

# RISK AND UTOPIA

## A Dialogue on Pornography

Paul Morris and Susanna Paasonen

In his 1977 essay “Entertainment and Utopia,” the film scholar Richard Dyer maps the utopian sensibilities of entertainment. For Dyer, the point of entertainment is to present “what utopia would feel like” and to provide solutions to social tensions, inadequacies, and absences experienced in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> The utopian promise of entertainment is of “something better” that viewers can escape to and that moves and touches them on the plane of the affective. The utopian promise of porn is one of carnal intensity, sexual plenitude, and pleasure. The literary scholar Steven Marcus describes these utopian aspects of the genre—the abundant depiction of sexual acts and flowing desires—with the notion of “pornotopia.”<sup>2</sup>

Originating from an interest in pornography—in how it works and matters—this essay probes its particularities and utopian promises. Structured as a dialogue between Paul Morris, a gay bareback porn producer, director, and founder of Treasure Island Media (TIM, est. 1998), with a background in studies of music, and Susanna Paasonen, a media studies scholar who has spent the last decade researching online pornography, this essay combines practice-based insights with theoretical reflection. By doing so, it addresses the force and appeal of pornography in general and its importance in and for gay bareback subculture in particular.

### Risky Sex

*Susanna Paasonen:* Gay bareback pornography (that features penetrative sex without the use of condoms) was established as a recognizable porn subgenre in the late 1990s, and TIM was a prominent actor in the field from the beginning.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on, and documenting the sexual practices of bareback subculture in the San Francisco Bay area, TIM has remained controversial by countering the imperative of safe sex in gay porn established since the outbreak of the AIDS

epidemic and by starring HIV-positive performers in intense gang bangs that feature abundant exchanges of semen. TIM has been sued and banned from adult industry events—and you even mention having received death threats because of your films.

In his work on barebacking, the queer theorist Tim Dean identifies it as a means of undoing the HIV closet that is “as double-edged as any closet, since it confers a measure of protection through deniability while incarcerating in silence those it shelters.”<sup>4</sup> He sees porn as central to the bareback subculture as a form of witnessing that documents sexual practices and renders forms of intimacy visible: understood in this vein, your films contribute the creation of a sexual counter-public.<sup>5</sup> Dean also writes of you as a documentary porn filmmaker and visual ethnographer committed to representing a sexual community to, and for, itself.<sup>6</sup>

*Paul Morris:* I have a responsibility to a community and a tradition. Does that sound pompous or overly serious? I hope not. What I think the people for whom I work—men active in defining the current gay sex culture—find interesting in what I do is the sense of the continuity of a real and ages-old lineage of practice: we’re a living archive of male sexual practice. What’s exciting about watching our porn—when it’s good and it works—is remembering, recognizing, and reconnecting with the deep practical experiences of male sexuality.

In the beginning particularly, I took care to situate the sex in specific spaces—a cheap hotel room, a San Francisco porn booth store, and so forth—all of which would be open and available to the viewer *if* they had been physically present. Come to this place, open this unlocked door, and these men will be there, waiting for you. There was nothing ideal about the places, which translated into general availability. A cheap hotel room is the spatial analogue of a whore. And the whore is the basic identity unit of any pornographic utopia. There is nothing more politically transcendent than a cheap whore. The body of the true whore is the flint that makes a spark of revolution possible. Through representation of the whore, porn turns the world of value and wealth and possessiveness upside down. If all men can buy me, anyone can have me, but no one can own me.

*SP:* TIM has a firm fan base in the Bay Area, but it has grown translocal, even global, via DVD distribution and online presence. This networked presence extends the local subculture and adds a virtual layer at least for those fans who do not recognize the particular locations and therefore see them as more anonymous frames of action.



Figure 1. On the set. Photo by Paul Morris

*PM:* We do what the web is supposed to do: we connect communities of identical desire around the world. Our primary metaphors are the neighborhood, the island, and the pirate. The revolutionary purpose of the original Castro neighborhood in San Francisco was to act as a place where men could explore their complete sexual and creative nature without the oppressive identities with which they'd grown up. The piratical island is one on which every man becomes a native simply by arriving. You may have been born in Germany, France, South Africa, the United States; but once you arrive on the island you are given a fresh identity that is primary: you are a whore, a cumdump, a breeder, whatever you like.

*TIM* is two things, basically. We're a developing and living archive of real male sexual experience. And we're a laboratory that performs experiments that the men involved in our community propose. You could say that we're a genetic laboratory exploring the vital sexual symbiosis of human and viral DNA. For the most part, gay porn pretends to represent experience without peril, experimentation without damage. Most gay porn hides behind a facade of "safeness." But in my case, the men in my work are considered and prized for being damaged, for having taken what conservative gays deem "the ultimate risk" and lost. In a world increasingly dominated by the medical gaze, to willingly live in symbiosis

with a virus is seen as irrational and socially expensive. I see it as necessary and revolutionary.

*SP:* Your films present something of an antithesis to the pedagogy of safe sex practiced in gay porn since the late 1980s in its celebration of bodily fluids and the sharing of semen—and the virus—through acts of “seeding” and “breeding.”

*PM:* Yes. You mention in your writing a quality in some porn of a kind of stickiness; having watched it, one feels dirty, and the sense of dirtiness continues after viewing. A writer for *Out* magazine said that he was afraid to watch my videos because he actually felt that he might become infected by them, that somehow they had a magical power to either overthrow his personal will and cause him to imperil himself or to actually introduce the virus into his blood. But this is what drew him to the work as well.

*SP:* Whatever leaves an impression on us sticks. Media scholar Katariina Kyrölä writes how media images of bodies stretched to the limits of their carnal capacity “reach out to viewing bodies and touch them so viscerally that they are likely to leave a mark, some form of a residue.”<sup>7</sup> As images and sounds stick, the sensations they evoke—be these ones of sexual arousal, disgust, confusion, or fascination—linger on. The potential contagions experienced by porn viewers can be seen as loops of intensity where bodily boundaries of safety are negotiated with notions of pleasure and disgust, as images and sounds come close, and perhaps resonate. The sense of contagion has to do with being touched or impressed in particular ways: something has managed to stick. There is a particular “stickiness” to your films also on a representational level: semen is licked off from hands, chests, and anuses, scooped out from rectums, rubbed on skin, and devoured with gusto. These are generally scenes of shared intensity that the participants create with obvious delight.

*PM:* The author of a recently published history of gay porn wrote a letter to his mother when he had finished it, letting her know that he’d made it through unscathed and safe. This makes me very sad: gay culture continues to become sillier and weaker, more desperate for the approval of “mother.” The truth, however, is that a gay man who doesn’t have a virus in his blood is no longer a complete gay man. Without the sense of separateness the virus enables, he lacks entirety and becomes all too easily a social ancillary to heterosexuality and straight society.

Let me clarify this a bit further. The issue of gay identity has always been deeply contested. Today the primary issue continues to be was I “born this way”

versus did I “choose to be this.” My generation of gay men lived—and died—in good part to explore in a truly revolutionary way the possibilities of an identity that was based not in heteronormative monogamy but in a freedom of sexual and emotional interconnection. Today, largely in reaction to the terror that resulted from the incursion of HIV, a growing model for identity isn’t one of “becoming” gay but of being born as a gay person, as a kind of helpless and innocent *fait accompli*.

Alongside this development is the enormous growth of a movement that is morally and religious based and claims that gayness is a sociopsychological syndrome that can be “healed.” The “conversion therapy” movement aims to cure gay men in order for them to lead ordinary lives, no longer attracted to men, available for successful marriage (to women) and child rearing. The drive in the United States to legalize and socially accept gay marriage is in part a reaction to the mind-set that gave rise to the conversion therapy movement—and vice versa. These two social movements, both of which are based on notions of “health” and social normalness, feed each other. One argues that being gay is a disease that can be happily cured. The other argues that being gay is normal, healthy, and perfectly assimilable into mainstream American society.

Whether or not there’s something like a blood difference or a brain structure difference for gayness, my life experience tells me that my difference isn’t curable, but is as deep—and as variable—as any other aspect of my identity. I don’t believe that there’s an essential monolithic gayness, an identity that is ready-made and suitable for monogamy or marriage. Gayness—queerness—is, among other things, an ineluctable organic process that requires the exploration among multiple gay contacts (both sexual and social) to determine the specific “facet” of one’s individual nature.

In the public mind—the American public mind, perhaps—HIV is the great symbol for a blood presence that is identifiable as “gay.” Among my employees, for example, when as young men each of them discussed with their parents the possibility that they were gay, the first and most emotional reaction on the part of the parents was a terror that being gay above all automatically meant that their child would seroconvert. So I use the metaphor of HIV: being gay is not in the genes, perhaps, but in the blood. And it remains a stigma and for many a terrible social experience—being gay or being poz. And the problem with assimilation into American society today is that it would require gay men to reduce themselves to the state of restrictiveness that heteronormative American society embraces. A gay man (a poz man) pretending for the comfort of others that he isn’t quite all that he really is—that, to me, is accepting a kind of madness. I react to that by saying

that we are, all of us, diseased and can't be assimilated into the mass neurosis of American life.

While we are profoundly different, our difference is read by American society as a disease (damaged but curable through damaging "therapy"). I choose to define gayness as perhaps diseased and without doubt incurable, in our blood, and the result of our being wildly and specifically who we are.

*SP:* This formulation reminds me of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's insistence on becoming as contagion rather than filiation: as a "multiplicity without the unity of an ancestor."<sup>8</sup> For them, the question is one of becoming rather than being. The issue here would be one of becoming gay, and queer, as a process where seropositive status links with resistance and viral contagion replaces hereditary production. In other words, forms of queer breeding do not reproduce the species but a sexual subculture based on alliance. The notion of queer kinship created through breeding and seeding involves a sexual and communal utopia that is detached from what Lee Edelman calls reproductive futurism: the promise of and commitment to a better future, as encapsulated in the figure of the Child.<sup>9</sup>

*PM:* No one understands who I am and what I'm about better than Lee Edelman.

*SP:* Edelman has written on your films as "Foucauldian resistance to the aesthetic conformity and sexual conservatism embedded in the representational politics of the mainstream studios producing gay porn."<sup>10</sup> Rather than celebrating seroconversion, he sees your work as embracing the material substances of bodies having sex and "immersing itself in celebrations of contact with cum."<sup>11</sup>

*PM:* In an age of sexual terror, porn can provide in a vitiated but real way the same transmission of information that I'm talking about. This is a reason why it's crucial for queer identities that the porn be true. We experience life through screens—television, computer, iPad, and so forth—which has led to the development of our eyes as primary sexual organs: very acute organs that sense accuracy and truth. "Safe" porn promulgates a weakened identity, antiseptic and clean. I purvey the deep filth from which complex men can grow.

Many years ago, in the heyday of San Francisco's gay emergence, I met Foucault at a sleazy bathhouse on Folsom called the Handball Express. I didn't know who it was until after I'd fisted him (in those days I was a very active fist-fighting top). I've always believed that information is transmitted through the physical communion of sex. Rather than studying with him, I absorbed Foucault through my left hand and arm—like E. M. Forster's experience with George Merrill and Edward Carpenter. One of them touched Forster on the small of his back



Figure 2. Zooming in on the semen. Photo by Paul Morris

and, according to Forster, “It was as much psychological as physical. It seemed to go straight through the small of my back into my ideas without involving my thoughts.” The information transmitted through sex is as much a part of our nature as the DNA that we receive from our genetic lineages.

### Intensity and Mediation

*PM:* Sexuality is a process of incremental discovery, and porn serves this process with intense accuracy and specificity. Every producer, whether professional or amateur, begins by setting out a terrain for exploration and representation. Once material is made public, immediate feedback assists the producer in determining the acceptable boundaries that limit the sexo-erotic area he can explore without hazarding the diminishment of audience. Boundaries always are set according to the dictates of the “real” and the “forbidden,” with both criteria being subjectively defined by the producer in complicity with the audience.

Take the idea of what constitutes real gay sex. It would seem to be a simple concept. But there is a majority opinion within the gay porn audience that any scene that has only oral sex isn’t “real” sex. It falls short of the goal. Real gay sex

must involve anal sex. Within the category of anal sex, the issue of safe/unsafe sets another set of boundaries. If participants use a condom, this will be real sex for some but not-real (that is, not “committed”) sex for others. For those who choose not to use a condom, if the top doesn’t ejaculate completely inside the bottom, the sex isn’t quite real. If the top ejaculates inside the bottom and then sucks the semen out of the bottom’s ass, this is stepping into the realm of fetish or forbidden for many. Going farther, any hint of blood or scat crosses not only behavioral boundaries but legal (albeit usually blue-law) limits as well. This can include even a spoken but unseen intimation of an act. If, for example, a participant states that he wants to eat shit out of a man he is either rimming or fucking, a line has been crossed. This line is detectable with absolute accuracy according to the strong and participatory reactions of the audience. “I’ll look for more of this!” will coincide with “I’ll never watch your work again.”

Female presence is another arc of defining limitations in gay porn that is absolutely stringent. If a participant speaks or behaves in a feminine way, a line is crossed. If a woman is present in a scene, even in a nonsexual way, a line is crossed. If a woman appears in a narrative porn video but only in a speaking part that is separated from the sexual episodes, a line has been crossed. If a woman is listed as a crew member, a line has been crossed. With each of these, the range and nature of reception is clearly and cleanly delineated.

Sexual imagination is flexible over time. But porn is used as a gauge and a reflection of one’s sexual nature. Because of this, the viewer is extremely vulnerable and open while experiencing porn. In the early days of gay porn, films reflected the widespread exploration of the nature of male sexuality by presenting within the context of a single film many possibilities and practices. Today, consumers are far more limited and particular about what they choose to watch. Rather than produce work that ranges over multiple types of actions, scenes, and contexts, pornographers create work that focuses on a limited and strict set of “elements.” To fail to do this is to betray a lack of understanding of your function and your audience.

*SP:* Dean points out that bareback porn “paradoxically adapts technologies of visual mediation—the digital camera, the Internet, to its project of overcoming mediation.”<sup>12</sup> The same applies to porn more generally as it tries to mediate the immediate feel and intensity of sex while being ultimately limited to conveying how it looks and sounds: taste, smell, and feel, stickiness and saltiness get amputated from the mediated sensorium. Furthermore, as you note, a range of boundaries and distinctions specific to pornographic subgenres conditions what can be

shown, how, and to whom. Watching scenes unfold on a screen gives rise to a sense of distance—perhaps even a hygienic one—at the same moment when the intensity of sex comes up close and aims to bodily grab the viewer.

*PM:* Mediation between what and what is the question, I think. There's a person—the persona, say—in between the body and the medium. The queer persona acts as a fulcrum, actively negotiating its balance between the body and the information received through the porn.

*SP:* Another way to put it is that porn tries to mediate the intensity and feel of sex through audiovisual means in order to find some kind of resonance with the audience.<sup>13</sup> The bodily presence of the performers is crucial for this. When rereading Richard Dyer's article on entertainment and utopia mentioned in the very beginning of the essay after watching a fair amount of your work, I was struck by a certain accord.

Dyer argues that entertainment creates five kinds of utopian solutions to the tensions and dissatisfactions of everyday life. The first solution is *transparency* as a sense of sincerity and open, spontaneous, honest communication and relationships between the characters on the screen, as well as between the characters and the audience.<sup>14</sup> In order for this to work, viewers need to be able to go with the flow, to be drawn into the scene without the distancing sense of the performers faking. This connects to the second solution, namely, *community* as a sense of togetherness and belonging, and as relationships where “communication is for its own sake rather than for its message.”<sup>15</sup> In the utopian sensibility, activity is collective and people come together out of a sense of communalism. Dyer builds his argument on analysis of Hollywood musicals, but they seem equally applicable to porn. With transparency and community, for example, an analogy can be made to the group scenes in your films that depend on the connection and communication between the participants as much as they do on their overall presence in the scene. The notion of community can then be extended to the bareback sex community more generally.

I find Dyer's third quality of utopian feel, *abundance*, equally central to TIM as the plenitude of bodies, acts, orgasms, scenarios, penetrations, and ejaculations. Obvious references here might be *Dawson's 20 Load Weekend* (2004) where Dawson spends a weekend having sex with twenty other men, or *The 1,000 Load Fuck* (2009) where semen is harvested for two years and then spectacularly played and experimented with, and collectively consumed. These scenes are literally about plenitude, abundance, and excess—the “enjoyment in sensuous material reality.”<sup>16</sup> Marcus has similarly defined his pornotopia as a pornocopia

of physiological abundance where “everyone is always ready for everything, and everyone is infinitely generous with his substance.”<sup>17</sup> For both Dyer and Marcus, plenitude works, since everyday experiences of scarcity and starvation are only all too common.

Dyer’s final two utopian solutions are *energy* and *intensity*. Energy is the alternative to exhaustion as “capacity to act vigorously; human power activity, potential.”<sup>18</sup> Intensity, again, is the excitement and affectivity of living and the alternative to the dreariness of everyday life: “Experiencing of emotion directly, fully, unambiguously, ‘authentically,’ without holding back.”<sup>19</sup> These aspects are particularly central to the performance styles and the physical presence of the people doing porn. Porn works by mediating such energy and inviting viewers into its loops of intensity. I feel this is pronounced in your films that leave out narrative frameworks except from the general frame of a scene or scenario. Bodies come close visually and sonically as the camera zooms in and follows their motion from moments of heightened intensity to instances of resting still as men pant, hold each other, and exchange looks and words. The intensity and power of the scenes is inseparable from the drive of the people making them through improvisation and by welcoming novel twists and turns with enthusiastic relish. These different utopian qualities or solutions contribute to TIM as a site of a particular, radical, and exclusively gay male sex utopia.

*PM:* Interestingly, energy and intensity are critical elements in gay porn, elements that are watched for and monitored by audiences. While a heightened degree of excited intensity is allowed and understandable, many pornographers err on the side of a clearly artificial intensity that undercuts the putative realness of their work. If the intensity is unmodulated, it’s read by the viewer as either inhuman or drug-based. As with film musicals, the set pieces have to have intros, lulls, high points, distractions in order to work as human. Gay men, when watching porn, need to know that they’re watching humans, not performers.

*SP:* Dyer also writes how “porn, like weepies, thrillers and low comedy, is realized in/through the body.”<sup>20</sup> The film scholar Linda Williams draws similar connections between porn, horror, and melodrama as body genres that try to evoke physical reactions and make the viewers’ bodies leak (with semen, sweat, and tears, respectively).<sup>21</sup> The shared idea is that the intensities of the carnal displays on the screen grab and move the audience and bridge some of the distance between the viewers and the bodies on the screen.



Figure 3. Captioning intensity. Photo by Paul Morris

*PM:* When we are watching horror, the frisson of engagement is possible because of the distance between self and image. One doesn't usually wish one's own body to be torn apart and abused. But porn is the opposite—one automatically and easily transposes the on-screen action onto one's own body, actively works into that experience through masturbation, timing one's own orgasm with that of the on-screen person. This is crucial to me and argues for the absolute necessity of making porn, which gives room for full engagement—that is, not the kind of porn which is populated by people who look and act as though they exist in an inhuman world that isn't available to the viewer. As I mentioned above, the places and the men in my porn are clearly accessible and available to anyone.

### The Places of Porn

*PM:* There's another reason for situating sex in nondescript places like hotel rooms or ordinary rooms. Porn is about place being dominated by flesh. It's the reverse of interior design. In porn, space is deflated by the fascinating presence and actions of bodies. In horror, by way of contrast, the torture space or haunted house is as important as the narrative action and bloodletting. Through the masturbating viewer's vested involvement with the repetitive movements, acts, and sounds of the bodies being observed, porn-time congeals (in ways comparable with the primacy of time for syncopated dance and the relative irrelevance of the dance space) and space weakens. The quality of attention and awareness this develops is immediate and focused, the opposite of transcendent or spatial. In both porn and dance-music, the power of place or space is replaced by human flesh, something we know as ourselves. Not only does it create an intensely democratizing political relationship with the social forces that create and enforce space, but porn also conditions the viewer to understand and accept the net—the radically egalitarian world of the flat computer screen—as a magical habitable space, as home.

*SP:* Scholars addressing porn often bypass the issue of masturbation, whereas for you—and, so I imagine, for the majority of porn users—this would be its *raison d'être*. Perhaps the appeal of the body genre analogy lies in the conceptual distance, or even comfort, that it affords. The analogy makes it possible to address bodily affectations of the visceral and horny kind on a nonpersonal level as matters of generic form. What you are describing is a much more intimate intermeshing and reverberation of bodies performing and watching where the computer screen folds into something of a shared terrain, even a virtual domicile.

Part of Marcus's argument is that pornotopia is an imaginary nonplace that can be geographically located anywhere but that ultimately exists in the audience's imagination. While set somewhere, the place of pornographic activity tends to nevertheless be detached from any particular physical location. For Marcus, the actual place, or landscape, of porn is that of the body: "The climate is warm but wet. Thunderstorms are frequent in this region, as are tremors and quakings of the earth. The walls of the cavern heave and contract in rhythmic violence, and when they do the salty streams that run through it double the flow."<sup>22</sup> He argues that porn is indifferent to place, since it both foregrounds this fleshy landscape and conveys boundless and featureless freedom that the specifics of place restrict, encumber, and distract from.<sup>23</sup>

In video porn, the locations are often motels, hotels, and anonymous residential houses—or vans driving through urban spaces, as on the gonzo-reality

porn sites *Bang Bus* and *Bait Bus*. The clubs, porn stores, and hotel rooms where your films have been shot are similarly anonymous sites yet also set in specific cities and locations. They might be thought of as Foucauldian heterotopia, simultaneously virtual and actual locations of nonhegemonic action. For Foucault, these other spaces “presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.”<sup>24</sup> One example that he uses to clarify this rather obscure notion is “American motel rooms where a man goes with his car and his mistress and where illicit sex is both absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden, kept isolated without however being allowed out in the open.”<sup>25</sup> Such locations—pornotopia-heterotopia—are semi-accessible pockets of activity and potentiality.

*PM:* The spaces in my porn are analogies to the men in the porn. Your quote from Foucault works perfectly if translated into queer porn identities: they are grouped, interdependent identities that are a “system of opening and closing that both isolates them”—in terms of constructed temporal personae—“and makes them penetrable”—in terms of being interpenetrating parts of a worldwide grouped, promiscuous body.

Space in porn is usually generic (incidental) or simply background (outdoor, motel room, shower, toilet stall), functioning in a way that not only enables the type of identity that the males bring to the scene (“top,” “bottom,” “straight,” “leatherman,” etc.) but also, coincidentally, parallels the intimation of harmony in the dance music that queer men move to. The melody and rhythm and timbral complexities are primary in dance music because they exist in time, are ephemeral. If harmony becomes too extended or functional (in the traditional sense of classical European functional harmony), it draws the music into narrative and distracts from the depth of trance. Trance in porn and in music allows the psychological identity to be experienced as plastic and necessarily ephemeral. If place becomes primary—other than accidental—in porn, the work becomes situated as erotica rather than porn. If location/space is pointedly primary, the nudity or even sex becomes incidental, located within a narrative that creates more substantial modelings of identity than pure porn is interested in. With horror, on the other hand, the place is primary and usually arrived at through unfortunate accident. And in that place are often found eternal monstrous identities that threaten human physicality and physical pleasure. In porn, the place is incidental and is arrived at by moving within a world of simple supernatural sexual saturation. Sex in porn illustrates and teaches that rich and constant pleasure is not only possible but necessary in the everyday world—and, through extension, in the world of the net.

People tend to think that pornography has been parasitic to the web, but the opposite is closer to the truth. The body is tremendously tenacious—it took millions of years for the primate body to evolve to its current state. At the core of human consciousness, we trust our sexual nature more than anything else. We know how enduring and valuable these sets of practices and desires have been. As the web has developed in symbiosis with human society, it has done so in good part by attaching to the most tenacious and hardwired level of whatever a human is, that which involves genitals and sex.

The evolution of sex occurred in tandem with the evolution of imagination, attention, and memory, involving sustained attention given to an image created and held on the interior “screen” of the mind. This developed with the practice of masturbation and was dependent on the rewards of orgasm, ejaculation, and respite (from social aggression based on sexual competition). Imagistic thought—imagination—gets transferred from a singular and personal interior screen to the public screen of the web. We hear much about “screen addiction” today, but that’s simply a sign of a new socially engaged rumination or reverie: the web teaches a maximally agile, maximally promiscuous virtuosity of attention through the evolution of the pornographic experience. What some call an addiction to online porn is an ongoing transcultural adaptation to a massively shared public imagination.

*SP:* Addiction to online porn, gambling, and gaming have been staple topics of social concern, yet the term *addiction* can be applied to seemingly any activity geared to pleasure and quest for enjoyment that draws the user back and back again. The notion of addiction implies a loss of autonomy and rational control. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, addiction becomes understood as insufficient freedom of will.<sup>26</sup> “Losing it,” addicts are impressed upon, and driven by, external forces out of their control. Being impressionable is conceived of as risky business and made sense of in terms of pathology.

*PM:* It’s been very interesting watching the growth of attention to “porn addiction” recently. There are groups growing online that have posited porn and masturbation addiction as a new and laudable “kink.” And there are the neo-Victorian groups that decry porn and masturbation as bad for the health, sanity, and “vigor” of the affected individual. There are antimasturbation/porn twelve-step groups, therapy retreats, online support programs. These invariably argue for the sanctity of monogamy and the heteronormative life of marriage. All energy is to be devoted to the single mate-for-life. But ultimately I think this is more about an institutional terror of mass screen-addiction with porn serving as a moralistic scapegoat. All of

these screens are under the control of no one. Everyone everywhere is suddenly immersed in screen-life as much as “real life.” It’s a growing population of people who are thinking, musing, and interconnecting in ways that can’t be controlled by power. The threat to politics is real and enormous.

But regarding a fear specifically of porn addiction, while this sort of effort at moralistic control or discipline may be fine for the “good gay”—the homosexual who wants to behave in a “healthy,” “wholesome,” and “productive” way—it’s very bad for the “bad queer.” Integral to queer identity is the fact that one’s life isn’t developed from or devoted to the genetic lineage into which one was accidentally born. The queer family isn’t a genetically based nuclear family. The basis of queer sex has nothing to do with the basis of heteromonogamy. The information that’s transmitted through queer sex involves the creation of the self, but not in a way that’s chemically or molecularly genetic. The privileging of the transmission of one’s DNA down through the generations is irrelevant to a queer individual, whatever “individuality” may mean in a queer context. Queers replicate through social, sexual, and creative promiscuity. We don’t reproduce, we replicate. The solitary sexual study that involves masturbation and porn at this stage in our history acts as a necessary queer meditative practice in liberating oneself and defining oneself apart from the suffocating hegemony of the “normal.” I think this can be felt most acutely in the United States.

*SP:* Michael Warner argues that sex is an occasion for losing control, for bare lust and fleshy desire, “for raw confrontations of power and demand” that opponents of moralism have too often “painted as sanitized, pastoral . . . as though it were simply joy, light, healing, and oneness with the universe.”<sup>27</sup> This has meant turning away from the visceral sensations of aversion and shame that sex may evoke. For Warner, such processes of normalization orient sex toward its “right, proper, healthy” forms.<sup>28</sup> Yet by rendering sexuality a rational endeavor, and effacing the visceral intensity of sex, normalization also effaces its appeal, “the very power that makes us value it.”<sup>29</sup>

The popularity and easy applicability of the terminology of addiction in relation to online porn speaks of such normalization as rationalization where implicit model users are geared to information retrieval and exchange rather than any sort of visceral stimuli. The perennial popularity of porn consumption as practices geared to pleasure and intensity of experience has been difficult to negotiate with this framework.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, masturbating users tend to remain problematic, or even anomalous, creatures in most journalistic and scholarly discussions concerning Internet use.

*PM:* Masturbation is as integral to the growth of the net as electricity. It has fed the growth of the net in the same way that chaos nurtures revolution. The truth is that the net is a queer environment. And while the traditions of science, engineering, and religion try to maintain a belief that the net is antiseptic, not “meaty” and based in genital stimulation, the self that awakens when one enters the net is a queer version of the quotidian self. Even the everyday “search” for nonsexual information is queered, in that the experience of intellectual velleity is trumped by the slightest pleasurable frisson of the accidentally aroused curiosity. You can see this as a corruption of sustained hegemonic/repressive focus or as the symptom of an agile and perfectly queer attention suited to future purposes of the net.

*SP:* The massive mundane circulation of memes, viral videos, and random links in social media points to exactly these kinds of pleasurable frissons, jolts of interest, and the arousal of curiosity as that which motivate the uses of networked media and keep users coming back for more. More specifically, given the centrality and popularity of online porn since the Usenet and its centrality in terms of web development in the 1990s (i.e., streaming video technologies, web hosting, safe credit card payment systems, or banner advertising), it is fair to say that masturbatory motivations have had—and continue to have—a perpetual presence in networked culture.

Thomas Laqueur argues that masturbation became defined as an anomaly during the nineteenth century, since it conflicted with the modern ideal of a rational subject. The masturbator turned inward and dwelled in sexual pleasure with no proper sense of restraint, control, or moderation.<sup>31</sup> Historically, the role of porn has been to fuel such excessiveness. The web facilitates degrees of contact and proximity with other users, participants, and performers while also affording the safety of distance and detachment, given that connections can always be cut. The discourse of addiction implies that in networked media, the “epidemics of the will” that Sedgwick writes about become contagious and viral.

*PM:* It’s inevitable and positive—inasmuch as the unavoidable is positive. It reminds me of the silly but perfectly queer answer that Oscar Wilde gave when asked what he would save from a burning building: “The fire.”

Interestingly, in the 1990s, early cyberpunk authors like William Gibson predicted an age in which the human could be uploaded entirely and exist eternally in a nonphysical “cyberspace.” But the body isn’t a vestigial part of being human, a shell that can be discarded. So the omnipresence and power of pornography—and its development as a more and more central element of web use—is in a sense the hopeless project of the anticorporeal aspect of the web doing its best to figure

out what that pleasurable meat is all about and how it might be discarded. In a sense, an impetus of network technology is a global manifestation of the death drive, an effort of the species to rid itself of the body and mortality completely. And always willing to do its part, the tenacious human body, through porn, is teaching itself to acclimate to inhuman states and durations of unprecedented orgasmic *jouissance*. The adoration of sustained genital bliss in general and the orgasmic state in particular is a gateway experience for the self-recognition of the future queer.

### Somatic Archives

*SP:* I would like to return to your earlier point on the centrality of remembering, recognizing, and reliving as central to porn watching, and connect it to the notion of the body as shaped by historically layered skills, experiences, and sensations that bring forth particular ways of relating to other bodies and reverberating with them. This comes close to the dance scholar Susan Kozel's discussion of resonance that is based on our assembly of senses and varied experiences and that allows for empathy with mediated experiences and acts.<sup>32</sup> The bodies of those watching porn resonate with (the image of) bodies on the screen in accordance to their layered corporeal histories, orientations, traumas, and fascinations. Such "somatic archives" facilitate the bridging of the sensory gaps between the acts seen and heard, and those once experienced in the flesh, while the rhythms of masturbation help efface such gaps further.

*PM:* Masturbation while looking at porn is a kind of dance. The net is unconsciously pushing toward interfaces that enable works of individually composed sexual rhetoric to which groups may perform in masturbatory practice. It's a frontier of expression, imagination, and aesthetics.

What I find exciting about TIM's porn is the recognition of something real and almost forgotten: a moment, a gesture, a connection. Often, when I'm reviewing a new piece with my guys, I will find myself saying "There it is" when some very particular thing happens. It is never predictable, which is why it's so valuable. Most commercial pornographers seem to believe that formulaic repetition is enough or that providing some fetishistic storyline or detail will work. That's why so much porn is closer to death than sex. They give you the skeleton but don't bother with the flesh. Our work is to try to illuminate and capture what the flesh is saying and has been saying for millennia.

The seeming incidentals of sex—the percepts, specifics, immediacies—are phonemes structured together through the "sentence" structure of a general

act. The somatic thinking is done on a level far below the surface identity of the practitioner. Think of skateboarders speeding down a street—that's the body thinking in the way a man having sex thinks.

*SP:* When watching porn it is nevertheless often hard to figure what the flesh is saying—or gesturing toward. Laura Kipnis states that porn speaks through visceral audience engagement, whereas for the literary scholar Isobel Armstrong the body speaks through affect.<sup>33</sup> Yet I wonder if such intensity or resonance involves speech as such, or whether these reverberations are in a different register and modality. How porn and the body “speak” is not defined by, or confined to, the semantic or the linguistic. Their forms of communication are more visceral and attuned to layered somatic archives.



Figure 4. Haptic proximity. Photo by Paul Morris

As you point out, the challenge of porn is to convey some of the intensity and immediacy of sex. As images resonate with viewers' sensory memories—and the partners and situations they once involved—the movement and feel of bodies on the screen become easy enough to sense, rather than just to make sense of. This is a matter of recognizing and reliving but also that of exploring, since the body constantly learns while its sensations, palates, tastes, and experiences

change, sometimes in surprising ways. Porn shapes and influences our contingent somatic reservoirs as resonance, titillation, disgust, curiosity, and exercises of imagination. These constantly accumulating and contingent archives then orient ways of sensing pornography.

According to my favorite dictionary definition, resonance refers to “oscillation induced in a physical system when it is affected by another system that is itself oscillating at the right frequency.”<sup>34</sup> Such frequencies are both intentionally sought and accidentally found when something moves us. Resonance may well smack of dissonance: numerous porn subgenres work with and through disgust, by pulling the viewers into uncomfortable proximity. Encounters with porn may equally be void of any kind of vibration. Resonance is not constant or given.

*PM:* The degree of resonance is the extent of arousal. Even with disgust or shame, these intimate realms exist and are to be explored and perhaps occupied. In making porn, we use everything we have at our disposal to seduce men into a repeated and extended experience that requires sustained concentration through an entire sex scene. It’s difficult because to a great extent the world works to disallow us our native resonances, labeling them as forbidden, wasteful, politically reprehensible. But when the point is to remember and embody a living rhetoric of queer sexual practice, one must be fearless: when resonance is sensed it must be explored. It’s how one becomes conversant in the language of the promiscuous body and imagination; it contains innumerable seeds for the crystallization over time of queer personal and social identities.

The European art music culture is similar. One understands and joins by committing to complex experiences that have lots of subtle signs. The same piece—the same pattern of notes—can be performed in one way and it’s dead, in another and it has the essence of human truth. If you go back and listen to Maria Callas’s master classes at Juilliard, her most common comment is that the students need to make their performance “more human.” A deep and enduring sex culture is transmitted similarly through the assimilation of extended structures—“scenes”—that are often composed of seemingly repetitious actions and patterns. Lay participants or dilettante/amateurs are able to “sample” the culture through excerpts, animated GIFs, and stills that spread autonomously throughout the web. The understanding is improved (through visceral recognition) if you have personal experience. This sexual experience doesn’t have to be extensive for recognition to happen, just as one’s appreciation of symphonic music is enhanced if you play an instrument but have never actually performed in a first-rate symphony orchestra.

The sexual scenes that I produce—“capture” would be a better word for it—are exactly parallel to extended musical structures and the masturbatory experience is parallel to the aesthetic experience of a musical structure. If individuals are familiar only with samplings or excerpts of popular symphonic warhorses, they would have a limited understanding of the culture of European art music. They would see it as strange, elitist, even unapproachable. The same is true of the porn I make. The web makes it simple to sample it, exaggerate it, and copy it. It’s common to see GIFs, or stills, or excerpts from our work on blogs and pirate sites. Negatively, these misrepresent the work. Positively, they act as road signs sending men to us. Today, participants in a sex culture often aren’t in physical proximity to the core experiences. They live in isolated places, small towns. So the experience is concentrated through editing so even remote participant-viewers can feel and understand and incorporate the information.

As attention becomes more fluid—promiscuous—and less structurally disciplined, “clues” have to be seeded through all available media. Still images are an obvious example. I became a still photographer solely because I wanted to scatter more accessible seeds that would draw men to the organism of the culture—or animated gifs that are created and disseminated to multitudes of blogs. It’s literally like scattering seeds for a wildflower and then waiting until spring to see the results. This is because attention, as it becomes more rarefied and ephemeralized, resists linearity and has to be seduced carefully and chaotically (with no linear connection) into progressive situations of more and more sustained effort. Not by design, but willy-nilly.

### **Sonic Resonance**

*SP:* Having shown all kinds of porn in the university classroom, the example that has so far created the most tangible discomfort was, to my surprise, the site Beautiful Agony where people can send videos of themselves reaching orgasm, cropped from head to upper chest. No genitalia are seen, as the focus remains on the facial expressions—very much as in Andy Warhol’s 1964 film *Blow Job*.<sup>35</sup> But unlike in Warhol’s film, we also hear the breathing, sighs, and grunts of the people climaxing. This aural intensity and intimacy, combined with the visual style of documentary realism, seemed to grab the classroom in a particular way. This may have to do with the conventions of using music in porn that would be familiar to most. From the 1970s porn funk to the 1980s synthesizer soundscapes, music has been used to provide rhythm and tempo for sexual acts while the textures of music have worked to detach the viewer from the diegetic sounds of the acts themselves. If this

additional, external layer of rhythmic texture is absent, the sounds of sex involve intensity that draws the audience into intimate proximity. With this particular site, the issue may also be one of the simplified plane of the visual. Since we do not see much of what is being acted out, attention shifts and the auditory begins to dominate.

TIM titles certainly do not hold back on visual detail—quite the contrary. Yet sound plays a crucial role in the mediation and creation of intensity: it comes up close and enfolds the viewer, similar to the example described above. This “sonorous envelope” consists of grunts, heavy breathing, and bodies slamming. You sometimes use captions to mediate what the performers are saying and what is happening if this escapes the camera. According to Dean, you heighten your “movies’ documentary effect by retaining all the contingent noises—traffic roaring by, a radio show playing intermittently,” and your “own enthusiastic remarks to the participants, periodic silence—that occur during filming.”<sup>36</sup> Despite the documentary mode and intensity of the films, you do much more than document and record the sounds unfolding. A great deal of attention is invested in facilitating bodily engagement through sound.

*PM:* The sound work is meant not to awaken the viewer from the masturbatory trance but to more fully engage him in it. This trance is a learning state and is the primary purpose, the real work, of pornography. Sustaining this trance, often through sound, is as important as the sexual excitement produced by the imagery. Sound shouldn’t rupture the engagement, and it can deepen it (if it works well). But unlike the kinds of trance that are induced through repetitious dance music, the physical specificity and truth of the pornographic trance is vitiated—homogenized—by the artificial rhythms of the sort of music usually used in mainstream porn. If you go back to porn produced by queer pornographers like Wakefield Poole or Peter de Rome, it was common for them to use classical music in order to both teach and enhance a sustained and structured pornographic trance. They could do this because gay men were familiar with the aesthetic trance that European classical music enabled. In one of Poole’s scenes, the entire *Poem of Ecstasy* by Alexander Scriabin overlays the sexual narrative.

Most often, we allow the sounds that were recorded at a shoot to be the sounds for the finished scene. But if this doesn’t work, we are shameless in augmenting the natural sounds in order to bring out the truth or meaning of a gesture, a moment, or a scene. We’ve used the sound of broken bones, animal cries, sound effects from horror movies, women’s screams, slowly rising oscillating tones, and so on to clarify the meaning of what’s being watched. We work very hard to keep

the sonic impact at a level where it's only a kind of footnote or bass note to the action. We've also used reverb, echoes, added (subliminal) music, tone sequences that, if sped up, would be recognizable as loops derived from pieces like the *Rite of Spring*, plus tinting scenes various colors (deepening red, for example, as the intensity develops, very slowly).

We also use drones, dog barks (sometimes continuing annoyingly), but always added on to enhance the visceral reaction of the viewer: as he masturbates he finally says "I wish that damned dog would stop barking!" but he moves into and through the frustration because of the images and that enhances his concentration, his trance, his engagement with the possibility of a promiscuous—that is, social—orgasm. In some of the more recent videos, there are scenes in which we change the "sound" of the playspace with each edit, corporealizing the space and giving it a "voice," a complex tone. We also do this sometimes with objects in the room, giving them sounds as they pass before the camera. In one brief sequence, a man moves away from a guy who is in a sling, then moves back toward him. This brief move is given the sound of metal being strained and bent so you can feel the strength of their attraction.

*SP:* Sounds then amplify the visual and build the overall rhythm of the scenes. It's noteworthy that intensity is also orchestrated and oriented through discord, by meshing the resonant with the dissonant to the degree that the two become inseparable. As a pornographer, you catch, capture, and highlight particular gestures, motions, and intensities—as in the "there it is" moments that you mention above. That which grabs, resonates: such encounters involve potentiality and affectation.

*PM:* I tend to think that the human tendency to move toward and into orgasm is a sign of an embodied belief in the possibility of a state of being within which something akin to orgasm (at least a higher state of physical and emotional bliss) can and should be normalized. Porn is utopian, argues for better conditions for the body, argues for the ease and infinite availability of "pleasure" and, more important, "fun," which I read as social creative chaos, almost manageable chaos—the necessary chaos of queerness. Just as the *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* is Princess Scheherazade's repetitious (and erotically driven) sequence of lessons in social humility and empathy for the cruel and murderous man she's wed, porn is 1,001 efforts by the body to argue for the necessity of its own realities, desires, imagination and its place in the social world, a social world that grows daily less and less friendly to or knowledgeable about this complex system that is our bodies, particularly our sexualized bodies.

SP: Such utopianism—or the promise thereof—is crucial to understanding the power and pull of porn, and its particularity as a genre and a field of activity. Its utopian promises of energy, abundance, transparency, intensity, and community are obviously not always met. Proximities with scenes of abundance and intensity may mesh pleasure and titillation with discomfort or shame, and they may create sticky, conflicting sensations that linger on. Nevertheless, these carnal intensities are the ones to invite users, viewers, listeners, and masturbators back as well as to engage them in networked exchanges and affective attachments as fans.

In mapping out the characteristics of utopian feeling, Dyer wanted to broaden analytic attention from studies of representation to those of affective codes and nonrepresentational elements such as the uses of color, rhythm, movement, and camerawork.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, rather than focusing on pictorial content or producing symbolic and symptomatic readings of pornography, studies of porn are likely to benefit from considering the issue as one of visceral utopian promises of energy and affective intensity. TIM’s films build, and build on, a utopian sensibility of transparency, community, abundance, energy, and intensity within the bareback subculture. TIM’s utopian sensibility—its aesthetics and politics—are in explicit conflict with the utopia of monogamous life partnership, as well as with the pornotopias catered by other gay porn companies, such as the San Francisco–based Titan Men, Raging Stallion Studios, and Colt Studio. One person’s or group’s utopia is—by necessity—another’s dystopia; and one person’s sense of intensity and authenticity is likely to leave another one cold, or even disgusted. The appeal of porn is nevertheless tied to its promise of utopian potentiality—a sense of possibility—that operates through and in the bodies of the people producing and consuming it.

## Notes

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2. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 216.
3. On barebacking, see Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture*

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5. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005); Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” in *Intimacy*, ed. Lauren Berlant (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 311–30.
6. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 119–20.
7. Katarina Kyrölä, *The Weight of Images: Affective Engagements with Fat Corporeality in the Media* (Turku, Finland: University of Turku, 2010), 122.
8. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 241.
9. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). The point is also extensively discussed in Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*.
10. Lee Edelman, “Unbecoming: Pornography and the Queer Event,” in *Post/Porn/Politics: Queer Feminist Perspectives on the Politics of Porn Performances and Sex-Work as Cultural Production*, ed. Tim Stütgen (Berlin: B\_Books, 2009), 36.
11. Edelman, “Unbecoming,” 37.
12. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 104–5.
13. For an extended discussion on resonance and pornography, see Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
14. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 26.
15. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 23.
16. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 22.
17. Marcus, *Other Victorians*, 273.
18. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 22, 26.
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28. Warner, *Trouble with the Normal*, 57.
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30. See Susanna Paasonen, “Trouble with the Commercial: Internets Theorized and Used,” in *International Handbook of Internet Research*, ed. Jeremy Hunsinger, Matthew Allen, and Lisbeth Klastrup (New York: Springer, 2010), 417–18.
31. Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 64.
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33. Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 161; Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 117.
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36. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 133.
37. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 20.

