

Comradeship of Cock? Gay porn and the entrepreneurial voyeur

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Abstract

Thirty years of academic and critical scholarship on the subject of gay porn have born witness to significant changes not only in the kinds of porn produced for, and watched by, gay men, but in the modes of production and distribution of that porn, and the legal, economic and social contexts in which it has been made, sold/shared, and watched. Those thirty years have also seen a huge shift in the cultural and political position of gay men, especially in the US and UK, and other apparently 'advanced' democracies. Those thirty years of scholarship on the topic of gay porn have produced one striking consensus, which is that gay cultures are especially 'pornified': porn has arguably offered gay men not only homoerotic visibility, but a heritage culture and a radical aesthetic. However, neoliberal cultures have transformed the operation and meaning of sexuality, installing new standards of performativity and display, and new responsibilities attached to a 'democratisation' that offers women and men apparently expanded terms for articulating both their gender and their sexuality. Does gay porn still have the same urgency in this context? At the level of politics and cultural dissent, what's 'gay' about gay porn now? This essay questions the extent to which processes of legal and social liberalization, and the emergence of networked and digital cultures, have foreclosed or expanded the apparently liberatory opportunities of gay porn. The essay attempts to map some of the political implications of the 'pornification' of gay culture on to ongoing debates about materiality, labour and the entrepreneurial subject by analyzing gay porn blogs.

Biography

Stephen Maddison is Head of Humanities and Creative Industries, and Reader in Cultural Theory in the School of Arts and Digital Industries at the University of East London. He is co-director of the Centre for Cultural Studies Research at UEL (<http://culturalstudiesresearch.org/>). His research addresses questions of sexuality and gender, cultural politics and popular culture. Stephen's work on pornography, embodiment and cultural politics has appeared in several major collections, including *Mainstreaming Sex* (2009), *Porn.com* (2010), *Hard to Swallow* (2011), and *Transgression 2.0* (2012), as well as in the journals *New Formations* (2013, 2004) and *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* (2009). Stephen is the author of *Faqs, Haqs and Queer Sisters: Gender Dissent and Heterosocial Bonds in Gay Culture* (Macmillan & St. Martin's Press, 2000) and numerous other articles and chapters on sexuality, gender and popular culture.

Comradeship of Cock? Gay porn and the entrepreneurial voyeur

Thirty years of academic and critical scholarship on the subject of gay porn have borne witness to significant changes not only in the kinds of porn produced for, and watched by, gay men, but in the modes of production and distribution of that porn, and the legal, economic and social contexts in which it has been made, sold/shared, and watched. Those thirty years have also seen a huge shift in the cultural and political position of gay men, especially in the US and UK, and other apparently 'advanced' democracies: we have moved from pariah status in the late eighties, at the low point of the AIDS crisis in the global 'north', to celebrated symbols of the apparent 'civilisation' and social liberalism of the neoconservative and neoliberal governments of that same 'north' in 2015. In the context of these changes, the meanings of gay porn have necessarily also changed; I don't intend to do justice to the full scope of those changes here. But, mindful of John D'Emilio's assertion that lesbians and gay men 'are a product of history...their emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism' (D'Emilio 1983: 468), my aim is to consider the current conditions in which porn consumption in gay cultures produces particular kinds of subjectivity.

As I shall demonstrate, thirty years of scholarship on the topic of gay porn has produced one striking consensus, which is that gay cultures are especially 'pornified'. Given the wider consensus about the apparent sexualisation and pornographication of culture generally (see amongst others: Attwood 2006, 2007, 2010; Boyle 2010; Dines 2011; Harvey & Gill 2011; Maddison 2004), this concentration of porn in gay culture is important for a number of reasons, many of which have been ably documented by other researchers (see amongst others Watney 1989, Kendall 2004, Mowlabocus et al <http://www.pornlaidbare.co.uk>). In this essay I want to try and map some of the political implications of the 'pornification' of gay culture, particularly in the context of ongoing debates about materiality, labour and the entrepreneurial subject. In order to do so, I will first survey some of the key accounts of the importance of porn to gay men, before going on to consider the implications of these accounts in relation to economic and political theories of neoliberalism, in order to establish the grounds for asking whether gay men, in their 'pornification', are ideal neoliberal subjects. I will then go on to test this suggestion by analyzing cultural artefacts that emblematised our relationship with porn, namely examples of gay porn blogs.

If consuming porn has always entailed an arguably over-determined relation to subject formation for gay men, this is partly because consuming porn has historically carried politically significant affects of urgency and liberation. But gay men are no longer marginalized and castigated by popular media, and by the state governments of the 'advanced' democracies, as we once were. At the same time, neoliberal cultures have transformed the operation and meaning of sexuality, installing new standards of performativity and display, and new responsibilities attached to a 'democratisation' that

offers women and men apparently expanded terms for articulating both their gender and their sexuality. Does gay porn still have the same urgency in this context? At the level of politics and cultural dissent, what's 'gay' about gay porn now? If gay porn once represented a subcultural 'comradeship of cock', to what extent have processes of legal and social liberalization, and the emergence of networked and digital cultures, foreclosed or expanded its liberatory opportunities?

'Pornified' Gay Men: Liberation and Heritage

The proposition that pornography has had a defining significance in Anglo-American gay male culture is so well rehearsed as to be axiomatic. In 1989 Richard Dyer suggested that 'most gay men enjoy porn to some degree or other' (Dyer 1989: 201) having earlier suggested that 'gay porn asserts homosexual desire' and has thus 'made life bearable for countless millions of gay men' (Dyer 1985: 123). Tom Waugh, also in 1985, suggested that gay porn 'subverts the patriarchal order by challenging masculinist values, providing a protected space for non-conformist, non-reproductive and non-familial sexuality, encouraging many sex-positive values and declaring the dignity of gay people' (Waugh 1985). Later, in his iconic monograph *Hard to Imagine*, written in the mid 1990s, Waugh reflected on the difficulty at that time of getting his students, living in a culture saturated with sexualized images, to understand the 'sacral, or at least political, quality of the image of desire' (Waugh 1996: 4). He goes on to suggest that for gay men 'fuck photos have always had to serve not only as our stroke materials but also...as our family snapshots and wedding albums, as our cultural history and political validation' (1996: 5). Similarly, John R. Burger writes that 'pornography makes gay men visible' and serves both as 'cultural document and erotic tool' (1995: 4, 5). Burger suggests that big budget narrative porn films of the 80s and 90s often proposed alternative histories of key events, such as the Vietnam war, by offering them as a context for gay desire: 'these gay revisionist histories, delivered in a pornographic context, substantially alter the way most gay men perceive American history' (Burger 1995: 37-38). In its narrative engagements and settings, 'gay pornography shows the *homoerotic* leaking into everyday reality – offices, gyms, rodeos' (Burger 1995: 41; emphasis original). And moreover, 'every porn-induced queer orgasm is a political act...flying in the collective face of those who would attempt to further oppress the advancing gay communities' (Burger 1995: 105). More recently, Sharif Mowlabocus has suggested that 'pornography permeates British gay male subculture' and 'is written into the code of gay men's everyday lives' and argues that 'within the context of heteronormative society gay-porn is always counter-hegemonic, though whether this subversive imperative is ever fully realized is...questionable' (Mowlabocus 2007: 61, 71).

If early (and frankly, professionally courageous) accounts of the special significance of gay porn seem at times to over-assert the radicalism of gay porn of the 1980s and 90s, writers like Dyer and Waugh certainly did not do so unproblematically. This current issue of *Porn Studies* marks the 30th anniversary of Waugh's 'Men's Pornography gay vs. straight', and re-reading now it is to be struck both by its optimism about the transgressive potential of male same-sex intimacy, and its careful

engagement with feminism. Similarly, Dyer's early writings on gay porn firmly assert solidarity with feminist critiques of porn, and roundly dismiss that 'small chorus of gay individualists' who 'resent intrusions from feminism upon their pleasures' (Dyer 1989: 199). Dyer also suggests that we should reject 'any notion of "pure sex", and particularly the defence of porn as expressing or releasing a sexuality "repressed" by bourgeois...society' (Dyer 1985: 123). With 24/7 access to a panoply of pornographic forms and genres now not only an option but arguably an imperative (an idea I shall return to shortly), it is easy to overlook the extent to which those of us who came out in the 1980s were not only starved of affirmative images of gay desire, but conditioned to fear the quality of our gaze upon male bodies.

In that context, gay porn has provided images of our desires, and ones associated not with shame and disgust but with pleasure and transcendence; porn has also worked to license the act of looking itself. In so doing, as Dyer notes, porn has positively impacted on the social and political experience of being a gay man living through a period in recent history when UK and US state governments actively worked to intensify discrimination and homophobia: in the late 1980s it was hard to imagine that gay marriage would ever be possible (I write this as the US Supreme Court has voted to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act, thereby upholding the constitutional right of same-sex couples to marry, and the UK has just voted in a Tory government that whilst in coalition in the previous parliament legislated for gay marriage).¹ As well as making male same-sex desire visible, and licensing the homoerotic gaze, Waugh suggests that the canon of gay porn images serve as heritage, a cultural memory that holds our history of relationships and cultural forms. Burger goes further, suggesting that the narrative contexts of gay porn appropriate 'dominant' culture and serve as a homoerotic overlay to 'normal' life, reinscribing both the momentous events of state, and the everyday moments of the patriarchy, in a fantasy of homoerotic emancipation. In so doing, porn deconstructs 'the oppressing standards of orthodox history' (Burger 1995: 38).

But to return to the problematic articulated by Sharif Mowlabocus: in a heteronormative culture, gay porn is almost inevitably counter-hegemonic, but to what extent does it realize this transgressive potential? To put it another way, thirty years after Waugh's essay: what are the politics of gay porn now? What modes of power and negotiations of power does contemporary gay culture transact in its fixation upon porn? In this essay, I want to consider the implications for contemporary gay subjectivity of the very inevitability of gay porn. If our cultural moment is 'post-gay' and 'pornified'; if porn consumption can now be regarded as 'work' and pornographic pleasures not merely transcendent but 'compulsory' (Power 2009; Maddison 2013); what does it mean to inhabit a culture in which the very code of our everyday lives is permeated by pornography² (Mowlabocus 2007: 61). indeed, where 'pornography itself now constitutes global gay culture' (Tziallas 2015: 772; my emphasis). Clearly, this isn't just a question for gay men: gay culture is hardly the only context in which porn consumption is ubiquitous. Yet, the historical and contemporary accounts offered by

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Dyer, Waugh, Burger, Mowlabocus and Mercer assert that porn has had an *instrumental* impact on the development of gay subjectivity and culture, which marks not only the degree to which gay culture is pornified, but its status, meaning and value. As Bruce LaBruce has suggested, 'pornography appears to be the last bastion of sexual radicalism' in an otherwise 'zombie movement' (LaBruce 2011). The irony of this statement shouldn't be lost on us: if gay porn acted as the 'cultural history and political validation' for pre-Stonewall queers and early liberationists, thirty years later, porn seems to be the only thing left 'beyond bland consumerism' (LaBruce 2011).

The 'pornified' nature of gay culture necessitates a discussion of the question of consumption: how have gay men been obtaining all this porn, and how have exchange practices developed over time and shaped gay culture and gay subjectivity? And especially now, when getting hold of porn is as easy as [going online picking up your phone](#), and no longer implies the subcultural negotiations it once did, and so-called emancipated acts of consumption underpin the entrepreneurial society, what does it mean that consuming porn permeates 'gay men's everyday lives' (Mowlabocus 2007: 61)? If gay porn encompasses a range of materials, from private amateur snapshots, and early crude fuck photos at one end, to the high budget narrative hardcore features of Catalina, Vivid, Falcon, Hot House, Raging Stallion and Titan produced in California in the 1980s and 90s, and on to the diverse 'artisanal' (Mercer 2011: 315-6) online producers that characterize the contemporary market, then gay culture is produced through the modes of exchange each of these forms has required. In my own experience of consuming gay porn, from the late 1980s to the current moment, I have engaged in a diverse range of exchange activities in order to obtain it. These have included: informal peer exchange of magazines, sometimes for other magazines, sometimes for other favours or commodities; informal peer exchange of VHS tapes (under similar conditions); watching pirated porn tapes at friends' houses or at night clubs and bars; acquiring the skills and equipment necessary to copy VHS tapes and then copying tapes for my own use and that of friends and lovers; purchasing magazines and videos in the US and EU and bringing them through customs; purchasing pirated VHS tapes from straight licensed sex shops in Soho and elsewhere; purchasing pirated VHS tapes from unlicensed back street gay sex shops; purchasing commercial DVDs from high street gay sex shops; stealing pirated VHS tapes from friends, and from an unlicensed sex shop; purchasing commercial DVDs and magazines from catalogues through mail order; downloading clips via a range of online p2p networks and technologies such as Gnutella, BitTorrent and news groups; sharing clips, films and images via USB drives with friends and colleagues; and purchasing subscriptions to 'artisanal' online commercial and 'amateur' hardcore porn producers. For gay men of my generation, I would anticipate them having engaged in a similar range of activities in order to obtain porn. These activities have broken a number of laws, and been subject to control and surveillance in many forms, from the simple embarrassment and shame in 1988 of passing through the curtains of a back street Soho sex shop and asking the man behind the counter if he had any *gay* porn, to the fear and threat associated with bringing hard core magazines (and a Mapplethorpe monograph, natch) back from New York in 1989 (Dyer 1989 recounts his

experiences of being stopped by customs in similar circumstances). In subsequent decades, my concerns were associated with dialup and later broadband bandwidth limitations, ISP download limits, and the fear of legal restraint and persecution of so-called pirates and file-sharers. Latterly (although somewhat redundantly, it seems) I have been concerned with questions of privacy and data. These activities have also produced complex and contradictory social effects.

For gay men like myself, whose political and personal trajectory through their twenties and thirties was bound to feminism, to friendships with women, and to gender dissident identifications, the assumed pornification of gay men, and my particular investment in it, produced a range of affects in personal, activist and professional relationships ranging from conflict, shame, and bitterness, to solidarity, affirmation and delight. These affective responses fairly predictably track the vicissitudes of the 'porn wars', and my evolving investments in them. My porn consumption has also been subject to a range of commercial constraints. In the 1980s, original (that is, non-pirated) VHS content was prohibitively expensive; renting a VHS recorder was more manageable, especially if costs were shared with flat mates (but then the machine was in the shared living room), but the key challenge was getting hold of tapes, which were illegal in the UK at this time (for heterosexual and queer materials alike). Barter and gift economies flourished in this context, where exchange was based on like-for-like, porn for porn; or porn as gift (happy birthday/Christmas/house-warming etc); or porn for services (pet-sitting, decorating, essay-writing). But in fact, most of the VHS porn I obtained at this time (roughly 1988-1995) was either passed on, shared or gifted by default: gay porn was literally a currency of many gay friendships and it was exchanged as a necessity, in private, just as you would have exchanged information about safe cruising spaces, safe places to go for a drink, favourable landlords, hostile tutors, gossip about fellow gay students/colleagues/workmates and so on.

Gay Men as Entrepreneurial Voyeurs

The purpose of this autobiographical digression is to tentatively map the range of both exchange activities and structural engagements implied by the consumption of gay porn by men who have lived through the period I have described. If being a happy gay man attuned to the erotic and cultural implications of his disposition necessarily means having a relationship with porn (as Waugh, Dyer, Burger and Mowlabocus suggest), that man's erotic and cultural life is a function of local and corporate commercial arrangements, his ability to access online networks and develop technical skills, his ability to understand and circumvent legal statute and its enforcement, his ability to negotiate social networks on and off the scene and on- and off-line, as well as his tastes, access to privacy, leisure time and money. In short, the pornification of gay men suggests that we are entrepreneurial voyeurs whose individual and subcultural journeys towards 'hard imaginings' (Waugh 1996: 5) have produced a subjectivity organized around the accumulation and appreciation of our human capital to a degree that implies that we are ideal neoliberals.

If the effects of late neoliberal economic policies have been to increasingly collapse distinctions between work and life, labour and leisure, this has in some ways benefited gay men: our history partly derives from a dissident appropriation of nineteenth century leisure class aestheticism and decadence (Sinfield 1994: 93-97). As David Alderson suggests, after gay liberation, the decadent and effeminate associations of gay men were 'preserved' and 'reinforced' by 'the purposeful marketization of gay subcultures' (Alderson forthcoming); [Evangelos Tziallas similarly suggests that the rise of gay male social networking applications \(GMSNAs\) 'whittle down Gay Liberation's utopic vision...but maintains its coded dream of a pure market economy' \(Tziallas 2015: 767\)](#). Gay men inherit an investment in taste choices, and in articulating their identity through aestheticism, from a history of gender dissent: Richard Dyer has noted that as a young gay man he was positively drawn to culture and the arts because of its associations with sensitivity and femininity: 'being queer was not being a man' (Cohen & Dyer 1980: 178-9). The shift from a consumer society, largely understood as female or adolescent, in the 1960s and 70s, to a universalization of market relations in late neoliberalism, has reconfigured masculinity and collaterally privileged those gay men with financial resources. Decadence is no longer unmanly, but effeminacy remains troubling, possibly more than ever for so-called 'metrosexual' man (Maddison in press). Alongside this shifting trajectory of gender and consumerism, Ros Gill, Laura Harvey and Feona Attwood (Gill 2003, 2009; Harvey & Gill 2011; Attwood 2006, 2010), amongst others, have noted complex patterns of empowerment and containment associated with processes of sexualisation. These processes may offer a degree of 'democratization' in relation to access to sexual culture and visibility for women, but the terms of that 'democratization' are at best problematic, and have been highly contested: Gill notes that apparent new freedoms for women have also given rise to the imposition of new responsibilities (2003: 100-6); whilst McRobbie has noted the extent to which these apparent freedoms trade on a 'faux feminist language' that shores up a 'neo-imperialist' notion of the 'West' (McRobbie 2008: 226).

If late neoliberalism seeks to affirm (as well as discipline) those willing and able to marketize their sexual assets, and intensifies the opportunities associated with both the imperative to consume, and the stratification of taste cultures (in direct proportion to its violent assault upon social institutions and the welfare state), we can see conditions in which gay male identities have been vulnerable to assimilation through those very cultural modes that can often feel most subcultural, resistant and reinforcing; and as men, how they have possibly been able to circumvent some of the new responsibilities associated with sexualisation. David Halperin (2014) has recently asserted the strategic and historical separation of gay identity and gay subjectivity, precisely to mark the extent to which identity has become an assimilationist strategy, making us less shameful, and more powerful. Lisa Duggan's familiar concept of 'homonormativity' addresses a similar dynamic, whereby an economically mobile gay constituency gains advantage through its political demobilization, which is anchored in 'domesticity and consumption' (Duggan 2003: 50). [These accounts echo the critique of gay/lesbian and queer 'visibility' offered by Rosemary Hennessy in her compelling study of sexuality](#)

and capital, *Profit and Pleasure* (2000). She suggests that many of the apparent political advances made by queers in the 1990s, especially in the US, were underpinned by largely unexamined class-based privileges that both activist and academic critique failed to understand as functions of economic power (Hennessy 2000: 141-2). More recently, in his stinging critique of queer theory, James Penney ~~has recently suggested~~ that the rise of identity politics since the early 1990s has been exploited by ideologies of liberal democracy and multinational capital that have offered fragmented identity groups, like gay men, important concessions, thereby forcing us 'to abandon ambitious agendas for social change as the price paid for the defence of hard-fought victories on the terrain of race, gender and sexuality' (2014: 51). Our histories, along with the skills and tactics associated with our political emancipation, have furnished us with resources valuable in negotiating neoliberal cultures.

Elsewhere I have elaborated the notions of immaterial sex and the entrepreneurial voyeur as attempts to understand the relationship between sexuality and contemporary forms of political and economic power (Maddison 2013). These ideas are informed by Foucault's work in *The Birth of Biopolitics* and also engage with interventions made by the autonomists, such as Maurizio Lazzarato (1999), as well as concepts of affect developed in new materialism (Maddison 2014), whilst remaining aware of some of the persuasive critiques of these approaches, especially in relation to their overstating of the radical effects of the 'immanent human...capacities and potentialities' of affective labour (Gill & Pratt 2008: 15), and their relative gender blindness (McRobbie 2011). The proliferation of pornography in the last twenty years, driven by digitization and networked cultures, has offered consumers greater choice, and for a range of sexual minorities, including gay men, this has intensified both our access to 'the image of desire' (Waugh 1996: 4) and the penetration of porn 'into the code of gay men's everyday lives' (Mowlabocus 2007: 61). But these choices and freedoms are available only within an increasingly privatized zone of entitlement, the desirability of which is used to legitimate the radical abandonment of the public sphere by state governments of the so-called advanced democracies (Bowring 2012). We may embrace the corporate sponsorship of Pride by Sky et al, which feels like a validation, and which pays for the party, but in so doing we offer Murdoch and his corporation liberal legitimation that works in part to obscure just how far our democratically elected government works to further corporate interests, and work against those of LGBTQ people as voters, workers, users of health, education, housing and welfare services, and as digital and international citizens.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault suggests that contemporary neoliberalism establishes 'mechanisms of competition' and 'an enterprise society', in which there is a 'generalization of the economic form of the market...throughout the social body and including the whole of the social system not usually conducted through or sanctioned by monetary exchanges' (Foucault 2008: 146-7, 225-6, 243). This extension of market rationality to delineate all social forms also extends to what Foucault describes as

'human capital'. This is the value that humans accrue as a function of the marketization of their biological and social capacities (Foucault 2008: 226-30). Michel Feher has suggested that neoliberal policies define us as subjects constantly seeking to appreciate our value (Feher 2009). This value is derived from a combination of innate (genetic background), contextual (social environment), and collateral factors (physical and psychological make up, diet and recreation). Lazzarato and others describe the value to the economy derived not just from our labour, but from our tastes, creativity, social networks and emotions as 'immaterial' labour (Lazzarato 1999). Neoliberalism incites us to govern ourselves through the management of these assets, which can appreciate or depreciate in value: 'the things that I inherit, the things that happen to me, and the things I do all contribute to the maintenance or the deterioration of my human capital' (Feher 2009: 26). Lois McNay argues that this organization of self around a market logic 'subtly alters and depoliticizes conventional conceptions of individual autonomy' by foregrounding choice, differentiation, and 'regulated self-responsibility' (McNay 2009: 62). This has profound effects for our ability to maintain social structures, as the entrepreneurial subject, working to maximize her or his human capital, has 'only competitors'. Neoliberalism proceeds on the basis that these 'competitors', alienated from one another by the governmental maximization of the inequalities between them, should seek advancement through the acquisition and exploitation of individual freedoms, which are proliferating constantly. Class and other forms of solidarity are discouraged precisely because these 'competitors' are constantly differentiated from one another, and because the 'idea of personal responsibility is eroded' by the outsourcing to individuals of 'rights' and responsibilities previously secured by the social contract (McNay 2009: 65).

How can this help us to understand the contemporary politics of gay porn? Firstly, we can move away from a model of human sexuality that sees it as necessarily repressed by social systems, and especially so in the case of minority sexualities; this model is implied by accounts of gay porn that see its libidinal excess as a releasing of otherwise curtailed sexual energies, and this tendency was one Richard Dyer himself warned against in 1985. In such a move, gay porn is perhaps no longer to be seen as the agent of our erotic emancipation from a masculinist and homophobic culture, but is instead a manifestation of immaterial sex, where libidinal, emotional and physiological energies, desires and sensations, all of which hardcore porn depends upon, are a function of human capital. Porn, gay or otherwise, exploits the immaterial sex of performers and actors, who represent a post-human elite: sexual 'cyborgs' (Davis 2009) and 'athletes' (Taormino 2011), with outsized genitalia, and bodily and affective capacities elaborated by the technical capacity of digital video production, and by surgical and pharmacological enhancement, who perform acts that express a post-Kinseyian logic of sexual pleasure (Maddison 2009) in the context of a 'gay pornographic production code' that installs an active/passive dichotomy and a conventional suck/rim/fuck/jerk sexual narrative (Mercer 2012: 316). The labour conditions experienced by this elite are likely to be far from commensurate with the privileged status of their sexual immateriality (Waldby & Cooper 2006). This immaterial sex is the

property of the commodities which it produces, but it is also a function of the post-Fordist working experiences of gay porn consumers seeking pleasure in terms that replicate and facilitate work patterns or that offer compensations for the privations of neoliberalism; this is a context in which we might see consumption of porn as a responsibility (Power 2009). If gay porn has had an historically significant role in upholding and affirming male same-sex desire and sex, it has undoubtedly also installed sets of expectations in relation to sexual performativity, narratives of genital play, attractiveness, body type, endowment, voracity, and sexual health that many of us find it hard to uphold. Consuming porn offsets the impossibility of the sexual standards it installs: impossible to achieve because we don't have enough time for an elaborate recreational sex life, despite the convenience of social media apps (Tziallas 2015); impossible to achieve because we are unable to autonomously realize our libidinous capacity, because we're too tired, alienated, socially inept, or domestically and socially compromised; or because our sensory and affective responses might relate more to mediated, networked interactions than to 'meat' intimate bodily ones.

To put it crudely, we may not be able to have the kind of excessive super-performative sex lives offered by the post-human images of our 'pornified' culture, but at least we can get off on watching others do it – and in neat twenty minute segments that facilitate an unsustainable work/life balance in which much of our social and creative energies, as well as our labour capacity, is directed at maintaining precarious work. Gay men, like other porn consumers, must act entrepreneurially to exercise discrimination upon a bewildering array of porn choices that not only must deliver private, fleeting experiences of pleasure, but which additionally work to constitute their gay self. And as we have seen, this determining quality of porn to selfhood for gay men isn't simply a function of the intensification of both network cultures and neoliberal effects in the last twenty years: Burger suggests that gay porn serves as 'popular memory' in which individual 'porn-induced queer orgasm[s]' are 'a political act, no matter how private' (Burger 1995: 105) and Waugh notes that 'fuck photos' are 'our cultural history and political validation' (Waugh 1996: 5). Successful consumption of gay porn in an increasingly standardised market, defined by a demand for high volume of content throughput, depends upon managing networks and social media apps where we must demonstrate entrepreneurial skill, choosing appropriate contractual subscriptions, following links and recommendations to new sites, screening and filtering feeds and contacts, keeping up with chat rooms, torrent lists, blogs and feeds to ensure we aren't missing out on opportunities not only to realize our desires but to become properly gay.

Given this, to what extent is gay identity foreclosed in its entrepreneurial voyeurism? We can assert on the one hand the particular force porn has had in determining contemporary gay male identities in the metropolitan cultures of the US and UK (and globally, according to Tziallas 2015), and on the other hand, the conditions in which the enterprise society seeks to limit social relations that don't manifest opportunities to maximize our human capital. But is this necessarily so? One logical

conclusion of these two lines of argument is that contemporary gay men represent the very apex of neoliberal subjectivity: alienated, competitive, consumer-driven, privatized, fixated on localized experiences of erotic fulfillment, socially and economically privileged but disenfranchised. But the very currency of porn in gay culture, which has its roots in a relationship with sexually explicit imagery very different from the one we currently inhabit, may mean that gay men have been precisely best placed to resist the exploitation of immaterial sex, and have instead fostered subcultural conditions for using their cultural heritage and erotic investment in porn to manifest a 'comradeship of cock', in which social relations flourish in the face of neoliberal alienation. Michael Warner's famous declaration that 'Post-Stonewall urban gay men reek of the commodity' and that 'we give off the smell of capitalism in rut' was not an outright condemnation of the commodification and assimilationism of gay culture, but instead was a call to recognise the need for a 'more dialectical view of capitalism' (Warner 1993: xxxi, n28).

The appropriation by queers of nineteenth century decadence may have subsequently lubricated the marketization of gay subcultures, as David Alderson has argued, but effeminate aestheticism and performed decadence also gave rise to formations that dissented against the 'manly purposefulness of industry and empire' as Alan Sinfield asserts (1994: 97). More recently, David Halperin has suggested that whilst 'gay identity' may imply assimilation, 'gay subjectivity' may offer a 'dissident way of feeling and relating to the world' (Halperin 2014: 12-13). The pornification of gay culture, implying intense modes of commodification and sexualisation, may produce entrepreneurial voyeurs willingly speculating on their human capital (Feher 2009: 34), but it may also, at the same time, continue to articulate the kind of dissidence Halperin envisages, and which Waugh and Burger identify as distinguishing the meaning of porn in late twentieth century gay cultures. Here, I propose to begin to consider questions of sociality, comradeship and gender dissent in the context of ideas of human capital and entrepreneurial voyeurism, by analyzing gay porn blogs, which potentially provide cultural evidence of the meanings made through porn, and the kinds of social interactions it facilitates.

Gay Porn Blogs: Designing Life?

As one would expect in a context where consumer choices proliferate, and taste decisions articulate significant cultural meanings, there are a number of gay porn blogs that profile the weekly releases by the major studios and artisanal producers which purport to help consumers make the right choices in terms of purchasing individual clips and rolling subscriptions. Many of these, such as [gaypornblog.com](#) and [waybig.com](#), are effectively shop fronts that offer a minimal review function, and are economically tied to producers' sites by aggregating pay wall access. As interesting as these sites are, here I want to focus on two blogs that have a less integrated relationship with commercial producers, so as to gain some perspective on the culture of gay porn consumption. The first of these, [craigdesigninglife](#), is a Tumblr feed, and the second is [Sissydude](#), an independent website primarily

published via WordPress that also maintains token Tumblr and Instagram feeds. Both blogs are apparently authored by creative professionals. In the case of craigdesigninglife, an anonymous poster describes himself/themselves as 'Gay architect Miami Loving Life – Here's a combination of my work, the work of others I admire, things I love, a few personal pics thrown in here and there! Oh + Hot Men!'. The profile picture appears to show a muscled dark haired young man with his shirt off, and the micro-blog's wallpaper shows a sunny image of a Miami beach front, with palm trees, blue sea and tower blocks. The blog title reads: 'Luxury Lifestyle Gay Houses Food Travel and Men!', and each post, invariably an image, includes the standard text: 'THE ULTIMATE LUXURY LIFESTYLE BLOG FOR THE GAY MAN'. Sissydude is authored by John Webster, an artist and illustrator who sells some of his own merchandise (art prints, t-shirts, cushions, mugs) through the online sissydude shop. Site info proclaims that 'Sissydude is a visual blog whirling in sexuality & mystery. All of my interests and obsessions take you on a totally transplendent journey of annoyance and self-discovery... Sissydude is all about love- and through sharing- introducing people to sexy things, art and vintage stuff (that followers may never have seen before). XXXO'.

Tumblr is a microblogging platform that hosts over 243 million blogs² and is well known for its pornographic content; the format allows easy posting of text and images via web-based or app-based platforms, as well as enabling comments and reblogging, as you would expect from any social media service. Users subscribe to blogs, which then appear in their news feed. On 22nd June 2015, thirty posts were made to the craigdesigninglife blog, all them comprising images. Of these, five were soft-core pornographic images of naked or semi naked men, including two selfies; six posts comprised hard-core images all apparently taken from commercial gay videos, two of which were multiple image posts showing sequences of genital acts; eight posts were images of exotic and luxurious travel locations (for example a hotel room with a curtained bed in the foreground and a balcony overlooking a tropical scene in the background); three showed luxurious houses or interiors; five posts were images of expensive cars (for example a Lamborghini in a private plane hanger with a US flag in the background); two posts had images of luxury items (one image of a Rolex watch, one image of a large private yacht with a helicopter on deck); one post was of a motivational slogan ('never forget the things you have when concentrating on the things you want'). This distribution of topics in posts is fairly representative of the content on craigdesigninglife, other than there not being any posts about food in this sample period, which otherwise seems a staple of the blog.

Almost all of the non-porn posts focus on aspirational images of luxury goods and locations; these posts rarely include titles or descriptions, and rely on the follower to know what or where it is. We might suggest that in such cases the specific detail of the post is less meaningful than the overall effect of luxury that is connoted: this is especially notable in relation to the travel images, which foreground a mode of travel and a type of destination, rather than offering a general celebration of diverse geographical locations: one high-end beach resort is much like any other, and this culture of

tourist travel seems to exist at a trans-national, trans-cultural, neo-imperialist level. The mode of travel is always luxurious, and the blog frequently features images of hotel rooms, resort beach huts and so on; similarly, destinations are either white sandy beaches or metropolitan urban cityscapes, or both (as in the case of the image of Miami Beach used in the profile wallpaper). The porn images are similarly predictable in style and content: they feature commercial and selfie photos, with muscled, tanned, sometimes hairy men, often engaged in oral, or more frequently, anal, sex. The blog is striking for the way in which it combines these two sets of porn and non-porn content in a seamless way, almost as though one stands in for the other: muscled attractive men and energetic sex acts comprising a menu of potential acquisitions, alongside expensive watches, resort destinations and up-scale interiors, all denoting 'THE ULTIMATE LUXURY LIFESTYLE...FOR THE GAY MAN'.

If making appropriate shopping choices, and assimilating neoliberal, trans-cultural values, are part and parcel of successful selfhood in late neoliberalism, then one way of reading *craigdesigninglife* is that it serves its followers by helping them to exercise informed discrimination in their taste choices. This would apply to both the porn and non-porn content. In this reading, *craigdesigninglife* provides gay men with the means to maintain and enhance the value of their human capital by empowering consumer choices that will align their tastes with those of a super-rich neoliberal elite: the 'portfolio' that comprises this human capital reconciles gay desire and 'lifestyle' with that of the elite. The combination of pornographic images and gifs, and images of conventional, albeit luxury, consumer goods and services, intensifies 'affective resonance' (Paasonen 2011), fostering libidinal as well as aspirational desire. Thus, the codification of porn in gay men's everyday lives here would seem to reinforce homonormative assimilation.

Yet, this seems too simplistic an account of the meanings generated by this microblog. Sometimes the juxtaposition of porn and non-porn posts creates dissonant effects, rather than mutually reinforcing ones. This often occurs when posts of commodities associated with mainstream heterosexual ~~men~~ masculinity (watches, motorbikes, sports cars) appear adjacent to images from gay hardcore. Here, it is the aesthetic mode, as well as the content, which generates the dissonance. In the sample period of 22nd June 2015, the image of a Lamborghini on a beach at sunset was posted after a porn image of a muscled man ejaculating on the ripped torso of another man. The image of the car deploys the visual codes of a glossy magazine, with lighting and photography derived from labour-intensive and expensive staging and post-production. The porn image is brightly lit to reduce shadow and highlight the 'meat' (Willeman 2004: 21) performance. Generically, one evokes a public world of celebrity and lifestyle culture, men's lifestyle magazines, wealth and luxury, and the other evokes a private world of personal pleasures reinforced by subcultural histories and practices. Thus, we might suggest that rather than the images of luxury goods and services having the effect of de-gaying or de-ghettoizing the porn images, assimilating the gay follower of *craigdesigninglife* to an aspirational, homonormative disposition where the porn simply serves to intensify the excitement attached to such assimilation,

we could say that, much like the narrative porn Burger writes about, the porn imagery 'queers' the unattainable, implicitly heterosexual, masculinized world of supercars and resort destinations³, reinscribing the 'everyday reality' of aspirational consumerism in a homoerotic fantasy that 'actively violate[s] masculinist norms' and which deconstructs 'oppressive social standards' (Burger 1995: 41).

-Given the meta-evidence, 'luxury lifestyle...things I love, places I love', I would suggest that in intent the craigdesigninglife microblog is nearer to the first, assimilationist approach, than to the second, dissident one. But clearly the two are not mutually exclusive. Messages and posts from followers indicate a high degree of investment in a mode of consuming the microblog that flattens distinctions between the porn and non-porn content, seeing both sets of material as mutually reinforcing. For example, the following exchange between a follower and the blogger appeared on 7th July 2015:

Follower: I saw the photo of you and your husband in the paper here in Miami. You are such a hot couple & a great example of a gay couple living life like any other really successful married couple. I hope I have that too one day. I think you guys are amazing.

craigdesigninglife: Geeez thank you! I want to just say we aren't living our life "LIKE" a regular couple, WE ARE just another couple! We don't think of ourselves as a "gay" couple. We honestly don't put any real time or thought into it! We're both to [sic] busy and we're simply a married couple.

I'm sure you'll find what you're looking for & again,thanks man!

And the following exchange appeared on 6th July 2015:

Follower: Dude, you posted a gif of a guy rubbing a guy's boner wearing andrew christians... Do you happen to know who they are? It's for educational purposes ;p

craigdesigninglife: No I don't but I wish I did! I'd just love to help you advance your education! Goals are good, keep it up bud! ;-)

Here meaning lies not only in the content of specific exchanges, but in their form, and in the affective intensity: values articulated in the conversations straightforwardly animate an assimilationist agenda in which gay men follow craigdesigninglife precisely to learn about how to be gay in the contemporary moment by exercising appropriate choices in both erotic/libidinal and luxury/fashion commodities, and in which such pursuits underwrite a denial of the very distinctiveness of 'gay' due to both the pressures of work in a neoliberal context and the desire for normality. Dissatisfaction or critique is limited to frustration at not knowing the origin of a particular image, or the label associated with a particular commodity. The social media format of the Tumblr platform here facilitates a 'comradeship of cock', but one where sociality is limited in both form and content.

As we have already seen, Sissydude positions itself very differently to craigdesigninglife: it is published on a more independent and versatile web platform, and is richer in the variety and quantity of content published. Sissydude also takes a more self-consciously critical and creative approach to the question of gay culture: it offers a 'transplendent journey of annoyance and self-discovery' and

foregrounds 'love' and 'sharing' as part of a missionary project to educate followers, 'introducing people to sexy things, art and vintage stuff (that followers may never have seen before)'.⁴ In terms of content, however, like *craigdesigninglife*, Sissydude posts a mixture of soft- and hard-core pornographic images of men, alongside non-porn images from popular culture. However, unlike *craigdesigninglife*, the images posted by Sissydude don't include commercial images of luxury commodities, but instead foreground kitsch TV shows, vintage beefcake and pinups, camp cultural icons, digital artists and photographers, altporn (Jacobs 2004, Attwood 2007, Maddison 2013) and drag culture. Posts are usually themed, and are often dedicated to specific emerging porn stars, camp appropriations of pop culture personalities or events, or independent artists and photographers. In the sample period of 14-20th June 2015, Sissydude uploaded nine posts. Of these, two reblogged material from vintage and kitsch blogs, two reblogged images from independent artists featuring nude and erotic material, one reblogged images from a commercial gay porn production (Randy Blue), two reblogged material from altporn sites (one featuring selfies of men with their trousers and underwear around their ankles, and another featuring fetish images of hairy men), one profiled the appeal for crowd-sourced funding for *Dragstrip 66 – The Frockumentary*, and one comprised a Sissydude speciality, the 'mega-post'. These 'mega-posts' represent a collage of found and reblogged material brought together in a curated collection, and are regularly posted on the Sissydude site; these work to distill the essence of Sissydude's preoccupations and 'obsessions'.

The mega-post of 17th June 2015, entitled 'SUPER DUPER MEGA-POST SPECTACULARish !!!' comprised 181 images and gifs, primarily pornographic in content, with a mix of reblogged selfies, images from commercial porn producers (including *str8hell*, Sean Cody and Lucas Entertainment), art portraits, fetish images (leather, feet, bondage), images from vintage beefcake and gay porn (including a front cover from *Honcho*, September 1982), and images from wrestling and body building competitions, all displaying a mix of ages and body types (from smooth twinks to older daddies and hairy 'chubs'), predominantly featuring white models, but also some Asian and Afro-Caribbean men. Scattered throughout this curated collection of porn, nude and pinup images are a number of non-porn images: the lurid art nouveau style poster for Barbra Streisand's *Belle of 14th Street* TV special from 1967; a photo of a type-written and hand-signed letter from Quentin Crisp written in August 1994 to a TV studio defending broadcast of *Tales of the City*; a black and white image of the actor Raymond Burr; a fifties fashion image of a woman in profile ('mantilla variation with spray of lilacs'); an image of the cover of the Donna Summer and Barbra Streisand single 'No More Tears (Enough is Enough)' modified so that the eyes of each diva blink alternately; a 1950s advert for *crisco*; and a kitty meme.

If the 'affective resonance' produced by the association of pornographic and erotic images with images of luxury goods and services on *craigdesigninglife* has the effect of either eroticizing gay assimilation to late neoliberal consumerism, or effects a homoerotic appropriation of familiar symbols

of unattainable economic prestige, then in both cases the blog forecloses the pleasurable affects associated with consuming pornographic images to a field of entrepreneurial voyeurism. In other words, whether conforming or dissenting, the preoccupation is with the relationship between gay porn and consumer culture. Craigdesigninglife schools its followers in both the kinds of taste choices through which they can display their accumulation of human capital, and patterns modes of social engagement that enable followers to speculate on that human capital – competitive, blokeish, commensurating.

In contrast, Sissydude associates the pleasures of porn with an apprehension of the fact that such pleasures have a history, and are located in a rich subculture associated not only with desiring images of male nudity but with drag performances, camp identifications, and community engagements, all of which potentially disrupt homonormative assimilation. Thus, a selfie showing a man's hairy thighs, uncut penis and white coffee mug is followed by the image of a poster advertising a pre-Stonewall TV special by a diva much-loved by gay men (hairy flesh displaced by a lurid art-nouveau fantasia of pink, purple and orange); a protest letter written by a legendary effeminate homosexual is juxtaposed with appropriated images of masculine muscle-men (uneven type on a scrunched up page with the famous signature, displaced by generic gurning and tattoos); smug, self-congratulatory selfies of young beautiful men are followed by a 1950s graphic of a grinning housewife holding up a can of Crisco ('hotariously' as Sissydude would say, anatomical invitation is followed by the means to make good on it). The association of such subcultural values with erotic pleasure serves not to incite followers to speculate on their individual human capital, but to reflect upon, and take pleasure in, resistant marginality [in what could be referred to as a comradeship of cock](#). Cybercarnality (Mowlabocus 2010) here doesn't turn pornographic pleasures into immaterial labour, collapsing privacy and fantasy into work-like opportunities to refine entrepreneurial skills for accumulating human capital: instead carnality is turned towards the gay subculture that manifests it. Whilst craigdesigninglife fosters skills-acquisition, trading sexual tastes and sexual desire for aspirational desire and knowledge of labels and destinations, capitalizing on what Feher suggests are 'innate', 'contextual' and 'collateral' factors that 'contribute to the maintenance or the deterioration of my human capital' (2009: 26), Sissydude is altogether more playful, irreverent, creative, and self-consciously marginal. Sissydude certainly celebrates masculine sexuality, but it doesn't do so at the expense of a recognition of, and a celebration of, the pleasure in gay effeminacy and in camp culture. These pleasures connect to a much longer history of aestheticism and decadence, rooted, as Sinfield (1994) reminds us, in political dissidence.

Conclusion

What do the next thirty years hold for gay porn, and for LGBTQ cultures? The purpose of marking the anniversary of Waugh's landmark essay should in part reside in considering agendas, not only for future academic and critical work on gay porn, but for the future of our communities. In this essay, I

have suggested that the current historical conjuncture empowers gay men as entrepreneurial voyeurs. Neoliberal cultures solicit the maximization of gay men's human capital, which in part derives from the contextual resources (Feher 2009) we inherit as gay men from a 'pornified' subculture [that I have referred to as a comradeship of cock](#). Such empowerment is uneven, and rests upon assimilation to economic and political projects inimical to the historic subcultures that made us, and to the possibility of our future communities. These patterns of empowerment, assimilation and community as they are experienced from within gay culture are riven with structural divisions of wealth, 'race', class, and gender: gay porn may have offered post-Stonewall men images of erotic liberation, but that porn also installed racist hyper-sexualised images of black men (Mahawatte 2004), and feminizing neo-imperialist images of Asian men (Fung 1991) that continue to organize gay pornographic representation. In terms of gender, we can see how the liberal coalition of LGBTQ 'outsources' what were once fundamental commitments to gender dissent across diverse queer identities, to the 'T' constituency: Susan Stryker suggests that 'trans thus conceived of does not trouble the basis of the other categories – indeed, it becomes a containment mechanism for “gender trouble” of various sorts that works in tandem with assimilative gender-normative tendencies within the sexual identities' (Stryker 2008: 148). One key agenda I would like to identify for future research, therefore, is the meaning of gender in gay porn cultures. As I've suggested here, decadent and effeminate subcultural histories have lubricated the marketization of gay cultures, yet gay men's pornification tends to elide such associations in a rigorous celebration of masculine resources, which gets played out in the formalism of the 'gay pornographic production code' (Mercer 2012) as active/passive, butch/twink. [This is clearly one limitation of a comradeship of cock](#). At the same time, the 'pornified' nature of gay culture is a marker of both our desirability, and of our intolerability, to different constituencies of feminists. It would seem, from the evidence of craigdesigninglife, that porn consumption and an embracing of the marketization of gay culture are not only synonymous, but mutually reinforcing of gay men's human capital in neoliberal terms. These terms underwrite the dismantling of gay subjectivity in favour of a gay identity (Halperin 2014) that I would suggest is fundamentally entrepreneurial. Yet Sissydude shows us a different mode of gay pornification, one that eschews the baubles of so-called luxury for a celebration of gay history and culture, [and which, despite its objectification of masculinity, offers a more complex relationship to the comradeship of cock](#). Sissydude offers images and ideas that not only celebrate the familiar masculinized images of gay porn, but which celebrate subcultural values, [practices and histories](#).

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¹ Although it should also be said that in the 1980s it would have been hard for lesbian and gay activists fighting Clauses 28 and 25 in the UK, and fighting government indifference to AIDS in the US, to imagine ever being *satisfied* with being offered the chance to become assimilated to an institution we have historically seen as oppressive.

² <https://www.tumblr.com/about>

³ Many of which, like Sandals, have a well known history of refusing bookings from gay couples. See <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/oct/12/gayrights.immigrationpolicy>, accessed 9/7/15.

⁴ <http://sissydude.com>, accessed 14/7/15.