

# CONTEMPORARY AUDIOVISUAL PORNOGRAPHY: BRANDING STRATEGY AND GONZO FILM STYLE

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## Introduction

This paper<sup>1</sup> is intended to be part of what could be called “second-generation porn studies”, the inception of which can be traced back to 2004, when Linda Williams edited and published the book *Porn Studies*<sup>2</sup>. Second-generation porn studies differ from the first generation in that they are not aimed at assessing – for either censorious or libertarian purposes – the political value of pornography and discussing its right to exist, but rather at considering its “phenomenal deflagration” (insofar as it pertains to several, multifaceted phenomena) in the context of current world media.

Williams argues that, in the light of the proliferation of pornography brought about initially by video technology and subsequently by digital and computer technology, any criticism trying to dwell on the appropriateness of the “pornographic entity” – as was often the case in the 1980s and 1990s – is visibly inconsistent.

Pornography is a well-established reality indeed, from both an economic and a social point of view. Suffice it to mention a few “numbers” characterising the porn industry:

1. Between 1988 and 2005, the United States alone saw more than a tenfold increase in the number of pornographic titles distributed, up from 1,300 to over 13,500. By comparison, Hollywood produced an average of 400 films a year in the past decade.
2. In 2005, the turnover of the porn industry in the United States amounted to about 13 billion dollars, as against 9 billion dollars collected by Hollywood in the same year.
3. There are about 4 million porn websites (12% of all websites currently on the Internet); every month, about 72 million accesses from all over the world are registered for these websites.

Such an explosion in the production and circulation of pornographic materials leads Williams to see «a fully recognizable fixture of popular culture» in pornography, which does «cry out loud for better understanding»<sup>3</sup>.

Williams argues that pornography should be construed not so much as a juridical, political or sociological issue, but rather as an autonomous *cultural form*, one which scholars are called upon to come to terms with. More specifically, what we would like to analyse is, on the one hand, the industrial conformation of contemporary pornographic audiovisuals and, on the other, the (related) stylistic configurations that distinguish it.

## Contemporary porn industry: a brand typology

In these last years – particularly, beginning from the second half of the 1990s –, the cultural geography of pornography has changed its own identity. We are in fact witnessing to a general turn that concerns the very essence and the materiality of pornography. Not only a vast *quantity* of pornographic texts is now available on the Net; but the very *quality* of the sexual representations seems to be going through an important transformation.

With regard to the latter observation, it is worth noticing that the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” has taken the shape of an ideological and epistemological device able to reveal itself inside several cultural, social and media events. Within this perspective, the notion of *cultural paradigm* “pornography” refers to a system in which different *cultural* “pornographic” *series* find their possibilities of mediation and configuration<sup>4</sup>. In other terms, if for *cultural paradigm* “pornography” we are referring to the whole discursive field in which it is possible to articulate and to reintroduce discourses dealing with the theme of the sexuality, the *cultural* “pornographic” *series* represent the concrete realizations of such discourses. From Michel Foucault’s “archaeological” perspective it is therefore possible to affirm that, contextually to the use of repressive devices, the rising bourgeois society<sup>5</sup> has encouraged the production of discourses on sexualities, and tried to gather their truth and to establish «the history of their conditions of possibility»<sup>6</sup>. In such a way, it is not only some *knowledges* that have been constituted but also *orders of discourse* and *technologies* about sex. This has favoured the birth of real *truths* about sex and its practices, delimiting pleasures, circumscribing identities and creating perversions and pathologies.

In comparison to this, Susan Driver has recently underlined the pornography’s pervasive character and its ability to connect itself with different spheres of experience and its knowledge: «Pornography – points out Driver – leaks across disciplinary boundaries and blurs conventional distinctions between private/public, subjective/social, work/play, school/leisure, sexual/intellectual realms of experiences»<sup>7</sup>. Particularly, the postmodern condition of pornography is clearly verifiable comparing two separate but linked processes which deal with the mainstream culture. Both of them, as Brian McNair has put into light, aim to address to the social demand of a use of pornography according to some of the more widespread and most commonly shared artistic, popular and democratic configurations. The first one, the *porno-chic*, aims at «transforming the dirty, unrefined sexuality of porn into much more sophisticated kind of text, considerably easier on the eye»<sup>8</sup>. The second one, the *striptease culture*, is clearly observable in the efforts of making more operational «the sexual saturation devices»<sup>9</sup> described by Foucault in the public sphere and within the media.

Watching at the quantitative entity of similar processes and, above all, at the extreme proliferation of the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” within the mainstream film culture (i.e. contemporary Hollywood cinema), today’s audiovisual pornographic industry has tried to re-phrase its own image and its own agenda following three complementary directions. First, it works in order to circumscribe its own *identity* and reclaim its own *authenticity* with respect to other zones of popular and high culture which tend to use the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” to promote several kinds of cultural distinctions and interests (economic, political and aesthetic). Second, this industry tries to make its own cultural products more attractive and more sophisticated. Finally, the porn industry constitutes an innovative system of production, able to use all the opportunities offered by the Net and, at the same time, capable of making them run at a profit.

More specifically, contemporary audiovisual pornographic industry seems to stand out for two

operational politics which are closely linked: on the one hand, it tries to rediscover its historical tradition, producing cultural products that directly refer to the past in terms of conventions, styles, subjects and pragmatic devices; on the other hand, it aims to emphasize the characteristic qualities of its industrial system – particularly its economic and institutional structures and its modes of production – taking as point of reference mainstream cinema (i.e. Hollywood). In other words, nowadays, audiovisual pornographic system tries to rediscover the *authenticity* and the *specialty* of their semantic, syntactic and pragmatic configurations by comparing itself with the *quality* and the *innovation* of a more competitive, globalized and fragmented movie marketplace represented by the dominant popular cinema entertainment.

According to Linda Williams<sup>10</sup>, it is possible to determine three distinct phases during which the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” has identified the cinema as an operational sphere in which to reconsider its own *discursive order*. Williams’ analysis focuses mainly on two connected aspects of this union between pornography and cinema. The first one deals with the *textual elements* which can be discerned within the audiovisual pornographic forms, in a way which links them to the historical qualities of cinema apparatus and its social and cultural configurations in terms of audiences, places and events. The second aspect is about the *social discourses* surrounding these pornographic forms, including an exhaustive account concerning sex and its several practices. As a consequence, audiovisual pornographic history is articulated according to the following stages:

1. The first, and the longest, is the era of the *stag film*, from the origins of moving pictures through the late 1960s. This early period of audiovisual pornographic history is characterized by the presence of texts which, while displaying hard-core sequences in terms of a radical narrative discontinuity, address an exclusively male audience.
2. The second stage is represented by the “classical” era of theatrically exhibited porno, a brief epoch in the 1970s and early 1980s. During this phase, audiovisual pornographic forms achieve a high degree of narrative complexity and draw the attention of heterogeneous audiences.
3. The third period – which occurs from the half of the 1980s to the late 1990s – is characterized by an extensive quantity of video productions. With the VCR and Internet revolutions two complementary processes came into being: a much wider variety of pornographies for every conceivable taste and orientation; and a much greater “interaction” with the pornographic media<sup>11</sup>.

However, it is worth noticing that nowadays we are facing a fourth temporal dimension of audiovisual pornography. At present, in fact, new media technologies make pornography more and more accessible for a large portion of the audience. On the other hand, it is also true that the notion of “pornographic cinema” has changed its configuration because cinema itself has changed. As Francesco Casetti has recently pointed out, by virtue of contemporary media convergence and the digital revolution, «cinema is re-articulated in several fields, too different from each other to be kept together», and «these fields are ready to be re-absorbed into broader and more encompassing domains»<sup>12</sup>. What is emerging from this complex interaction is a plurality of *supports*, a plurality of *products* and a plurality of *modes of consumption*. As a result, adult cinema industry has had to renew its politics and is now «in search of innovative business models» capable of addressing its consumers<sup>13</sup>.

As a matter of fact, it seems that contemporary porn cinema is aiming to promote its image by focusing on an articulated *branding strategy*. With respect to what we said above, this industry is

involved in calibrated marketing practices in so far as its primary purpose is to advertise its own products in terms of *authenticity/specialty* and *quality/innovation*. Moreover, this industry performs its strategies within a globalized marketplace of entertainment, where the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” is used with different intents.

According to Lester Thurow, in a global marketplace, where «the knowledge-based economy is fundamentally transforming the role of the nation-state», business firms are able to adopt two strategic options: to become a dominant global player or to become a highly specialized, shrewd niche player<sup>14</sup>. It seems that the production subjects that inform the actual porn cinema system are playing their roles by choosing the second option described by Thurow. In the economic field of the adult cinema industry, to assume the role of a highly specialized niche player means above all to provide products presenting a high degree of *quality* and *diversity*. Take, for example, the following recent words pronounced by Farley Cahen, an editor at *Adult Video News*: «Some people say porn is porn, but consumers have preferences. Some like amateur, with neighbors in their socks in a poorly-lit setting»; but, continues Cahen, «most consumers like a more polished product with high quality production and prettier girls doing fun things»<sup>15</sup>. It is for these reasons that we have to speak of brands instead of products. In fact, what distinguishes a brand from a product is the capacity of the former to be a dominant member of a product class marked by emerging properties.

Brand is a physical and perceptual entity. In this sense, when we have dealings with brands we have to consider two complementary operational spaces: in the first place, the *product space*, which is determined by the specific properties of a product class; secondly, the *perceptual space*, which involves the capacity of consumers to combine the physical features of a particular product with their cultural and intellectual patterns of reference given by other previous experiences. Both *product space* and *perceptual space* are ruled by certain regularities or principles of coherence that permit some products of a category to become brands. Thus, the value of an authentic brand is based on its power to configure itself as a *synthesis* of both physical and perceptual entities, and in this sense it also relies on its capacity of occupying a niche within product categories. «It is the “closure” of brand elements – explains Wolfgang Grassl –, their degree of unity and integration, which facilitates brand awareness, since each piece of information can act as a retrieval cue for the other»<sup>16</sup>.

The contemporary pornography cinema industry is involved in *branding strategy*; that is, it is trying to capitalize its resources (namely economic, aesthetic, structural and human resources) in order to provide to its consumers a wide range of products able to transform the economic profits achieved into cultural values (*quality, authenticity* and *diversity*). From this point of view, this cinema industry has taken advantages of the potentialities offered by Internet by presenting itself as a market player capable of bearing a dividend, but also able to put in practice newer marketing strategy. As Frederick S. Lane III writes, «a flourishing online pornography business is one that is not only financially successful but it also one that has met the basic commercial challenges that every new business must face – infrastructure, reliability, variety, competition, marketing, service, and value»<sup>17</sup>.

To a certain extent, the next step is that of understanding how the major leaders in adult filmmaking have tried to become highly specialized niche players. An aspect to be analysed is that of estimating how the porn cinema producers have worked in the installation of some strategies aimed at *placing* their own products with respect to the market and to the competitors. It seems that they have proceeded to the configuration of four basic brand typologies, each of which has counted on many devices – mostly in debt with the classical cinema tradition – to put into effects cinema discourse. If tradition and innovation do mix up indistinctly in the construction of such brands, this happens in order to defend and support an identity, a heart of meanings and “promises” respectively to be assigned to the products and to be guaranteed to their consumers.

The first category to be considered is the *author brand*. In this commercial making typology, the “closure” element of the brand is represented by the figure of the *author*; that is the classic paradigmatic element of cinema institution that works as a positioning element of the product in the production conventions adopted by the studio. The author is a vehicle of synthesis between her/his own personal attitude of creating a language and the productive project outlined by the same studio. Once again the comparison with the mainstream cinema turns out to be suitable; in fact, as Barbara Grespi points out when talking about contemporary Hollywood marketing practices, the authors «match their own aesthetic strategy with the studio industrial strategy, becoming to all intents and purposes a product, or a privileged production line»<sup>18</sup>.

The installation of that kind of *branding strategy* is clearly observable in the productive project, coordinated by John Stagliano, promoted by Evil Angel (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 – *Evil Angel*, 2009.

The company, which has recruited among its ranks some of the most prestigious existent porn cinema directors (Rocco Siffredi, John Leslie, Joey Silvera, Nacho Vidal, Belladonna, Buttman Magazine Choice etc.), deals in the exclusive sale of audiovisual products made by these authors, granting them the utmost autonomy, even if, at the same time, it does guarantee the packaging quality of their films. In Stagliano’s words:

*At Evil Angel I wanted to create a situation where the directors could be rewarded for the hard work they put into creating their product. Here the directors make more money if their videos sell more. This is a great incentive for them to find new and better ways to make videos. All indications are that this system works very well. The DVDs that we make are the best-selling in the business. Each one of our directors is unique in style and content, but similar in their commitment to create the best product possible*<sup>19</sup>.

Evil Angel presents itself as a place of convergence of different kinds of practices of the author, and the capacity of letting in the market trustworthy products from a qualitative point of view is strictly linked to the value that is acknowledged to the variety of approaches of several authors.

In the *actor brand*’s case, the winning element of synthesis between physical features and perceptive features of the products is summed up by the *actor* device. As everybody knows, the actor, especially if female, has always been an essential element within the structure of film industry, formalising, through her/his body and her/his name, a certificate of commercial guarantee<sup>20</sup>. The contemporary pornography cinema industry seems to use at least three different declinations of actor *branding strategy*. The first one focuses on the names of the most famous female pornostars and tries to capitalize these human resources by creating a brand based on *diversity* and *quality*. This is how, for example, Sins Factory/Pink’o, a European studio divided into production and distribution activities, operates; its aim, in fact, is «to provide top quality

material and highly diversified products, designed to satisfy all the demands of the adult entertainment market»<sup>21</sup>. The strategies of establishment of a brand tend, for this first possibility of accomplishment of the actor device, to internalize a common industrial practice of defining a product based on the distinction of different spheres of positioning of it with regard to the consumer's taste and expectations<sup>22</sup>.

The second declination of actor *branding strategy* is directly tied with a particular filming practice known as *gonzo style*. This style, which now is becoming one of the dominant modes of production in porn cinema, deals with the construction of actresses' "proto-star persona" that are not yet famous in the market. A pretty good number of female stars of contemporary porn cinema (Jenna Haze, Katsumi, Gina Lynn among others), in fact, has been professionally baptized when appearing in those films that have made of this particular device direction their enunciative mark. Within this brand configuration we can certainly count the project coordinated by Jules Jordan who we have just mentioned: director, producer and actor, this basic figure of the current porn cinema has built up his own commercial brand betting on a more opportune exploitation of a style considered both as a language and as a vehicle of the actors' body and the images' construction<sup>23</sup>.

The third point of view from which we can face the *actor brand's* determination concerns the *amateur* axis and the ability of some performers to promote their own image in order to obtain economic profit margins. The role played by amateur cinema in the context of the *cultural paradigm* of "pornography" has always turned out to be extremely important. In this sense, the extraordinary popularity of *Wifey's World* website (Fig. 2) proves that a «real life entertainment provided by an actual married couple» meets an operative business plane<sup>24</sup>.



Fig. 2 – *Wifey's World*, 2009.

A particular typology of brand "closure" is represented by the *genre*, a problematic notion which, in the field of film studies, has given rise to some problems in terms of theoretical approach. From our point of view, *genre* is conceived as an operational device able to bring together the pragmatic value of generic formula and the specific economic necessities of marketing strategies. In this way, *genre* becomes an essential resource in establishing a proper brand and diversifying the products for consumers (*genre brand*). «All new brands – writes Louis Thomas – are experience goods for buyers, who are correctly informed about the distance of the claimed attributes of the new brand from established brands»<sup>25</sup>. For example, 21 Sextury Video, owned by Media Entertainment Establishment, based its politics of branding also on *genre* strategy<sup>26</sup>. Like other studios, 21

Sextury Video advertises its products by working on the five fundamental *architextual* axes through which traditionally audiovisual pornographic texts spread their semantic articulations (sexual orientation, age, fetish, physical characteristics, race). The achieved resolution can be interpreted according to the *genrification*'s notion suggested by Rick Altman, who thinks that the constitution of genre presents itself as a ceaseless transformation process, directly linked to the need of modern capitalist society industry to produce in a differed way<sup>27</sup>. This logic brings about a sort of *genre pastiche*, in whose field the five *architextual* axes already mentioned are intertwined and declined in the name of specialization (“mature pregnant”, “Asian teens”, “foot fetish” and so on).

In the last brand typology (“*high concept*” brand) the market niche which is necessary to fill is represented by “high quality” cinema in terms of technologies employed, high cost, packaging product and narrative simplicity. It is precisely in this case that contemporary pornographic cinema meets the New Hollywood’s mode of production and, as Thomas Schatz underlines in his seminal essay, its «infinite capacity for multimedia reiteration of a movie hit»<sup>28</sup>. In this way, porn cinema becomes a highly specialized niche player along two perspectives: on the one hand, it introduces its products into the mainstream entertainment system, creating dynamic commercial intertexts and involving the audiences in the creative process of audiovisual forms – not only as multimarket consumers but also as mediators in the play of narrative signification; on the other hand, today’s porn cinema tries to re-enact the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” into the wider context of popular culture while striving, at the same time, to promote its essence in the name of *authenticity* and *specialty*. A clear example of this double movement is offered by Digital Playground. This studio, in its commercial paratext, advertises its products in the following way:

*Digital Playground emphasizes quality first, employing fastidiously high production values in erotic film for women, men and couples. Digital Playground’s commitment to excellence, innovative technology, brilliant full-length productions and exclusive Contract Stars are the secrets to its success*<sup>29</sup>.

## Contemporary porn language: gonzo film style

This paragraph aims at providing a contribution to the analysis of the cultural series “gonzo pornography”, which flourished in the United States in the early 1990s, in the heyday of “porn videos”. This kind of pornography – named after Hunter S. Thompson’s “gonzo journalism”<sup>30</sup> – was invented by John “Buttman” Stagliano and meant to be a low-budget response to expensive Vivid’s or Adam & Eve’s productions, which were dominating the market at that time. Gonzo totally rejected the slick and affected look of their style – which was partly still “under the stranglehold” of their “filmic” past –, and presents itself as an exemplary case of pornography which has broken all possible bonds with the cinematic apparatus and does not in the least try to emulate it. On the contrary, gonzo takes advantage of the video’s expressive potential, which it uses in nearly ontological terms as a means to give veracity to its representation of sexual reality.

In the last decade, following the appearance and the spreading of Internet, gonzo pornography found its technological medium of choice in computer-based platforms and presented itself as the primary embodiment of “network(ed) porn”. From a systemic point of view, gonzo pornography establishes itself as a prevailing discursive modality in contemporary pornographic audiovisuals, one that is opposed but complementary to the “neo-classical” style which is very well represented by the

so called “high end”<sup>31</sup> (and high budget) hard-core movies with which it shares the market. Let’s think, for example, about *Pirates* (Joone, 2005), the most expensive pornographic film made to date (1 million dollars), which presents itself as a “pornographic blockbuster” almost as spectacular as the Walt Disney hypotext, *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (Gore Verbinski, 2003). *Pirates* can indeed be seen as an attempt to reintroduce pornography in the domain of cinematic apparatus and – so to speak – to reconstruct its cinematic character through filmic parody.

In the following pages, we will try to highlight the main “stylistic units” characterising gonzo pornography style, by focusing on the relation between the representation and the enunciation of sexual acts within its linguistic dispositive. Following Leonardo Quaresima’s proposal, style will be defined as a system «the physiognomy of which is given by the modalities of the relations existing at a certain moment among the various units that compose them»<sup>32</sup>. According to Quaresima, style is the systemic aggregation of units pertaining to several cultural orders (thematic-narrative, linguistic-enunciative, technical-expressive), manifesting themselves as genre’s sociolects and – on a lower discourse level – author’s idiolects.

It is worth pointing out, en passant, that the branding strategy analysed in the previous paragraph can be considered as the instrument whereby the porn industry provides its various systemic or sub-systemic (sociolectal or idiolectal) aggregates with a precise *visual identity*, which is legally registered as brands and sub-brands (for authors, actors, businesses etc.). Brands lie at the heart of the immediate social recognisability of a style, and at the same time give it a precise economic value which is instrumental to its market distribution. In other words, brands constitute the discursive entity establishing a correlation between the expressive value of a style and its monetary counterpart.

What we will personally try to do is to explore what happens “upstream” in this process by investigating *which* units make up gonzo pornography as a coherent and structured sociolectal system (and *how* they relate to one another).

A brief historical-linguistic excursus will provide some grounds for discussion. In the already mentioned *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”*, Linda Williams states that pornography has always shown – ever since its early days – a kind of “structural paradox” which contrasts the rendition of the “truth” of sex – taken in its “documentary” execution –, with its representational manifestation, which is functional to its spectacular performance. On the one hand, pornography «obsessively seeks knowledge, through a voyeuristic record of confessional, involuntary paroxysm, of the “thing” itself»<sup>33</sup>, that is, of the “reality” of sex; on the other, it takes shape as a «choreography of performing and laboring bodies»<sup>34</sup>, conducted on the basis of a set of iconographic conventions governing the procedures for “generically” reconstructing the sexual “reality”.

This paradox is epitomised by what is called the “money (or cum) shot” in the industry’s jargon, that is to say the external penile ejaculation which can be found at the end of all pornographic sequences; this shot is intended both as proof of reality – in that it demonstrates the “truth” of the (male) sexual pleasure staged – and as hypercodification of the genre, a highly conventionalised feature that generally marks the conclusion of the sexual action being shown. Such iconographic conventions developed over more than sixty years, in the course of the long “primitive” age of cinema pornography: from Eadweard Muybridge’s chronophotographic experiments – the first example of filmic fetishisation of female bodies – to the “clandestine” stag films shown in “men-only” clubs or brothels. Their “golden” formalisation, however, was only reached during the 1970s, when pornography abandoned clandestinity to take up some space in hard-core feature-length narrative.



Underpinning those conventions is the common representational principle of *maximum visibility*, which aims, as Williams states, to «favour close-ups of body parts over other shots, to overlight easily obscured genitals, [and] to select sexual positions that show the most of bodies and organs»<sup>35</sup>. Drawing on Stephen Ziplow's *Film Maker's Guide to Pornography*<sup>36</sup>, Williams compiled a list of the main sexual acts currently constituting the primary patterns of visual imagery of the pornographic genre, or at least of heterosexual pornography<sup>37</sup>. The list includes:

1. Masturbation, with or without paraphernalia.
2. Straight sex, defined as male-female, penis-to-vagina penetration in a variety of positions.
3. Lesbianism.
4. Oral sex, defined as both cunnilingus and fellatio.
5. Threesome, with male or female as the third party.
6. Orgy, i.e. a lot of people making it together.
7. Anal sex.
8. Sadie-max, i.e. a scene depicting sadomasochistic relations such as whipping, spanking, or bondage, performed with or without paraphernalia.

A further addition to the list is the “cum-shot” (or “money shot”), that is, as stated, a scene depicting the external penile ejaculation, which is the primary iconographic element of pornography – and the only one remaining substantially unvaried compared to the eight elements mentioned above, which show higher “exchangeability” and “modularity”. A pornographic scene is the result of the “logical” correlation between a cum-shot and at least one of these sexual acts, which is then moulded according to the principle of maximum visibility.

We could say that the above list contains the principal thematic-figurative units underlying the semantic dimension of this genre. «As we expect to see monsters in horror films, guns, suits and hats in gangsters film» – stated Williams – «so in a porno do we expect to see naked bodies engaging in sexual numbers»<sup>38</sup>. In other terms, these sexual numbers form the iconographic “core” of the heterosexual hard-core feature, which still is and always has been at the heart of this genre ever since its creation in the early 1970s. Let's take a scene from the very recent *Nurses* (Robby D, 2009), a perfect illustration of what we could call a “medium” high concept product shot in Digital Playground's style and based on traditional fiction (with a plot, characters and acting).

The scene, based on the sexual performances of a threesome (one man and two women), lasts for a total of about twenty-two minutes and it contains several “numbers” of lesbianism, oral sex and vagina penetration leading to the conclusive cum-shot (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – *Nurses* (Robby D, 2009).

It can be noted that all pornographic scenes can be viewed as micro-tales, or as abstract thematic-narrative configurations that can be divided into arousal, “execution”, climax and satisfaction. Movement from one stage to the next can be marked, from a figurative point of view, by one or more of the sexual practices listed above.

Sexual numbers constitute the semantic elements of pornography, «its genre's building blocks»<sup>39</sup>,

as Rick Altman named them. However, it is Altman himself to point out that every genre is expressed according to specific syntaxes which govern the structural dynamics of semantic elements. Williams notes that the hard-core feature of the 1970s and 1980s introduced the sexual numbers in the framework of coherent narrative structures, where they played a functional role in the story<sup>40</sup>. Sex scenes were not only diegetically justified, they also functioned as turning points, “strong” moments in the story mediating between the oppositions informing the narrative.

Gonzo pornography also relies on the iconographic conventions outlined above to find its primary generic reference. They are nevertheless applied in a totally untraditional stylistic system, if nothing else because it is wholly detached – both semantically and syntactically – from the cinema-based model. More specifically, when compared to traditional pornographic feature films, gonzo productions are developed on at least three axes of stylistic “reconfiguration”:

1. Performativeness
2. Documentariness
3. Interactivity (/interpassivity)

These axes bear strictly circular relations and inform the “stylistic units” of gonzo pornography in a both semantic/syntactic and pragmatic perspective, so that it becomes a distinct *pornographic genre*, one possessing a robust and easily recognisable social-semiotic status. First of all, gonzo pornography does not need to build an extrinsic diegetic container for inserting sex scenes; this diegetic space is thus superseded by spectacular space, a space that in Roger Odin’s words «declares itself as a construction made in preparation for a show»<sup>41</sup>. A sort of inversion between semiotics and pragmatics takes place: while traditional pornographic feature films represent the show as reality, gonzo films (being similar to stag films from this point of view) represent reality as a show. In other words, while the former invite the audience to build a “world”, the latter lead them to observe a “reality”. One should also mention that even when gonzo style appears to refer to traditional narrative *topoi* (such as the teacher, the nurse or the secretary) and to related discursive universes, as a matter of fact they are immediately declared as such, as if they were “role plays” set at a first representational level, the reality of which is underlined by contrast.

Gonzo pornography bases its style on giving up narration: its aim is not to be found in the production of a tale relating sex scenes to the unfolding of a plot, but rather in the simple reporting of actions that are captured in their “natural” deployment. In other terms – referring to André Gaudreault’s famous distinction – gonzo pornography contrasts the narration of sex (as can be found in traditional hard-core) with the “monstration” of sex, that is, its “simultaneous and rigorously synchronous” presentation.

The result is a paratactic textual pattern that is based on the juxtaposition of independent, temporally unrelated syntagmatic “chunks”, all of which are arranged around a shared semantic core – generally consisting in a shared architextual reference. In other terms, a gonzo “film” neglects the presentation of a linear narrative plot, one that relies on the logical succession of a number of actions within a consistent diegetic universe, in favour of a set of separated episodes that are kept together by the simple sharing of the textual surface. We could summarize in the following table the main differences between traditional pornography and gonzo pornography:

<i>Traditional pornography</i>	<i>Gonzo pornography</i>
Diegetic space	Spectacular space
Narration	Monstration
Unfolding of a plot	Reporting of actions
Temporal succession of actions	Paratactic juxtaposition of performances

The overall structure resembles not so much that of a tale as that of a catalogue or list, meant as the enumeration of a sequence of corresponding units. It is no coincidence that one of the production schemes characterising gonzo pornography is the “serial loop”, or so to speak the quantitative, virtually infinite piling up of the chapters composing a series (Ed Powers’ *Dirty Debutantes*, for example, contained over 200). It is worth pointing out that the paratactic structure of gonzo style is functional to its computer-based segmentation (and use). The website of Diabolic, one of the main gonzo pornography producers, for instance, features hundreds of examples. Clicking on any of them – say *Gangbang Auditions 8* (Gregg Alan, 2002, Fig. 4) – clearly shows how the network is used as an alternative distribution channel to DVDs: the three scenes composing the “film” are all interpreted by different porn stars and are all unrelated to one another.



Fig. 4 – *Gangbang Auditions 8* (Gregg Alan, 2002).

The only connection among them is the shared reference to the sexual act being shown and made explicit in the title (*gang bang*). The scenes are split into three small video files that can be easily downloaded from the Internet.

The effacement of narration gives way, in gonzo style, to the expansion of the sexual act. Compared to traditional pornographic feature films, where pure sex scenes accounted for about 60% of the film’s total running time, gonzo style implements an “all sex” model, where about 90% of time is allotted to sex. Sex scenes are greatly expanded in time, so that depending on their type they can last between 20 and 40 minutes. By comparison, sex scenes in traditional hard-core films were completed within 5 to 10 minutes. From a representational point of view, the result is first and foremost a kind of “anabolic effect” (Anabolic is, in fact, the name of a production house specialising in gonzo pornography), where the audience is presented with undeniably *athletic* skills allowing the performers’ body to reach “peaks” of performance that are unequalled in the history of pornography.

The extension in time of pornographic syntagms therefore appears to coincide with the thematic-figurative exasperation of sexual performances, an adequate description of which can only be found in the literary device of *hyperbole*. Underlying gonzo style is, in essence, a new “frenzy of the visible” (as Williams famously phrased it) which has led to the proliferation of new sexual

practices (reverse DP, gang bang, deep throat, swallow, multiple facial, ass-to-mouth, cum swapping, anal gaping, etc.), frequently of fetishist origin, and their subsequent institutionalisation into new iconographic conventions which have come to figuratively constitute characterising elements of gonzo style.

And it is in the presentation modes of such practices that the documentary axis finds its place. Odin stated that the documentary mode is based on the construction of a «real enunciator that can be queried for truth» who directly involves the audience without applying any fictional construct whatsoever. Gonzo pornography uses this documentary mode to give sexual acts a high “referential gradient” aimed at increasing their veracity. It is as if gonzo pornography showed its fictional scenes as documentation material to certify the *reality* of what is shown – as opposed to its *exceptionality*. In *Buttman in Budapest* (1999, Fig. 5), for example, as in many other episodes of John Stagliano’s series, this documentary “pattern” is expressed in the tourist’s trip and the “random” encounters caused by it.



Fig. 5 – *Buttman in Budapest* (John Stagliano, 1999).

In the *Gangbang Auditions* series (Fig. 6), instead, the documentariness is realized through the interviews with the actresses “from the street”, placed at the beginning of each different episode.



Fig. 6 – *Gangbang Auditions 9* (Gregg Alan, 2003).

This documentary strategy of pornographic fiction is implemented by combining a number of factors, which are related to both the technical-expressive side and the linguistic-enunciative one. From a technical-expressive point of view, it can be noted that gonzo pornography introduces – in a nearly bazinian acceptance – the prohibition of editing and cutting: “cuts” are reduced to the minimum, sexual performances are filmed “live” through a mobile cine camera that captures their development uninterruptedly, with no manipulation of sound or images. Besides, the correspondence between the time of showing (i.e., of seeing) and the time of performance (i.e., of doing) is the precise means whereby gonzo pornography certifies the truth of its representation, free from any filmic or profilmic trick. Cum-shots, for example, are often shown in traditional pornography as a “deferred” shot that is shown at the right time thanks to film cutting. In gonzo pornography, instead, these shots are filmed in one “long shot”, as a way to testify to their natural consequentiality.

From a linguistic-enunciative point of view, in line with what we stated, gonzo style is based on active and/or performative observation within the space of representation. The video camera is present, active and related to the space of representation through a precise enunciation pattern varying from subjectification to interpellation<sup>42</sup>. Consequently, quite a few films are shot from the point of view of the male performer only, thus expressing a number of corresponding, involving

looks of the female performer. In *Tunnel Vision 3* (Jules Jordan, 2008, Fig. 7), for instance, the video camera is hand-held by the performer during the “activities” he is carrying out. The objective of all this is to set the audience within the space of representation, literally in the place of a performer who becomes a mere “disembodied penis” (in fact, penises are often the only part of their bodies being filmed).



Fig. 7 – *Tunnel Vision 3* (Jules Jordan, 2008).

The result is a sort of pragmatic superimposition of the audience over the actor, who should be considered here not as a narrative representative but rather as a (virtual) performative extension. The enunciation strategy thus seems to be a testimony of the veracity of the athletic performances being shown, and to transforming the scopic activity of the audience into pragmatic interaction (with evident masturbatory purposes). To conclude, the best theoretical construct to describe this enunciative mechanism, and the nature of this new “pornographic mediation” of subjectivity, can probably be found in the concept of interpassivity, introduced by Slavoj Žižek in the 1990s as a counterpart to interactivity<sup>43</sup>. «The term interpassivity – stated Zabet Patterson – pushes us toward a different understanding of the type of work that goes on in looking at Internet pornography»<sup>44</sup>. Interpassivity, in fact, to be understood as a «shadowy and [...] uncanny supplement/double»<sup>45</sup> of interactivity, is for Žižek a transferential relation in which, as stated by Patterson, «the other not only does the work for the viewer [as it is with the interactivity] but also enjoys or believes in the viewer’s place»<sup>46</sup>.

## Conclusion

At the end of this essay, we just want to briefly synthesize two last points related to the issues discussed above. The first one deals with the methodological perspective adopted towards the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” and with its concrete *cultural* “pornographic” *series* made possible by contemporary audiovisual device. As said at the beginning, our intention was to welcome Linda Williams’ invitation and start studying pornography as a *cultural form*; that is, as an object which expresses and produces certain meanings and values in several context of our society (economic, institutional, aesthetic) and in the sphere of media communication. In particular, our analysis intended to shed light, on the one hand, on the principal modes of production which characterize contemporary audiovisual pornography and, on the other, on its prominent styles of representation. What we have presented are just some “work notes”, which we would like to develop in the future. For these reasons – and this is the second point of our conclusions – our intent is to promote a more accurate study of pornography in its audiovisual forms. In order to promote a more *systematic* and *systemic* analysis of the topic, two forthcoming complementary contexts of research have been thought: the first one is the VIII MAGIS – Gorizia International Film Studies Spring School (Gorizia, March 19-25, 2010)<sup>47</sup>; the second one concerns a future publication dedicated to porn cinema and its audiovisual articulations.

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