sought pleasure before safety. Berkowitz and Callen effectively excuse the stable monogamous couple from the remainder of their pamphlet, stating that the prescriptions they outline thereafter are only, effectively, for the promiscuous, although they are careful not to name the latter subject as such. Even so, the authors hail the reader of the pamphlet as the bad investor, whom they hope to rehabilitate into the good investor. To enter into the discourse of safety, the gay subject is positioned from the outset as one for whom guilt must inherently constitute his being: he wants the bad kind of sex.

More to this point, the very sex that the pamphlet goes on to categorize as unsafe is rendered innocuous to the stable couple form. If one’s erotic organization subscribes to the correct protocol, precautionary testing, and monogamous form, that which gets termed “unsafe sex” is transformed to “safe sex”; it reverts to the category of unmarried and permissive, wholesome and good. While there are epidemiological reasons to subscribe to such logic, it is the discourse here that interests me, since the discourse also

figures in the construction of the category of AIDS and the kinds of people it seeks to regulate.

The pathology of AIDS precedes its transmission. The promiscuous gay subject is viewed as abnormal and diseased regardless of serostatus, but to be permitted among the ranks of the un-diseased (in both social and medical categories) there is also a classed component at play: CMV testing, Berkowitz and Callen reveal, is both expensive and not easily obtainable at the moment of their writing. To enter the privileged category of “lovers” who seek to codify that love within a “relationship” — those for whom any kind of sex is permissible, without fear, without shame — something more than financial security constitutes the minimum barrier for entry. The metaphor of “a good investment” here we see is literalized, but I would alter this construction slightly: an expensive investment.

The remainder of Berkowitz and Callen’s report shifts from a rhetoric of “how- (not) to” have sex to one of thinly veiled moralism, which in the process drives home sex’s construction as a privileged practice to be withheld from those deemed from the outset as more at risk of transmission. Subtitles in latter portions of the pamphlet include: “Should AIDS Patients Have Sex?”; “Guilt, Morality, and Sex Negativity”; and, in the spirit of Kramer, “Love.” Under the guise of aid, these subheadings delimit the proper subject’s contours, a subject for whom such a pamphlet is, we learn, unnecessary. For all of the pragmatism and seeming good will, “How To Have Sex in An Epidemic”

might more accurately be titled “*Who Can Have Sex in an Epidemic*,” with Berkowitz and Callen implementing the same shaming mechanisms that Kramer did.

Douglas Crimp playfully invokes the same pamphlet’s title in his essay “How to Have *Promiscuity* in an Epidemic” (emphasis mine). Crimp’s essay, part of the groundbreaking collection *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, also includes Leo Bersani’s seminal work “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Bersani, like Crimp, is critical of AIDS’ capacity to rewrite promiscuity’s position within gay culture:

Far from apologizing for their promiscuity as a failure to maintain a loving relationship, far from welcoming the return to monogamy as a beneficent consequence of the horror of AIDS, gay men should ceaselessly lament the practical necessity, now, of such relationships, should resist being drawn into mimicking the unrelenting warfare between men and women, which nothing has changed.<sup>24</sup>

Bersani rightly critiques the homonormative mimicry of heterosexual couples that gay men at the time invoked as a “safety” practice, but he does not go as far as Crimp in locating within promiscuity itself a practice of safety. Rather, Bersani’s project asks us to consider what it would mean to embrace gay sex’s cultural inscription as a form of the death drive.

Crimp’s essay “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” draws attention not only to the broader social responses to AIDS, for whom “sex has been the real culprit all along,” but to the chorus of gay men who themselves had internalized and recapitulated

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<sup>24</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is The Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 25.

the same rallying cry that Bersani here cites.<sup>25</sup> Crimp also devotes attention to Kramer, but adds to the fray *the New York Native* publisher Charles Ortleb and *San Francisco Chronicle* author Randy Shilts, the latter of whom in *And the Band Played On* popularized an etiological narrative of the supposed “Patient Zero,” the French-Canadian airline steward Gaëtan Dugas<sup>26</sup> who at the time was thought to be the source of the virus at the beginning of its spread in North America, on account of his promiscuity and mobility. Crimp contends that Kramer, Ortleb, and Shilts, in their works and articles, emboldened “an altogether different story, the one they had been printing all along—the dirty little story of gay male promiscuity and irresponsibility.”<sup>27</sup> The very conflation of gay sex with disease that could be seen outside of the gay community begins to be spoken more ardently from within it. In his analysis, Crimp notes a curious contradiction in these sex-averse gay authors: “they blame the lack of response to the epidemic on the misrepresentation of AIDS as a gay disease even as they themselves treat AIDS almost exclusively as a gay problem.”<sup>28</sup> In their retellings, a shared disdain for gay promiscuity was meant to elicit greater concern on behalf of the government: the sexually sanitized

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<sup>25</sup> Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, eds. Leo Bersani and Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 238.

<sup>26</sup> Gaëtan Dugas was only exonerated in 2016 by a team of researchers from the University of Arizona who sequenced the HIV virus. Their groundbreaking research was published in *Nature* and found that HIV likely entered the United States by way of Haiti in 1970 or 1971, where it remained centralized in New York City, before being carried to San Francisco in around 1976. See Michael Worobey, Thomas D. Watts, Richard A. McKay, Marc A. Suchard, Timothy Granade, Dirk E. Teuwen, Beryl A. Koblin, Walid Heneine, Philippe Lemey, & Harold W. Jaffe, “1970s and ‘Patient 0’ HIV-1 Genomes Illuminate Early HIV/AIDS History in North America,” *Nature* (November 3, 2016): 98-101.

<sup>27</sup> Crimp, 241.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

gay subject would stifle homophobia and the evacuation of promiscuity's political and liberatory valence would harken a more robust government response. This response, in addition to internalizing homophobia, places gay men squarely at the center of AIDS as both the site of blame and the hope for redemption. Crimp critiques this contradiction for its simplification and overdetermination of the role of gay men for understanding the cultural significance of AIDS.

Crimp is interested in precisely how cultural conventions work to delimit and shape what can and cannot be said about AIDS.<sup>29</sup> In both Shilts and Kramer, Crimp sees literary and theatrical forms that espouse bourgeois individualism as the popular means for grappling with AIDS; this discourse prioritizes personal responsibility and locates heroism (as well as villainy) in the individual. In these cultural texts, Crimp locates not advocacy for safe(r) sex, per se, but rather the injunction to form monogamous sexual relationships as the dominant strategy for addressing the epidemic.<sup>30</sup> Crimp is not only critical of these bourgeois propositions, but finds in the very promiscuity they decry the very survival strategies that would be necessary to live through the epidemic. If "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic" ultimately limited the imagination for what sex could be and who (and with whom one) could have it, Crimp distinguishes promiscuity from sex to reveal how the popularity of the prior presents tactics for reimagining the latter which are already survival strategies: "we were able to invent safe sex because we have always

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<sup>29</sup> Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," 245.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasure of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures.”<sup>31</sup> But pornography for many gay men informs promiscuity just as much as lived sexual experience. Crimp speaks around pornography without naming it as such, but I argue its constitutive role in the cultural and social lives of gay men warrants further study.

Crimp historicizes the political response to AIDS campaigns that refused the call to desexualize the gay subject, illustrated best in Jesse Helms’ notorious amendment of a fiscal bill in 1988 that prohibited federal funding to AIDS research and education that



Figure 13: One of the *Safer Sex Comix* (#3) shows a scene of phone sex.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 253.

condoned homosexual activities.<sup>32</sup> The offending material in this case was a series of safer sex comix commissioned by the very same Gay Men's Health Crisis (See Figure 13) that Larry Kramer had helped to found (and which later expelled him from their ranks), which, although Crimp is reticent to name as such, should be understood as pornographic; Crimp's refusal to refer to these comix as pornography is in keeping with the tendency to avoid the p-word in certain critical circles, since to do so was often to open a can of worms. Helms famously photocopied the erotic comix for a select number of his colleagues, which he then delivered in brown envelopes that included the warning "Personal and Confidential, for Senators' Eyes Only." He even visited Reagan with the same brown envelope in the oval office. (It gives this scholar a momentary chuckle to imagine Helms sharing gay pornography with Reagan in the oval office, although the consequence of this meeting was a strong rebuke from the president for any federal funding that would promote the "the gay lifestyle," as these comix were presumed to do.) The federal government was thus implicated in the production of pornographic literature that, in addition to teaching safe sex techniques, took seriously and promoted the desire and pleasures of its readers. After Helms' amendment, the government would no longer fund any AIDS organization that "promoted or condoned homosexual activity" in their educational materials. This amendment would mean any federally subsidized sexual education would have to be de-sexualized.

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<sup>32</sup> The amendment initially forbade the promotion or encouragement of the intravenous use of illegal drugs, but this was later stripped from the amendment.

The comix in question deserve scrutiny. Crimp notes that, rather than teach gay readers to recoil from their sexual practices, these comix gave license to and expanded the repertoire of sexual acts they could participate in. Crimp is sensitive to the fact that most of the literature about AIDS prevention was a “failure to take into account any aspect of the psychic but fear”<sup>33</sup> and his essay includes two of the panels from the comix, but he does not closely read them. His failure to engage these pornographic texts in more detail is disappointing, because in such an absence their descriptive force belongs to Helms alone; it is precisely their consideration, though, that can open up a multiplicity of forms and meanings. These comix exhumed fantasies and genres that extended beyond the audiovisual mainstays of commercial gay pornography to include scenes of S&M, fantasy, incest, and intergenerational sex, which, taken together, I argue speaks to the desire at the time for pornography to foster an erotics of the imagination itself instead of the corporeal. Reality, and the pornography that resided within an ontology of what gets termed “real” sex, could no longer be the only realm of pleasure. If filmed pornography was grappling with the possibility of showing penetrative sex ethically and responsibly, non-mimetic forms of representation—which will be the focus of this chapter—could envision and return to an unbounded sexual playfulness. I want to suggest that this expansion of possibilities was not a denial of the epidemic’s ravages, but rather a strategy to expand the sites of pleasure.

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<sup>33</sup> Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” 266.

Many questions, though, remain: Can anonymity be intimate? How should we mourn the dead? What is pleasure to the dying? Did promiscuity ever leave us? What is safety in the age of AIDS, and for whom, anyway?

### **3.4 Erotic Mourning and Remembrance**

The 1970s became a distant past to the gay men living in the 1980s, a shift unceremoniously foisted upon them by the arrival of the AIDS emergency; nostalgia quickly marked the preceding decade of “Gay Liberation” as one of carefree promiscuity.<sup>34</sup> AIDS’ arrival served as the intractable marker for pre- and post-promiscuous sex, a paradigm shift for rethinking gay sexual sociality. Of course, the 1970s were not actually carefree, and the sex that was had was not actually without consequence. It is surmised that HIV had been spread for nearly a decade before the first known case emerged in 1981, but this information would not be known for many decades. Gay Liberation, as an idea, however, gained popularity as a symbolic unshackling of the identities and libidos of closeted men, whereas AIDS threatened to re-shackled them, bringing shame and fear back into the picture. Sex was no longer liberatory and life-affirming; it was being drawn into a deep embrace with death. Promiscuity, many thought, was no longer possible, except in the realm of fantasy.

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<sup>34</sup> See the documentary *Gay Sex in the 1970s* for a general sense of how the 1970s become romanticized once the AIDS emergency appeared. *Gay Sex in the 70s*, directed by Joseph Lovett, (2006; New Almaden, CA: Wolfe Video, 2006), DVD.

If “sex put to a recording” constitutes the barest definition of pornography, then the mind itself can be thought of as the first pornographic recording device, however imperfectly it remembers that sex. A constitutive feature of *the pornographic* is the constitution of antecedent sexual experience, but it is striking that rarely does the pornographic imagination actually call upon the mind and memory’s contingency—its nostalgic quality—to propel its machinations. Pornography concerns the sex of the past, the sex that has already been, that is no more, but which we live to experience one (or many) more time(s). As I have argued earlier, pornography’s status within homosexual culture as one of the honored sites for reflecting gay subjectivity makes gay pornography’s engagement with the AIDS pandemic not just helpful but critical for understanding sexual identity during a period of extended existential uncertainty. Queer Theory has long engaged and problematized the supposedly undesirable connection of a death-drive in and of gay sex from the 1980s onward, best exemplified in Leo Bersani’s previously mentioned “Is The Rectum a Grave?” (1987) and Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2008), but little scholarship takes seriously the semiotic and affective roles gay pornographic productions of this time played, which *also* grappled with this linkage.

As the work of David McDiarmid revealed, the pornographic vernacular can be seen to disrupt the dominant discourse on HIV. This disruptive feature plays upon the pornographic form’s capacity to make visible that which a society insists remain invisible. To render the PWA in pornographic terms requires a more considered

engagement of desire and pleasure alongside the frailty and susceptibility of the human form.<sup>35</sup> Playwright Robert Chesley fiercely insisted upon the vitality and life-sustaining possibilities of sex to recuperating gay men's identity and sociality in a time when both were under heightened scrutiny. Credited with the first AIDS-related play to appear in New York – *Night Sweats*<sup>36</sup>– Chesley wrote plays that were often pornographic in the sense that they were populated with sexual fantasies and simulations that intended a certain cathexis for his theater-going audience that he hoped would inoculate them against the rising external and internal homophobia and erotophobia. The association we traditionally hold of pornography as a deliverer of pleasure alone fails to fully account for the project Chesley had in mind, though; for in his writing, it becomes apparent that there is something *else* pornography can do, not *instead of* but *in addition to* producing arousal.

The play *Jerker* was set in 1985 San Francisco and portrays two anonymous men—JR and Bert—who over the course of the play engage in phone sex—sharing fantasies that bring them to multiple orgasms—and ultimately bond with and care for one another in the midst of the AIDS crisis. To situate the pornographic potentiality of

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<sup>35</sup> Disability Studies, broadly, has begun to ask this question in relation to sexuality. For an analysis of how laws have criminalized the failure to report one's HIV status to sexual partners, see: Chris Bell, "I'm Not the Man I Used to Be: Sex, HIV and Cultural 'Responsibility,'" *Sex and Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 208-228.

<sup>36</sup> The first "AIDS Play" to appear in America was *The AIDS Show*, a modular piece of ensemble educational theater. Noreen Barnes-McLain "Death and Desire: The Evolution of the AIDS Play," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Fall 1997): 116.

this play, I turn attention to Chesley's literary archive alongside his 1986 play *Jerker*, which, in its narrative structure and complex reception history articulate the contentious relationship between pleasure and AIDS in the mid-1980s. In the process, I hope to rehabilitate a largely forgotten cultural text of the AIDS epidemic (See Figure 14). Chesley's controversial play *Jerker*—which drew national ire for a sexually explicit excerpt that aired on public radio—offers an important counterpoint to the 1985 touchstone AIDS plays *As Is* (Larry Hoffman, 1985) and *The Normal Heart* (Larry Kramer, 1985). The latter two plays were quickly adopted by both gay activists and more traditional theatergoers alike as paradigmatic texts in the emergent genre of AIDS theater that would find its apex a decade later in plays like *Angels in America* and *Rent*.



**Figure 14:** A personal photo in Robert Chesley's archive taken from a production of *Jerker*.

Chesley's plays, by contrast, had a more tumultuous and varied receptions.<sup>37</sup> The play *Jerker* pushes back against an anti-sexual portrait of the era and provides an alternative perspective—thanks in part to a literary archive that only recently became available to the public—to reveal the complexity of the theater's bearing witness to the crisis in real-time, which has been noted as one of the fastest forms of media response to AIDS at the time.<sup>38</sup>

*Jerker's* full title, excessively descriptive and overwrought, is *Jerker, or the Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy With Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty*.<sup>39</sup> There is much to unpack in this title, but I want to draw attention to two features in particular: “a pornographic elegy” and “twenty telephone calls.” In Chapter 1, the spatial particularities of gay pornography painted a complex portrait of gay visibility, cruising, and the closet, but gay pornography's function as media still served primarily to facilitate pleasure. As a result, my interpretation in the last chapter concerning the relation of Gay Liberation politics to gay pornography cut against the grain as a symptomatic reading, and was

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<sup>37</sup> Chesley's play *Night Sweat* (1984) preceded Hoffman and Kramer's critically hailed plays by a year. *Night Sweat*, though, vexed audiences. Taking a cue from *Soilent Green's* finale, its storyline centers on a dystopian assisted suicide facility for gay men who have been diagnosed with AIDS and wish to die. It was met with overwhelmingly negative reviews. See Robert Chesley, *Night Sweat*, collected in *Hard Plays, Stiff Parts: The Homoerotic Plays of Robert Chesley* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1990), 8-69.

<sup>38</sup> David Roman, *Acts of Intervention* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 44-87.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Chesley, *Jerker, or the Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy With Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty*, collected in *Hard Plays Stiff Parts: The Homoerotic Plays of Robert Chesley* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1990), 70-118.

influenced by the exceedingly heterotopic environments that constituted and constructed the possibility for sex. Pornography's version of gay liberation was not merely a shedding of repression.

By contrast, the startling subtitle "A Pornographic Elegy" announces in Chesley's work that the pornography in question is already deeply unfamiliar and political, that is: it is pornography that is invoked as a tactic, as a discourse, as a mode of engagement that here serves to modify and inform the elegiac form. Elegy, of course, most commonly refers to poetry that seeks remembrance and reflection, and typically takes as its subject the deceased. The admixture of "a pornographic elegy," in the same spirit of McDiarmid's artwork, presents an unexpected synthesis of seemingly unrelated ideas, or at the very least a fusion of forms that at first gloss do not appear complementary. How could pornography possibly help us remember the deceased? Would such a pornography still deliver pleasure, or what transformation of pleasure results from such hybridity? The melodramatic form serves as a bridge to mollify the tensions between pornographic and elegiac structures.

The "Twenty Telephone Calls" portion of Chesley's title constitutes the mode of address of the play and poses two unique challenges to pornography studies, which largely has contained its proper objects of study to film, video, and other streaming media. On the one hand, the theater is rarely treated as a pornographic medium. On the other hand, a telephone would seldom occupy more than a portion of a theatrical

production, and in *Jerker* it constitutes the entire structure. These are strange bedfellows, indeed. We have, then, the telephone as theater as pornography as elegy. The telephone seems a peculiar medium for both: in the case of theater, it keeps actors separate from one another and minimizes the range of possible actions, and in the case of the pornographic, it completely dispenses with the visual supremacy, creating a mimetic rift or diminishment. But in the combination of all three, the peculiarities of one coupling are offset by the affordances of the third. The visuality absent from the telephone and longed for in the pornographic, the theater reinstates; but even so, the staging instructions of Chesley's play would limit this visuality to masturbatory gestures and lounging in bed. In this manner, *Jerker* both compensates for and strictly disciplines its mode of address.

There are precedents for Chesley's unique combination of forms, however. Other plays before *Jerker* had incorporated nudity and highly suggestive sexual content,<sup>40</sup> but rarely would such theatrical works hail themselves as "pornographic," for risk of inviting scorn or boycotts. Likewise, the telephone in the 1980s was a popular tool for sexual expression especially during the AIDS crisis, which can be seen in the explosion of phone sex advertisements in gay pornographic magazines, but its prominence has

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<sup>40</sup> The most famous precursor to make heavy use of full-frontal nudity was *Oh! Calcutta!*, which premiered in 1969 as an avant-garde theatrical review. While there is much nudity in the play, the script seems self-consciously to distance itself from accusations of being pornographic. One notable lyric in the final song gives evidence to this anxiety, which imagines the audience's reactions to the play: "How come none of the guys have hard-ons?" Another example of a well-known play to make use of nudity, albeit in a more limited manner, is *Hair* in 1967.

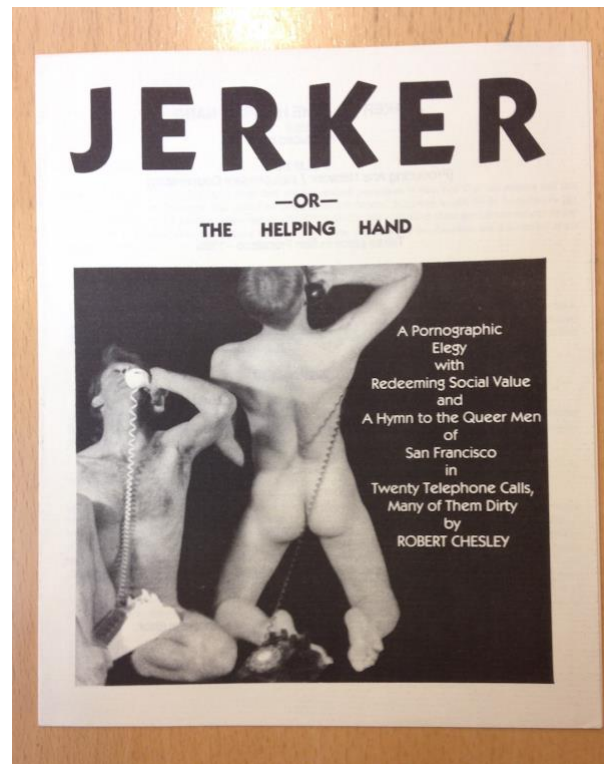
often been overlooked or seen as a sidebar to the onslaught of VHS pornography.<sup>41</sup> Both VHS and the telephone, however, return us to the realm of the private sphere: the home. As the mode of contracting AIDS became increasingly linked to sex, gay men began to seek out alternative forms of erotic encounter. The bathhouses and the porno theaters were beginning to be shuttered. Chesley's pornographic invocation uniquely allowed for an escalation of the fantastical and non-mimetic. If the "proper" realm of pornography was limited to the recordable and demanded a reckoning with reality by promoting safer sex behaviors, phone sex was unrecorded and unregulated; one was free to explore any topic, any sex act, no matter how taboo or unsafe. It was, in contrast to video pornography, unbridled fantasy. And even as the language spoken in pornographic phone calls may have broken every unspoken rule of safer sex campaigns, the telephone offered the ultimate prophylaxis.

Chesley's stalwart refusal to sanctify, vilify, or subtract eroticism from the gay subject should be his lasting legacy. Of all his plays, *Jerker* was the most vocal proponent of a expressing gay sexuality, and in its production history and subsequent adaptations endured the most vociferous protest for its explicitness. Self-described as a pornographic elegy with "redeeming social value," — which was itself a reference to the qualification that precluded representations from obscenity charges so long as they achieved this

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<sup>41</sup> My own archival research has shown, that, in the 1980s, pornographic magazines whose primary purpose is to advertise the videos of the era become saturated with advertisements for phone sex, both commercial and amateur (peer-to-peer).

ambiguous utility<sup>42</sup>—*Jerker* celebrated a pornographic portrait of gay sexuality at precisely the time when gay pornography was coming under intense scrutiny to reeducate a more “responsible” desire (See Figure 15).



**Figure 15: A playbill from a production of *Jerker* reveals just how heavily it advertised the pornographic features of the play, and in particular, phone sex.**

Chesley’s rendition of “safer sex” breaks from the dominant condom advocacy of the period, offering in its place spoken fantasy and memory as sites for arousal. Phone

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<sup>42</sup> In *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957), the Supreme Court ruled that the status of obscenity, which is not protected by the first amendment, could be determined as material “utterly without redeeming social importance,” when applied to a community standard by an average person. This language was rephrased as the lack of “redeeming social value” in *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, 383 U.S. 413 (1966) before *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973) clarified obscenity further as that which lacks “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”

sex and onanism are not treated as novel, superior or even preferable to other sexual endeavors, but are given to us as matter-of-fact options. Their service to the concept of safety are not predetermined nor limited to a pedagogical value. In fact, the words “safe” and “AIDS” appear nowhere in the text. Chesley firmly believed that prudery killed, and that his plays offered a different kind of resource to gay and closeted men; I want to suggest that there is another reason for Chesley’s vociferous embrace of eroticism, which is that eroticism became a cathartic source of vitality and hope to an audience living with pronounced uncertainty and fear of their very desires.

Anonymity plays a key role in the cultivation of pleasure at the same time that it foments dread in *Jerker*; at the heart of JR and Bert’s relationship is this contradiction. Not knowing who the other truly is allows JR and Bert the freedom to express themselves without reservation, granting intimacy divorced from attachment, physicality, and the risk of AIDS. Not knowing who the other truly is—by the same token—assures that their connection will only ever reside in the ethereal space between their telephone receivers, granting that intimacy instability, uncertainty, and a figmentive quality. While they come to know each other by their first names, it is only JR who knows how he met Bert, and only JR who retains Bert’s phone number. Every call made in *Jerker* is one that JR dials, and this unequal dynamic places Bert perpetually in the dark. Long before caller-ID, Bert cannot screen or return JR’s calls, unless JR were to leave his phone number on Bert’s answering machine, which he eventually does in the

penultimate scene of the play (too little, too late). This anonymity lends them the latitude for unbridled fantasies and also the freedom to confess a nostalgia they feel for the suddenly and impossibly distant 1970s, but as anonymity brings them closer together, it also implants in their conversations the desire to know more about one another, or, to quell anonymity's unknowingness. In fact, it is primarily the fantasies they spin out to one another across their disparate spaces — not last names, nor where they're from — that come to connect to them: the sex they used to have transformed to aural storytelling becomes a network of desire that bridges their physical divide.

When Bert asks JR what his profession is as a way of trying to identify him, stuttering, “Who *are* you? What... work do you do?,” JR recoils at the notion that his profession might stand in for his identity. When he considers the question again, though, and in the context of their phone sex they have so passionately engaged in, he reveals — perhaps facetiously — that he is “an historian of love among strangers in San Francisco.”<sup>43</sup> It seems possible that, given JR's description as an injured Vietnam veteran with limited mobility, the anonymity he insists upon in what otherwise reads as a courtship narrative, might find further explanation in the longstanding discrimination faced by disabled persons within the gay community. Bert does not recall JR from the scant descriptions he gives him concerning how they had met. In this manner, JR carefully maintains the anonymous version of himself he wants Bert to have, which

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<sup>43</sup> Chesley, *Jerker, or the Helping Hand*, 104.

means, he gives Bert only the pornographic vocalized fantasy version of himself, untethered from a corporeal body.

This power disequilibrium plays into the phone sex that JR and Bert have. *Jerker* offers titillation in a series of sublime vocalized transgressions (giving us: fraternal incest, intergenerational roleplay, water sports, discipline and punishment) that reveal the untidy vicissitudes of desire. In fact, the phone sex that takes place—the most clearly pornographic moments of *Jerker*—are steeped in taboos that dominate gay porn videos but which are unbounded by the constriction of visuality. It is not surprising that “brothers” become the preferred role for JR and Bert to take on. The two talk of tying one another up to a tree, tickling and torturing the other, and finally coming to orgasm. Anonymity allows “pornographic desires” like these, which shirk all sense of the model gay citizenship, to be spoken, constituting a space of non-judgment.

I read Chesley’s pornographic invocation as an ethical conferment of dignity and care upon strangers (both for characters within the play and for viewing subjects in the audience) who had been and continued to be isolated and alienated by the epidemic. In fact, the pornographic invocation serves as a survival strategy, but not in the same way that some gay commercial pornography aspired to affect behavioral changes for gay men engaging in sex. For instance, Cindy Patton in *Fatal Advice* outlines the struggle to bring about safer sex practices through educational sex videos as well as activist-consulted commercial gay pornography that featured responsible sexual behaviors

that—the hope was—would be adopted by viewers and reduce the risk of transmission.<sup>44</sup> Especially in the case of commercial gay pornography, these videos struggled with the question of pleasure and often worked hard to make the case that safer sex was not, in fact, unenjoyable. Two approaches quickly arose to address this concern, one of which took pains to stress the pleasures of safer sex, and the other of which minimized the degree to which safety was even mentioned or shown beyond the sexual initiation, which may seem counterproductive to a movement intent on engendering pedagogical outcomes.

Patton recounted an incident when she and her colleagues were engaged in a heated argument to locate “condom continuity.” A crisis of sorts emerged around a pornographic video that early on had featured the performer donning a condom, but which thereafter rendered said condom invisible through its editing and selective camera angles. Was this, in fact, still safe sex in its representational form? Patten’s colleagues slowed the footage down frame-by-frame to try to locate the prophylactic in between thrusts. Was there continuity of condom usage in the video? Could they make it out if they slowed the video down to a halt? Larger questions emerged from this debate. As Patten puts it: “Did all the heavy-handed efforts at eroticization implicitly suggest that safe sex was boring, thereby making unsafe sex seem more erotic? Did

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<sup>44</sup> Cindy Patton, *Fatal Advice: How Safe-Sex Education Went Wrong* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 118-138.

eroticism arise more from the acts or from the narration, from the prohibitions or from the identities surrounding them?"<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, fantasy and textual mediation come to matter a great deal in arriving at answers to these questions.

Beyond the problematic nature of the term "safe sex," Patton came to question the degree to which pornography could be said to direct human action, in any discernible manner. As she points out, the desire for pornography to re-train and rehabilitate the gay subject's behavior is borne of the same logic that anti-pornography feminists leveraged to promote censorship. In *Fatal Advice*, Patton lays bare the overdetermination that surrounds debates of causality and pornography in the 1980s, stating:

A range of groups, for nearly opposite reasons, have placed great stock in pornography's power to direct human behavior. One branch of feminists concerned about violence against women hoped to link pornography watching with the propensity to commit sexual violence. Equivalently, HIV prevention workers hoped that gay men would shift their desires and practices toward non-HIV-transmitting activities after imitating the 'good parts of safe sex pornography. But if the vast majority of heterosexual men who use pornography have never engaged in acts of sexual violence, then neither does safe sex pornography impel audiences to commit acts of transmission disruption.<sup>46</sup>

Patton here suggests that pornography had been thought to catalyze disparate ends: to produce sexual violence on the one hand, and to teach safe sex pedagogy, on the other.

The question that stems from Patton's criticism is this: if pornography does not in any measurable way produce clear-cut and deliberative behaviors of either an altruistic or

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 5.

detrimental nature, then what can we reasonably expect pornography to do? A question like this circulates more prominently in the social sciences and often either misunderstands or seeks to discredit the humanistic approach; the logic goes that the study of cultural objects must result in a tangible, measurable effect, which can then be taxonomized with a classifiable outcome. Against this impulse, I read gay pornography in the 1980s as neither a panacea for good or ill but rather as a tactic of disruption and a way of seeing that defamiliarizes our understanding of sex, which was a topic under heightened scrutiny and anxiety as a result of AIDS. An assortment of pornographies attempted to engage the AIDS epidemic precisely as Patton suggests, through the growing discourse of safety, but attempts to quantify or define causal behavioral changes will always prove speculative, at best. While condom advocacy became a popular campaign for modeling “safe” and later a more tentative “safer” sex in much gay video pornography of the time, Chesley’s pornographic intervention attempted to mitigate the ameliorative stances and shame that underwrote even such well-intentioned interventions.

Chesley celebrates desire through storytelling; more importantly, though, Chesley invokes pornography as a tool for remembrance and protest. Chesley’s archive was only recently made available to the public, a hopeful sign for his growing importance to literary criticism but also an indication of the relative paucity of work on him. A trove of his collected writings, newspaper clippings, reviews, manuscripts, and

correspondence resides in the Lincoln Center at the New York Public Library Performing Arts Center. Among these documents are fifteen hand-written notecards Chesley made for a speech at *Epidemic: Center Stage*, an event that explored the political linkages between theater and AIDS. In addition to his remarks, there is a curious note entitled "Anti-Erotic Platitudes" that offers an informative point of entry for thinking through his politics. Three statements, followed by three rebuttals, give a telling glimpse:

"The party's over." (It was not just a party.)

"Play safe." (We're not just playing: that's a children's word.)

"You can have fun safely." (Again: fun is part of sex, of course, but is scarcely its whole significance)<sup>47</sup>

Party. Play. Fun. These are the crimes that are remedied through curtailment or amendment: *end* the party, play *safe*, have *safe* fun. In these platitudes, Chesley identifies the common characterizations of the gay male sexual ethic in the 1980s as hedonistic, childish, and reckless, or all of the above. These platitudes interpellate a gay subject whose overriding interest in pleasure's dangerous pursuit predestine his own downfall, standing as simultaneous explanation and condemnation for the epidemic at hand. Strikingly, these platitudes were not simply the rhetoric of the homophobe, but were issued in equal parts by allies and members of the gay community in the laudable pursuit of survival.

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Chesley, *The Robert Chesley Papers, 1978-2005* [bulk 1980s-1990s] \*T-Mss 2010-112 (New York: The New York Public Library: Billy Rose Theatre Division).

While I do not cast aspersions on those who promoted abstinent approaches in order to combat the health crisis, I want to bring this tension to the fore for contemporary scholars. The tactics we might now call sex-averse risked reincorporating blame, guilt, and shame back into the gay psyche that Gay Liberation had struggled so hard to shed, a move Chesley staunchly opposed. At the bottom of this note on platitudes, Chesley wrote: “Gay sex of the 70’s was backrooms, glory-holes, baths, Ringold Alley, the piers, the trucks.”<sup>48</sup> This statement in Chesley’s archive arrives without the quotation marks that signposted the platitudes as ventriloquizations — nor is it followed with a rebuttal, calling into question how Chesley thinks of this definition. The description appears matter-of-fact, without clue to its tenor. Chesley’s portrait of “Gay sex of the 70’s” notably fails to mention pornography, but it seems that by the 1980s this absent purveyor of pleasure was to be the very vehicle for stewarding cultural memory for an entire subgroup and to nuance the platitudes that he found so demeaning. Theater of this era contested history as much as it bore witness to and managed the ongoing health crisis.

The portrait of the 1970s that Chesley paints is one where sex and sociality are entangled, where sex inherently forms a public, and where sex manages and makes possible a group’s identity. If this was gay sex in the 1970s, then what was gay sex in the 1980s, if not the dissolution of these very life-sustaining features? The path toward an

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

answer to this question is inextricably linked with AIDS, fear, and death, but this view alone lacks complexity. If we look *only* to the early gay pornography of the 1980s, we find that most of the videos that emerged failed to address AIDS at all.<sup>49</sup> When, as we saw earlier with Patton's work, gay pornography did begin to respond more pointedly to the epidemic through safe sex campaigns, the version of safety that was offered revolved exclusively around the visibility of condoms, which introduced its own set of instabilities and tensions, resulting in ineffectual, or questionable, results at best.

Condom visibility was only one part of the discourse, a well-known tactic which offered a limited account of how gay pornography came to be put to use in response to AIDS in the service of reeducating desire, but in many cases, it has become the whole story.

Chesley's play *Jerker*, though, presents an alternative and more complex portrait of what pornography can do, as well as what pornography might be. The pornographic here traffics in nostalgia for the comparatively carefree 1970s at the same time that it disembodies that era's sex through the telephone of the mid-1980s, rendering only an auditory echo of an unreachable past. The pornographic here defies the increasing call to sanitize sex under the auspices of safety while foregrounding sex's growing reliance on

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<sup>49</sup> Film scholar Thomas Waugh is highly critical of "the thriving porno industry's avoidance of the epidemic (except for a few exemplary figures like Richard Locke). It's unfathomable to me why there has been so little debate about the industry's utter bad faith in its masking of whatever safe sex the performers are fortunate enough to be allowed to practice on the set and above all in its abundant glamorization of risk behaviors. Apart from perfunctory printed guidelines scrolling here and there, and some producers' self-righteously pronounced avoidance of internal ejaculation (when did the come-shot trade ever show internal ejaculation?), the industry's culpability in this matter is a baldly stated matter of record." Thomas Waugh, *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 233.

and imbrication with technology and mediation. The pornographic here produces distance and alienation between physical bodies which had just a decade before been brought into greater proximity at the same time that the pornographic here imagines comfort and solidarity and affirmation in anonymity that is not simply postulated as vacuous and unloving but as fertile ground for intimacy, care, and friendship. The pornographic becomes something more complex than the received wisdom of the time, which envisioned gay pornography's utility—if positive at all—as purely prophylactic, beyond the idea that the watching of sex gay in pornography served as a substitute to the viewer for “real” coupled sex.

Chesley refused to let AIDS rend sexual desire and expression from gay men's lives, irrespective of their serostatus. Furthermore, just as McDiarmid later would do, Chesley eroticized the bodies of those living with AIDS and those living with the fear of AIDS in a way that easily invited criticism. At the same time, he subscribed to the call for safer sex without recoding the sex of the 1970s as “unsafe.” This was a complicated balance to strike, given that the play ultimately paints a portrait of isolation and eroticism that traveled across airwaves. Audiences at the time were asked to consider the voice not just as a vehicle for protest, but also for pleasure.

The AIDS Service and Education Foundation invited Chesley to speak at the Onstage Epidemic event with a particular mandate: to reveal how his writing “contributes to the audience's understanding of AIDS as a medical, social, and political

issue and how it increases the public's awareness of safer sex practices."<sup>50</sup> Chesley's archive includes the notecards he used to address the Onstage Epidemic event, which reveal Chesley's ambivalence towards AIDS as a metanarrative. The first notecard illustrates this tension:

For a playwright who is concerned with writing for and about the gay male community, AIDS is simply a very significant part of the picture. If I didn't want to deal with it, I'd have to write Science Fiction plays or history plays. In the past several years, I have written some 7 or 8 scripts, which come from & deal with the AIDS tragedy. None of these plays is an "AIDS play" in that none of them actually deals with the disease itself; and only in the last of these plays, *Pigman*, is the dirty word itself used.<sup>51</sup>

Chesley both acknowledges the inescapable force of AIDS to influence his work and, at the same time, the desire to escape the status of "AIDS play." Given this careful avoidance, Chesley operates as a vexed figure for understanding how the theater of the time had engaged and helped to shape the discourse around AIDS, but it is precisely the immediacy, ephemerality, and contentiousness of his work that make such a consideration necessary, and his near-wholesale absence from AIDS scholarship so egregious. Chesley's semantic erasure of the word AIDS does not diminish the engagement of the epidemic but rather elevates its force as a structuring absence. As he wrote, "AIDS is simply a very significant part of the picture." The health crisis suffuses every spoken line of his plays by treating AIDS as a kind of haunting, just outside of our grasp, a ghost capable of appearing at any moment. The erotic phone calls of *Jerker*

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<sup>50</sup> Chesley, *The Robert Chesley Papers*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

become respite and avoidance from that haunting, but also a circuitous reminder of the constitutive ways AIDS indelibly reshaped gay men's pleasures and desires.

### **3.5 Mediation and the State**

*Jerker* was produced across numerous formats—first as theatrical performance, shortly thereafter as excerpted radio broadcast, and lastly as filmic adaptation—and depending on the modality, its reception and classification as obscenity shifted. Ironically, it is in the final video adaptation of *Jerker* that the least pornographic and most sterile iteration appears. It seems that, given the full range of possibilities of audio-visual representation and the semi-permanence (or at least extended life of) that the VHS tape promised (or threatened) in contrast to its ephemeral antecedents,<sup>52</sup> *Jerker* the video shed its pornographic trappings in favor of a more decidedly melodramatic form. The video, which might have crossed into the realm of hard core explicitness, instead minimized the already soft-core pornographic features that granted its precursors their notoriety.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Alilunas's recent research critically charts the rise of VHS pornography in the 1980s, offering a media and reception studies oriented analytic that has been much needed to account for this era in pornography studies: Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> One is reminded of the limitations the theater is traditionally thought to have, in comparison to film. Erwin Panofsky noted the unique affordances the cinematic medium held over the theatrical medium, which he found impoverished, by comparison. Cinema, according to Panofsky, uniquely offered a *dynamization of space* and a *spatialization of time* that the theater could not hope to achieve. In contrast, I am claiming the filmed version of *Jerker* fails to take advantage of these medial affordances, but comes to exaggerate isolation and stasis, which dispenses with the erotic tension of the play. As a result, the film comes off as stilted and wooden but also loses much of the irony that the play engenders in granting simultaneous vision to the two disparate playing spaces. The film divides up space in shot-reverse-shot editing, creating discrete spaces that the staged theater productions often dissolved. Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium of the Motion Picture," *Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1936), 98.

The original play, on the other hand, embraced the word-of-mouth it could generate among gay and gay-allied audiences, often seeking to play up its innuendo, heighten its masturbatory gestures, and exaggerate its orgasmic moans; in fact, correspondences from Chesley's archive reveal he would write to theaters to ask whether audience members had visible erections. The invocation of pornographic features rendered through the spontaneity of the theatrical performance may have heightened the very pornographic qualities, allowing each show to modulate its bawdiness to the dynamic ebbs and flows of audience reception. In turn, the theaters themselves became a stand-in for the porno theaters that were simultaneously being shuttered out of fear of the unsafe sexual activity they were thought to foster.<sup>54</sup>

The radio broadcast of excerpts from *Jerker* proved to be even more salacious. This iteration of the play appeared second but had the most lasting effect on the play's legacy. It was precisely the pornographic quality to the performance that the radio broadcast of *Jerker* came under fire for promoting, in part, I surmise, because the radio broadcast placed the radio listener in precisely the position of a phone sex recipient, lacking, as it did, the visual grammar that attended *Jerker's* other iterations. On August 31, 1986, Larry Poland heard the broadcast on KPFK-FM and complained to the FCC that his children might have heard its "obscene material." It was the accessibility of this

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<sup>54</sup> See Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 154.

broadcast that unnerved Poland. The scene in question was one of lamentation, when JR and Bert reminisced about their bygone sexual explorations during the 1970s. It is important to note that in this scene, the two declare their refusal to be vilified for what was now deemed “unsafe” sex. Chesley argued that it was precisely in the radio’s capacity to reach an audience that his play could never hope to find — tied as its productions were to major metropolitan theater districts — that these broadcasts could serve a kind of public service function. In that regard, the radio not only heightened the erotic charge of *Jerker* (rendering it almost indistinguishable to actual phone sex), but lent it the status of “safe sex tutorial” for those who may not have had any other outlet for exploring or understanding homosexual desires. It was for precisely these reasons, though, that the play’s abridged broadcast on public radio came under fire.

The effects of the play’s radio performance were substantial. In the collection *Hard Plays, Stiff Parts*, Chesley worries about the ramifications of this scandal:

So *Jerker* has inadvertently caused a lot of damage. The whole fucking nation is worse off, and it’s quite conceivable that lives have been lost that could have been saved if vital, direct information on the spread of AIDS had been available on the broadcast media. Nobody ever died from being offended, but *prudery kills*. I can only hope that *Jerker* has done and will continue to do some good, with its message of pride in gay identity and honesty about sex.<sup>55</sup>

In 1986, the Federal Communications Commission launched an investigation into obscenity charges against KPFK-FM, a non-profit radio station in Los Angeles, which broadcast a portion of *Jerker* on their weekly gay radio show “I Am, Are You?” (Aug 31).

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<sup>55</sup> Chesley, *Jerker, or the Helping Hand*, 72.

These charges were later dropped in 1987, on account of the episode airing after 10pm, but the damage was done. The scandal spurred the FCC's to revise its indecency policy. The FCC eventually removed the after-10:00 PM "safe harbor" provision,<sup>56</sup> which was itself a partial response to the seven dirty words comedy bit by George Carlin from the 1970s.<sup>57</sup> This FCC policy change resulted in an erosion of the understanding of what actually constituted indecency. Their revision stated that broadcasts were actionable as "indecent" if they depicted "language or material that depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs." This revision in turn informed the Supreme Court's 1991 ruling in "Barnes v. Glen Theatre, Inc." that public nudity could be banned even if it were deemed to hold an expressive function. Justice Souter's famous declaration from his concurrence stated that "nudity itself is not inherently expressive content." The result was that expressivity no longer held as much sway in thwarting the legal claim against indecency. *Jerker* helped, inadvertently, to reshape the law in the United States, and as a result was tinged with the status of "bad object," or in this case, an object that historians and critics could stand to forget. The

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<sup>56</sup> This provision was established by the Supreme Court as a negotiation to the FCC's indecency regulation, which had, prior to then, only regulated the "seven dirty words." The provision was intended to allow broadcasters the right to broadcast so-called indecent material (which holds a different legal meaning from "obscene") only between the hours of 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM, as this would be a time when children would be sleeping.

<sup>57</sup> This refers to the seven words one could not speak on public broadcast, whether television or radio. The seven words are: shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits.

narrative it portrayed was viewed as perverse and obstinate. The sex in question did not, by the state's determination, hold a redeeming value, and many prominent gay figures at the time were in agreement.

That *Jerker's* mediation altered its messaging should not surprise us; within the diegesis of the play itself, various media hold noted prominence for the narrative. In addition to the telephone, the play relies heavily upon the answering machine, the Walkman, and the EKG machine. Technology propels and circumscribes gay sociality in important ways. The telephone that crucially holds the play together fosters the semi-anonymous intimacy between JR and Bert over time, long before Grindr and Scruff would become popular telephonic tools for millennials to cruise one another. In an anecdote from within the play, the sharing of a Walkman headphone initiates a fondly recalled tryst. The answering machine's critical role in developing suspense as the play progresses reminds us that communication often came with delay and uncertainty; it also serves as a harbinger of Bert's implied death. Then there is Bert's somber recounting of a dying friend's vital signs being artificially and invasively attended to by the EKG machine, which he notes renders the body into an unrecognizable and alien form. In these examples, Chesley's technological motif underscores both its capacity for intimacy as well as the threat to dehumanization. Technology both facilitates and delimits intimacy.

### **3.6 (Tear)Jerking: Melodrama Meets Pornography**

Chesley's play *Jerker* recreated the homoerotic tension of pornography theaters from the 1970s—and underground “stag films”<sup>58</sup> before that—and transformed theatrical space into a site of communal arousal. In his personal correspondence, Chesley would ask directors whether the play had titillated the audience, and in an interview with Michael Kearns for the Pride Playhouse Collection's video adaptation of the play (which was recorded just months before his own death), Chesley fondly recalled: “I had one man write to me that my play re-sexualized him after two years of being abstinent. He went out that night and had sex. I also love it when members of the audience tell me they're hard throughout the play.” Turning the theater into a communal space of shared eroticism was not inconsequential, but rather served an important function to the play. John Clum argues that *Jerker's* eroticism was stuck in the past, that “the only bearable erotic fantasy is of sex before AIDS,”<sup>59</sup> but what Clum fails to see is precisely how Chesley's retelling of the past creates in the space of the theater a momentary and tangible eroticism. At this same time, the emergence of group masturbatory clubs like *The New York Jacks* and *San Francisco Jacks* also stands as testament to the fact that masturbation, fantasy-play, and phone sex were not merely poor substitutes for “real”

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<sup>58</sup> For a good article on the homosociality of stag film spectatorship, see Thomas Waugh, “Homosociality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen,” *Screen* 4.3 (2001): 275-291.

<sup>59</sup> J.M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: St. Martin's Press/Griffin, 2000).

sex but had begun to find appreciation in their own rights as “new” or emergent perversions.<sup>60</sup>

The pornographic semiotics of *Jerker* deviate, however, in significant ways from the video pornography in the 1980s: in *Jerker*, dyadic contact is withheld; there is no kissing, no oral sex, and no anal penetration. Similarly, *Jerker* does not stagger its sexual engagements to build in intensity toward an inevitable grand finale of the close-up “money shot.” Rather than combine a unique assortment of bodies and sex acts, the pornographic scenes from *Jerker* remain largely masturbatory and rely almost exclusively on the *imaginative force of the vocal*. What the audience witnesses are ten simulated orgasms, implied—but not shown—through rhythmic gestures carried out under bedsheets. Rather than rely on the *frenzy of the visible*, Chesley harnesses the voice almost exclusively to elicit pleasure and in the process demotes the visual grammar to a secondarily function, to that of pantomime. In this regard, *Jerker* may have been best suited to the radio format that we saw garnered it its most tumultuous reception. Also, unlike the pornographic tropes of maximum visibility and perpetually increasing intensities (lesser sex acts that build up to and find their conclusion in orgasmic revelry), Chesley interestingly structures the play to wane in sexual intensity, effectively replacing erotic escalation with increasing emotional catharsis. The two characters, JR and Bert, are kept apart from one another’s playing space (having exchanged numbers

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

prior to the play's opening), until the penultimate fantasy sequence that culminates in a fairy tale about two young princes going on an adventure together. Rather than engage in sex, in their fantasy union, JR and Bert share an embrace. The viewer is encouraged to interpret this embrace as a figment, even though its actualization would be a welcome one, given the physical solitude that runs throughout the play. Some productions signal the ontological instability of this embrace through smoke or a shift in lighting. Others remark in notation that JR now should have full use of his body, which prior to this scene is marked by the crutches that rest next to his bed (he is, we come to learn, a veteran of the Vietnam War who returned to America with injuries). The only touch or "helping hand" within the play is one's own; but it is a touch that is directed and amplified by the voice of another, whose absence is felt. When the play concludes with only JR, desperately trying to make contact with Bert—whose answering machine repeats its tonally dissonant playful message before a disconnection notice ultimately announce his death—the melodramatic form has wholly subsumed the pornographic.

Pornography has long been defined by the involuntary bodily response it produces in its spectators: arousal. It is the capacity of pornography to "move" the body to orgasm or to intermediate states of arousal that leads to the overdetermined idea that pornography can also enact other bodily behaviors, all of which position pornography as a kind of agent, and the body as the medium upon which that agent inscribes, dictates, catalyzes a particular change. Body genres are held to a different standard than

what are seen as artistic genres, the binary of which reproduces the body-mind divide that much of Western philosophy has concerned itself with since its dawn.

If pornography initiates the organization of *Jerker*, melodrama concludes it. Both pornography and melodrama are body genres, with melodrama inherently gendered as feminine and commonly derided for its trivial style and over-reliance on feelings. David Halperin describes melodrama's significance to a gay audience as such: to "accept the inauthenticity at the core of romantic love, to understand romantic love as a social institution, an ideology, a role, a performance, and a social genre, while still, self-consciously and undeceivedly, succumbing to it."<sup>61</sup> Halperin ties melodrama to camp, but he also expands its orbit to include an "erotics of melodrama," which must be preserved and transmitted to future generations.<sup>62</sup> Linda Williams can further help us to unpack the function and structure of melodrama. In "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," Williams categorizes the melodramatic form as one of excess, which it structures on spectacle, episodic presentation, and a dependence of coincidence.<sup>63</sup> The intensification of emotion that it deploys recalls bodily hysteria, which performs an important function to *Jerker*, as it does for many of the earliest AIDS plays of this era. The health crisis complicates the formulation of a traditional romantic unit (the primary

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<sup>61</sup> Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 294

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 295

<sup>63</sup> Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), 3.

goal in all romantic melodramas), which Chesley resolves by offering a recuperation of “bad sex” (masturbation, phone sex, pornography) alongside an elegy to “good sex.” While the melodrama can be counted on to elicit tears (or, playing from the title here, to be a tearjerker), Chesley presents this bodily compulsion alongside the bodily compulsion to come (the second meaning of the title’s jerker). By muddling melodrama and pornography, Chesley asks us to consider how body genres operate in the literary imaginary, sometimes in tandem, and what their invocation could mean as tools to memorialize and contest the popular narratives of AIDS.

When members of ACT UP / New York picketed the Nixon exhibition for its portrayal of the PWA in suffering hagiographic photography, they demanded “the visibility of PWAs who [were] vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back. Stop Looking at Us. Start Listening to Us” (qtd. in *Hard to Imagine*).<sup>64</sup> *Jerker* takes this message to heart, bristling against the platitudes Chesley outlined:

“The party’s over.” (It was not just a party.)

“Play safe.” (We’re not just playing: that’s a children’s word.)

“You can have fun safely.” (Again: fun is part of sex, of course, but is scarcely its whole significance)<sup>65</sup>

Mourning need not only be sorrowful. Chesley recognized the axis that sadness and desire share in the body; both move us in ways that seem out of our control. Re-examining Chesley’s *Jerker* for how it literally jerks us around—that is, for how its

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<sup>64</sup> Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 18.

<sup>65</sup> Chesley, *The Robert Chesley Papers*.

somatic imperatives register within and through the body—reminds us that the AIDS theater of the time was not monolithic in its depiction of the PWA and that the desire to bridge sadness, outrage, mourning, and erotic pleasure need not be seen as incompatible with one another nor unworthy of remembrance.

## 4. “Just Give Us Honest Dick”: Gay Video Dreams of Cybersex

The popular conflation of internet use and gay male sexuality—a conflation with queer cinema as its crux—occurred almost immediately following the commercialization of the internet.

— Noah A. Tsika<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1 *The Irretrievable Internet Archive*

I am reading a porn magazine at The ONE Archives in Los Angeles, when I come across the following: “In this age of MTV-like image-bombardments and fifteen-second sound bites, is it any wonder that the gay sexvid industry has followed suit? This is not to say that orgy-type squirtathons or unrelated, plot-free loops have no place in the gay erotic pantheon; who among us can deny stroking off to such cinematic hedonism? But isn’t there room for those who seek credible storytelling?”<sup>2</sup> Jerry Douglas poses this rhetorical question—the answer to which seems to be a beseeching “Yes, there should be!”—in his monthly *Parting Shots* editor’s column. Douglas, himself one of the first well-known directors of gay “sexvids,” was also the editor-in-chief of the gay male porn magazine *Manshots* throughout its decade-long run in the 1990s, and he typically utilized his column to bring his readers up to speed on the recent trends in gay pornography, and, more commonly than he would have liked, to pay tribute to the alarming number of gay

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<sup>1</sup> Tsika’s observation could be enriched by a consideration the ways in which gay pornography was also—if not moreso—an influence in this conflation. Note that Tsika objects to the capitalization of the word *Internet*. Noah A. Tsika, *Pink 2.0: Encoding Queer Cinema Online* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Douglas, “Parting Shots,” *Manshots*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (June, 1993): 81.

performers and producers who were dying of AIDS at the time.<sup>3</sup> Here, though, Douglas expresses resentment toward a trend that will become prominent in the 1990s—the increasingly plotless, hyper-sex filled gay video porn<sup>4</sup>—for which he lays the blame squarely at the feet of youth culture, emblemized here in the cable network MTV, with its attention-deficit-spurring rapid-fire barrage of image and sound. This rhetorical accusation of a supra-media incursion into another format is not uncommon, and I will return to the question of media reinscription (as contamination) later in the chapter. For now, though, I want to focus on Douglas’s vocal dissatisfaction with commercial gay sexvids, and on the very thing that seems anathema to pornography: displeasure.

Douglas goes on: “Perhaps, the answer lies in breaking old ground, with a crop of talented filmmakers savvy enough to realize that the heat in sex videos might require

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<sup>3</sup> In one intriguing letter to the editor, a disgruntled reader threatening to cancel his subscription of *Manshots* writes to Douglas, “I have been meaning to write you for some time, but waited hoping that you would see the error in publishing obituaries in your magazine... After a period of time it becomes almost impossible to view a video cassette without coming across at least one person (if not more) that has died... I, for one, use these cassettes as a large portion of my sex life and am not interested in trying to build a fantasy around someone who is no longer with us... The totals are mounting up and lead me among many others (to believe) that the industry is totally unsafe and makes everyone participating suspect.” Douglas responds, “It is this very sort of ostracism—pretending that it can’t (or doesn’t) happen here—that allowed the AIDS epidemic to get out of hand in the first place, whereas *awareness* of its omnipresence has proven to be the most effective means of changing the sexual behavior that perpetuates the plague. Pretending that AIDS doesn’t exist and that men in films are fantasy figures who fuck with impunity seems to be sadly chuckle headed. [...] We will cancel this reader’s subscription, but will continue to provide this information to our readers, for we do indeed consider *Manshots* a publication that provides both fact and fiction.” Jerry Douglas, “Parting Shots,” *Manshots*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (December, 1990): 81.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Schaefer has theorized this phenomenon—the evacuation of narrative from pornography sometime around the mid-1980s—may not be a particularly alarming trend, at all, but actually a return to form. In his estimation, it may be the brief period of the 1970s and part of the 1980s, when pornography aspired to achieve the status of feature length narrative, that was the anomaly, serving as a mere entr’acte between plotless, repetitive sex loops. “Gauging a Revolution: 16 mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), 7.

a breather from time to time. Sort of like sex in the real world.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Douglas seeks a return to narrative-centered gay pornography, more akin to the films of the 1970s, when the form aspired to achieve the status of an artistic practice and gave plot development a more prominent role. In his quest to resolve what appears to be boredom, Douglas reveals a retrospective desire for the representation of sex in video porn to resemble the sex in “the real world.”<sup>6</sup> This desire contrasts the previous chapter’s inquiry into fantasy sex that mourned and supplemented the loss of a seemingly “liberated sex” of the 1970s during the height of the AIDS epidemic, which, in turn, the chapter prior to it complicated by offering readings of 1970s gay pornography that featured heterotopic spaces, rife with danger. The longing for a past that may not have been as utopian as we remember (or wish to remember) creates a temporal rift, one where the *now* can never live up to the *irretrievable past*, the irretrievability of which grants that past its desirability. In a complex temporality, this chapter looks to the past’s vision of a future cybersexual pornography to see if such a gaze is as longingly sought after.

Before setting out on that journey, I want to press on what occasioned Douglas’s dissatisfaction with sexvids, or to ask, earnestly, was that displeasure always there? If

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> It is unclear if in this moment Douglas unironically references the highly popular “Real World” TV series — one of the first incarnations of “unscripted” reality TV — that had begun a year before in 1992 on MTV, and which included a great deal amount of down time, or “breathers,” as Douglas might put it, in between depictions of wanton sex and general debauchery. Given his disdain for MTV, we might presume Douglas means the real world that lacks hyper-mediation, but was such a world even *real* anymore?

commercial gay sexvids were no longer providing fantasies that offered fulfillment of some kind or another, then what were they doing? What do we desire when we ask that our representations look more like “the real world,” and what, furthermore, does the intermingling of media into our world—and the rise of the Internet in the 1990s—change about how we understand what counts as reality? Can the two be merged, or are they always already distinct? This chapter hopes to break down these and other questions as it moves toward, but never fully arrives at, the Internet porn I had set out to find.

In his pop culture history of the rise of gay hard core *Bigger Than Life*,<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier recounts the publication history of *Manshots*—the magazine I was reading in the archive—and how Douglas came to establish it. Douglas had been a reviewer for the magazine *Stallion* but was let go in 1987. After leaving *Stallion*, he approached First Hand Publications to propose a new magazine that would be devoted entirely to gay adult videos. The first issue, released in September of 1988 “arrived at a key historical moment—the growing availability of videos and the emergence of the home viewing audience had broadened the reach of pornographic films, and that was reinforced by the impact of AIDS which by 1987 had become a full-blown catastrophe.”<sup>8</sup> What makes

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Williams writes that Escoffier’s text “is an authoritative account of the rise of gay pornography since the 1970s – the studios, the stars, the auteurs. Written by an enthusiastic and knowledgeable fan, this book is a model of the genre of popular writing about pornography.” Despite lacking a critical analysis of the genre he historicizes, Escoffier’s book offers a treasure trove of references and source material that proved invaluable. Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field”: 26.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, *Bigger than life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2009), 234-235.

*Manshots* so compelling from an archival perspective is its reign over the entirety of the 1990s: the magazine first publishes in 1988, and folds in 2001. No other pornographic magazine quite so definitively catalogued, critiqued, and provided insight into the shifting gay pornographic media landscape of the time, and so no other source provides quite the richness of thought and breadth, either.

I had not expected to be reading a porno rag in an archive. In fact, initially I had set out to pursue a very different agenda. In turning my attention to the 1990s, I had hoped to account for the early online gay pornography of the era, to the very pornography I had cut my teeth on as a teenager. I wished to read it from the vantage of two decades later to see how it held up as a cultural and historical object, but I was presented with a methodological dilemma: How does one access the early gay pornography of the 1990s? The answer to this question eluded me.

Much of the old internet is long gone, the victim of link rot, reference rot, and content drift—media slang for the many ways in which the Internet palimpsestically writes over itself, or site subscriptions expire, or code breaks.<sup>9</sup> Simply put, the Internet is ephemeral; and while the Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive began “web scraping”<sup>10</sup> the World Wide Web back in 1996 to remedy precisely this problem, it did

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<sup>9</sup> Try, for instance, clicking on some of the links from the last chapter (which was written first and therefore is the oldest), which covers web porn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and you will find that half of the links no longer work, or take the viewer to a new and unintended web pages.

<sup>10</sup> This is sometimes also referred to as “crawling.”

not collect much in regards to pornography, let alone the minoritarian gay pornography.

Jill Lepore outlines how the Wayback Machine works in her *New Yorker* article:

The Wayback Machine is a Web archive, a collection of old Web pages; it is, in fact, *the* Web archive. There are others, but the Wayback Machine is so much bigger than all of them that it's very nearly true that if it's not in the Wayback Machine it doesn't exist. The Wayback Machine is a robot. It crawls across the Internet, in the manner of Eric Carle's very hungry caterpillar, attempting to make a copy of every Web page it can find every two months, though that rate varies.<sup>11</sup>

But The Wayback Machine doesn't scrape the whole Internet, and in fact, what it scrapes is a mere glimpse of a single moment, taken approximately every two months. Imagine how often a website publishes, changes, and un-publishes its content in two months' time, and it very quickly becomes evident that if the Wayback Machine is our best hope of archiving the Internet, the vision it grants is hopelessly incomplete. Admittedly, that partial view is better than nothing, but we must confront the fact that the Internet is constantly exceeding our capacity to record and retain it.

After some sleuthing, I discovered that the discourse over online pornography's value to the Wayback Machine—whether it was, indeed, worthy of remembering, and so, recording—was already playing out in tired and expected ways. Multiple threads<sup>12</sup> of the Internet Archive's online message boards reveal users of the archive who are shocked to find what little pornography has snuck through the cracks, and often they

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<sup>11</sup> Jill Lepore, "Cobweb: Can the Internet be Archived?" *New Yorker*, posted Jan 26, 2015: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/cobweb>; Accessed December 9, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance: <http://archive.org/post/287994/please-delete-the-porn>.

make requests that the Internet Archive delete such “smut.” Many, in fact, find it impossible to fathom that the Wayback Machine’s scrape of a porn site could be intentional, and presume, rather, that its inclusion was due to some accident or a prank request. Anyone can, after all, make a request that the Wayback Machine “save page now.”<sup>13</sup> One poster, “pegzmasta,” explains the gravity of archiving Internet pornography via the Wayback Machine as follows:

It doesn’t make sense for Public Libraries to block Digital Libraries, like archive.org, on their computers—right? When could such an event occur? Well, there is always the possibility that children may be recommended to search the Internet Archive by librarians in order to find research materials for school. If they encounter porn on the Archive (even though it’s not HARDCORE porn): Won’t this spark a craving to learn more about it? What if they are too young to learn about this explicit subject matter?<sup>14</sup>

This panic over the Internet’s capacity to diminish the purity of the figure of the child is not a new one, but rather part of a long tradition that I take up later on in this chapter. In this moral reservation, the figure of the child comes to place a demand on the Internet Archive that is in stark contradiction to its avowed mission *to remember*. Here, users leverage the imagined child to insist that the Internet Archive *forget* that which is, by most accounts, a pervasive part of online culture.<sup>15</sup> The Internet—or our archive of it—in these discourses is imagined as a proxy parental figure to innocent children. All of

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<sup>13</sup> To learn how to have the Wayback Machine scrape any website, see:

<http://www.bitsgalore.org/2014/08/02/How-to-save-a-web-page-to-the-Internet-Archive>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://archive.org/post/1053748/porn-on-ia-wtf> Posted April 11, 2016. Accessed December 9, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Let us not forget the early millennial off-Broadway hit puppet musical *Avenue Q*, which made no bones about this point with the show-stopping number “The Internet is for Porn.” See Whitty, Jeff, Robert Lopez, and Jeff Marx, *Avenue Q: The Musical: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2010).

which is to say, even in the age of pervasive surveillance and mechanisms for recording, the Internet is not forever, but it, too, fades with time, and often intentionally.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than lasting forever, the average lifespan of a website is roughly one hundred days.<sup>17</sup> Neither my memory nor the Wayback Machine was going to be able to recover the lost gay Internet porn of the 1990s, try as I might to conjure the faintest of recollections. Contrast these irretrievable archives with Tim Dean's recent assertion that the digital reproducibility of modern pornography augurs a bright future: "The study of pornography, far from suffering a dearth of archives [...] thus confronts a surfeit of them. We have more porn archives than we know what to do with."<sup>18</sup> While pornography certainly thrives in its digital form today, the lack of preservation for digital pornography of the past gives pause. Dean's technotopian outlook does not fully acknowledge the many ways in which digital media become obsolete over time, and if not tended to, disappear. What's more, the process of storing digital media rests upon what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland articulate as a central paradox: "Digital media, if it 'saves' anything, does so by transforming storage into memory: by accelerating decay, by proliferating what it reads, by making the ephemeral endure.

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<sup>16</sup> One workaround to this problem that Jill Lepore discusses in her article is Perma.cc, which creates "permalinks," by archiving immediately the link that scholars and other professionals cite and footnote. The hope is that this "patch" will create links that never break, regardless of if the website exists into perpetuity or not. Jill Lepore, "Cobweb: Can the Internet be Archived?" Jan 26, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Dean, "Introduction: Pornography, Technology, Archive," in *The Porn Archives*, eds. Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 8.

That is, new media ‘store’ information by making what is stable more ephemeral, so that now, in order for something to remain, it must not remain: it must constantly be regenerated.”<sup>19</sup> The act of saving requires the constant production of copies, and sooner or later, the curator, whether Wayback Machine or other digital repositories like archive.is or screenshots.com will have to decide what gets copied and what gets deleted. Add to this mix the problem of how to parse and search the multiple iterations of a highly curated Internet that the Wayback Machine scrapes and continues to make copies of, and we see that the process of archiving is never not itself a form of critique, but rather always a reiterative restructuring of the past, contingent on the present moment’s selection parameters.

Online pornography does not stand much of a chance of being preserved if we leave it up to the broader institutions that are tasked with selecting and preserving cultural memories, lending heightened urgency to the apprehension—in both the sense of an anxiety over and a desire to grasp—of its digital form. Linda Williams shares this less-than-optimistic view, noting that the study of pornography suffers from “the missing archive, a crucial element necessary for the cultivation of a scholarly field. The

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<sup>19</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland, “Habits of Leaking: Of Sluts and Network Cards,” *differences* (26.2): 5.

lack of preservation of the pornographic heritage is appalling, and we cannot count on the hit-or-miss salvages of the Internet to do the job.”<sup>20</sup>

I am reading a porn magazine at The ONE Archives in Los Angeles. While I am dismayed by what I cannot account for—the pornography that I vaguely recalled downloading at plodding speeds on a dial-up modem in the rare instances when I had privacy—the magazine I hold in my hands offers me something unexpected. What I find in it comes to return me, in strange and winding ways, to the very Internet I had sought to locate.

It is here that I get a glimpse into the technofutures of gay pornography that the—by comparison—remedial gay video porn of the 1990s imagined. Counter-intuitively, this chapter’s inquiry is bound up to older inscribing technologies—to the print magazine that largely catalogued and critiqued gay sexvids and to the gay sexvids themselves. It is in these forms—print and video—that, following Paul Young’s imaginative project *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals*,<sup>21</sup> I examine how the arrival of the

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<sup>20</sup> This quotation comes from the first version of an essay that would later appear in the inaugural issue of the scholarly journal *Porn Studies*, which itself confusingly bears the same name as Williams 2004 anthology, *Porn Studies*. In the earlier version of her essay, Williams engages directly with Dean over the question of whether porn studies has an adequate archive. This aspect of Williams’s essay does not feature in the *Porn Studies* version. Linda Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” in *The Porn Archives*, eds. Tim Dean, Steven Rusczycky, and David Squires, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 35.

<sup>21</sup> Young charts the ways in which cinema has dealt with the emergence of radio, television and the Internet by dreaming about them in technological cinematic fantasies. At each new era, he argues, the features of the newer medium are tested—and often, incorporated—into the logic of cinema. Paul Young, *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals: Media Fantasy Films, from Radio to the Internet* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Internet produced new anxieties that manifested in fantasies about hyper-mediated sexual experience—MUDs,<sup>22</sup> virtual reality, teledildonics, and other hybrid forms of cybersex—which then came to dynamically inflect how print and video imagined its own relationship to the production of gay fantasy. Much of the digital 1990s may be lost to us entirely in its computational form, but the older media that inscribed the dot com bubble and produced a flurry of analog records retain their trace. The following is an archaeological exploration into the media fantasy of gay cybersex. To that end, I examine the general sense of displeasure and disappointment circulating around gay sexvids of the 1990s, which I read through Walter Benjamin as suffering from a “loss of the aura” and a flailing sense of realism. I read into the technopanics over the burgeoning Internet of the 1990s a veiled threat of queerness. I close with a close analysis of the surprisingly narrative-laden gay porn video *Technical Ecstasy*, which imagines the gay pleasures and dangers that await the gay figure in a virtual world, if he can find it.

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<sup>22</sup> In an early print user manual for the sexual uses to which the Internet was thought capable of being put, the authors of *net.sex* write, “There is some virtual reality on the Internet, but it’s not too sexy—yet. Welcome to the world of *MUDs*—the quaint name for *multiuser dungeons*, the Internet’s answer to virtual reality. [...] [M]ost MUDS are text-only affairs (pardon the pun!). The graphics and virtual bus stops with virtual women to woo are a long time in coming. Most Internet connections lack the bandwidth to quickly move eye-grabbing graphics to our computers, so the ‘virtual reality’ of the Net is primarily text-only.” Candi Rose and Dirk Thomas, *net.sex* (Indianapolis: Sam’s Publishing, 1995), 122.

## **4.2 Video Killed the Narrative Drive: or, How Gay Pornography Lost Its Aura**

In 1935, Walter Benjamin wrote of the loss of aura for the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, marking what he saw as a new era in the art object's cultural position, reception, and societal influence. After the introduction of photography and film, there could no longer be art in the rarified sense. Its authenticity had been compromised through its newfound iterability. The image would henceforth be reproducible, accessible, and commonplace. Benjamin clarifies the authenticity that the technological reproduction lacks, an aura instantiated by its time and place:

The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day. *The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and of course, not only technological—reproduction.* But whereas the authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand, which it brands a forgery, this is not the case with technological reproduction.<sup>23</sup>

Technological reproduction changes the dynamic of the here and now. The here and now can be manipulated through features that only the lens can see, meaning something that eludes human vision; the here and now can furthermore be moved into a wholly new context. Such a technological reproduction makes art for the masses readily available; it also makes art readily consumable. Benjamin locates in this transformation an immense political potential that is capable of advancing tremendous social change.

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 21.

By and large, Benjamin views the technological reproduction of the art object fortuitously, in spite of—or indeed, because of—this newfound lack. The aura, that ineffable singularity of the here-and-now-ness found in the original, was forever lost. The social relations opened up by the mechanically reproduced object would forever be marked by this loss.

Pornographers in the 1990s take great pains to name a loss within gay video pornography that bears some resonance—although important contrasts, too—to Benjamin’s description of the loss of aura. Even despite their differences, Benjamin is the preeminent thinker to pursue the question of authenticity, realism, and media’s imbrication.<sup>24</sup> While pornography in the 1970s was largely an event that one would communally experience within a theater, the introduction of video (in both Betamax and VHS formats) by that decade’s end would drastically reshape pornographic consumption practices. Following Benjamin, I read the growing sense of “inauthenticity” within gay pornographic videos as tied to the narrative evacuation in the porn that Douglas describes in this chapter’s opening. In contrast to Benjamin and for the many writers of *Manshots*, the loss of aura for gay sexvids was thought to be a

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<sup>24</sup> To my knowledge, only one other scholar takes up this essay to think about pornography. Linda Williams uses Benjamin intriguingly to consider the question of media effects, which traditionally are thought to act in a unilateral manner: the film acts upon the viewer. For Williams, Benjamin’s loss of aura reveals the power of images to shock viewers. Citing an interpretation by Miriam Hansen, she notes that there is another possible reading, which involves Benjamin’s little understood idea of “innervation.” Innervation, a concept from a footnote of the second version of the famous essay, concerns a two-way mimetic process, whereby the viewers both takes in sensations and sends them back out into the world. In short, viewers are habituated to the media that in turn adapts the viewer to a changing socio-cultural environment. *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 17-18.

very bad thing, indeed. This is not surprising, given their different interests in looking to authenticity—political revolution on the one hand, pleasure’s delivery on the other. This loss of authenticity to the gay pornographic image comes with a hint of technophobia, as well, which corresponds with the emergence of the Internet as video porn’s newest frontier. Gay pornography in the 1990s was highly commercialized and iterative, but two technological advancements in particular threatened this regime: the affordable camcorder and the Internet. The camcorder threatened to make amateur and upstart pornography a real possibility, while the Internet threatened to provide a means for the dissemination of it and other pirated material, as well as more interactive instantiations.

In 1991, Dave Kinnick writes a “State of the Art”<sup>25</sup> column for *Manshots* entitled “The Amateur X Video Craze,” which rails against the insurgence of amateur video into the commercial gay video market.<sup>26</sup> Subtending Kinnick’s criticism is the continued specter of the AIDS epidemic (which comes to arbitrate the division that pornography rests upon—between fantasy and reality—in complicated ways) and newfound affordances of video technologies (such as the capacity to record video on the VCR; and the newly affordable ability to shoot video on personal camcorders). Taken together, the demand brought about by AIDS for a reckoning with reality and video’s capacity to deliver it seem to have threatened the commercial gay pornography industry’s fantasy

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<sup>25</sup> Here I refer to a recurring column in *Manshots* called “State of the Art,” which examined trends in the gay pornography industry.

<sup>26</sup> Dave Kinnick, “The Amateur Video Craze,” *Manshots* Vol. 3, No. 4 (April, 1991): 67-71.

machine. Commercial gay pornography had all but a monopoly on installing its version of gay desire; the amateur craze, by Kinnick's account, threatened to upend this monopoly. In fact, for Kinnick, the stakes are even higher: as he sees it, amateur video not only threatens an industry, but also an underlying notion of fantasy itself. If fantasy were under threat, what was being produced by this new pornographic craze, and why at this moment? Something approaching "reality" was creeping back into pornography.

The rigidity of this fantasy / reality binary within gay commercial video pornography was not as firm as these protestations would lead one to believe. If we consider the claim of amateur pornography's elevated reality against the warning that accompanied most commercial gay pornographic videos throughout the 1990s, we see a more complicated portrait:

The following video fantasy is being presented as a viable alternative to actual sexual contact with another person(s). This is presented solely as a visual fantasy. Some of the precautions taken by the producers in the preparation of this visual fantasy may have been omitted for editorial considerations but have been used continuously throughout the production of this video.<sup>27</sup>

We know from the last chapter that gay pornography of the 1980s often advocated for safe(r) sex; that much is not new. But a new tension surfaces in this disclaimer's suggestion of a substitution, rather than a supplementation. The fantasy the disclaimer

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<sup>27</sup> This opening disclaimer comes from the gay porn video *Dirty Stories*, which I screened on Betamax in the archives of UCLA Library, but the same disclaimer appeared before almost all of the videos I watched from this era. *Dirty Stories* (1997; San Francisco: Falcon Studios, 1997), Betamax.

offers presents the pornography to follow as a replacement to sex rather than a supplement or enrichment. The disclaimer ransoms the viewer's actual sex life with the pornographic, offering representation in place of praxis. This ransoming invocation relies upon its own capacity to demonstrate the demarcation of fantasy from reality, which then requires rigorous and recurrent upkeep. The injunction to remind the viewer that "this is a visual fantasy" chafes against the suggestion that this could be "a viable alternative to actual sexual contact with another person(s)," and begs the question of what it would mean to exchange the fantastical for the actual. As in the last chapter with phone sex, here watching sex on videotape is treated as its own kind of sexual experience, rather than as supplement or enhancement.

This disclaimer, though it may seem straightforward, actually muddles the distinction between fantasy and reality. The declaration of "precautions taken" during the production must inherently remind the viewer of the threat of HIV, piercing the diegetic realm of the fantasy with a recognition that safety protocols were taken—although in what form, we are left to speculate. In other words, the gay pornographic video invokes, rather than distances, the reality that threatens always to rupture fantasy. This encroachment on reality, though, is attenuated by the added acknowledgment that the viewer may not be able to see such precautions, for continuity reasons. By this, the video typically refers to the absence of scenes where condoms might be donned, and that any "meat shots" will minimize their presence, as well. The result of this disclaimer

is a fine line in distinctions. The gay pornography in question would both present the fantasy of sex prior to AIDS—that is, free of condoms, uninhibited, delinked from the virus, and shame-free—but also assure its viewers that it had done ethical due diligence and considered the safety of its performers. Commercial gay porn packaged its fantasy within the reality it hoped to elude, or put otherwise, it acknowledged the reality that it thereafter sought to outrun.

What, then, does amateur video threaten? The obvious answer is a share of the market, which would require a reconsideration of their formulaic offerings. But I also propose that amateur video, and new technologies more broadly, come to answer the implicit question of what is to be done concerning the lost authenticity of most gay sexvids. In the instance of amateur gay porn, these videos return a sense of realism by moving away from the neat and codified commercial pornography of the time. Commercial gay pornography in the 1990s expanded upon its mass-market approach by delivering a growing number of genres, which largely abandoned the rougher, experimental, and avant-garde approach of gay hard core from the 1970s for increasingly indistinguishable recapitulations. These were videos (usually 60-90 minutes in length) that were heavy on sex and light on narrative—which, in its limited form, often signaled itself through a diverse array of masculinist tropes—and which became

known as the “webbing”<sup>28</sup> or the framework that connected sex-scenes. This codification of commercial gay video pornography effectively streamlined and mass-produced the narratives of gay pleasures; what is ironic, then, is that these critics deem amateur pornography the adulteration and diminishment of the form, when it is precisely the commercialization of video that most similarly describes Benjamin’s concept of the lost aura. Amateur gay videos threatened to throw a wrench in the Taylorism of gay sexvids.

Amateur pornography had no such set rules and could distinguish itself quite easily. Kinnick notes that “it is this problem of flagrant perfection that forms the root for the recent appeal of amateur video. The amateur mini-revolution fuels the hope in the viewer that it’ll return us to seeing guys in videos who seem real and accessible.”<sup>29</sup> The “reality” that commercial pornography fleetingly acknowledged in disclaimers only to banish thereafter could take hold in amateur works, although amateur video pornography, too, would not dwell on AIDS in any sustained manner. Industry standards and practices could be jettisoned or ignored. Condoms could be donned or not. The unnatural, wooden acting indicative of commercial porn could be replaced by other forms of awkwardness—like the awkwardness of performing sexually for your camcorder. Sex could again be strange.<sup>30</sup> If commercial pornography is largely an

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<sup>28</sup> John Mercer, *Gay Pornography: Representations of Sexuality and Masculinity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 53.

<sup>29</sup> Dave Kinnick, “The Amateur Video Craze,” 68.

<sup>30</sup> Amateur gay porn videos from this era are difficult to come by. I was able to procure Al Parker’s *America’s Sexiest Home Videos* (Pacific Sun) (1990), which includes four amateur scenes, and one professional scene with Parker himself. Of the amateur scenes, a number of kinks were represented. These included a man

exercise in internalized disappointment—the common viewer will never have *that* physique, *that* lover, *that* kind of sex, *that* pleasure—then amateur pornography upended these shortcomings by suggesting, to the contrary, maybe you could. Rather than stand out for looking “pornographic,” performers would stand out for looking ordinary. Patricia R. Zimmerman reminds us, “[p]rofessionalism suggests performing a task for financial return, and amateurism indicates doing something for pleasure, for the sheer love of it.”<sup>31</sup> The fantasy of gay pornography could be stripped away for something that resembled a believable pleasure, even if that reality was always already a construct and always already a commodity. The instability of this division leads us to wonder: what exactly counts as real in gay pornography, and how else does the media of this era help to shape the narratives of such an authenticity?

The so-called crisis of amateur video was not the only threat to gay video pornography in the 1990s. In another article from *Manshots* dated July of 1990 and entitled “Hard Times in the Gay Video Industry Today,”<sup>32</sup> insiders from Falcon Studios

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recording himself defecating multiple times in between jerking off. In another, a man used a pump to engorge his penis to elephantine proportions while he tea-bagged a second man. All of the amateur scenes in *America’s Sexiest Home Videos*, as the title suggests, took place in the space of the home. Most included scenes of masturbation, and many elided the faces of participants—all semiotic indicators of these acts’ amateur authenticity. *America’s Sexiest Home Videos*, compiled by Al Parker (1990; San Francisco: Surge Studio, Pacific Sun Entertainment), DVD.

<sup>31</sup> Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Doug Richards, “Hard Times in the Gay Video Industry Today,” *Manshots*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (July, 1990): 28-33.

warn of the impending decline of gay pornography, but they hold video pornography's very over-commercialization responsible for this demise. To Matt Sterling, John Travis, and Dick Clayton, gay pornography's popularity threatened to diminish its quality. More specifically, they suggest the success of the gay video industry had attracted the attention of straight pornographers who hoped to exploit the market by making crossover gay videos, about which they knew nothing about. The gay video market of the 1980s had taken off too well—elevated by an ease of access and buoyed by the affordance of private spectatorship. The fear-mongering and homophobia that the religious right and the growing conservative movement cultivated amidst the AIDS crisis furthered porn's move back to private spaces—and straight pornographers were taking notice.

There is good reason to be skeptical of these claims, though: Falcon Studios was one of the earliest producers of gay hard core films (starting in 1970) and played no small role in the commercialization of gay pornography. While straight producers unfamiliar with the tenets of gay video and the desires of a gay audience may have contributed to the deluge of hapless pornographies, another factor was also changing the gay porn industry: consumers were increasingly renting rather than owning, making high turnover the objective, not purchase. New titles would appear weekly, and videos no longer needed or required staying power or unique appeal. Studios like Falcon, though, hoped to lure renters into purchasing their products, but viewed the

diminishment of their peers' video quality as a direct threat to their rent-to-own model. Gay viewers were increasingly exclusively renting, or renting and illegally dubbing; as a result, gay video porn did not need to stand out. In other words, porn was becoming disposable again, ephemeral, replaceable. In short, straight pornographers and the VCR were blamed for the diminishing narrative emphasis and ratcheting up of fantastical sex acts in the gay pornography at the time. The critiques of gay video pornography by gay pornographers suggest a paradox of sorts: It is as though video porn's success was also its demise. Video killed the narrative drive. Video killed the authenticity. And, at the end of the day, video made a killing. What are we to make of these pornographers' suspicions of the dominant medium, and how does the encroachment of the Internet fit into this distrust?

I return briefly to Kinnick's critique of "The Amateur X Video Craze" to look for answers. Not only does Kinnick's conclusion hold commercial video pornography potentially complicit in the rise of amateurism, it also zeroes in on what may be the ultimate goal for gay pornography, regardless of mediation:

If there is one last word on the intrigue and ultimate success of the [amateur] genre, I'd like to give it to my favorite film critic, Roger Ebert, who has said (and I paraphrase) that the purpose of cinema is to create a unique world on the screen that the viewer doesn't want to leave when the film is over and the lights come up. I think this should be true for adult video as well, especially that which is aimed at a gay audience who is inherently film-literate. Amateur tapes, by definition, can't afford the time or resources to accomplish this. And yet, 'big budget' gay videos so rarely do anyway. Maybe it's the very failings of modern

gay mainstream video that has spawned the renewed interest in the amateur product. In other words, 'just give us honest dick.'<sup>33</sup>

This argument cuts across both kinds of gay pornography: something about *both* commercial gay pornography *and* amateur instantiations was deficient. To Kinnick, amateur gay pornography proved unsatisfactory because it lacked the funds to produce an immersive world, whereas commercial pornography had the resources but lacked the unique voice to deliver on that immersiveness. The supplication for "honest dick"<sup>34</sup> might be shorthand for an authenticity lacking in representation, but the desire never to leave the world of pornographic video seems harder to fathom. An alternative to this thought would be a representation that elides the distinction between worlds, a "mixed reality"<sup>35</sup> of sorts. That, too, seems more in line with the pornography that would develop in the web 2.0 stage. The relation of amateur and commercial pornographies as oppositional may not be as obvious as we would believe. The disdain for and indeed scaremongering around any non-commercial and/or non-video pornography — whether that means amateur porn or cyberporn or eventually amateur online porn — might concern the promise of "more honest dick," but it might also symptomatically reveal nothing more than an anxiety over market instability. New media often arrive under

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<sup>33</sup> Dave Kinnick, "The Amateur Video Craze," 70.

<sup>34</sup> The articulation of a desire for "honest dick" is striking and opens us up to many possible inflections. While in all likelihood not a countervailing invocation of the untrustworthiness of "Tricky Dick" Nixon, "honest dick" may refer to the desire for an unmediated intimacy, whether that mean one without condoms, without pretext, or without reservations. It may also mean "honest dick" in the sense of knowing a sexual partner's serostatus. In any event, "honest dick" becomes the aspirational feature that gay pornography hopes to achieve, and in that sense, it is also the quality absent from gay pornography of the time.

<sup>35</sup> I borrow this term from Mark Hansen, *Bodies in Code* (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

heightened scrutiny, even panic, over how they will shift the ways we navigate our worlds.

The portrait I have painted so far of gay video pornography in the 1990s stems largely from *Manshots* articles dissatisfied by three things: the loss of narrative, the arrival of amateur porn, and the over-commercialization of gay video porn. The high level of gay sexvid releases, though, tells another story: one of rampant consumption. Against the increasing access to affordable video camcorders, mobile telephones, and World Wide Web, video pornography in the 1990s often depicted newer technologies in a skeptical light, at the same time that they exploited their novelties in strange ways. J. David Bolton and Richard Grusin have defined “remediation” as “the representation of one medium in another,”<sup>36</sup> but their understanding of remediation seems to move in only one direction, where newer upstart media efface and incorporate features of antecedent media. But what about the opposite direction? What happens to older media upon the arrival of the new? How might gay video porn preserve itself by imagining—and forestalling—its own obsolescence?

### **4.3 Cyberpornic Cyberpanic**

By the mid 1990s, the gay video pornography industry—and in truth, the whole pornography industry—was feeling anxious for its future, and rightly so. The

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<sup>36</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 45.

emergence and accelerating adoption of the World Wide Web by a growing number of households would harken yet another regime change for producers and directors to adapt to, meaning once again an uncertain future. Pornography as a cultural expression was already splintering into new markets by way of cable television and DVD, but to an extent those were known quantities. Something about the Internet, though, was wholly distinct, a horse of different color.<sup>37</sup> Simultaneously, anxiety was brewing in American culture, more broadly, and at precisely the same nexus: cyberspace and pornography.<sup>38</sup> We need only look to the publications in 1995 of both *TIME*'s writer Philip Elmer-Dewitt's scaremongering article "On a Screen Near You, Cyberporn: A New Study Shows How Pervasive and Wild It Really Is," or *Newsweek*'s "No Place for Kids? A Parent's Guide to Sex on the Internet" to see the zeitgeist in full alarmist mode. In fact, much ink has been spilled—or, given the topic, many keys stroked—to attempt an explanation for the technopanic stoked by scaremongering articles like these, which focused almost exclusively on the Internet's capacity to deliver pornographic pleasures.

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<sup>37</sup> Even as I indicate the specificity of the technopanic over the impending sea change that would be cyberporn, it is important to note that video porn's arrival experienced its own technopanic, suggesting a certain cyclical process is at work. Peter Alilunas writes "adult video [...] was frequently the subject of breathless magazine and newspaper reporting that typically favored pornography's opponents. The technopanic model carries particular salience[...], given that home video technology allowed the widespread—and affordable dissemination of pornography." *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Oakland, The University of California Press, 2016), 32.

<sup>38</sup> Many articles, works of science fiction, and film also gesture to a growing anxiety over sexuality's imbrication with cyberspace. See, for instance, Julian Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace: How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society," *The Village Voice* (December 23, 1993).

*TIME* magazine's article in particular had long-reaching effects, especially in its political ramifications.<sup>39</sup> Despite its significant cultural impact, Elmer-Dewitt's article is questionable journalism at best—and the somewhat bizarre history of its publication is symptomatic of mainstream discourses surrounding porn at the time. *TIME*'s exposé examines the so-called proliferation of pornography into that uncharted territory of cyberspace. Elmer-Dewitt and anyone with a working modem would have had access to the internet, but (surprisingly for a typical news story, but unsurprisingly given the story's topic) the author denies any personal viewing habit that might lend insight into the very pornography he writes about. Rather, his article summarizes an undergraduate thesis from Carnegie Mellon University. The undergraduate in question, a 30-year-old by the name of Marty Rimm, had secured publication for his thesis on cyberporn with *The Georgetown Law Journal*—no small feat for an undergraduate!—through somewhat secretive and exceptional conditions: no one could have access to the report prior to its publication, save for the members from his research team. Of course, Rimm did share excerpts and summaries of his findings with Elmer-Dewitt of *TIME*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The most tangible effect was the passage of the *Communications Decency Act* (Title V of the *Telecommunications Act of 1996*), which intended to regulate both indecency and obscenity on the Internet. Nebraska Democrat James Exon helped to bring about its passage by citing these reports and compiling his own "little blue book" of printed out online smut that he then invited other Senators to peruse before the final vote. The act would be passed into law but was unanimously struck down as a violation of freedom of speech by the Supreme Court in *Reno vs. ACLU* in 1997. For the original act, see: *Telecommunications Act of 1996*, 47 U.S.C §609 (1996).

<sup>40</sup> Dorothy Imrich Mullin, "First Amendment Issues and the Web: The Internet Porn Panic and Restricting Indecency in Cyberspace," *Proceedings for Untangling the Web Conference* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1996): <http://misc.library.ucsb.edu/untangle/mullin2.html>.

Among the more explosive details that Elmer-Dewitt reported via Rimm's thesis was that 83.5% of online images were pornographic. The article legitimizes Rimm's study through its supposedly rigorous methodology, which we are told involved surveying 917,410 sexually explicit pictures, descriptions, short stories and film clips.<sup>41</sup> One obvious question the article fails to address, though, is how anyone could quantify the content of *all* images on the Internet, without looking at *all* images on the Internet, a no-doubt Sisyphean endeavor. Indeed, Rimm's study was focused solely on adult bulletin boards and alt.binaries newsgroups;<sup>42</sup> in other words, he was looking for porn, so it should come as no surprise, then, when he found it. But Rimm's job was more of a rim job—he circled around the topic of cyberporn, but never really dove in. For instance, what was the pornography he found? This seemingly naïve question is not one that Rimm or Elmer-Dewitt satisfyingly answer, for the simple fact that Rimm and his fellow researches opened only 1%<sup>43</sup> of the files in question to verify their actual "pornographic" nature (which itself is never given a definition), meaning they based their analysis primarily on download counts and the meta-data in question—that is, on how a file was

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<sup>41</sup> Philip Elmer-Dewitt, "On A Screen Near You: Cyberporn," *Time*, Vol. 146, Issue 1 (July 3, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> Donna L. Hoffman and Thomas P. Novak, "A Detailed Critique of the *Time* Article: 'On a Screen Near You: Cyberporn (DeWitt, 7/3/95)' (version 1.01)," *He Says / She Says: Debates on the Time Cover Story "Cyberporn"*: <http://alumni.media.mit.edu/~rhodes/Cyberporn/hn.on.time.html>.

<sup>43</sup> The *Newsweek* article reported, "Rimm wrote a computer program to analyze descriptions of 917,410 dirty pictures (he examined about 10,000 actual images, to check the reliability of the descriptions)." Just to clarify,  $10,000/917,410 = 1.09\%$ . See Steven Levy, "No Place for Kids?: A New Study Shows How Pervasive and Wild It Really Is," *Newsweek* (July, 2, 1995): <http://www.newsweek.com/no-place-kids-184766>.

described, and not on what it may have contained.<sup>44</sup> Even had they opened the other 99% of the files, the crucial question one would then want to answer is what actually counts as pornographic, for which “I know it when I see it”<sup>45</sup> proves equally unsatisfactory. The results of Rimm’s findings, then, begin to appear somewhat like a game of telephone, where one misheard phrasing begets another. Since its publication, Rimm’s thesis has come under intense scrutiny. Numerous scholars and journalists have verified the ill-begotten nature of the research as a combination of what Alice E. Warwick calls “shoddy social science methodology, questionable research ethics, and wishful extrapolation.”<sup>46</sup>

Elmer-Dewitt’s article makes a number of other staggering pronouncements as well. Cyberporn is immensely popular, he tells us, although this deduction is also based on blind faith in the sites’ self-nominalization: “13 of the 40 most frequently visited newsgroups had names like alt.sex.stories, rec.arts.erotica and alt.sex.bondage.”<sup>47</sup> It is also, he says, highly profitable and ubiquitous, claims that I, for once, find less specious. In his next statistical unlikelihood, though, he notes that “98.9 percent of consumers of online porn are men,” a number that seems not just improbably high, but also

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Famously, Justice Potter Stewart stated in his concurring opinion, regarding the discernment of hard core pornography, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it*, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.” *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. at 197 (1963), emphasis mine..

<sup>46</sup> Alice E. Marwick, “To Catch a Predator? The MySpace Moral Panic,” *First Monday*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (June 2008): <http://www.firstmonday.dk/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2152/1966>.

<sup>47</sup> Elmer-Dewitt, “On A Screen Near You: Cyberporn.”

impossible to verify. It is notable, too, that this demographic finding seems to hold no bearing on his later claim that many fear cyberporn for the potential harm it poses to children who might happen upon it. Lastly, he adds, the unsubstantiated content of this cyberporn glut is “not just naked women” (revealing the assumption of a heterosexual reader)—which we might initially think is meant to grant us a sigh of relief—but is actually far worse: “the adult BBS market seems to be driven largely by a demand for images that can’t be found in the average magazine rack: pedophilia (nude photos of children), hebephilia (youths) and what the researchers call paraphilia—a grab bag of “deviant” material that includes images of bondage, sadomasochism, urination, defecation, and sex acts with a barnyard full of animals.”<sup>48</sup> Pulling no punches, Elmer-Dewitt here goes into full a social panic mode but diverges from the more common anti-pornography feminist approach of demonstrating straight pornography’s irredeemable nature through misogyny.

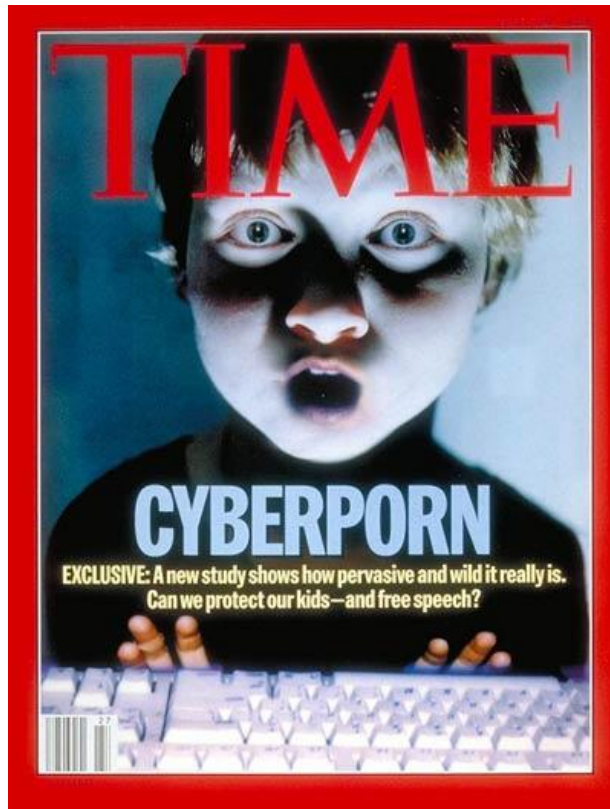
It is the children in the above list that Elmer-Dewitt focuses the remainder of his article on. Violence against women, of course, is something Americans have long tacitly and expressly accepted, and bestiality, while certainly taboo and inhumane, cannot hold a candle to the prohibitive rhetorical charge of the eroticized child.<sup>49</sup> The panic Elmer-

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> We need only recall the controversy surrounding artist Sally Mann’s photographs of her own naked children to see how quickly discourse shifts into the panic of child pornography. See Sarah Parsons, “Public/Private Tensions in the Photography of Sally Mann,” *History of Photography*, 32:2 (2008): 123-136.

Dewitt writes about starts with child pornography<sup>50</sup> before moving to the threat of children looking at pornography. The anxiety (or disbelief) over children's sexuality is not a new one; Freud took pains to clarify this point more than a century ago, but it



**Figure 16: TIME's cover (1995) of the child getting his first peak at cyberporn.**

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<sup>50</sup> There is a wealth of fascinating scholarship on child pornography. See Steven Ruszczycky, "Stadler's Boys; or, The Fictions of Child Pornography," in *The Porn Archives*, eds. Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 399-419; Chuck Kleinhans, "Virtual Child Porn: The Law and the Semiotics of the Image," in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 71-84; Amy Adler, "The Perverse Law of Child Pornography," *Columbia Law Review* 101, no. 2 (March 2001): 209-273; Pat Califia, "No Minor Issues: Age of Consent, Child Pornography, and Cross-Generational Relationships," in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: cleis Press, 2000), 54-96.

appears no less shocking today.<sup>51</sup> To drive this point home, one of the two images that *TIME* includes in this article is that of a young child gazing into a computer screen in rapt attention (See Figure 16), which media theorist Wendy Chun describes as follows:

The cover of *Time's* cyberporn special issue [...] enacts first contact. The glare of the computer screen, in stark contrast to the darkened room, simultaneously lights up and casts shadows over the startled blond boy's face, literalizing his enlightenment/overexposure. His eyes and mouth are open, and his tiny hands are lifted off the keyboard in horror or surprise: the images emanating from his monitor open and immobilize his facial orifices. The roundness of his open mouth evokes images of vagina-mouthed inflatable dolls. Further, the screen's glare exposes wrinkles under the little boy's eyes, signs of premature aging, of a loss of innocence that belie his tiny hands and two front teeth. His solitude in front of the computer screen and the room's dim lighting suggest secrecy. Instead of basking in the cozy light of his family home, he is immobilized by *us* watching him, since we—the readers—are in the position of the intruding pornographic image.<sup>52</sup>

Chun's close analysis recalls both the *Genesis* scene of Eve eating from the tree of knowledge and the climactic event of Dorian Gray's inner perversity revealed in his decrepit prematurely aged portrait: the child takes in his first glimpse of cyberporn and is irreparably changed for the worse. It is telling, though, that the very frame of the magazine stands in as the frame of the computer monitor, not only—as Chun pointedly notes—interpellating *TIME's* readers as the pornographic image, but also locating us within cyberspace. The image seems to ask: "If you were cyberporn, what cyberporn

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<sup>51</sup> On the matter, Freud writes, "One feature of the popular view of the sexual instinct is that it is absent in childhood and only awakens in the period of life described as puberty. This, however, is not merely a simple error but one that has had grave circumstances, for it is mainly to this idea that we owe our present ignorance of the fundamental conditions of sexual life." Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 7, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 173.

<sup>52</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 90-91.

would you be?" Of course, the reader is in no such space, but that is the beauty and the power of the image, to project the fear of cyberporn onto the reader and to compel them to grapple with that uncomfortable position.

The image of the child viewing his first XXX image holds a particular familiarity to me. Indeed, rather than reckoning with my interpellation as cyberporn, I am transported back to my own first instance of watching cyberporn as a young teenager. Was I, in Elmer-Dewitt's understanding, the victim of cyberporn? Had it forced itself upon me? What is critical to understanding Elmer-Dewitt's article is its articulation of cyberporn as an *intrusion* and an unwanted *exposure*.<sup>53</sup> It is, in some senses, the equivalent of the exhibitionist who, as in the film *Pink Flamingos*,<sup>54</sup> opens his trench coat to reveal his genitalia to unsuspecting pedestrians.<sup>55</sup> No child, the article inherently argues, could ever *want* or even *choose* to look at pornography. Indeed, much of the actual concern here is the question of access and the space of the home. Structurally, cyberporn continues what video porn started in the decade before—a return of hard core to the realm of private spaces. But whereas there were still barriers of access for video—one would have to purchase or rent a video from a source that would presumably verify one's age—these barriers were easily thwarted by cyberporn (or so

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>54</sup> This example is a favorite of mine, not just because it is completely unexpected—as all good exhibitionism should be—but also because the character ties a long sausage to his genitals, in the process prostheticizing his member. *Pink Flamingos*, directed by John Waters (1972; Baltimore, MD: Dreamland, 2004), DVD.

<sup>55</sup> Extending this metaphor a bit further, it be worth asking who is the supposed agent who opens the coat? Pornmakers? Porn stars? Internet providers? Lax legislators? Irresponsible parents? Society as a whole?

the panic would have us believe). One of the newfound allowances of the Internet is its capacity for impersonation and anonymity, both of which could help grant access to pornography online.<sup>56</sup>

There is another concern at play here that returns us to the question of cyberporn's content. Put bluntly: Is the Internet going to turn our children gay? Chun goes on to write that "[o]nline pornography intrudes into the home, circumventing the normal family disciplinary structures, subjecting children and threatening to create deviant subjects."<sup>57</sup> But did parents *really* worry that cyberporn might turn their children into bestialists, urolagniacs, coprophiliacs, sado-masochists, and pornographers? Admittedly, the answer may be a demonstrable *yes*, but I am skeptical that the list of paraphilias is the whole story. Kristen Drotner writes:

media panics do not tell us much about actual media. But as cultural seismographs, they reveal broader problems of modernity. If it is true, as I claim, that the panics are one way of addressing and trying to balance an inherent modern paradox, then it is perhaps in line with the irony of history that the panics themselves feed on a paradox: they are based on one or more Others that—through their very absence—remain central sources of renewed attacks. It is impossible to speak "about" these Others. On the other hand, without them it is impossible to speak at all.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> In other words, the Internet fosters anonymity, which can be harnessed to impersonate. In the kitschy 1990s user guide *net.sex*, its authors describe the pros and cons of maintaining one's anonymity, stating that while it may allow for more honest and open dialogue, it also could foster harassment with impunity. Rose and Thomas, *net.sex*, 103-104.

<sup>57</sup> Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 87.

<sup>58</sup> Kirsten Drotner, "Dangerous Media? Panic Discourses and Dilemmas of Modernity," *Paedagogica Historica*, 35:3 (1999): 618.

The Other that Elmer-Dewitt, and through citation, Rimm, cannot name, but which nonetheless haunts the background of this panic is the male homosexual. Moreover, it is his presumed predatory nature, and the capacity for the Internet to foster such predation, that renders cyberspace so dangerous, symbolically marking it as the space of a contagious queerness. While the presumed deviance of the litany of niche pornographies that Elmer-Dewitt rattles off is nothing to scoff at—and I have additions I would suggest to the author—homosexuality is strikingly missing. I do not think this absence results from political correctness or from homosexuality's legitimacy—"Don't Ask, Don't Tell" went into effect in 1993, and "The Defense of Marriage Act" would pass in 1996—but rather the unspoken Other that these other deviances serve, not unlike the act of racist "dog-whistling," to whisper in the ears of readers.

Eve Sedgwick's pertinent and trollingy-titled essay "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" clarifies my point. Sedgwick looks to the supposed denaturalizing of sexual object choice and renaturalizing of gender via revisionist psychoanalysis and ego-psychology discourses to see how they come to explain proto gay boys' emergent sexualities. Restaging the constructivist / essentialist debates, Sedgwick reaches the conclusion that there is, in fact, "no unthreatened, unthreatening theoretical home for a concept of gay and lesbian origins."<sup>59</sup> An origin of media transference of homosexuality is, in fact, what is at stake in the cyberporn that *TIME* reports on. Sedgwick goes on to write of what

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<sup>59</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay," *Social Text*, No. 29 (1991): 26.

may be a far more nefarious “vision of a world after the homosexual” which AIDS first allowed our culture to imagine: “[A] medicalized dream of the *prevention* of gay bodies seems to be the less visible, far more respectable underside of the AIDS-fueled public dream of their *extirpation*.”<sup>60</sup> Clearly occupying a more constructivist perspective, Elmer-Dewitt rings the bell that in turn became a clarion call for parents to take responsibility: prevent perversion, prevent homosexuality, prevent the unchecked glut of information that the Internet would choose to deliver in order to defile your unsullied children.

Elmer-Dewitt’s article was incredibly effective at stirring up outrage, and held impressive political ramifications. Consider Laura Kipnis’s first chapter to *Bound and Gagged*, which recounts the incidents leading up to the 1989 court case *United States v. DePew*, the first prosecution in the United States to concern sex-related bulletin boards—themselves antecedents to the Internet.<sup>61</sup> Defendant Daniel DePew was entrapped by an undercover police officer for conspiring to produce a snuff film that was argued would have resulted in the rape and murder of young boys. Except the film was never made, the boys never contacted, never defiled, never killed, nor would they likely ever have been, even without the sting operation. There were, of course, no boys: only words. DePew had had a penchant for logging onto gay bulletin boards to relax after work, where he enjoyed engaging in S&M role-play scenarios.<sup>62</sup> On these boards, he could chat

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

<sup>61</sup> Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

with whomever he pleased and spin out spontaneous co-written fantasies. Over a series of months, an undercover police officer coaxed DePew and another man named Dean Ashley Lambey into speaking ad nauseam about these fantasies, encouraging their stories of sado-masochism and young boys and goading them on until they had arrived at the idea of a snuff film. Kipnis explains, “DePew’s private erotic theater [...] enacted a particular kind of problem-solving. It was, in a sense, scripted, with a repeating cast of characters in assigned roles and certain themes that were returned to again and again. These memorialized the injuries to masculinity and identity that had marked his early life, but also, with a brand of heroic optimism, attempted to cure them.”<sup>63</sup> The whole set-up and prosecution, Kipnis argues, could be viewed as a failure on the part of the government to properly *read* the pornographic narrative being spun here—in other words, a failure to interpret the connotative meaning—for what the fantasy tried to repair: DePew’s own sense of failed masculinity.

I recount Kipnis’s argument to make the case that DePew’s status as a gay man is not inconsequential to his behavior on these bulletin boards,<sup>64</sup> nor to the undercover police officer steering him into a plot that imagined the creation of a pedophilic snuff

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>64</sup> In one of the most wrenching moments of the chapter that lends insight into how his fantasies worked to repair his own “failed” sense of masculinity, DePew suggests to the undercover officer, “It’s gay men who have spent their lives hating themselves and are consequently ‘the most submissive and best bottoms because they hate themselves so much, they want you to do everything you can do to them...they’re such dirty filthy people, it’s like they’re paying their penance.’ It seems likely that he was describing himself.” Ibid., 43.

film. The officer in question, after all, posted on a specifically gay-oriented bulletin board. As Kipnis points out, "It is inevitable that the Internet will increasingly be used for entrapment purposes, as was the case with DePew and Lambey. The rationale for this expansion of law enforcement into the fantasies of the citizenry comes cloaked as the all-too-necessary responsibility of protecting children from perverts,"<sup>65</sup> and, in fact, she was right. We can see this trend continued in the popular *To Catch a Predator*, a hidden camera reality television show that was produced by Dateline from 2004-2007 and which served as an undercover sting operation against mostly middle-aged men looking for sex with predominately underage girls online. The *TIME* article was incredibly effective at provoking political outrage because its central thesis concerning the Internet encoded a message that could easily be read as homophobic and disavowed: beware of cyberspace; it harbors perverts who will defile your children and spread their perversion to them.

Lee Edelman writes in *No Future* about precisely the deployment of the figure of the Child as that which secures for heteronormative culture its own "reproductive futurism." In what he surprisingly circles around without naming as a cyberporn panic, he states:

The political right [...] invite[es] us to kneel at the shrine of the sacred Child: the Child who might witness lewd or inappropriately intimate behavior; the Child who might find information about dangerous "lifestyles" on the Internet; the Child who might choose a provocative book from the shelves of the public

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

library; the Child, in short, who might find an enjoyment that would nullify the figural value, itself imposed by adult desire, of the Child as unmarked by the adult's adulterating implication in desire itself.<sup>66</sup>

Edelman encourages the adoption of the very negativity, anti-sociality, and anti-futurity that society assigns with queerness and to reject the figure of the Child as pure, unadulterated, or lacking in pleasure. Orienting Edelman's reading to a media discourse, his analysis would no doubt align the threat of the queer figure to cyberporn. I want to claim Edelman's analysis gains clarity when read more forcefully through the formation of the Internet as a cultural site of panic that not only helps to produce the figure of the pure Child via cyberporn, but also in makes legible the gay figure's perceived power of dominion over that virtual realm. Having looked to anxieties that circulated in the gay video industry and the broader cultural milieu, I turn our attention now to *Technical Ecstasy* conflicted portrait of cybersex.

#### **4.4 Technical Ecstasy**

In 1999, Wash West<sup>67</sup> released the gay pornographic video *Technical Ecstasy* about a protagonist Deano who participates in a study on the effects of cybersex.<sup>68</sup> The premise of *Technical Ecstasy* shares some narrative filiation to more mainstream films like *The Matrix* (1999). In *Technical Ecstasy*, a man named Deano (played by porn star Dean

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<sup>66</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 19, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Wash West is better known today as Wash Westmoreland. He made the rare transition from gay porn director to prestige film director. In 2014, his film *Still Alice* about Alzheimer's Disease won Julianne Moore an Academy Award as Best Actress.

<sup>68</sup> *Technical Ecstasy*, directed by Wash West (1999; Los Angeles: Men of Odyssey), Streaming.

O'Connor) undergoes experiments led by an unnamed scientist (Drew Andrews) that allow him to transport his consciousness into a series of pornographic fantasy sequences via a computer. In these sequences, the patient Deano effectively takes on the persona of different porn stars and thereafter engages in a series of genre-specific sex scenes. In a way, the film's conceit allows for four wholly unrelated scenes to be sutured together. These scenes carry forward the traditional pornographic tropes of rising sexual action that culminate in orgasm, after which an alarm sounds, accompanied by a visual marker "FANTASY ENDING" (See Figure 17) and an audible recording of the same message. Deano is then shown awakening in a rendition of a low-budget scientific laboratory—replete with tin-foil-esque space suit, harsh geometric metal bed, and VR mask. Asked



**Figure 17: When the first cybersex scene ends, a "FANTASY ENDING" alarm alerts Deano that he will soon be returning to reality.**

by the scientist how the first fantasy scene has gone, Deano eagerly replies with affirmation that it has gone well, referring to its fantastical sex scenario as seeming “just like real life.” When Deano returns to his apartment, we are given a glimpse into just what his real life looks like, and it appears wholly unlike the sexual scenario he just emerged from. Deano lives with his boyfriend Joey (played by Derek Cameron), but the two remain aloof. Whether time has diminished their intimacy or some other unknown factor, we cannot know, but Joey’s introduction heightens the film’s tensions. The remainder of *Technical Ecstasy* follows Deano’s continued participation in the cybersex study—which includes a cowboy scenario, an athletic scene, an army barracks orgy, and an S&M encounter—and his growing sense of alienation from reality. *Technical Ecstasy* offers a tale of virtual reality, or what the scientist (See **Figure 18**) refers to as “a



**Figure 18: The scientist watches the first cybersex scene take place on his computer.**

computer-based program that allows the user to morph into another identity and to experience an intense sexual ecstasy alien to his own reality.”<sup>69</sup>

At its core, *Technical Ecstasy* is interested in media effects and in particular whether virtual reality has any. As the film progresses, Deano becomes increasingly invested in the experiments, which further amplifies Joey’s fear that his boyfriend may be cheating on him. When Joey eventually confronts the scientist to inquire about his boyfriends’ participation, the scientist reveals the true purpose of the study is to better understand the side effects of virtual reality, including a mild form of schizophrenia he terms “reality casualties.” In about .5% of test subjects, he tells us, the subject grows increasingly incapable of distinguishing between reality and fantasy, which we are led to believe is precisely the condition that Deano has acquired. Midway through the film, Deano indeed finds himself trapped in one of the scenarios: he now resides permanently—it would seem—in a porn star’s body and a porn star’s experience.

*Technical Ecstasy* calls the ontological division between fantasy (the virtual) and reality (the everyday) into question much earlier, though, and with less fanfare. The film opens in medias res, so are not privy to Deano or his cyber embodiment of the porn star Chad Kennedy. Unlike films like *Being John Malkovich* (1999) or *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), which cue the occupation of one person’s body by another individual through some aesthetic signal—silhouetted borders, fish eye lens, a semi-transparent scrim over the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

face—in *Technical Ecstasy*, that eventual revelation occurs only at the scene's conclusion. The film opens with a naked man wandering down an empty desert road. The scene visually and thematically references *The Terminator* (1984), wherein Schwarzenegger appears completely out of context to his surroundings and naked. In *Technical Ecstasy*, a man in a station wagon stops to try to pick up the naked wanderer, and the first indication of technological intervention comes in the form of dialogue that is duplicated on a computer monitor. The driver says, "Wanna Take a Ride with Me?" to which the naked man robotically responds, "Sure, why not?" As the naked man enters the car, we see on the hood a computer monitor that displays the very words that have just been spoken. The scene does not dwell upon this computational interruption but rather amplifies this strangeness through what we might call the "computational coldness" of the naked man. It appears as if he suffers from amnesia. The car driver makes small talk before he makes a move on the naked passenger, to which the passenger initially recoils. Taken aback, the driver asks incredulously "What's the matter—don't you like cowboys?" to which the passenger apologizes, "No it's not that—I just feel kind of naked right now." There is uncertainty in this response; he feels naked but does not seem to be aware that he *is* naked. In hindsight, we can read this scene as the depiction of disorientation from embodying a virtual other.

It is not just the body that the naked man seems uncertain of, it is also his desire that comes into question. As the cowboy attempts to seduce the young wanderer, the

naked man's penis begins to twinge, a marker—by pornographic semiotics, at least—of excitement. The cowboy, recognizing this arousal, responds, “You like that cowboy musk?” and the wanderer answers, unsurely, “Guess I do?” The same questioning pattern repeats until the wanderer's reluctance passes and the two begin to have sex. The cowboy takes his time with the wanderer, fellating him before eventually penetrating him anally in the back of his trailer. The anal sex scene is especially pedagogical and drawn out, and one gets the feeling that the wanderer may be in discomfort. This power dynamic continues until the cowboy realizes the wanderer watching himself in a mirror. The film deflects our attention from the sex toward the act of self-observation and conditions us to the possibility of being skeptical of images, as



**Figure 19: Deano looks on at his virtual self in amazement during his first cybersex experience in *Technical Ecstasy*.**

well as doubling them. The cowboy, recognizing this ocular fixation, repositions the mirror underneath the wanderer so that he can view himself being penetrated from below. It seems that, rather than being fucked, the wanderer would prefer to watch someone else be fucked: his reflection (**See Figure 19**). This, alongside the occasional sound of computer blips, and one cutaway scene to the scientist watching the whole scenario play out on his own computer monitor—indicate to the viewer that something is amiss. Once the conceit of the film is made known, the viewer may retroactively interpret the scene as Deano cybernetically embodying Kennedy—in essence granting him a status of both a penetrating and penetrated body. The computer images and sounds, as well as Deano’s interest in seeing Kennedy—his avatar—getting anally pleased, gain legibility when interpreted as intra-diegetic spectatorship.

Deano’s confusion—which mirrors the viewer’s—is evident from the start, and only becomes more pronounced as he continues to attend the scientist’s laboratory for additional experiments (against the wishes of his boyfriend Joey). After an S&M scene ends where Deano cybernetically embodies the porn star Jon Eric (whose character name is, peculiarly, “man Deano”), and we are returned to the scientific laboratory, we find that Deano has not exited the fantasy, but porn star Jon Eric has. Confused and visibly frightened to be returned to reality but trapped within his avatar, “man Deano” wanders the streets in Jon’s body and begins a new life, taking up residence in a new apartment. One day he comes across his boyfriend Joey on the street and attempts to



**Figure 20: Deano emerges out of cybernetic "man Deano," whom he had become trapped inside.**

connect with him, hoping to be recognized for his true self, but Joey makes no such connection. Even still, and perhaps perversely, "man Deano" seduces Joey, after which another sex scene ensues, this time with Deano trapped within "man Deano" penetrating his own boyfriend (in a nesting doll sort of situation). The aesthetic of this sex scene is presented in black and white, which gives it a noir sensibility. Interspersed in the sex between Jon and Joey, we see flashes of a previous sex scene with Deano and Joey, rendered in color. As if in a tug-of-war, the competing lovemaking scenes find their resolution in the original Deano emerging out of the virtual "man Deano" (**See Figure 20**), and the latter couple fall into their own ecstatic reverie, freed from the technical apparatus that had entrapped Deano, or so we think. The two relax in a state of

post-coital bliss. Somehow aware of the confused transformation that has taken place, Joey whispers to Deano, "I'm really glad you're back." Deano replies, "Yeah, back to reality," They both profess their love to one another, but just as it seems we have received the porn film's happy ending, the same alarm that has demarcated the end of the previous cybersex sessions rings out, in flashing red pulsates. "FANTASY ENDING," a voice from beyond ominously intones, "FANTASY ENDING." Deano, face flush in the crimson hue, looks up in shock, as both he and the viewers are forced to reckon with the fact that either the "reality" that had structured this film has been virtual, or that Deano had never actually escaped cyberspace to begin with (See Figure 21).



**Figure 21: Deano and Joey are reunited in the last shot of *Technical Ecstasy*, but the "FANTASY ENDING" alarm complicates their ontological position.**

#### **4.5 Processing the Cybersex Dream**

There are several stories that *Technical Ecstasy* tells us. One is the tale of technophobia. But rather than an anxiety over childhood purity, here anxiety breaks along two axes: the loss of indexicality, and the loss of embodiment. The loss of indexicality is bound up with the idea of a loss of authenticity. Benjamin articulated the loss of aura as the undermining of the original image by technological reproduction, but still saw this as an ultimately propitious change; *Technical Ecstasy* forbids us from knowing what is original and what is simulation, which would seem to deny the ascertainment of authenticity altogether. As viewers' access to the reality which representations are thought to index becomes increasingly vexed, mediation itself gains heightened visibility. To the gay video pornography industry, the expansion into cyberspace threatened an even less indexical medium that would only further diminish the already receding "honest dick" that Kinnick mourned in his "State of the Art" column. Gay pornography, in this understanding, didn't yield greater access to reality, but rather further alienation from it. While cyberporn, in *Technical Ecstasy's* telling of the tale, does not deny authenticity, it agnostically troubles our capacity to discern it. A perhaps overly simplistic counter to this agnosticism comes in computation's steady encroachment into everyday life, which makes mediation commonplace, and in that sense, cyberspace's sex appears to have a valence of realism.

As to the question of embodiment, N. Katherine Hayles and Mark Hansen, for example, have argued that the anxiety of digital disembodiment is a misgiven one, and that the digital is still material and embodied, as is our experience of it. The fantasy of uploading our consciousness into a cyborg upon our body's expiration, Hayles reminds us, emerges from a misunderstanding of information as itself disembodied.<sup>70</sup> Linda Williams, in her epilogue to the second edition of *Hard Core*, writes of late 1990s CD-Rom pornography that attempts to offer a gamified experience of cybersex. She writes that it is not, in fact, *reality* that cybersex offers, but an *uncanny sense of dispersal*, what she calls "the mobility of a 'self' interacting with two vying impressions of reality each of which is slightly lessened in effect through the interference of the other." She goes on, to characterize "the fantasy of disembodiment [...] as a new kind of mobility, a blurring of the boundaries between here and there that in no way escapes the body."<sup>71</sup>

Another story *Technical Ecstasy* tells concerns a future that had not yet arrived, and as such, serves as speculative warning. The virtual pleasure that *Technical Ecstasy* imagines was not one capable by most computational standards of the day. Consider that the Internet in the early 1990s—despite what the *TIME*-inspired panic would have us believe—was a far more textual than visual communications network. Still images and GIFs were traded on message boards more than movie clips, which were famously

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<sup>70</sup> See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1-24.

<sup>71</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 312.

slow to download on account of predominantly 56K dial-up connection speeds. Early user manuals explaining the Internet more often described it as a remEDIATED telephone system than a televisual or cinematic one, although these would converge eventually.<sup>72</sup> The Internet itself would not become more visually oriented until GUIs (graphic user interfaces) became popular, which really took off with the introduction of Windows 95 in 1995. Download speeds were glacially slow throughout the 1990s due to limited bandwidth, but streaming video services like RealPlayer and Quicktime would grow popular once cable modems arrived.<sup>73</sup> Most technofuturists and industry experts would regretfully report that the technology for virtual reality was at least a decade off,<sup>74</sup> if we were hoping for the virtual reality that science fiction or *Technical Ecstasy* was offering.<sup>75</sup> One would not be entering the pornographic holodeck and engaging in dynamic real-time sexcapades anytime soon.

Whereas the panic over *TIME*'s reporting on cyberspace was predicated on an anxiety of perversion accosting children, unbidden, *Technical Ecstasy*'s anxiety surrounds

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<sup>72</sup> For a good text on the convergence of media technologies, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>73</sup> Ian Peter writes, "The first browser which became popularly available to take advantage of this (world wide web) was Mosaic, in 1993. Mosaic was as slow as a wet week, and really didn't handle downloading pictures well at all—so the early world wide web experience with Mosaic, and with domestic modems that operated at one sixths of current modem speeds at best, were pretty lousy and really didn't give much indication of the potential of this medium." Ian Peter, "History of the World Wide Web," *The Internet History Project* (2004): [http://www.nethistory.info/History\\_of\\_the\\_Internet/web.html](http://www.nethistory.info/History_of_the_Internet/web.html).

<sup>74</sup> For instance, Larry Miller, president of New Machine Publishing, which developed erotic CD-ROMs in the 1990s, said, "There's not much going on with virtual reality sex right now. There is a lot of writing about it, but systems aren't readily available. [...] We're close to a decade away from anything that's going to simulate virtual sex." Phillip Robinson and Nancy Tamosaitis, with Peter Spear and Virginia Soper, *The Joy of Cybersex: The Underground Guide to Electronic Erotica* (New York: Brady, 1993), 257.

<sup>75</sup> See the foundational text and origin of the concept: William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Grafton, 1984).

addiction. Cyberspace here gets positioned as that which incites the over-consumption of its pleasures. Deano becomes a cybersex junkie, or, as in Marilyn Chambers's famous pornographic film, insatiable. Whereas the child in the *TIME* article was imagined as an innocent victim, the scientist describes Deano to his boyfriend as predisposed to mental illness.<sup>76</sup> At home, Deano is aloof; he starts smoking; he isolates himself. Even though the scientist argues his symptoms are the rare side effects of virtual reality and predisposed mental illness, we might as well be reading a handbook on Internet addiction. Such handbooks contain sensationalist warnings that read like the plot of Dean's next adventure: "Caught in an on-line underworld of nonstop chat rooms, fantasy dungeons of monsters and mayhem, and electronic bulletin boards with more listings than a small city's telephone directory, [...] Internet addicts are engrossed in a very different experience than the one you or I might imagine."<sup>77</sup>

What about cyberspace, though, does *Technical Ecstasy* consider so tempting? There is the opportunity to have sex without consequence, much like the phone sex discussed in the last chapter. There is also the distance that cybersex affords Deano, as seen in his fascination with his avatar as an object for viewing. In regards to the latter, techno-futurist Howard Rheingold's prediction of "teledildonics" in 1990 is illustrative.

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<sup>76</sup> Homosexuality, of course, has a long history of pathological inscription. While The Psychiatric Association dropped homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III) in 1973, the AIDS epidemic reinvigorated its pathological understanding. The scientist's explanation of a predisposition to mental illness in *Technical Ecstasy* resonates with this lineage.

<sup>77</sup> Kimberly S. Young, *Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction—And a Winning Strategy for Recovery* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 12.

Rheingold defines teledildonics as *tele-*, “at a distance,” and *dildonics*, “a device capable of converting sound into tactile sensation,” or, a mode of futuristic sexual communication.<sup>78</sup> Rheingold goes on:

Before you climb into a suitably padded chamber and put on your 3D glasses, you slip into a lightweight (eventually, one would hope, diaphanous) bodysuit, something like a body stocking, but with the kind of intimate snugness of a condom. Embedded in the inner surface of the suit, using a technology that does not yet exist, is an array of intelligent sensor-effectors—a mesh of tiny tactile detectors coupled to vibrators of varying degrees of hardness, hundreds of them per square inch, that can receive and transmit a realistic sense of tactile presence.<sup>79</sup>

Teledildonics signals cyberspace’s capacity for play and imagination. Intimacy from afar promises, in its most normative valence, to keep long distance relationships monogamous. More radically, Vladimir Edelman writes that users might experiment with their sexual and gender identities and practices via teledildonics,<sup>80</sup> which then offers cyberspace the quality of a safety (a radical departure from Rimm) to express desires that may not map onto one’s present identity structure or physical body: here there is an avenue for future trans studies to explore what virtual bodies might mean. For Stacy Gillis, “cybersex” resonates with Rheingold’s understanding of teledildonics, in that it is a “synchronous sexual exchange” between two people across a great

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<sup>78</sup> Rheingold attributes the word “dildonics” to “zany computer visionary” Theodor Nelson. Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 345.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 346

<sup>80</sup> Vladimir Edelman, “Touch goes High-Tech,” *Psychology Today* 29.1 (Jan.-Feb. 1996).

distance.<sup>81</sup> Notably, for all these techno-futures, the exchange remains human-to-human one, even if heavily mediated by the computer.

In *Technical Ecstasy*, it is plausible that Deano has cybersex, but we do not know precisely if he engages in sex with other “real” users in their own VR chambers or simply a computer program. When Deano’s boyfriend finds out what he is up to, Joey is upset. He presumes Deano has been philandering. But questions of infidelity find confusion when rendered through cybersex: Is cheating localizable to the body’s performance? Or is it tied to the conscious self’s desires and fantasies enacted through the avatar? Is it cheating if the body you inhabit isn’t the same body that is in a monogamous relationship with someone? None of these questions have easy answers. Do these questions still resonate if the sex in question does not involve another human “on the other line,” so to speak? Rheingold is careful in his conceptualization of teledildonics to play down the possibility of a human-machine sexual connection:

The first fully functional teledildonics system will be a communication device, not a sex machine. You probably will not use erotic telepresence technology in order to have sexual experiences with machines. Thirty years from now (2020), when portable telediddlers become ubiquitous, most people will use them to have sexual experiences with other *people*, at a distance, in combinations and configurations undreamed of by precybernetic voluptuaries.”<sup>82</sup>

We need only look to James Woods’ erotic televisual encounter in *Videodrome* (1984), the orgasmatron device in *Barbarella* (1968), or the vibrating remote-controlled sex toy from

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<sup>81</sup> Stacy Gillis, “Cybersex,” in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 92.

<sup>82</sup> Rheingold, *Virtual Reality*, 345.

*Shortbus* (2006) to see how pervasively anxieties around human-machinic sex circulates in culture.

*Technical Ecstasy* also tells the story of dueling homosexual scripts: promiscuity versus faithfulness. The homonormative impulse<sup>83</sup> is strong with Joey, who, as I mentioned before, surmises early on that Deano may be philandering. The film offers a stark contrast to the seeming sexual liberation and celebrated promiscuity of the 1970s. Once Joey tracks down the scientist and experiences the pornographic simulation for himself, he appears curious but ultimately dismissive. When he returns to their apartment and confronts Deano about his participation in the study at Hard Futures, Inc.<sup>84</sup>, he expresses marginal pleasure, stating, "It was alright. You know, like being someone else." But when asked by Deano if he would try it again, Joey demurs, "'No, I don't think so. I just think that reality is a lot sexier.'" Joey's reaffirms Kinnick's earlier plea for "honest dick," by grounding it in sense of reality, but is "honest dick" even imaginable for Deano, who cannot discern reality anymore? Perhaps we can read Deano

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<sup>83</sup> Lisa Duggan explains that homonormativity "invokes a political mainstream described as reasonable, centrist and pragmatic—a mainstream constructed rhetorically through triangulation. The 'new' center is contrasted with unacceptable poles of 'extremism' or 'old' politics on the Left and Right." The project of homonormativity hopes to forge a gay mainstream and was quite successful in doing it. It mirrors its politics on heteronormativity and aspires in many ways to show that homosexuals are really no different from heterosexuals. The primary battle it waged and won was marriage equality. Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward A Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 176.

<sup>84</sup> I want to note the cheesiness of the corporation at the heart of this supposed virtual reality study. Hard Futures's business card reveals a URL of [www.cum](http://www.cum.com) (no .com) and a voiceover tells us: "Hard Futures, home of cyberpussy and the interruptive anus, now bring you "technical ecstasy," the very best in man-to-man adult recreation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At Hard Futures, you'll virtually have an orgasm." See *Technical Ecstasy*.

and Joey's anxiety about online philandering as a negotiation of or proxy for gay culture's past promiscuity and a way of having it both ways: cyber-promiscuous and "meat space"<sup>85</sup> monogamous.

Throughout the course of the film, we see that cyberporn comes to hold a slightly different inflection from cybersex, in that it is constituted as an object, and not an action, but these boundaries blur somewhat, as well. Once pornography moves online, it becomes far more interactive—perhaps even more so than it was in the porno theater of the past—for a number of reasons: it is capable of not just being viewed, but also being searched for, curated, remixed, duplicated, compiled, hyperlinked, and spread. The infinite choices, positions, fetishes, kinks, and scenarios we see mobilized in *Technical Ecstasy's* multiple incongruous genres within itself anticipates this feature of cyberporn. The virtual reality conceit becomes the mere "webbing" to string together these different genres: amateur, Western, urban, military, sadomasochist, and noir—resulting in a truly postmodern approach to pornography by way of bricolage.<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Coopersmith writes that, "in the last two decades, consumers of pornography have accelerated the diffusion of new communication technologies like the VCR and CD-ROM by becoming

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<sup>85</sup> "Meat space" is the unfortunate term some virtual reality enthusiasts use to describe the non-virtual world.

<sup>86</sup> Fredric Jameson, writing on video, states, "Now reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning—the signified—is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage" Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 96.

early buyers and users, thereby providing a profitable market for newly introduced services.”<sup>87</sup> This, of course, is a well-worn idea in media studies. He goes on to say, “the waves of new communication technologies have affected pornography in ways as revolutionary as in any other area of society,”<sup>88</sup> which is what this chapter has sought to reveal.

Broaching the man-machine divide complicates both gay anxieties and desires, offering an escape from the homonormative demands of reality, but it might also facilitate them. The gay figure here, a technophile and an addict, offers a cautionary tale of cyberspace, remediated, as it is, within this video. The fact that *Technical Ecstasy* undercuts its ending with a moment of ontological uncertainty—that which had looked to be reality appears now to be virtual—reveals the vexed position in which gay pornography as an industry found itself at the time. *Manshots* editor-in-chief Douglas had longed for ways to return authenticity and the sense of realism to gay pornography. What *Technical Ecstasy* provides, instead, is a reversal of this wish: reality becomes more virtual and, by association, pornographic. Cyberspace reinscribes reality and the desires of its inhabitants. The computer offers the radical possibility for a simulation that mixes into reality, but that doesn’t mean it gets rid of embodiment, just delays and modifies

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<sup>87</sup> Jonathan Coopersmith, “Pornography, Videotape, and the Internet,” *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* (Spring 2000), 28.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

the body's sensorium. The cybersex of *Technical Ecstasy* suggests our bodies may be the last to find out.

#### **4.6 Archival Plenitude, Archival Paucity**

I am reading a porn magazine at The ONE Archives in Los Angeles when I come across a review of *Technical Ecstasy*, a gay sexvid that is released near the close of the 1990s and the height of the dot com bubble—just before it popped.<sup>89</sup> This review sends me scurrying to locate the film. Does UCLA have a copy of it? I scour their holdings of 531 gay porn films from this era, which includes titles from Falcon, Matt Sterling/Huge Videos, Hot House Entertainment, Jocks, and Mustang Studies. It is not in the spreadsheet. The next day, I fly to San Francisco in search of *Technical Ecstasy*, a needle in the haystack. I am told by the head archivist at the GLBT Historical Society that they do not collect video pornography from the 1990s. Those videos were too commercial, too commonplace. They were everywhere then, but nowhere now. Disappointed, I walk to the local gay porn shop Auto Erotica in the Castro and find an issue of the porn magazine *Honcho* that catches my eye. I pick it up and find something unexpected: an article entitled “The Gay Information Superhighway.” I buy the magazine and begin reading.

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<sup>89</sup> The dot-com bubble is described, roughly, as the period from 1997-2001 when rapid investment, expansion, and adoption of the Internet took place. It is widely reported to have burst in 2001 in a financial crackup that saw the demise of many Internet companies. See Neil Munro, “When the Dot-Com Bubble Burst,” *National Journal* 33 (February 10, 2001), 420-421.

Author Robert E. Miller eagerly invites the reader on a journey: “Welcome to the gay information superhighway! Plug in your modem, place your fingers on the keyboard, and navigate your way into the new technology, enjoying all the thrills cyberspace has to offer the gay voyager.”<sup>90</sup> Miller’s article does not delve directly into whether gay pornographic websites were en vogue or how precisely one could access them, but he does gesture to erotic uses to which the inchoate Internet might be put. Notably—and enthusiastically—he writes of the possibility for online users to engage in cybersex, as well as the sharing of erotic GIFs.<sup>91</sup> More fundamentally, though, Miller’s article offers a practical guide for how the early Internet could be approached by the novice user. It is a sensible guide that would have benefited straight and gay patrons alike, outlining the services of the time: CompuServe, Prodig, America On-Line, GENie. He demonstrates the online venues one might pursue: personal ads, e-mail, conference and chat modes, graphic files. He explains the basic user information regarding Internet browsing, equipment, connections, e-publishing, and safe computing. The modifier “gay” in “The *Gay* Information Superhighway” seems at odds with the content of the article, which only pays lip service to the figure of the homosexual. This strikes me as

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<sup>90</sup> Robert E. Miller, “The Gay Information Superhighway: New Technology Opens Up a Number of Possibilities in Communication and Services That Are Tailor-Made for Gay Men and Lesbians,” *Honcho*, Vol. 18, No. 8 (August 1995): 81.

<sup>91</sup> The history of pornographic GIF is long and storied, and it begins with the early Internet and, surprisingly, remains popular in our present day. Due to the limited amount of space they require, GIFs proliferated on the early web and could easily be traded peer-to-peer or shared on bulletin boards, offering a few seconds of moving image pornography that played in a recurrent loop. For more, see: Michael Flatt, “Doing What You Love: The GIF and Tactical Pleasure in the Workplace,” *Polygraph* 26 (December 2017): 110-129.

peculiar, given the pictorial spread that accompanies the article, which mashes up nude images of men with digital symbols, coding, and circuitry. It leaves me wondering: what's so gay about this information superhighway?<sup>92</sup>

I am told by the owner of Auto Erotica that another porn shop exists — The Magazine in the Tenderloin — but that he had heard they were about to close. I hurry out, as though the second store might shut if I dawdle. I head over to find, much to my relief, it is open and has a full inventory: mostly print magazines, but some VHS tapes, DVDs, and other rare, more collectible memorabilia. I speak to the owners, a gay couple that I would guess are in their late 60s, early 70s. I tell them I was informed their store was closing and ask if that was right. They confirm they will close soon, but admit to not having a final date in mind. “It takes a lot of work,” they say, “to run a gay porn store in 2017.” Their store is stocked, I come to find — somewhat depressingly — by families who bequeath whole collections of gay pornography upon the death of loved ones. These families do not know what else to do with these men's pornography collections. I wonder what will become of future collections once this store closes. At Duke University, a year before, a librarian had revealed to me — much to my horror — of a

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<sup>92</sup> This is a much larger question than I have space to address here. That said, this question has been taken up elsewhere, although more often in popular media and news outlets. One particular effective summary of the debates about the presumed queerness of the Internet can be found in the Introduction to *Pink 2.0*, 1-27. See also: Jacob Gaboury, “Queer History of Computing,” *Rhizome* (February 19, 2013): <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/feb/19/queer-computing-1/>; Jack Glascott, “How the Internet Made Us Gay” *Huffington Post* (February 2, 2016): [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jack-glascott/how-the-internet-made-us-gay\\_b\\_6726840.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jack-glascott/how-the-internet-made-us-gay_b_6726840.html); lemon tart, “Why Gay People Love the Internet: Four Reasons,” *The Most Cake* (July 19, 2010): <https://themoecake.co.uk/culture/why-gay-people-love-the-internet-four-reasons/>.

similar donation by the family of an elderly gentleman that the library ultimately threw away. I implored her to contact me if they ever received another such donation that they did not want. The owners of The Magazine say they are donating their building, which is three stories tall, to the Bob Mizer Foundation, which plans to open a museum, gallery, and research space, and which has just relaunched Mizer's groundbreaking homoerotic magazine *Physique Pictorial*, twenty-seven years after its last publication and a quarter century after Mizer's death.<sup>93</sup> It seems, then, what goes around comes around. This archive was closing, but another one was taking its place. So too, the gay pornographic archive more broadly seems to vacillate between plenitude and paucity. I am still looking for my way into the gay cyberporn of the 1990s.

On their shelves, I find the magazine *Manshots* that I had just perused in its entirety mere days before at The ONE Archives. I purchase every unique issue they have for \$20 (the owners cut me a deal, because I am buying so many) and walk back to my lodging with two bags worth of *Manshots*. I make a list of every technologically-inflected video porn I come across in their pages, which are fewer than I had hoped for. The titles and descriptions are promising: *Voicemale* (1992) envisions futuristic porn in 1999 through video phone sex and computer sex; *Sex, Guys & Videotape* (1992) bases its story of MTV and reveals the effects of videotape on sexuality; *Trade-Off* (1992) concerns voyeurism and the camcorder; *Plugged In* (1996) looks at cable TV and video; *Download*

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<sup>93</sup> See <http://bobmizer.org/>.

(1996) is credited as the first gay porn to broach the topic of cyberspace, following Johnny Hanson, who declines a blind date to cruise for cybersex on his computer; *Get it Online* (1996) has no description but looks thematically relevant; *Online Connections* (1996) promises computer dudes who make connections that steam up the screen. And then there is *Technical Ecstasy* (1999). Like any scholar worth his salt, I go online to look. Had it been there, all along, I wondered, in cyberspace? Most of the titles from this list are unavailable, and many of the gay streaming sites that specialize in non-contemporary gay pornography—now classified as “vintage porn,” which does not seem quite right for the 1990s—are incredibly slow, with outdated user interfaces and belligerent pop-up ads. And then, at what feels like the moment just prior to defeat, I see it, available for purchase. I can hardly believe my eyes. Hurriedly, I type in my credit card information, click to confirm purchase, cross my fingers, and wait for technical ecstasy to be mine.

## 5. Dire Straights, or the Indeterminacy of Sexual Identity in Amateur Gay-for-Pay

Erotic identity, of all things, is never to be circumscribed simply as itself, can never not be relational, is never to be perceived or known by anyone outside of a structure of transference and countertransference.

— Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1 *The Recession meets Web 2.0*

The contemporary moment of gay pornography finds access to a veritable pornucopia of online forms. So too, for the researcher, there is little impediment to performing inquiry into 21<sup>st</sup> century desires, although the preceding chapter suggests that may not always hold true. This chapter looks to the “here and now” of online gay pornography, and more specifically, situates its inquiry in the web 2.0 era of the Internet. After the dot-com bust in 2001, there were the meandering post-9/11 years when the Internet was trying to figure itself out—we can think of this as the Internet’s adolescence. One major change that took place over this period was the increased speed of Internet access due to widespread adoption of cable modems. Online video had been possible prior to the 2000s but was impractical; with the increased speed and near-instant gratification that the cable modem afforded, it became ubiquitous. “Web 2.0” names a change in the Internet’s functionality and content. This term gained popularity around 2005 and has

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 81.

been credited to Tim O'Reilly.<sup>2</sup> It describes a shift in how the Internet was being used as well as structural and linguistic advancements in developer coding. In brief, the Internet was becoming more interactive. Websites were emerging that spurred users to become content-creators. YouTube, Wikipedia, MySpace, and Facebook were taking off and blogging sites were de rigueur. If the Internet of the 1990s was largely textual, the Internet in the 2000s was something you saw, experienced, and had a hand in creating: users uploaded pictures, videos, comments, entries, blogs, you name it. Websites were streamlined to be more user-friendly; developer code was becoming more dynamic; everyone's data was being mined to produce smarter algorithms to tailor your Internet experience.<sup>3</sup>

As such, the millennial era of gay pornography installs a new set of relations for the consumption of pornography, marked first and foremost by an ease of access and an array of diverse pornographies to choose from. Additionally, pornographic "Tube" sites begin to emerge, which model themselves off of YouTube and allow users to upload their own amateur-produced pornography or pirated clips from longer pornographic features. With the vast expansion in the kinds of pornography available, this period offers a heightened sense of taxonomy, a moment where the increased visibility for representations of sexual acts began to proliferate. Against the backdrop of these

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<sup>2</sup> Tim O'Reilly, "What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," *Communications & Strategies* (Sept. 30, 2005): <http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

technological advancements, though, I want to take into account the Financial Crisis of 2008.

Just a few years after Web 2.0 began to be a buzz word, the sub-prime mortgage crisis shook America and the global market. The worst recession to hit The United States in more than a generation, the so-called “Great Recession” can be read as the culmination of almost three decades of financial deregulation. If we consider the simultaneous rise of affective or immaterial labor,<sup>4</sup> as it is sometimes called, or “the gig economy,” as others refer to it, we see in this moment an overwhelmingly out-of-work or under-employed work force that is trying to make ends meet by picking up odds and ends and selling non-tangible products like sensations and affects. The recession and Web 2.0 are two contributing factors that will come to shape the following analysis.<sup>5</sup>

To bring this modern era into relief, I examine the genre of “gay-for-pay” as a case-study. This form of pornography operates in part upon the social media protocols of surveillance to arouse suspicion around authenticity and pleasure on the one hand, and ambiguity and displeasure, on the other. I suggest this complicated negotiation eroticizes and stands in for an ever-diminishing narrative structure of online

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *boundary* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 90.

<sup>5</sup> Another fascinating study that takes these factors into consideration is Connie Scozzaro and Jeff Nagy’s essay on real estate in pornography after the great recession (often featuring abandoned McMansions). Their essay argues realty comes to hold erotic investment for online pornography post-2008, especially on the website Property.Sex. See Connie Scozzaro and Jeff Nagy, “Putting the ‘Home’ in Homemade Porn”: Real Estate in Pornography After the Financial Crisis,” *Polygraph* 26 (December 2017): 85-109.

pornographic representation, or perhaps more accurately, the supplementation of diegetic actions with non-diegetic narrative. The “gay-for-pay” genre of pornography orbits around an invocation of purportedly straight men who engage in all-male sex acts. In the digital era where pornography can now account for almost any sexual minority and position, this scene of pleasure relies upon a near constant oscillation between the boundedness of representation (the supposed knowability of the recorded sex act) and everyday life (the supposed knowability of the sexual identity that organizes one’s life), as seen in the juxtaposition of sex acts that would seem to beckon the “truth” of a coherent sexual identity.

In this time of heightened financial precarity and interactive media, the structures and the acts that have been commonly thought to coalesce around (if not discipline) identity come into conflict. In what follows, I speculate that their growing tension animates viewing pleasure through a constant disarticulation and recombination, or what Wendy Chun might call “spirals of power and pleasure.”<sup>6</sup> Online gay-for-pay pornography reveals a crisis of heterosexual masculinity, which gay pornography both capitalizes upon and troubles. As the Internet becomes more pervasive and participatory, so too does pornography, which leverages the blurred boundary between reality and the Internet for perverse pleasures. If amateurism was

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<sup>6</sup>Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and freedom*. Cambridge: MIT Press, (2006): 104.

viewed as a potential threat to mainstream video pornography in the 1990s, by the 2000s those fears had come to fruition. Amateur gay pornography becomes an increasing force in no small part because digital technologies and the Web 2.0 structure of the Internet allow—and indeed, invite—virtually anyone with the equipment and a connection the opportunity of becoming a pornographer. Amateurism’s promise to deliver an authentic sense of reality becomes the bedrock of gay-for-pay pornography’s internal grammar.

## **5.2 Tyra Banks’s Disbelief**

On July 9, 2009, *The Tyra Banks Show*<sup>7</sup> aired an episode titled “I’m Gay For Pay!” In the show’s lead-in, Tyra Banks teases her audience: “They look like two average all-American guys. But there’s something about Aaron and Kurt that you might find shocking. They are both straight guys who for the right price have sex with men on camera.”<sup>8</sup> The audience audibly gasps. Tyra Banks looks on in disbelief as her guests, a panel of straight identified men, explain why they work in gay pornography (**See Figure 22**). Banks’s provocation invites surprise and implies a certain novelty to the inclusion of heterosexuality within the matrix of gay pornography,<sup>9</sup> but soft and hard core gay

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<sup>7</sup> *The Tyra Banks Show* was a daytime talk show hosted by famous runway model Tyra Banks. It aired from 2005-2010 and took a tabloid format, covering contemporary and often controversial issues. Tyra Banks, *The Tyra Banks Show*, (New York: Bankable Productions, Episode: July 9, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Linda Williams in *Hard Core* agrees with such an assessment, writing, “In gay male pornography, where there is not heterosexual identity to maintain, male submissives predominate.” See Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 196.



**Figure 22: Tyra Banks looks on incredulously as her guests explain they identify as straight but nonetheless perform in gay pornography.**

pornographies have long undermined hyper-masculinity and conventional renderings of heterosexuality. For instance, gay pornography has frequently appropriated the stereotypical sites of straightness for its backdrop, such as military barracks, college fraternities, and gym locker rooms. The tension of the hetero/homo binary in online gay-for-pay carries forward this trope. Without acknowledging this tradition, Banks overestimates the novelty of this pornography and assumes its import for an audience largely unfamiliar with it. In the process, she not only fails to articulate its specificity and historical context, but more troublesomely she relies on heteronormativity and a spectacularization of the gay sex act to propel her inquiry. Gay-for-pay pornography is significant not because it actually threatens heterosexuality, nor because it is a new

genre of pornography.<sup>10</sup> Rather, what marks its significance is its current popularity in the cultural imaginary as a pornography that disrupts received notions of sexual identity.

This episode of *The Tyra Banks Show* reveals the conflicted position of gay-for-pay pornography in U.S. culture that simultaneously exhibits interest in and repulsion to gay sex.<sup>11</sup> In the hour-long program, Banks interviews three well-known gay porn stars<sup>12</sup>—each of whom identifies as straight<sup>13</sup>—ostensibly to shed light on the gay-for-pay phenomenon. However, Banks’s line of questioning quickly turns indignant when it

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Waugh writes of Curt McDowell’s gay pornographic film *Loads*, which in 1980 depicted the filmmaker’s autobiographic sexual encounters with six straight men. Waugh contemplates McDowell’s striking subject matter: “I am here referring rather to the eroticization of the Not-Gay, the Straight Man. For some, it may be gratifying that the tables are turned. The straight man becomes erotic surface, objectified, both idealized and debased, the object of erotic obsession. It is an obsession frequently present in gay male pornography.” Even earlier than McDowell’s *Loads*, though, the idea of gay-for-pay could be seen germinating in the practice of rough trade, wherein gay men sought sex with men who did not identify as gay and as such risked violence. These examples gesture to precursors of gay-for-pay, which fall beyond the scope of this chapter, but also substantiate the persistence—rather than novelty—of such a desire in gay culture and representation. See “Men’s Pornography: Gay vs. Straight,” *Jump Cut*, no. 30 (March 1985).

<sup>11</sup> I situate this chapter within an U.S. context, which is where each of the pornographies described hereafter were produced. Furthermore, I use *homosexual* and *gay* in an equivalent sense, as well as *heterosexual* and *straight*. There are complications to such equivalences concerning gender that deserve note. *Homosexual* can refer either to a male or female subject, as can *heterosexual* and *straight*. The term *gay* within an American context is more problematic; it commonly refers in its contemporary use to a male subject, although it can also at times refer to a gay female. Because gay-for-pay pornography is largely devoid of women, though, my use of these four terms will refer to a male form. Additionally, although the categories *gay* and *homosexual* do not ascribe an essential sexual role to them within the U.S. context—meaning these identities are not reserved solely for bottoms or solely for tops—pornographic representation frequently depicts submissive sexual roles as feminized, and so gayer, than aggressive roles. This tendency appears to carry misogyny forward into notions of homosexual identity. Waugh enumerates the challenges of historical specificity for these very terms in the first chapter of *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> The performers’ names are: Kurt Wild, Aaron James, and Dean Coxx. *The Tyra Banks Show*, (New York: Bankable Productions, Episode: July 9, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> The straightness of these performers is constantly performed. Banks’s first question to each of these men is whether they have a girlfriend or wife. They all do. If their partner is pregnant or they have children, this seemingly unrelated gets mentioned as further evidence of their heterosexuality. *Ibid.*

becomes apparent these so-called straight men refuse typical categorization. Porn star Aaron diagnoses Banks's and the studio audience's discomfort as follows, "I think people have a problem with gay-for-pay because they have a problem with homosexuals."<sup>14</sup> An audience member lends credibility to Aaron's allegation, telling Tyra he, "ain't gonna do no nothing strange for a piece of change."<sup>15</sup> As stated above, these and other heated exchanges in this episode suggest gay-for-pay pornography poses a threat to and deviation from the monogamous heterosexual couple. In Banks's talk show, the gay male figure that becomes the unspoken menace.

While the specter of the gay male produces much of Banks's and her audience's anxiety, it is precisely this figure that Banks fails adequately to take into account. Rather than pursue the viewer's desire that mobilizes this genre of pornography — or what I suggest constitutes its internal logic — the Banks episode fixates on a failed endeavor to reconstitute these gay-for-pay porn stars as "true" straight men. It is this failure to consider the gay male viewer's relation to and investment in gay-for-pay pornography that propels my own inquiry.

As I have suggested, *The Tyra Banks Show* develops a conflicted relationship to gay-for-pay. On the one hand, the episode validates gay-for-pay pornography as a significant contemporary pornography worthy of mainstream media scrutiny, but on the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

other, it neutralizes the perceived threat to heterosexual identity through moralism and homophobia. The show's refusal to move beyond the supposed threat to heterosexuality limits its insight. Hereafter, I focus on this question of why gay-for-pay pornography compels the gay viewer's gaze.<sup>16</sup> Considering gay male desire helps us to overcome the limitations of Banks's analysis and allows us to ask how that desire shapes the pornography in question and how the pornography in return reeducates gay desire.<sup>17</sup> In asking these questions, we will need to examine in what ways its recording and online dissemination, or its medium specificity, have altered and facilitated this genre. As a result, this inquiry will offer a more expansive—although by no means comprehensive—exploration of contemporary gay-for-pay pornography before closely attending to particular examples, both to reveal the diversities of and, more importantly, to develop provisionally an underlying logic to the genre. In this pursuit, I posit a classification for gay-for-pay pornography that brings its narratives, aesthetics, and medium specificity into a conflicted alliance between identity-thwarting sex acts and supposedly authentic mediation.

### ***5.3 Deciphering the Gay-for-Pay Genre***

In what follows, I situate my definition of gay-for-pay pornography in a post-web 2.0, post-recession landscape, which is not to suggest the genre did not exist prior to it (in

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<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, when I refer to the viewer of gay-for-pay pornography, I assume a gay-identified subject position, although such a determination remains speculative, rather than empirical.

<sup>17</sup> I borrow this term from Richard Dyer. See: "Male Gay Porn, Coming to Terms," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 30 (March 1985): 27.

fact, it most certainly did), but rather, to locate a new force and urgency in the form itself once these convergent historical events come to pass. Additionally, I present the following definition tentatively, with the knowledge that it must necessarily evolve as the examples that follow reveal nuances and challenges to it. This approach hopes to locate the current specificity, rather than explore the broader and more complicated genealogy of its pornographic etiology. Tentatively, gay-for-pay can be said to be a contemporary genre of gay pornography that foregrounds the alleged real-life straightness—itsself a site of contestation—of its performer(s) as an integral component to its pornographic grammar. In its narrative, one or more of the performers self-discloses as straight, yet he agrees to engage in sex with other men for the camera. Typically, although not always, the straight performer takes on the sex role of the active penetrator in anal sex or the passive recipient of fellatio. This genre of pornography normally begins with a narrative gesture, often a scene or an interview, that establishes the performer's straightness.<sup>18</sup> If the burden to prove swiftly one's own alleged heterosexuality seems an odd introduction to gay pornography, the narrative provides various explanatory strategies for why the performer might be willing to engage in gay

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<sup>18</sup> It is here where the viewer ascertains the performer's butchness. Questions concerning whether he has a girlfriend or not, as well as his favorite sex position, hobbies and sports are posed. The entire affectivity of the performer may be scrutinized. Body posture, movement, vocal inflection, accent and timing could belie a gay man impersonating a straight man engaging in gay sex, and thus diminish the function of the pornography.

sex.<sup>19</sup> The most frequent explanation, as suggested by the genre's name, includes monetary reimbursement,<sup>20</sup> but other explanations include being tricked into the act<sup>21</sup> or losing a bet or game.<sup>22</sup> In each of these instances there's a displacement of what typically compels—desire—and the gay identity often ascribed to such acts is bracketed. To be a gay-for-pay performer, the straight man performs boredom, disinterest, and disgust, qualities which counterintuitively do not negate pleasure, but rather ransom it. It may be assumed that the spectator derives his pleasure from the disjuncture between the performer's true identity and his performance of sexual arousal, although this assumption itself should be pursued further.

Monetary reimbursement serves as the primary motivating factor in gay-for-pay pornography (as the name alone attests), but the economics of gay-for-pay should be understood less for its alleged profitability and more for its narrative function of displacing desire. That said, against the backdrop of the 2008 Financial Crisis, it would be difficult *not* to see the recession informing this pornographic genre's popularity.

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<sup>19</sup> Similarly, John Mercer refers to the “new alibis” that proliferate in gay-for-pay pornography, which he breaks down into the financial alibi, the amoral alibi, and the exploratory alibi. Mercer considers these alibis to be an update to what Thomas Waugh in *Hard to Imagine* had termed the athletic alibi, artistic alibi, and naturist alibi. For Waugh, though, these alibis were available to consumers to use, in order to grant plausible deniability and shore up any suspicion of their own possible homosexuality. In Mercer's update of these alibis, though, the meaning is slightly different: they become the intra-diegetic explanation that a straight-identified performer gives for why they are willing to “go gay” in a gay-for-pay porn. See John Mercer, “Gay for Pay: The Internet and the Economics of Homosexual Desire,” in *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, ed. Karen Ross (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012): 540-545.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.brokecollegeboys.com/>; <http://www.cam4.com/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.baitbus.com/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.straightcollegemen.com/>; <http://straightfraternity.com/>; <http://www.gaychicken.com/>; <http://www.hazehim.com/>

Rather than initiating gay-for-pay, the recession accentuates and accelerates this genre's discerning logics. On paper, gay-for-pay does not reliably demonstrate financial rescue to its performers. The performers on the *Tyra Banks Show* claim to have made a great deal *more* money through gay-for-pay pornography than they ever could through heterosexual pornography,<sup>23</sup> but the evidence as to just how much more remains unclear. Furthermore, the number of "stars" in gay pornography, on a whole, continues to diminish. Rather, gay-for-pay leverages the popularity of amateurism,<sup>24</sup> which is itself spurred by DIY technologies like smart phones, flip cameras, and webcams, most of whom require less rigorous and sustained financial backing.

The "star system" of gay pornography, which modeled itself off of Hollywood and was the dominant performance structure for the first three decades of gay hard core, is one that Jeffrey Escoffier writes about in his essay on gay-for-pay pornography. He notes that a "new 'porn star' fashions himself from the cultural myths and social roles that define male sexuality or violate masculine roles, or that affirm homosexual desire or draw upon ethnic or racial beliefs. [...] Whatever his sexual preference, when any man seeks employment in gay pornographic video production he must justify his choice from

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<sup>23</sup> On *The Tyra Banks Show*, Kurt Wild claims he earns ten times what he would make filming straight porn (from \$300 per straight porn shoot to \$3000 per gay porn shoot) while Aaron James claims he would make \$500 in a straight scene but need to sleep with twenty girls in a month to equal what he could make filming one gay scene, meaning he could earn \$10,000 per gay scene (a twenty-fold increase). Despite the disparity in precisely the amount, gay-for-pay is presented here as lucrative to those who achieve a following on more popular websites.

<sup>24</sup> For a thorough overview of cyberporn, which speaks to the aesthetic prominence of amateurism and its implications in pornography today, see Zabet Patterson, "Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era," in *Porn Studies*, ed. by Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 104-123.

a number of perspectives.”<sup>25</sup> Escoffier is writing about how the porn star must construct a persona that he then cultivates over time and interweaves into his porn performance oeuvre. This persona also serves to grant him a kind of permission or entry into gay pornography, which he notes still comes with substantial stigma. Escoffier’s observation comes under tension, though, when the star system itself begins to dissolve. While there are still some gay studio porn stars that profit handsomely and appear in numerous high profile productions, the shift to amateur performers was already well underway when he wrote his essay in 2003. Unknown performers, most of whom are not wooed and preened to become stars, and performers who work independently from studios, are on the rise.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, many of the gay porn performers who have achieved some kind of visibility among the gay community still perform additional labor in the form of dancing, trade show meet-n-greets, drag show opening acts, and escorting. To say that no one seems to be making a killing at gay pornography would be an understatement.

For the amateur gay-for-pay pornographers, payment is especially unreliable.

For example, many amateurs perform on cam show websites like *cam4* and *chaturbate*,

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<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, “Gay-for-Pay: Straight Men and the Making of Gay Pornography,” *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter 2003): 540-546.

<sup>26</sup> There is a contradiction in this trend. The industry seeks a never-ending stream of amateur performers, but inevitably, some amateurs will gain popularity and begin to accrue their own following. In turn, they will begin to resemble gay porn stars and appear in more films. Once that happens, however, they will have lost their status of amateur. It will be important to try to understand how the amateurs who make this transition, such as Bravo Delta, navigate this contradiction, and what effects it has on both the narrative trajectory of their career and the kinds of work they can get.

which do not pay a set rate to performers upon completion of the pornography.<sup>27</sup> Rather, a website like *cam4* facilitates the somewhat convoluted series of transfers that goes as follows: viewers purchase tokens in bulk from the website; viewers then incrementally dole out tips to webcam performers they enjoy; the webcam performers “cash out” their accrued tokens at the end of a performance. If a viewer complains or a moderator deems that the performance has not met expectations, payment may be denied to the performer, or they may be penalized. For instance, most shows advertise what the performer will do for a certain amount of tokens (e.g., 500 tokens to see me naked; 1000 tokens for me to jerk off, etc.), but the performer sets the price. It is up to the community and moderators to then judge whether the act meets the advertisement. The token structure here has a policing effect, both for the performer to the website and the performer to the viewer, and it requires a series of conversions to deliver remuneration.<sup>28</sup> The viewer does not always know whether a performer is paid and if so, at what amount. As a narrative device, though, these payments serve an explanatory function of self-imposed coercion. Two friends—amateur performers—both of whom attest to and perform their heterosexuality may perform a cam show for a night wherein they engage in some kind of sexual activity together, effectively going “gay-for-pay.” On

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.cam4.com/>; <http://www.chaturbate.com/>

<sup>28</sup> Not always will a website offer a monetary payout. For instance, reddit.com incentivizes its users to share pornographic photos and videos in order to earn karma, which several users point out is just a made-up number.

a cam show, these amateurs may set their price—let's say, 3000 tokens—and refuse to act if the goal is not met.

More often than not, though, the goal is met, and the men do act. It is as though these straight men could not refuse the money, that in a post-recession United States, the precarity of daily life makes it impossible to turn down any work. So unsurprisingly the amateur performer is commonly depicted in dire straits, barely making ends meet. Gay-for-pay encodes itself nominally in the logic of poverty and under-employment,<sup>29</sup> and in the process substitutes money for desire, making thinly veiled prostitutes of its performers. With the fantasy of mutual lust swept away, the fantasy of prohibition takes up shop, replacing reciprocity with an uneven power dynamic of straight men in compromising situations.

With this register in mind, it is striking that *The Tyra Banks Show* focused so heavily on the economics of gay-for-pay pornography while failing to recognize its eroticization of lower class straight men. Instead, Banks's show provides another definition of gay-for-pay, which will help further to unpack its determining logics. Near the end of the episode, Sean Kennedy, at the time an editor of the U.S.-based LGBT news magazine *The Advocate*, defines "gay-for-pay" as follows, "It basically means guys who are pretending consciously or unconsciously to be gay in order to take advantage

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<sup>29</sup> Constance Penley's essay "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn" nicely attends to this dynamic from the perspective of working-class and impoverished white personifications. See "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn." in *Porn Studies*. ed. Linda Williams, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 309-331.

financially of gay guys.”<sup>30</sup> Kennedy gets this definition doubly wrong. First, they perform heterosexuality more than homosexuality, and certainly not a kind of “gayface” that Kennedy suggests. Secondly, Kennedy forecloses the possibility that the straight man too might gain something out of the scenario other than financial reward. Furthermore, would it not be possible that a gay man might want—or indeed desire—a straight man who participates in sex with other men without identifying as gay?<sup>31</sup> The commentators on Tyra Banks’s are adamant about upholding the tenuous divisions between gay and straight identity, but in the process, they foreclose complexities that emerge from a closer reading of gay-for-pay.

Kennedy, for instance, misapprehends the critical structural tension inherent in gay-for-pay. The performance of hyper-masculinity gains prominence in the act of the straight man negotiating the terms of the all-male sex—even as DIY and amateur renditions of porn seek non-performative authenticity. But this emphasis on performance should not be viewed simply as an enactment of gayness. Rather, gay-for-pay puts gay and straight identities into tension with one another when viewed through what Foucault famously termed bodies and pleasures.<sup>32</sup> Kennedy reduces this notion to

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<sup>30</sup> *The Tyra Banks Show*, (New York: Bankable Productions, Episode: July 9, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Recall from Ch. 1 that Carl Wittman denounced such a “perversity,” calling it “anti-gay.” See “A Gay Manifesto,” *Gay Flames Pamphlet* No. 9 (New York: Gay Liberation Front, 1970).

<sup>32</sup> Foucault writes “we need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow” See *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 159.

“pretending to be gay,” which for the purpose of this chapter is too reductive. To claim the viewer of gay-for-pay fools himself into thinking the performers are indeed gay fails to consider how the narrative structure complicates the performance of the so-called gay sex act with an overlaid performance of hyper-masculine heterosexuality (through disgust, shock, horror, anger, etc.). There is a deliberate mapping of performance and documentation onto one another that gay-for-pay makes visible.

I insist that the gay-for-pay actor is crucially *not* pretending to be gay; it is his identification as a straight man that he performs excessively in this genre. The pornography here dismantles gay identity from what is thought of as gay sex acts. This pornography raises the viewer’s consciousness to a level not typically demanded by pornography, so that the viewer must constantly weigh the coherence of the sexual identity of the actor, which is its own performance, against the audio-visual performance of sex. The question we are left with is rudimentary, but pivotal: what constitutes gay identity, if not the gay sex act? Gay-for-pay destabilizes the link between identity and act, which leaves us positing whether there can be a gay identity without acts. In the process, this genre also complicates our knowledge of straight identity, which is implicated in the gay sex act. It is this untethering of act and identity that I wish here to grapple with, not because such an untethering will substantiate this delinking

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outside of pornographic representation — although it may exist in certain instances<sup>33</sup> — but rather because this genre offers it up as a fantasy. The question of the viewer's desire for such an untethering of identity and act deserves consideration. What does it mean for the gay viewer to desire and indeed to get off on the fantasy of sex with straight men and the fantasy of sexual identity's resistance to sexual acts? What does it say about both gay and straight identity formations, and why has this fantasy proliferated so widely and rapidly in its online instantiation?

The question of performance helps to clarify the definition of gay-for-pay I have put forth but also provides an important objection to consider. One could easily argue that *all* pornography is performed, and as such, the actors' lives outside of the production are of little to no consequence to the performance. However, we must consider the ways gay-for-pay pornography differs from mainstream cinema and conventional studio pornography in its conceptualization and deployment of performativity. I am arguing that what renders gay-for-pay unique from the aforementioned modes of performance is a juxtaposition of meta- and realist techniques. The classical Hollywood film aims for verisimilitude in representation and unobtrusiveness in access. Furthermore, its diegesis — or the representational world within which the narrative occurs — is closed, hermetic. The viewer of such films should

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<sup>33</sup> Jane Ward's *Not Gay* provides the clearest example of this, as told from a sociological perspective. See Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* ((New York: New York University Press, 2015).

have an immersive experience of a fictional world that is richly imagined but not reflexive of its own status as film. Much classical and pre-Internet pornography subscribed to this ethos.

As I suggested above, contemporary gay-for-pay pornography typically fuses its meta-narrative and diegetic narratives. The meta-narrative draws attention—much like the amateur format of gonzo porn highlights the performer as camera operator—to its own status as porn.<sup>34</sup> The diegetic narrative, however, strives for authenticity and unobtrusiveness. Gay-for-pay porn crucially makes use of both, having it both ways. The amateur DIY recording technologies strive for authentic, realist representation—often mirroring the documentary genre. At the same time, the meta-narrative highlights a second storyline that undermines the performance of the first, suggesting another reality beyond the pornographic representation. Similar to how Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effect would break the fourth wall in theater through various techniques, online gay-for-pay pornography breaks the immersive quality of pornography by making the reality outside of it a part of its performance.<sup>35</sup> Combining the two ontologies

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Dyer emphasizes the self-reflexivity commonly featured in gay pornography. In explaining self-reflexivity’s prominence therein, he writes, “This is of a piece with much gay culture. Being meta is rather everyday for queers. Modes like camp, irony, derision, theatricality and flamboyance hold together an awareness of something’s style with a readiness to be moved by it” See “Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography,” *Critical Quarterly* (March 1994): 60.

<sup>35</sup> Brecht’s writings on the alienation effect have been instructive in thinking through gay-for-pay. He observes, “we must always remember that the pleasure given by representations of such different sorts hardly ever depended on the representation’s likeness to the thing portrayed. Incorrectness, or considerable improbability even, was hardly or not at all disturbing, so long as the incorrectness had a certain consistency and the improbability remained of a constant kind. All that mattered was the illusion of compelling

forges a simultaneous dissonance. Brecht's purpose in alienating his viewer was to bring awareness to the circumstances ordering society and to bring about the potential for a change in them, but it is unclear whether gay-for-pay's reflexivity offers any substantial payout beyond irony. Just how the viewer makes sense of these two competing forces determines whether one finds gay-for-pay to be disconcerting or liberatory and points to a growing ambivalence within masculinity's sexualization.

Gay-for-pay pornography presents a complex argument. It relies upon standard societal notions of sexual identity at the same time that it disrupts these categories. The disruption of these traditional categorization garners gay-for-pay its compelling status. If we take as true the supposition that homosexuals and heterosexuals are oppositional categories required to define the other against,<sup>36</sup> then gay-for-pay challenges this seemingly necessary division by bringing these two categories into direct contact and contention. In addition, this genre of pornography contests the idea that the signifiers of arousal verify sexual truth or pleasure. Gay-for-pay upends the claim that the body, unlike the mind, cannot lie.<sup>37</sup> The logic follows that for a straight man to maintain an

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momentum to the story told, and this was created by all sorts of poetic and theatrical means." See "A Short Organum for the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1949), 182.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault makes this argument in *The History of Sexuality volume 1* and Janet E. Halley repeats it in "The Construction of Heterosexuality," that heterosexuality as a concept followed the invention of homosexuality.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, because the body is a vehicle for performance, it most certainly can lie. See, for instance, Ch. 5 "Counterfeit Pleasures: Fake Orgasm and Queer Agency" in Annamarie Jagose, *Orgasmology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

erection and climax with another man would disprove his heterosexual identity. But gay-for-pay insists on the suspension of that assumption. There are any number of props and supplements a performer might use to elicit an erection or orgasm, ranging from the use of erectile-inducing pharmaceuticals like Viagra to the viewing of off-screen pornography. While conventional pornographies might shirk at the idea of revealing such accompaniments to arousal, these erectile technologies, though by no means staples, play soundly into the narrative logic of gay-for-pay explanation strategies.

This last point becomes evident when early in the *Tyra Banks Show* Kurt Wild reveals that he prefers to perform the role of the “bottom” during gay-for-pay sex shoots. Tyra Banks reacts as if she has finally caught the culprit red-handed; this man could not possibly be straight. Her disbelief that Wild could still claim straightness in performing the submissive role in anal sex reinforces the commonplace assumption in the rubric of homosexuality that the penetrated partner is more effeminate, and so gayer, than the penetrator.<sup>38</sup> Wild counters that the submissive role requires almost no arousal on his behalf and so is in fact easier to perform than that of the top. To be submissive and “receive the gift,” as Banks euphemistically refers to it,<sup>39</sup> does not even require an erection. From this example, we see that gay-for-pay challenges the assumed naturalization and inviolability of sex roles. There is a very intricate orchestration about

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<sup>38</sup> Tyra Banks explicitly states, “If you’re going to receive... I mean—come on—that’s more gay!” *The Tyra Banks Show*, (New York: Bankable Productions, Episode: July 9, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

which sex act a performer undertakes when, if at all, and in what order. For instance, a performer typically would not jump right into bottoming—or being “broken in,” as it is sometimes referred to for the uninitiated—because to do so would raise suspicions that the performer was not actually straight from the outset. And yet a performer like Wild, who—having completed his fair share of penetrating—now prefers to bottom almost exclusively due to the passivity of this role, counterintuitively reaffirms his heterosexuality because passivity can be performed without arousal. Within pornography, the signs of arousal do not necessarily substantiate desire or pleasure. In gay-for-pay, pleasure can mean watching someone not enjoy themselves.

#### ***5.4 Heterosexual Logics: Competition, Misdirection, Open-mindedness***



**Figure 23: Duncan and Noah play "Gay Chicken" on the website *straightfraternity.com*.**

To add complexity to the definition I have provided for gay-for-pay pornography, I want to turn now to contemporary online examples, ever proliferating, and offer three close readings of gay-for-pay narratives to develop a tentative classification and to distill further its underlying logic and tension. These three examples demonstrate what we might think of as variations on a theme. This triplication reveals the expansiveness and diversity of the genre, while simultaneously illustrating its guiding logic in reeducating gay desire. The first example, “Gay Chicken,” (See Figure 23) originally produced by *straightfraternity.com*, can now be found in its abbreviated format on a number of porn hub websites like *X-Tube*.<sup>40</sup> As far as online videos go, which are notably ephemeral, this one in particular has been disseminated frequently and still remains online, a testament to its popularity. In the video, an unseen pledgemaster informs two pledges, Noah and Duncan, “We’re going to play a game. The loser of the game is going to get cummed on.” Immediately, Duncan states to Noah, “So you’re losing.” Noah rebuts, “No, you’re losing.” Here, then, is an explanation strategy that supersedes monetization. It also simultaneously uses the notion of competition both to bolster the participants’ masculine bravados—and so evidence straightness—and to undercut them by revealing an ultimately homoerotic endgame. It is unclear who is the winner and who is the loser in a situation where one straight man must ejaculate onto the other repulsed man’s body. This indeterminacy is precisely the confusion that gay-for-pay pornography relishes.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.xtube.com/watch.php?v=EiDvm-G660->

The pledgemaster, who remains unseen until the very end of the video, asks his two pledges to strip naked and then clarifies the rules. The intention of the game is to engage in increasingly invasive sexual acts until one pledge no longer feels comfortable, at which point he calls out that he's "chicken." A series of such exercises ultimately results in a victor who is deemed less chicken or in this instance more willing to engage in sexual acts with the other player. The video takes as its backdrop a fraternity and the associated infamy of various hazing rituals, which lends the otherwise unlikely scenario a modicum of plausibility. As the two men undress, they note to each other how cold the room is, hoping to relay to both the pledgemaster and the viewer that the size of their penises—or their sense of masculinity—has been impaired by the temperature. In this moment, we again encounter an instance where the performers are simultaneously defending their sense of masculinity and yet undercutting it. As so much of their masculinity seems bound to the size of their respective penises, it is telling that Noah, who vocalizes the fear that his penis might be deemed small, develops an erection first. His erection coincides with Duncan touching his knee in the first round of the game. If before Noah had worried the temperature might diminish the size of his penis, here he remains notably silent when the touch of his male companion results in an erection. There is no explanation given, nor does the gay viewer likely need one. This moment speaks to a fantasy the genre's internal logic harbors that straight men, too, can be aroused by contact with other men.

The next two sex acts Duncan and Noah partake in consist of giving one another a hand job followed by fellatio. Noah appears more excited by the games both physiologically and vocally, but he couches his sense of enthusiasm in terms of the competitive nature of the game. In the end, the pledgemaster declares Noah the winner because he is able to perform the sex acts longer and with less complaint. The second pledge Duncan performs these games with reservation and opts out more frequently, declaring himself “chicken.” But the very act of losing a round becomes for Duncan an alternative way to prove his heterosexuality while participating in all-male sex acts. In both pledges’ cases, these tests are accompanied by a constant call-and-response wherein the perpetrator asks, “Are you chicken? Are you chicken?” to which the recipient of the action must respond “No” or “Yes.” In this spoken exchange, the act of bullying becomes yet another method of managing of the event, and another performance of straightness overlaying all-male sex acts.

The quality of the video deserves attention, too. The footage here is grainy and the lighting poor. This and the use of unknown, everyday performers give the video an amateur quality that lacks the glossy, finished veneer of typical studio-produced porn. For in the case of its aesthetics, maximum visibility<sup>41</sup> is not the foremost concern, which

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<sup>41</sup> Linda Williams highlights the idea of maximum visibility in *Hard Core*, which also goes by the name the “frenzy of the visible.” Williams posits that this logic results in pornography making the erection and ejaculation of the penis its epicenter (ending almost always with the externalized cum shot). Richard Dyer’s asserts that this trend is not wholly translatable to gay pornography: “The oddness of showing the man ejaculating outside of his partner’s body is less striking in gay porn; withdrawal to display is odd, but much

would require a well-lit set, tight compositions, and spatial integrity in editing. The camera's unprofessional, jerky motions and the lack of seamless edits reveal a low-budget aesthetic that recalls the spontaneous capture of documentary filmmaking. The documentary-style is no accident. It vouches for the authenticity of the event and the performers' heterosexuality, even as they engage in sex with one another. In contrast, studio produced pornographies tend to create a clearer separation between the performance and the performer—always presenting to the viewer its uncanny façade. Here DIY technologies make such distinctions harder to discern.



**Figure 24: The *Bait Bus* website banner depicts a straight man being duped out of the monetary reward he was promised for having sex with another man.**

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(probably most) actual gay sex in fact involves external ejaculation (and did so even before AIDS).” See “Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and self-reflexivity in gay pornography”: 53.

As a second example, I offer the *Bait Bus* phenomenon for consideration.<sup>42</sup> In name, *Bait Bus* refers to the bait-and-switch form of fraud that informs this website's protocol.<sup>43</sup> In one of the most consistently duplicated narratives of any of the pornographies represented here, a crew in a van approaches and picks up a straight man from the streets. The unseen videographer tricks this man through the prospect of having sex with a woman and later through the promise of earning money into fucking a man, much to his confusion and distaste (**See Figure 24**).

All the action in this web series takes place in a large white van that drives around town as the scene unfolds. This unique location presents some striking implications for *Bait Bus*. First, the boundary between public and private that typically guards the sex act opens up as a site of contention. As the shoot commences, the viewer sees cars pass by on the streets and highways, creating a spatial dissonance that mirrors the sexual dissonance of the gay-for-pay act. That which typically remains private here publicizes itself not just to the viewer at home, but also to the unwitting public. There are resonances here to De Rome's *Underground*. This muddling of the private and public spheres, though, cannot conceal what would otherwise be considered a hostage

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.baitbus.com>

<sup>43</sup> John Mercer also writes about the Bait Bus series, which he argues forwards the idea of the predatory gay male. This makes Mercer uncomfortable for the possible queer reading that one can also perform of the series as inherently deconstructive. I would merely add that Mercer must then inherently view the queer project as a utopian one, for one could also subscribe to the anti-social thesis advanced by Edelman and Bersani and still refer to the Bait Bus series as queer. See Mercer, "Gay for Pay: The Internet and the Economics of Homosexual Desire":546-547.

situation. Certainly, on some level, the viewer recognizes the convenient fiction that—if nothing else than legally—this scenario must be staged. But taken on its own terms, the underlying violence of capture provides a third competing explanation strategy to the promises of sex with the woman and monetary reimbursement.

Upon completion of the sexual act, the perpetrators dump the duped man by the roadside without his promised reward. The same spiteful conclusion recurs in each video; the van speeds away, with its con artists laughing. The *Bait Bus* website quite proudly flouts its role in facilitating the resurgence of the gay-for-pay phenomenon, claiming to be “the original site that started a revolution, picking up straight guys, offering a little cash, and seeing how far they would go with a man.”<sup>44</sup> The site’s second tagline, though, confirms the more sinister undertone: “Granted, they were always tricked at first to already be with a guy, but once the blindfold came off and the cash came out, every guy was fucking another guy and getting his dick sucked. Join now!”<sup>45</sup>

In addition to these negative insinuations, the presence of the woman in *Bait Bus* presents a unique variation from much gay-for-pay pornography. Generally, gay-for-pay pornography dispenses with the figure of the woman or promises her as reward for undertaking gay sex without actually following through.<sup>46</sup> However, here the female

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.baitbus.com/t8/>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> The previously mentioned website [www.straightfraternity.com](http://www.straightfraternity.com) is an exception to this claim. That website maintains a separate page of videos featuring some of its gay-for-pay performers in straight sex scenes.

performer lures the straight man onto the bus, thus serving as guarantor of his heterosexuality. What begins as the promise of a blow job follows with the stipulation that the man be blindfolded, at which point a previously unseen man replaces her and proceeds to fellate the straight man. Inevitably, the straight man takes off his blindfold to see the woman pleasuring him. After the straight man's shock and protestation at having been blown by a man—and, more horrifyingly, enjoying it—the videographer renegotiates the encounter, offering the woman's desire or additional money to prolong the all-male sexual encounter (**See Figure 25**). She *wants* to see him get blown by this man, or she *wants* to see him fuck this man. In such an instance, the woman's desire and gaze are elevated above the straight man's, which must undergo a transference in order for him to go through with the act. It is a short-lived transference, though. After the duped man inevitably agrees to have anal sex, the woman vanishes from the scene until he finishes. She reappears only afterward to repair his embattled heterosexual identity,



**Figure 25: Dave from *Bait Bus* takes off his blindfold to find that a man, and not the woman promised, has been performing fellatio on him.**

but more critically to coerce him out of the van.

*Bait Bus* fabulates a sadistic fantasy for the viewer, whereby the subterfuge that leads to the sex devoid of its ultimate promise—women and money—complicates and competes with the pleasure of the sex itself. More than in “Gay Chicken,” which displayed a sense of reciprocity and full disclosure, here a kind of Schadenfreude—the pleasure derived from viewing the straight man’s misfortune—dominates the scenario. In their calculated alliance, the videographer, female performer, and gay performer hold all the cards, at least in terms of the narrative. But as numerous episodes of *Bait Bus* proliferate, a unique consequence results. Its repetitive nature lends these videos a similarity and interchangeability that come to belie its cinéma vérité.

Although the camera work, unknown status of its actors, and on-the-street environments lend these videos the semblance of authenticity, the recurring narrative structure indicates a kind of mass fabrication. This repetition undercuts any willing suspension of disbelief for the presented diegesis at the same time that formulaic narrative mitigates the recognition that the straight performer here has been—in narrative at least—sexually violated in the process. If the abuse the straight performer experiences is also part of its pleasure, the viewer can rest easy, knowing the duress portrayed is itself an act. But what might this complex depiction suggest about gay male desire? The lighthearted eroticization of homosocial bonding in “Gay Chicken” pales in comparison to *Bait Bus*, which instead displays the malice of revenge fantasy. And it

gives evidence to the difficulty in locating a singular and coherent logic to the genre.

Our third and final example concerns the performer Bravo Delta 9 and reveals gay-for-pay pornography that no longer even needs to call itself such, but rather relies on the web 2.0 structure of the Internet to facilitate the same function. According to his X-Tube profile, Bravo Delta 9 states he is “just a straight college guy who likes to show off and maybe make some cash on the side because of it. I keep an open mind and I’m not homophobic, so anybody can watch, comment, support, and get off.”<sup>47</sup>

Bravo Delta 9, whose pseudonym stands for “balls deep, or the act of inserting the penis into the vagina all the way to one’s balls,”<sup>48</sup> performs his heterosexuality through his profile and his nom de guerre. Even so, he does not disallow gay men from watching his videos, as though that were something he could control. And indeed, Bravo Delta 9 appears to have a healthy gay following. Under “Turn Ons,” on his X-Tube profile, the very first sentence admonishes—albeit graciously—men who have expressed sexual interest in him: “Sorry guys, I’m into girls, but I’m an open-minded guy and don’t mind showing off for everyone.”<sup>49</sup> This simultaneous rejection but open mindedness toward gay male desire displays the oppositionality common to gay-for-pay, one we already have seen in play in the Tyra Banks episode. Bravo Delta 9 denounces the desire, pleasure, and sexual identity of a gay man, at the same time that

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.xtube.com/community/profile.php?user=bravodelta9>

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bravo delta](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bravo%20delta)

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.xtube.com/community/profile.php?user=bravodelta9>

he beckons the projected desire of other gay men. In this sense, there is what Tom Kalin has termed a homophobic homoeroticism at play.<sup>50</sup> In his self-shot X-Tube videos, Bravo Delta 9 never records himself with anyone but himself. In fact, all of his videos on X-Tube consist of solo shoots where he masturbates by hand or with the aid of a Fleshlight sex toy. Another distinct feature of Bravo Delta 9's videos concerns his anonymity. If he does not wear aviator sunglasses, Bravo Delta 9 blurs his face. This desire to be seen but not known is consistent with much amateur pornography, where unidentifiable bodies—or bodies without heads—predominate. Other than the vaginal shape of his sex toy and the brief references to his claimed heterosexuality on his profile, nothing about Bravo Delta 9's masturbatory videos inherently substantiates a gay or straight identity. Masturbation appears to be the universal and unaffiliated sex act, or empty enough as a signifier to be tipped in either register.

Bravo Delta 9 quickly acquired a mass following on X-Tube (**See Figure 26**).

More than two-and-a-half million distinct visitors have watched his videos since they first appeared in June, 2010, and it is precisely his popularity on X-Tube, a host site for both amateur and excerpted studio pornography, that drew the attention of *CockyBoys*.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Tom Kalin, referring to Calvin Klein's new advertising campaign in 1982, writes, "[T]his was a most complicated homoeroticism, it was—contradiction of contradictions—a deeply conservative, homophobic homoeroticism. Klein and Weber exploit their male models' presumed heterosexuality and 'natural' masculine beauty. Usually athletes and working class men partially unclothed, their public semi-nudity is excused via accepted cultural modes of male bonding." See Tom Kalin, "Flesh Histories," in *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art and Contemporary Culture*, eds. Allan Klusaček and Ken Morrison (Montreal, Quebec: Véhicule Press, an artexes edition, 1992): 125.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.cockyboys.com>

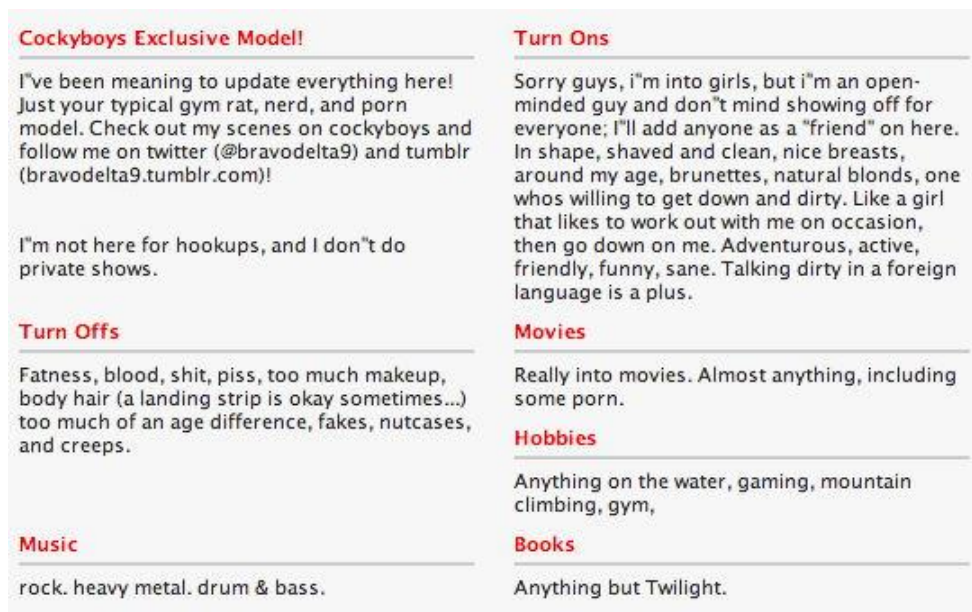


**Figure 26: A still from one of Bravo Delta's X-Tube videos, before he was discovered by the website *Cocky Boys*.**

The gay-oriented porn website *CockyBoys* focuses on, as the name suggests, boys who are cocky (although certainly the root “cock” is meant to resonate unsubtly, which usually translates into aggressive, domineering “alpha” men forcefully fucking a host of submissive sissy boys. Since May of 2012, Bravo Delta (who has since dropped the numeral “9” from his name, which was an unsubtle reference to his penis size) has appeared in seven videos for the *CockyBoys* website.

*CockyBoys* operates as a membership-only website that notably does not specialize in gay-for-pay pornography. In fact, most of its performers identify as gay men. Bravo Delta is one of the few purported straight men to feature here, and he joins the ranks as a prototypical aggressive top, which falls in line with the assumed homology between sexual identity and sexual role. How his sexual identity comes into

play in his videos contrasts greatly from “Gay Chicken” and *Bait Bus* and most other gay-for-pay pornography. No explicit mention is made of Bravo Delta’s sexual identity within the narrative diegesis of his videos. Rather, the textual features of the website, such as Bravo Delta’s *CockyBoys* profile<sup>52</sup> or the video summaries and searchable keywords allude briefly to his straightness (See Figure 27). But it is not a point dwelled upon or developed in the pornographic narrative, nor is there ever any clear explanation given for why Bravo Delta elects to perform sex with these men.



**Figure 27: Bravo Delta's *Cocky Boys* profile textually performs his heterosexuality.**

Instead, *CockyBoys* relies on Bravo Delta’s notoriety and built-in audience from X-  
Tube, where viewers were already familiar with his amateur work, to establish his  
heterosexuality, thus rendering a kind of gay-for-pay pornography that is more

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.cockyboys.com/modelstour/bravo-delta/>

dispersive and less explicit in its function. In fact, in a kind of self-reference, the first video that Bravo Delta shot for *CockyBoys* bears resemblance to the videos he self-produced on X-Tube, which again points to the open signification of masturbation. In the scene, he masturbates with the aid of several sex toys reminiscent of the Fleshlight, as he typically did on X-Tube. Here, though, among the other toys dangling from the wall are a series of sizeable dildos, which mark a stark difference from Bravo Delta's previous solo pornography and remind the viewer that the threat of penetration looms in the background—although in this video the threat does not materialize, and the dildos serve only as a visual joke or wishful thinking.

An even more notable difference between his X-Tube and *CockyBoys* videos, though, concerns the loss of Bravo Delta's anonymity, a distinction that highlights the importance of the perceived authenticity of the visual. At *CockyBoys*, Bravo Delta can no longer conceal his eyes behind sunglasses, a cropped composition, or a post-production blurred face. It is difficult, one would imagine, to be anonymously cocky. Were Bravo Delta allowed to mask his identity, there would be nothing to lose in the act of "going gay-for-pay." And so I offer another underpinning to this genre of pornography: there must be something at stake—usually some threat—for the straight man to be desirable to his viewer. In showing his face, Bravo Delta ransoms his personal identity to elevate his pornographic character's appeal, muddying the divisions between public and private as well as diegetic and non-diegetic narratives.



**Figure 28: Bravo Delta and Max Rider get each other off in a scene of mutual masturbation.**

When Bravo Delta graduates from solo shoots to duo scenes (See Figure 28), *CockyBoys* does not give him much dialogue, nor is the narrative set-up for the sex featured prominently. Rather, the sex itself acquires primacy. For instance, in his first all-male sex scene, Bravo Delta drives up to a truck stop and picks up a young man, telling him they will have to be quiet when they get to his home because his parents are asleep. Though not explicit, there are subtle indications of Bravo Delta's straightness that allows us to categorize this episode as gay-for-pay. First, this scene depicts an act of cruising or anonymous casual sex that refuses intimacy and implies shame. Bravo Delta may have sex with men, but he is not openly gay, nor can the stranger he fornicates with impugn his identity. The forewarning to be quiet upon arrival speaks to the need for secrecy, which again highlights the illicit nature of the encounter. Though this video does not barter sex for monetary incentive, the ludic rules of a game, trickery, or the chance at sex

with a woman, it subtly encodes itself in gay-for-pay's grammar of transgression and disavowal.

Although there is little explicit narrative given to explain why Bravo Delta, a purportedly straight man, has sex with other men, his previous status as amateur X-Tube star reveals new insights into the medium specificity of online pornography. To most dedicated viewers, Bravo Delta's X-Tube profile demonstrates his straightness, which continues to augment the videos he shoots for *CockyBoys*. In the rare occasion where there *is* an introductory backstory to a *CockyBoys* video, it references Bravo Delta's X-Tube videos as a kind of calling card.<sup>53</sup> So too, Bravo Delta's X-Tube profile now reciprocally makes reference to his *CockyBoys* shoots. The pornography here disperses and cites itself in and across its peer websites. One pornography does not exist hermetically by itself, but rather through the hyperlink, it expands to a vast network of past videos one has made, which can inform, haunt, or recontextualize coterminous pornography, and pornography yet to be made through an ever expanding transmedia narrative web.

### ***5.5 (Re)Mediating Heterosexuality: Online Interactions and Paratexts***

While I began with the intention of making contemporary online gay-for-pay pornography legible, these examples have necessitated a more diverse and capacious

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<sup>53</sup> Such as the video "Bravo Delta & Gabriel Tag Ben Rose!" (CockyBoys.com, 11/6/12).

approach. The definition of the genre I put forth at the onset now requires some revision. This reworking is needed especially in light of the Bravo Delta example, where the narrative lacked the evidentiary trope of explicitly proving straightness — which is instead implemented across websites through fan culture. Still, I contend that explanation strategies remain integral to gay-for-pay's logic but vary in their deployment and ultimately secure different ends. Whereas "Gay Chicken" involves a frankness to its explanation strategy and results in sex as a competition, *Bait Bus* relies on deception to lead its participants into sex as coercion. Defying both of these models, Bravo Delta's explanation strategy fails to present itself explicitly on *CockyBoys*, but this does not negate its operation.

I propose two possibilities for how the explanation strategy functions in the instance of Bravo Delta. First, its absence here serves as an invitation to the viewer to seek out further information in the same manner that *CockyBoys* illustrates Bravo Delta's heterosexuality: by compelling viewers to look elsewhere online. Bravo Delta has, in addition to his X-Tube Profile, Twitter and Tumblr accounts, sites where he promotes his porn career and connects with his fans. In just this manner, I was able to contact Bravo Delta and ask him, as others have online, what his motivation was and continues to be in filming gay porn. He suggests money and a desire to work within the medium

of film and broadcast compelled him to work for *CockyBoys*.<sup>54</sup> Whether this answer proves satisfactory is not important. Rather, what is important is that in the absence of a narrative explanation strategy, the viewer may locate information concerning the non-diegetic Bravo Delta, the one outside of the pornographic representation, and substitute it for that of Bravo Delta, the character within the pornography. The two Bravo Deltas collapse into one. The second possibility speaks to the growing codification of gay-for-pay's pornographic tropes. As the genre proliferates, its operations repeat and become better known, to the point of standardization. Perhaps the straight performer of gay-for-pay no longer needs to state his alibi; the viewer can either infer it or locate it individually.

Without an explicit explanation strategy to grant Bravo Delta permission to participate in gay sex, there is less necessity for the pornography to overlay a performance of his heterosexuality. The two operate symbiotically. Another way of stating this is, Bravo Delta's videos on *CockyBoys* behave more like conventional gay male pornography, which makes sense given that this is the website's primary focus and not gay-for-pay. So why even bother calling Bravo Delta's pornographic videos gay-for-

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<sup>54</sup> Bravo Delta responded, "The pay is nice, and it helps get me through school when I'm not working. It's not just for the money (though); I've always been into video production, I've worked in a high school news studio since I was in 6th grade and I've worked for public access groups for at least 6 years. Originally, I wanted to get into film or broadcast production, but I always had a small desire to be in porn (either production or acting)." Bravo Delta. Personal interview. 29 Nov. 2012.

pay? In Bravo Delta's case, a few textual features on *CockyBoys* and the reference of his X-Tube profile cursorily insinuate his heterosexuality, but in this regard, even the X-Tube profile makes only a modest attempt. Taken with the minimally-invoked explanation strategy, Bravo Delta's heterosexuality leaves a great deal to the imagination, and only direct communication seems to offer answers, which points to the integral coevolution of the genre and its medium.

The barriers, after all, between the performer and the viewer have never been so fluid. Another side effect of amateurism is that one can use Twitter or X-Tube messaging to reach out to the performer. The act of discerning the explanation strategy by this method places the onus once again on the non-diegetic—or the performer's life beyond the pornographic representation—as the site of authenticity. It may even provide the pleasure of and for the viewer, who is more devoted to, involved in, and implicated by the depiction of the real, whether that is onscreen or off.

The interactivity here is no accident, nor is the imbrication of gay-for-pay pornography with amateur aesthetics, which I have argued demonstrates its aspiration for documentation and *cinéma vérité*. These features are both influenced by the medium specificity of online pornography, and as such, they are discursively tied to their time of production and contemporary distribution technologies. Gay-for-pay as a category is not new, but rather it is a genre of pornography popularized in its current form from a long

line of precursors. Its various antecedents go back as long as gay male erotica has been produced, starting in an associative manner with the stag film.<sup>55</sup>

John R. Burger marks the development of the gay-for-pay as a phenomenon originating somewhere between 1982-1988 in *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography*.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, Burger connects the arrival of this genre of porn with the unique historical shift in pornographic reception: the advent of the home video market, which revolutionized porn production, distribution, and consumption. Prior to this change of format, Burger argues pornography was produced for the gratification of its creators—the director and performer—but that afterwards, it becomes a profession or craft:

When gay video became big business, the filmmakers became money moguls, and the concept of porn stars developed into a full-blown star system. [...] Backed by ample budgets, (directors) were able to afford the latest in video technology and production values, as well as prime models. The objects of these directors' erotic desires are young, muscular, 'straight looking' guys. Through the lures of money and potential fame, (directors) employed many straight performers for their videos: 'gay for pay,' as it is known in the trade.<sup>57</sup>

Like Escoffier, Burger's claim returns us to the "porn star," but also to the moment that VHS turned pornography into a trade. Why, though, must that transition have negated pleasure on behalf of the directors and performers? This was the very same displeasure

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas Waugh's compelling study *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* closely explicates the phenomenon of the stag film of the early 20th Century. Stag films were marginal pornographic films made for viewing in private among small groups of nominally straight men.

<sup>56</sup> John R. Burger *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Hayworth Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

we saw animating the last chapter in the 1990s. Professions and trades, too, can be pleasurable. What Burger's line of thinking gestures toward but falls short of developing is the desire of the viewer, whose shifting reception from the theater to the home must have contributed in some part to the casting change. While it remains possible that directors had always wanted to hire straight performers and could only afford to do so because of VHS, a more comprehensive account would need to consider the influence of the home viewer.

One scholar who contemplates this question more broadly is Julian Hanich. Hanich analyzes the remediation of porn<sup>58</sup> from the big screen to the home, wherein he argues that the shift in the distribution of porn through the computer results in an increase in availability, choice, and interactivity for the user. This explanation is apt, but his assertion that this medium shift is inherently a move from a public to a private space deserves reconsideration. This point is critical to Hanich's argument, which itself rebuts Magnus Ullen's disavowal of the importance of medium specificity for porn scholarship,<sup>59</sup> because it suggests the move inside the home lends the porn-watcher a safe haven in which he can avoid a sense of shame. Hanich diminishes shame's role by suggesting the cyberporn user engages in a private act in a private space, as if one can

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<sup>58</sup> Hanich, Julian. "Clips, Clicks and Climax: Notes on the Relocation and Remediation of Pornography." *Jump Cut*, No. 53 summer 2011 Web. 10 November 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Ullen, Magnus. "Pornography and its Critical Reception: Toward a Theory of Masturbation." *Jump Cut*, No. 51 spring 2009 Web. 10 November 2011.

only feel shame in public, and he goes on to claim this move to the private space can intensify the masturbatory force of watching porn. But is the use of the home computer—or, increasingly, the tablet or cell phone—tantamount to privacy? While it may be accessed in private, the Internet is a virtual public. We need only think of cookies, search histories, ad trackers, Amazon and Netflix recommendations, pay-only sites, chatrouettes, cam-sites, social networks, NSA's Prism program to point out some of the ways in which the moves we make online are monitored, shared, and tracked by governments, advertisers, institutions, online friends, and other third parties. It is not radical to suggest going online means leaving a trace, one that can be followed accidentally or intentionally. Our porn histories are part of that trace. My amendment to Hanich, then, is that the act of going online is a complex oscillation between private and public spaces.

In *Screening Sex*, Linda Williams complements this observation by tracing the ramifications of pornographic reception as it moves from the big screen to computational media. Williams' twofold argument states that whereas cinematic pornography constituted the viewer as a spectator—with the larger-than-life sex on the big screen intended to arouse—the smaller screen versions of pornography figure the viewer as an interactive-user. Thus, rather than arousing, this medium of pornography

actually facilitates the act of coming to orgasm.<sup>60</sup> The larger cinematic format preserves a distance both spatial and temporal from the porn to the viewer, while pornography viewed on the computer dissipates these distances. Furthermore, Williams argues that it is not just in proximity to but also in proportionate scale that the spatial qualities of porn become equivalent to the human form; the image is both within reach and life-sized.<sup>61</sup> It is as though the viewer can, despite the interface of the screen, reach out and touch the image, which has gained a haptic resonance. The more striking evolution to online pornography, though, is the shrinking temporal gap between performance and reception. With web cameras, the two are nearly instantaneous.<sup>62</sup> Here then, there is a paradigm shift in the kind of pornography that the medium itself favors.

Why does this shift matter? Whereas the pornographies of literature and cinema have been structured on an Aristotelian model of immersive and emplotted narrative, Internet pornography—in its interactivity, mixture of public and private spheres, and dissipation of the gap between the time of production and consumption—fundamentally alters the relation between the viewer and the pornography, so that suddenly the consumer of porn holds the potential to become the consumed object.

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<sup>60</sup> Linda Williams, "Conclusion: Now Playing on a Small Screen," *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 312.

<sup>61</sup> Williams perhaps overstates this spatial equivalence, for in the instance of online pornography, the computer screen rarely contains life-sized images, but in fact tends to diminish the size of the human form. The broader point, though, that the image has changed from larger-than life to an approximation of human size still holds true.

<sup>62</sup> Linda Williams, "Conclusion: Now Playing on a Small Screen," 300 – 317.

Tellingly, what all of the gay-for-pay porn I have looked at shares is its invocation — whether scripted or documented — of amateurism in some form.<sup>63</sup> The pledges in “Gay Chicken” were relative unknowns, as were the revolving door of men featured on *Bait Bus*. Only in the case of Bravo Delta did we see a performer approaching the status of porn star, but he too began as an unknown on X-Tube.

The predominance of amateurism in gay-for-pay and indeed in much online pornography matters not just because performers now appear less idealized and more like their viewers. In addition, online amateurism not only invites the viewer to come to orgasm, as Williams suggests, but invites them to *become* pornographers themselves.<sup>64</sup> The very DIY recording and editing technologies that capture and distribute the gay-for-pay corpus we have looked at are readily available to most viewers. This opportunity to become a pornographer and the fluidity of temporal and disseminative boundaries echoes and inflect the oscillation between gay and straight identities.

The Internet allows pornography the option to give up the finessed façade of professional pornography and to embrace the grittiness, amateurism, and documentary

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<sup>63</sup> The otherwise slickly produced website *CockyBoys* is perhaps the outlier to this claim, and yet it too maintains amateur features. Constance Penley writes of professional adult film companies in the 1980s and 1990s producing fake amateur films, or “pro-am” films, after amateurism first gained popularity. See “Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn,” 111. I argue this trend carries through to Internet pornography, where the distinction between true amateurism and its simulation continues to blur, but what is consistent is the invocation of authenticity and proximity to so-called “real” encounters.

<sup>64</sup> *CockyBoys* even has a form that its users can fill out if they should have an interest in becoming a performer for the site. In fact, one of their regulars (Dillon Rossi) joined in just this manner, winning a fan contest.

quality of real sex. Much of contemporary gay-for-pay has taken this path, venerating authenticity over fabrication. In an ironic turn, though, the material inscriptions that substantiate this authenticity consist of features like night-vision, blurred or choppy frame rates, and uncut footage or stationary cinematography. These very features, which in conventional cinema and video would have seemed inauthentic or disruptive, here are not only legitimate but indeed substantiate the marks of reality. Furthering this irony, the reality the viewer receives is one that largely appears unrecognizable, where sexual identity and sexual acts are incommensurate and indeterminacy reigns.

### **5.6 *Dialectics of Indeterminacy***

How do we then think about gay-for-pay, and what does it tell us about the reeducation of gay desire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In this chapter, I have scrutinized gay-for-pay as a popular genre in contemporary online pornography, but what more can this kind of examination reveal? Is it, following Lauren Berlant, a form of cruel optimism, an attachment to compromised situations that would seem to inhibit the gay male viewer's very thriving? Berlant writes, "Misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) describes the psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire."<sup>65</sup> Does the gay male viewer misrecognize, and if so, what? Does he misrecognize that straight figure as a thinly veiled gay performance? Does he misrecognize the straight figure as himself? Or does he

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<sup>65</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 122.

misrecognize himself as the gay figure who could have sex with the straight one? There seems to be no end to the misrecognitions that might inhere in gay-for-pay. That said, it also seems counterintuitive to deliver a sentence for a genre of pornography that aspires to indeterminacy. With this caveat in mind, I offer two tentative interpretations.

The first interpretation carries forth the logic introduced in the Tyra Banks episode and results in an ossification and policing of the boundaries of gay and straight identity. This interpretation denounces gay-for-pay's deconstructive method of operation and the way that it complicates predetermined knowledge formations. It attempts to disambiguate the ambiguous, and to that end obsesses with the business of unmasking—or outing—the straight performer as actually gay. As such, it reinforces and hardens old understandings of gay and straight, promotes the notion of gaydar or the affective reading of the surface, and decries an eroticism of homophobic homoeroticism not because it is homophobic, but because it is not homophobic *enough*. When gay-for-pay pornography foregoes the gay identity associated with all-male sex acts, this interpretation reads such a disavowal as an endorsement of homophobia but an inadequate one. In allowing straight men to experience such sex and yet to remain straight, the perceived cohesion of heterosexuality diminishes, which then requires an even more intensified homophobia to reconstitute itself.

The second interpretation embraces the pleasure of indeterminacy and as such relies on the breakdown of gay and straight boundaries and a falling away from identity

categories to a more liberatory experience of bodies and pleasures, or a spectrum of sexual satisfaction. This second interpretation suggests a utopic potential for porn, as clichéd as that notion has become. It is also an interpretation that many who identify as gay or queer might disfavor. For in such a utopia, an egalitarianism of the sexual replaces the security of sexual minorities. And yet there is another possibility that is less sweeping.

Gay-for-pay does not after all do away with the identity categories of gay or straight, and the disruption it allows is only for the self-identified straight man to remain as such. Perhaps rather than offering polymorphous perversity, the gay male desire for a past fantasy emerges: the memory of a time when his lust for men was not yet incorporated into an identity—when, by default, he was still deemed heterosexual. By their hegemonic dominance, heterosexuals do not experience the transition from one identity formation to another, the act of coming out of the closet. Gay-for-pay offers the fleeting recreation of the moment when sexual acts codify the subject into a sexual identity and asks, why must these two equate? The disruption here ultimately honors an ambiguity that gestures to the constructedness not just of homosexuality but also of heterosexuality.

Both of these interpretations tellingly rely on the other. To rigidify, there must be ambiguity. To ambiguate, there must be rigidity. It seems not so likely that one interpretation more accurately discerns this pornography's cultural position, but that the

two are necessary to inflect and mutually inscribe the other. Just as gay-for-pay favors indeterminacy, so too gay male desire might reside not in one interpretation or the other, but in a conflicted joining of the two. Gay-for-pay provides a glimpse into not just the fantasy of gayness, but also that of straightness, bound as these identity formations are to one another and to the narratives and technologies we use to get off.

## 6. Conclusion: The Queer Heart of Porn Studies

Like pornography, queerness occupies the space of what resists the advances of knowledge, what conceptualization can't domesticate by way of its will-to-identity. As such it never coincides with itself, never quickens into form.

—Lee Edelman<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1 Remapping Disciplinary Boundaries

*Pornographesis* has been an attempt to map some of the formal particularities of gay pornography across its denotative production over the last half century. It seems fitting here, at its end—or rather, at “the fantasy of its closure”<sup>2</sup>—to look to the disciplines that shaped its formation and to engage them more closely. Pulling the lens back slightly, in the following coda I track porn studies and queer theory's many inscriptions, desires, and aversions, in order to see how *Pornographesis* has negotiated the fantasies that inform their disciplinary formations. This leads me to a series of questions that I hope will be productive to future research projects, including: What is the relation of porn studies to queer theory, and vice versa? What are their incongruities? How might thinking the two epistemological projects together offer new insights into each?

Linda Williams writes in a retrospective assessment of porn studies that the field achieved legibility under the discipline of film and video studies. Williams goes on to note that the study of pornography might have thrived, too, under “history,

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Edelman, “Unbecoming: Pornography and the Queer Event,” in *Post Porn Politics: Queer-Feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex-Work as Culture Production*, ed. Tim Stüttgen (Berlin: b\_books, 2009): 38.

<sup>2</sup> Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2012): 313.

anthropology, cultural studies, or the then-developing queer studies.”<sup>3</sup> I am curious about the final category in Williams’s list, and turn with more granularly to queer theory, a foundational, though not synonymous, antecedent to and sometimes awkward collaborator with the more broadly construed queer studies. In particular, I am interested in answering the following: What does queer theory teach us about porn studies?<sup>4</sup>

The familial resemblance between these projects in the late 1980s and early 1990s suggests that their co-emergence was perhaps not incidental at all, but rather resulted from sex-positive feminist and non-straight scholars who, amidst the culture wars (and the rise of neoliberalism), took that indeterminate site of power—sexuality—as their primary object of study at the intersection of media and praxis. Both porn studies and queer theory are deeply indebted to Foucauldian thought in their deployment of historical discourse analysis, poststructuralist methodologies, articulations of power, and unabashed interests in perversion. Both projects emerged in dissent toward and reconfiguration of second-wave feminism; both share an objective to denaturalize sex and uncover its social constructions; and both agitate against the patriarchal processes of normalization.

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Williams, "Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field," *Porn Studies* 1.1 (2014): 25.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow here from Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s pedagogical essay “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” *PMLA* 110 (1995), 343.

Queer theory initially took dissident sexual expression, and the cultural legibility of those acts, as the impulse to distance itself from the anti-porn tenets of much second-wave feminism. Gayle Rubin's 1984 essay "Thinking Sex" was highly influential in queer theory's formation and asked why feminism could not yet think critically about sexual practices that fell outside of "the charmed circle," that imagined division between "good" sex and "bad" sex.<sup>5</sup> In her diagram, pornography unsurprisingly falls outside of this circle, as do homosexual sex acts. Rubin's own writing responded in part to the infamous 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality that had tumultuously brought together bristling factions of anti-pornography and anti-censorship feminists. Porn studies, too, emerged out of that tumult, for early porn studies scholars had to defend themselves against the media effects debates of anti-porn feminists.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Rubin wanted to "think sex," Linda Williams in *Hard Core* (1989) sought to "speak sex,"<sup>7</sup> which revealed her Foucauldian influence and the enunciatory imperative of sex. Williams goes on to theorize the cultural position of pornography as "on/scene," which she defines as "the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and

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<sup>5</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, (Boston, Mass.: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984): 267-319.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance: Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Thomas Waugh, "Men's Pornography: Gay vs. Straight," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 30 (1985): 30-35; Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> The title and focus of Williams's first chapter is "Speaking Sex." *Ibid.*, 1-33.

pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene.”<sup>8</sup>

The tension of on/scenity diagnoses pornography and its study as an open secret that requires a defensive posture to reconcile. On/scenity also reveals the arbitrary line between the unacceptable and acceptable, signaling the importance of context. A medical diagram of the naked body in the doctor’s office isn’t pornography, but in a different space, it could be. That slipperiness is something to which queer theory is also no stranger.

In the case of porn studies, on/scenity installs a voyeuristic logic into the very project of exploring a genre that, according to Williams, is all about “speaking sex.” In response to longstanding media effects debates that seek an etiological answer to variations on the question, “Does pornography cause X?,”<sup>9</sup> perhaps we could say that the desire to locate an etiology is always already premised on the desire for eradication, rather than understanding.<sup>10</sup> Porn studies, then, is about complications to visibility, as

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<sup>8</sup> This definition comes from Williams’s introduction to her anthology *Porn Studies*, but she first coined the term in the added epilogue to the second edition of *Hard Core*. In fact, she has revealed elsewhere that *Pornographies On/Scene* had been her preferred title for the anthology that would become *Porn Studies*. See: Williams, “Introduction,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 5; Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 282; Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” *Porn Studies* 1.1 (2014), 34.

<sup>9</sup> In the 1980s, the X of this formula stood for rape/violence/misogyny, but more recent media effects debates have come to treat pornography as a (mental) health crisis. X in the latter case can be seen to mean any number of things: erectile dysfunction, lowered libido, heightened libido, depression, anxiety, anti-social behavior, addiction, or—and classically—the demise of a relationship.

<sup>10</sup> Here I reference Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s queer critique: “There currently exists no origins or development of individual gay identity that is not already structured by an implicit, trans-individual Western project or fantasy of eradicating that identity.” “Introduction: Axiomatic,” in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), 41.

Williams famously terms the “frenzy of the visible,” where tropes like the “money shot” stand in as constructions of desire’s so-called “truth.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is a field capable of political critique, often in service to questions of obscenity and censorship. And not unlike the ocular tension of on/scenity, queer theory has always been a political project aimed toward unsettling the boundaries of heteronormativity and interrogating those subjects who fall outside,<sup>12</sup> and in its utopian versions, imagining an otherwise.<sup>13</sup>

When the term “queer” travels within porn studies, however, it often fails to denote queer theory’s inaugural desire that it evade culturally legible sexual-identity categories. The “queer” of queer theory initially sought to undermine referentiality and to question the construction of identity structures, whereas the broader “queer studies” was more likely to codify identities into discrete and legible categories to further the pursuit of civil rights and recognitions.<sup>14</sup> “Queer” within porn studies follows a more

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, *Hard Core*, 36; 112-113.

<sup>12</sup> The question of normativity permeates queer theory. Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant coined the term *heteronormativity* and in a footnote coined its related term *homonormativity*, which Lisa Duggan then elaborated upon. Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson’s critique the codification of anti-normativity within queer theory as a, ironically, normalized practice. See Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical inquiry* 24.2 (1998): 547-566; Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward A Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 175-94; Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson, “Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” *differences*, special issue “Queer Theory without Antinormativity,” 26.1 (2015): 1-25.

<sup>13</sup> Here I am thinking of José Muñoz’s notion of *disidentification* or Michael Warner’s use of *counterpublics*, both projects that challenge or work against dominant process in order to provide refuge to the disenfranchised. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 49-90.

<sup>14</sup> Queer Theory has not been able to fend off implications of being an umbrella term for minority sexual identitarian categories, but I want to follow its initial desire to do precisely that.

identitarian approach to “queer” than queer theory’s aspirations had demanded, adopting its usage as fairly synonymous to “gay” and “lesbian.” As I demonstrated at the outset of *Pornographesis*, film scholars Thomas Waugh<sup>15</sup> and Richard Dyer<sup>16</sup> were foundational to the study of gay pornography in the 1980s, but rarely did their work trouble these identitarian categories; more often their work engaged in the feminist “sex wars” by taxonomizing gay pornography in order to reveal its distinctions (and distance) from heterosexual “smut.”

From the 1990s onward, gay and lesbian porn scholarship experienced a veritable explosion of scholarly writing.<sup>17</sup> Williams notes this ascent as well, stating that

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<sup>15</sup> See: Thomas Waugh, “A Heritage of Pornography: on the Gay Film Collection of the Kinsey Institute,” *The Body Politic*, No. 90 (January 1983): 29-33; Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Thomas Waugh, “Men’s Pornography, Gay vs. Straight,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 30 (March 1985): 30-35; Thomas Waugh, “Men’s Pornography, Gay vs. Straight’: A Personal Revisit,” *Porn Studies*, 4:2 (2017): 131-138; Thomas Waugh, “Homosociality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen,” *Sexualities*, Vol 4, Issue 3: 275-291.

<sup>16</sup> See: Richard Dyer, “Male Gay Porn, Coming to Terms,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 30 (March 1985): 27-29; Richard Dyer, “Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography,” *Critical Quarterly* (March 1994): 49-62.

<sup>17</sup> Here is an abbreviated overview: Heather Butler, “What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers? The Development of Lesbian and Dyke Pornography,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 167-197; José B Capino, “Seminal Fantasies: Wakefield Poole, Pornography, Independent Cinema and the Avant-Garde,” in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 155-173; John R. Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Hayworth Press, 1995); Jeffrey Escoffier, *Bigger Than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* (Philadelphia: Running Dog Press, 2009); Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis,” in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 145-68; Lucas Hildebrand, “Historical Fantasies: 1970s Gay Male Pornography in the Archives,” *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representation in the 1970s*, eds. Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 327-348; Nguyen Tan Hoang, “The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2230-270; John Mercer, *Gay pornography: Representations of Sexuality and Masculinity* (London: IB Tauris, 2017); Cindy Patton, *LA Plays Itself/Boys in the Sand: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014); Cherry Smyth, “The

the “queer and ‘queering’ approach has perhaps flourished the most” in the field of porn studies. She goes on to explain that the “growing field [of] studying gay pornography...can be expected to flourish because the scholars who write about these pornographies have found them crucial to their identities as gays or queers.”<sup>18</sup> In this quotation, Williams presents the terms *gay* and *queer* alongside one another, almost interchangeably, but also as *constitutive of* identity.

While I do not dispute the importance of pornography to gay culture and identity, the way in which “queer” signifies here—as if “covering all the bases”—diverges starkly from queer theory’s fantasy of the very disruption of identities.<sup>19</sup> Why do Williams, and porn studies more broadly, tend to conflate these terms? One answer may be that activists’ reclamation of the homophobic slur “queer” as a signifier of pride during the AIDS epidemic brought “queer” and “gay” together *before* queer theory sought to disarticulate these terms.<sup>20</sup> In her foundational essay “Queer and Now” (1993), Eve Sedgwick writes that “same-sex sexual object choice” remains the definitional center

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Pleasure Threshold: Looking at Lesbian Pornography on Film,” *Feminist Review* 34.1 (1990): 152-159; Jack Stevenson, “From the Bijou to the Bedroom: A Secret History of Gay Sex Cinema,” *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 24-31.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” 26.

<sup>19</sup> It deserves note that queer theory has itself also been taken to task for failing to mean more than “gay and lesbian.” See, for instance: Susan Stryker, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 2 (2004): 212-215.

<sup>20</sup> In a strange anthropomorphism, the field of queer theory can sometimes appear to take the form of the person with AIDS (PWA)—whose political activism so heavily informs its birth—as seen by countless critics who will with regularity declare the health of the field as wavering, diminished, on life support, and in many cases, over.

of queerness; simultaneously, she calls for “queer” to signify *more than* same-sex attraction.<sup>21</sup> The tension of making same-sex object choice central while simultaneously refusing to limit queerness to an identificatory understanding of “gay” can also be seen in her development of a “universalizing vs. minoritizing” framework. Sedgwick deployed these latter concepts to destabilize and ultimately disrupt the longstanding “nature vs. nurture” debates that struggled to find an etiology to homosexuality, but this tension also reveals the scales at which her vision for a queer discourse operated: with the universalizing project of coming to terms with, on the one hand, myriad forms of sexual “difference” existing beyond discrete identity categories, and, on the other, the minoritizing project of supporting “gay men” during the AIDS crisis<sup>22</sup>. In other words, the “queer” of queer theory often served, at least in its earliest articulations, as a concept whose referent was slippery, and as such was imagined to offer a radical hermeneutic for disrupting received knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

In the ideal queer theory, then, “queer” holds a complicated meaning that is at once deferential toward but not isomorphic with same-sex attraction. But within porn studies, this distinction seems to hold little critical purchase. If queer theory has been in a near-constant state of flux—if not being declared “over,” then articulating its failures

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<sup>21</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

<sup>22</sup> In an interesting bridging of praxis and representation, the pornography industry was one of the first cultural institutions to heed the call of queer activists by incorporating safer sex protocols and disclaimers into the gay pornography of the era. See: Cindy Patton, *Fatal Advice: How Safe-Sex Education Went Wrong* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 118-138.

<sup>23</sup> Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” 8.

and lacuna incessantly so as to start its project anew — porn studies has, until recently, appeared less reflective and critical of its approach. That, however, is beginning to change.<sup>24</sup> Whereas queer theory has come to attend the textual and the political structures that challenge dissident identities, porn studies has tended to be more text-oriented, and so has a more traditional hermeneutic upbringing, bound like so many other humanistic fields to the project of close reading. Porn studies grounds itself in close reading, although that, too, is beginning to find nuance through historicist, archival, industry, and reception methodologies. As I cited in the introduction, John Champagne's early polemic "Stop Reading Films"<sup>25</sup> calls for scholars to leave behind the textual analysis of gay pornography for a more contextual analysis of the sexually fluid reception and exhibition practices.<sup>26</sup> Here, then, we see a branch of porn studies that casts doubt on the methodology and epistemology of gay pornography as texts and takes a queerer approach to apprehending pornography's social meanings. My own approach has not been to follow Champagne down the path of no-more-readings, but

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<sup>24</sup> The meta-discursive analysis of pornography studies as a field is in short supply, but is beginning to be written about. See: Linda Williams "Notes on a Weedy Field," Tim Dean's introduction in *Porn Archives*, Laura Kipnis's chapter "How to Read Pornography" from *Bound and Gagged*, and Frances Ferguson's *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action*.

<sup>25</sup> John Champagne, "Stop Reading Films!: Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Summer, 1997): 76-97

<sup>26</sup> We can add to this tradition the following: José B. Capino, "Homologies of Text, Space and Spectatorship in All-Male Adult Theaters," *Cinema Journal* 45.1 (2005): 50-65; Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, "The 'World' of All Male Pornography: On the Public 'Place' of Moving-Image Sex in the Era of Pornographic Transnationalism," in *More Dirty Looks*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 2004), 110-127; Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

rather to take his approach of questioning the very epistemological project he undertakes (or chooses *not* to undertake) as a constitutive part of the project of porn scholarship that often is not addressed explicitly.

In looking to the contemporary online form of pornography, the proliferation of naming and categorization would seem to codify a host of paraphilias into identity structures; if you can think it, there is porn for it, the Internet meme “Rule 34” tells us.<sup>27</sup> The genres and structures of desire that pornography caters toward are seemingly endless. Linda Williams notes in the epilogue to the second edition of *Hard Core* (1999) that she cannot do justice the variety that had emerged since the 1980s, although she tries, including the following pornographic entries: sadomasochism, yuppie, gonzo, amateur, fetish, bondage and discipline, instructional, “real” lesbian, bisexual, fat, enema, spanking, transvestism, transgender, racial and ethnic.<sup>28</sup> What is striking is Williams’s observation, though, of an illegibility that simultaneously attends this inundation of forms: “unitary categories of identity begin to cross and blur.”<sup>29</sup> To her list, we can add feminist<sup>30</sup> and queer porn,<sup>31</sup> ready for ethical consumption, as well as newer digital forms with less ethical valences: cam shows, revenge porn, dick pics, etc..

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Rule%2034>

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1999): 301-303.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>30</sup> See Taormino, Tristan, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Constance Penley, and Mireille Miller-Young, eds. *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> *Community Action Center* stands as a prime example of queer pornography that actively seeks to disrupt identity formations. See *Community Action Center*, directed by A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner (2010; Chicago, IL: Video Data Bank, 2010), DVD.

In *Carnal Resonance*, Susanna Paasonen echoes Williams in her suspicion that such categorizations lend themselves to clear identities, insisting that “sexual depictions and activities need to be considered outside the framework of fixed identity categories. A queer orientation to pornography involves analytical curiosity and openness that does not start from or resort to binary models.”<sup>32</sup>

Porn studies can also help us to examine queer theory more closely. One notable interlocution concerns the question of queer theory’s diminishing interest in sexuality in some fronts and expansion into others.<sup>33</sup> Tim Dean writes that “queer studies, like the broader lesbian and gay political movements to which it bears a complex relationship, has won institutional respectability by strategically distancing itself from the messiness of the erotic.”<sup>34</sup> For a field that once tried to “think sex,” queer theory’s attention grows ever more divergent in its myriad inclinations: camp aesthetics, canon formations, gender performativity, counterpublics, disidentification, anti-sociality, utopianism, temporality, intersectionality, affect, failure, and anti-normativity. After an initial burst of tracts that focused on sexuality,<sup>35</sup> only in rare and often spectacular instances—as in Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant’s essay “Sex in Public”—does “sex” appear

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<sup>32</sup> By binary models, Susanna Paasonen seeks to disband pornographic thinking posed in terms of, “us and them, in and out, gay and straight.” See *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 153.

<sup>33</sup> For more on this question, see Janet Halley, and Andrew Parker, eds. *After sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Tim Dean, “No Sex Please, We’re American,” *American Literary History*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2015): 616.

<sup>35</sup> Here I am thinking of Gayle Rubin and Leo Bersani. See Rubin, “Thinking Sex”; Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009).

anymore (here as exhibitionist erotic vomiting). Queer of color critique, though, disorients and demands a reconsideration of this observation. Several scholars in this field, including Samuel Delany, Darieck Scott, Kobena Mercer, Jennifer Nash, Juana Rodriguez, Mirielle Miller-Young, Robert Reid-Pharr, Ariane Cruz, Nguyen Tan Hoang, and Robert Fang, take on the complex question of the imbrications of sex, queerness, and race. The tendency to treat sex early on in queer theory as a racially unmarked – and by default white, as well as predominantly male, experience – ushered in the need for an intersectional analysis of sex, one which did not make any more assumptions.<sup>36</sup> I want to suggest that the inclusion of pornography – as media form – into this matrix offers a compelling and underserved perspective from which to adjudicate sexuality. Tim Dean’s audaciously (auto)ethnographic *Unlimited Intimacy* offers one example in recent scholarship that brings queer theory and porn studies into conversation, taking on the rise of bareback sex communities by looking to Treasure Island Media’s gay pornography as its object of analysis.

Queer theory can help porn studies chart new lines of thought, as well. What would it mean, for instance, to take Paasonen’s suggestion that we treat pornography

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<sup>36</sup> This same phenomenon can be seen in identitarian discourses of homosexuality that presume whiteness. See, Allan Bérubé, “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays,” in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, ed. by Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): 234-265. Roderick A. Ferguson offers a good starting point for thinking queer of color critique’s intersectional and disidentificatory approach as a kind of corrective. He writes, “Queer of color analysis disidentifies with historical materialism to rethink its categories and how they might conceal the materiality of race, gender, and sexuality. In this instance, to disidentify in no way means to discard” (5). See his *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

with less familiarity, and defamiliarize our understanding of it through its formal incitation of rhythms, durations, tropes, forces, and structures? Since porn studies has so aptly deconstructed the fictive representations of female pleasure through the “frenzy of the visible” and “the money shot,” a deconstructive approach to pornography’s rendering of sexual identity would seem fitting. What would it mean, furthermore, to not read pornography as having an *all-already-thereness*<sup>37</sup>—that is, as a text whose meaning it wears on its sleeve—but to challenge pornography’s capacity to represent beyond its surface and to incorporate its complicated haptic and affective dimensions into that interpretation? Lastly, what would it mean to broaden the kinds of questions that porn studies can ask, that is, to treat the study of pornography as an interdisciplinary project that takes seriously Williams’s observation of the resonance it holds across a number of disciplines?

In comparing these two epistemological projects, I have traced homologies that suggest a strong filiation between queer theory and porn studies, but their complementarity reflects their different and curious particularities, too. For while queer theory and porn studies appear increasingly to intersect—beyond even the rise of purportedly queer and feminist pornographies—they also leave impressions on one another, which I have tried to make explicit. Linda Williams’s suggestion that porn

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<sup>37</sup> I derive this concept from Eugenie Brinkema’s provocative essay “Irrumation, the Interrogative: Extreme Porn and the Crisis of Reading” which pushes against the notion of pornography’s supposed self-evidence. *Polygraph* 26 (Winter 2017): 130-164.

studies might have flourished under queer studies invites us to consider the ways that queer theory—queer studies’ instantiating hermeneutic—might yet reinscribe porn studies’ project. To study pornography has continued to require a rigorous defense<sup>38</sup>—what I call “the disclaimer”—of the critical value of the very object before the analysis we hope to pursue can begin. In my opening, I referred to this as “the wound” that porn studies could not seem to help but return to, time and again. I also located the exceptional position as a reactive gesture to the defensive posture: we study pornography because it is titillating, utopian, liberatory; or, we study pornography because it is deleterious, dystopian, imprisoning. Porn studies can learn from queer theory to be messier, more promiscuous, capacious, and unfamiliar, and acknowledge the queerness of such a project without relying on exceptionalism.

As queer theory has taught us, there is more one way to be queer, and more than one queer theoretic. Another lesson queer theory tries to teach is one of failure and reinvention: its own founding desire to pursue an anti-identitarian epistemology may have been impossible, but this aspirational goal opened up new lines of thought.

*Pornographesis* has tried to open up new lines of thought, too, and to be lovingly critical of porn studies by shaking off some of its attachments. Another lesson queer theory teaches us is to let our objects surprise us. Pornography—for all the shock our culture

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<sup>38</sup> In an ironic turn, it is contemporary queer theory that appears to be more institutionalized and less in need of a defense.

would like to give it—is often quite boring, rote, and formulaic. Such repetition can be helpful, when trying to limn the borders of new forms and genres, but it can also result in stagnant observations. The pornography I read in *Pornographesis* I gravitated toward because I didn't understand it from the outset; it was complicated; it didn't follow the rules I thought pornography had established. Many of my conclusions, as a result, rest in the uneasy space of ambiguity. In that sense, I may be guilty of having selected pornography that was non-normative within an already minoritarian counterpornography, making extrapolation on a broader level hard to achieve. While I sought defamiliarization, I also sought a sense of historicism and constancy to hold *Pornographesis* together, which is why, against my better queer aspirations, I oriented this project as one of the gay male subject. Here, then, is how I split the difference. These are gay male pornographies, but they provide radically different portraits and knowledges across time. In that sense, I have multiplied the ways we can look at homosexual desire and identity, which, when viewed together, refuses easy sedimentation. Following Edelman, *Pornographesis* inscribes; it also de-scribes.

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## Biography

John Paul Stadler was born in Columbus, Ohio on August 8, 1982. He received his Bachelor of Arts in 2005 in English and Film & Media Studies from Washington University in St. Louis and his Master of Fine Arts in 2009 in Fiction Writing from the University of Colorado, Boulder. His publications include "Introduction to 'Pleasure and Suspicion'" (*Polygraph* 26, 2017, with Rachel E. Greenspan), *Prehistoric (The Cupboard Pamphlet)*, 2016), "Pornography After Sex: or The Archival Turn in Porn(ography) Studies" (*Polygraph* 25, 2015), "Critical Bottoming: Repositioning Male Effeminacy and Its Racialization" (*Reviews in Cultural Theory*, August 2014), "What Will Be: The Deferred Language of Vito Acconci," (*Art & Documentation*, Fall 2014), and "Dire Straights: The Indeterminacy of Sexual Identity in Gay-for-Pay Pornography" (*Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 55, Fall 2013). At Duke University, he was the recipient of the Bass Instructional Fellowship (2016-2017), The Women's Studies Dissertation Fellowship (2015-2016), The Domestic Dissertation Travel Award (2014, 2016), Summer Research Fellowship (2015, 2013), and Conference Travel Award (2014). He holds certificates from Duke in Feminist Studies and Information Science + Studies, and belongs to the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts (SLSA).