

# **COMMODIFIED GENDER PERFORMANCE AND INFLUENCE IN PORNOGRAPHY**

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Pornography is a reflection of a collective fantasy. Pornography can be subtle and nuanced or it may be graphic and direct. Regardless of the form it takes, most pornography reflects a collective fantasy that interacts with societal definitions of gender. The interaction with gender is at the center of the socially objectionable aspects of pornography. It is through gender identity that it is possible for pornography to become violent, to objectify and to become an oppressive force. Pornography's power to do these things is powered by the demands of a capitalist system and supported by the societal structures that create and consume the pornographic commodities.

This paper will proceed with the assumption that sexuality in itself is not a shameful occurrence and that it is a central part of the human experience. The potential for societal taboos in regard to the viewing of sexual imagery are set aside so that attention may be given to the gendered systems at work in pornography.

## **What is pornography?**

Pornography is an artistic creation that is designed to be sexually arousing or otherwise provide erotic stimulation. There is no concrete definition for what constitutes pornography as diverse sexual fantasies and desires exist. What is pornography varies based on the target audience and the intended or accepted reason for consumption of the work (Rea 120).

Above all else, pornography is a commodity. Pornography is created to satisfy the demands of a specific audience that is willing to invest in such a commodity. This element removes some of the autonomy of the creators of pornography to exercise creative control of the product. Therefore, to some degree pornography is as much a product of capitalism (represented by the paying audience) as it is the script writers and directors.

This paper will focus on pornographic film created for the purpose of being consumed by a majority audience. Many of the concepts discussed can be applied to photographs as well, but some of the theoretical elements are drawn directly from cinematic or film studies and as such are more clearly referenced in that context.

## **What is gender?**

Gender's most common recognizable form is as a type of social category. Gender identity is the implementation of the categories of gender by the individual. The socially recognized categories are linked in a correlated relationship with biological sex and are therefore constructed

through social discourse as fixed, existing as an option of either purely masculine or purely feminine.

Actual gender identity, those identities that are enacted, could be more accurately depicted as a continuum rather than a binary. More identities exist near the ends of the spectrum than in the middle, but there is no hard boundary between masculine and feminine identity and therefore gender may be fluid.

In pornography gender identity is directly paired with sexual identity. The compound identity would be impossible to render on any sort of graph or grid because of the number of dimensions and factors that affect the presentation of the identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins refer to a phenomenon of identity politics known as “intersectionality” (Collins S14; Crenshaw 1262) which captures this multiplicity and uniqueness of experience well. Intersectionality, at a basic level, is the compound social identity of the individual that consists of all conceivable background identities that influence a person. Commonly these identities include gender, sex, race and sexual orientation.

I discuss intersectionality in the context of gender because the identity experiences are inseparable and it is not possible to cogently identify what aspect of the intersectional identity is responsible for which experiences. Due to there being no stratification in the self-concept to mirror the various social categories (Collins S18), the various categories taken individually are weak mechanisms by which to identify social experiences or social performances, such as those in pornographic imagery.

In pornography all components of identity are relevant to the experience and to the function of the gaze, but those with the most significant social impact are gender and sexuality,

due to the nature of the images being portrayed. Male, female, gay and straight are central categories to normative ideas of sexuality, but may not be the most important to the presentation of gender in pornography. More essential, non-labeled, categories make up the more influential set of themes that affect gender in pornography.

Characters in pornography are portrayed or portray themselves as having a level of sexual aggression or sexual passivity which is then linked to their gender and ultimately the gender identity. This trait is what allows a character to take on either the subject or object position. The subject is portrayed as sexually active, typically represented by the masculine identity, and the object is portrayed as sexually passive, which is typically represented through the feminine identity.

Gender as a social category is not the only concept of gender and perhaps is only useful as a broad label with very little specificity to describing what is perceived as gendered social identity.

### **Pornography and the Gaze**

A key concept in feminist thought that vilifies pornography is the notion of “The Gaze.” Jacques Lacan defined the gaze as being an anxious state that is associated with an awareness that one may be viewed (Lacan 92). The concept of the gaze was not invented by Lacan, but his work is the version of the gaze that is most congruent with psychoanalytic theory, which influenced Michel Foucault and several modern feminist theorists. The concept of the gaze began with Jean-Paul Sartre as a way of discussing the relationship between the viewer, the artist and the subject in visual art forms (Stack and Plant 359).

Laura Mulvey expanded the reach of Lacan's gaze to include gender politics by invoking it as the "male gaze." The theory of the male gaze insists that there is a gender disparity in the viewing of imagery because men were primarily involved in the creative production of most film (Mulvey 8). The disparities in film may be seen in the amount of time that is spent focusing on parts of the female body that are considered erotic or in the featuring of women as objects for the arousal of males in the film as well as the viewer. Mulvey establishes that there is also a female gaze, but that it is the way that women see themselves, which is also through the male gaze because men are the creators of media (Mulvey 12).

Mulvey and Lacan both focus on the objectification aspects of the gaze, as it forcefully casts all social actors as performers of societal roles and establishes an awareness of being viewed. The difference between the two forms of the gaze is that Mulvey renders the gaze as gendered. What exactly does the gendering of the gaze mean? Mulvey's intention may have been to show a literal difference between the view of men and women and then disregard the female gaze as being created as a byproduct of the male gaze. This interpretation is problematic because it views gender as being a binary structure with only two possibilities – male and female.

Binary gender is the product of patriarchy, it is constructed and therefore ignores any sexual or gendered experience that exists outside of the confines of the artificial gender framework (Butler 277). While Mulvey's gendering of the gaze is coherent in the realm of heterosexual society it loses its effectiveness as a theoretical framework to consider pornography when it is applied to homosexual pornography. Through Mulvey's theoretical lens there would be no appropriate subject to objectify. A possible solution to this is to not consider Mulvey's categories of gaze as being paired with gender in a strict sense, but to reinterpret them as *masculine* and *feminine* or perhaps *subject* and *object* gazes. The impact of the "male gaze" and

the gender system is not to be negated in homosexual pornography, but is not directly related to the gender identity of either the object of the gaze or the viewer.

Mulvey should not be interpreted as being incorrect as a result of constricting her concept of the gaze in a way consistent with heterosexual patriarchy and binary gender. Mulvey's work did not attempt to fully explain the nature of the gendered gaze, but was instead to expose sexism and sexual objectification that was present in imagery that was created by an oppressive dominant gender. Mulvey's theory of the gaze can be applied as it was originally designed, but it can also be expanded to consider more diverse forms of gender oppression across an entire gendered matrix.

The gaze is important not because it defines a voyeuristic intent that can be present in pornography, but because it functions as a mirror for the viewer to reinforce a notion of always being watched and always socially being an actor even in the most intimate of moments. In the traditional gender binary this invokes the social commands of masculinity to be sexually aggressive and to act out the masculine gender template for men. For women the social instruction received from pornography can be even more problematic as it directly casts the female role as one of the sexual object. The objectified position expects to be constantly under surveillance by the gaze and as such is encouraged to perform the socially expected role with little deviation. Women in pornographic films are often portrayed as sexually eager and are shown to be seeking attention from men. The portrayal of women needing men in pornography is the element that closes the gender loop. Men, as the primary creators of pornography, have creative control and therefore cast women in the helpless role to appeal to their own ideas of sexuality. In turn the myth of women as passive recipients, or active seekers, of sexual gratification of men is reproduced and is allowed to continue unquestioned.

Heterosexual pornography has a history in the gender binary and with confined gender roles as a result of normative expectations of gender and sexuality in society. Homosexual pornography should have the capability to shatter gendered performance and to render an erotic space that is free of any sort of disparity in the gaze where all actors are portrayed to an equal level of objectification or enact the same level of subjectivity. This theoretical capacity of homosexual pornography is not reality.

In some aspects the single-gender environment of homosexual pornography allows for a clearer example of the gendering effect of the gaze and pornography in general than its heterosexual counterpart. The roles of “top” and “bottom” in homosexual pornography replicate the masculine and feminine positions of heterosexual pornography but do so in a more pronounced way (Morrison 169). In heterosexual pornography it may be difficult to distinguish between performed gender roles and “natural” gender, whereas defined sexual positions that are incongruent with the expected gender presentation of the heterosexual matrix exclude many opportunities for such biologically-based dismissals of gendered performance.

The relationship between Mulvey’s male gaze and the performance of gender in pornography is the construction of a masculine identity. The feminine identity is traditionally constructed as what is not masculine and is therefore not directly invoked in pornography, or society, external to the work that it does to create, maintain or reinforce the masculine identity (Wilchins 49). One of the characteristics that Mulvey exposes is the power of male privilege to protect men, at least in the traditional sense of masculinity, from sexual objectification and to provide a sexual object for men to enact their desires upon. For gay male pornography the men that identify as “tops” have their privilege reaffirmed, while “bottoms” are portrayed as existing for the sexual gratification of those with active sexual desire. Those who identify with the

passive sexual desires are shown roles consistent with a gendered society and may feel the psychological impact of being disposable in the sexual narrative. Mulvey's essay speaks of the female as having a castrated identity. The socially constructed meaning of the penetrated male has a similar social and psychological effect, rendering the penetrated male as symbolically castrated in the view of other men (Hardy 3276). This castration, whether existing as the absence of a penis or as the loss of anal virginity, is a trait present in the self-concept (as a part of the intersectional identity) which allows a viewer to associate themselves with characters portrayed as having the same characteristic in pornographic film.

For simplicity I will focus on gender performance in gay male pornography as the basis for my observations regarding gender in homosexual pornography. In this particular genre of pornography where there are multiple masculine identities portrayed gender is controlled through a variety of techniques including domination, feminization, marginalization and degradation. These attributes are all related to the theatrical performance in pornography itself, but ultimately they are components of the gaze as they are tools used by the creator to preserve notions of gender and to comply with the expectations of the masculine gaze.

Domination is one of the most common ways of maintaining the active/passive dichotomy in gay pornography (Mercer 155-156). It is possible to enact an active and passive relationship in sexuality without it being linked to dominance or a gendered performance, but in the case of gay pornography dominance is used as a theme for controlling the expressed gender roles. The depiction of rape or other coercive or forced sexual acts grants agency and autonomy to the actor who is the active participant and relegates the passive actor to a position of being an outlet for the sexual desire of the active actor. When the scene involves two men it is typical for the active actor to be portrayed as hyper-masculine, whereas the passive actor suppresses

aggressive traits in favor of a subjugated masculinity (Morrison 170). The passivity or activity of each actor is not designed as emerging from the desire of each actor, but instead through the desire of only the active actor or through a prescribed social power relationship. The social power relationships usually have a clear authority dynamic such as inmate/warden, master/slave, coach/athlete, et cetera. The implementation of these roles makes the gendered gaze more transparent. Viewing sexuality through the lens of such strong power relationships there is already a clearly defined dynamic. In portraying the passive actor in a role of relative powerlessness with the active actor it grants narrative permission to objectify the passive character.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the gaze is the visual representation. While the performance itself is important there is a lot of symbolism in the creative choices exercised in the visual presentation of that performance. A review of cover imagery for modern pornographic films reveals many of the same major themes as can be observed in the films themselves. The covers, which are the first visual contact a potential viewer would have with the film, target specific identities by enacting perspectives which a perspective viewer may identify with. Imagery portraying the buttocks in the foreground with the penis hidden from view may engage viewers who identify with the active role, whereas imagery showing the penis in foreground from a low perspective may target viewers who identify in a more passive role (Gamma Entertainment 1). This dichotomy of perspectives is inconsistent with Mulvey's idea that the gaze is the same for both gender positions, but it does highlight that the subject and object positions are maintained.

Specific cases of cover imagery provide a richer method for analyzing the function of the gaze in the maintenance of gender roles than attempting to condense such a wide spectrum into

concise summative categories. The innocuously named “Tools of the Trade” features a visually simple cover with a photograph of two men. The gendered distinction begins with how the men are dressed. The man featured in the foreground is fully clothed, whereas the background male is wearing only briefs, which his thumb is holding taut to suggest they may be in the process of being removed. The foreground male is accessorized with a tool belt, a hyper-masculine symbol. The positioning of the two men as well as their clothing indicates the positions they are being placed into. The background male takes the feminized position by being more exposed than the foreground. Through giving the foreground male a tool belt the photographer is further subordinating the background. The sleeve text for the film reveals that the foreground character is the “foreman” and is given the active position through dominating his employees (Hot House Video 1). Another film, “Kiss Lick Suck Fuck”, in its sleeve text is described as a return to the basics of sex, distancing itself from fetish and dominance-oriented films. One of the cover frames portrays two men kissing. In that frame, one man is focused fully on the act, while the other is looking toward the camera. This reveals a dynamic of the gaze which is perhaps its most powerful component. The active participant is allowed to be fully engaged in the act without awareness of the audience and therefore escapes acknowledgement as a sexual object, whereas the other participant is aware of and must engage with the audience/viewer. Despite the sleeve’s claim that the film avoids dominance themes, one of the frames of the cover depicts one of the actors grabbing the other actor’s hair for a forced kiss. The potentially gender-agnostic act of the kiss is converted to an aggressively gendered act by one of the participants taking an active role, revoking the agency of the other participant (Hot House Video 1).

The subject gaze, or male gaze, in pornography is influenced by the gender identity and the beliefs about gender held by the creator of the pornographic work. The

performance of the actors and the perspective of the camera are guided by the identity and beliefs. The performance is then observed by the viewer and the perspective is transferred to the viewer. The way the perspective is interpreted will vary based on the gender and sexual identity present in the self-concept of the viewer. The awareness of the relationship between self-concept and the performance of gender contributes to the contextual expectations for gender script in the viewer.

### **Social Construction of Gender**

The gaze is the tool used to control gender through pornography and the subconscious method to gendering pornography. The key element that makes these relationships possible is the performativity of a socially constructed gender. Gender does not *exist*, it is *performed*. As discussed previously, gender is constructed in common discourse as a binary that is informed by patriarchy. There are theories that claim a biological basis for gender and such attempt to solidify a connection between sex and gender (Fausto-Sterling 92). The arguments over the basis of gender are a component of a larger nature versus nurture debate in social sciences regarding what attributes are controlled by either biological or social factors. Feminist scholars in general accept the social construction theories regarding gender identity development (Fausto-Sterling 101).

There has been much work on the socially constructed nature of gender in feminist discourse. Judith Butler and Michel Foucault provide some of the most in-depth theoretical contributions to the topic. Foucault focuses on the disciplinary aspects of discourse upon sexuality whereas Butler considers the normalizing impact of patriarchy and examines the origins of the gender system in discourse. These theorists consider sex, gender and sexuality as

social creations and argue cases against biologically-based defenses of gender oppression or sexual repression.

A central theme of the social construction theories of gender is performativity. Performativity is a way of describing the process of an identity category being self-replicating through mimicking accepted performances of that identity category (Butler 684-685). Butler proposes that there is no real identity behind the categories that are performed and there are only performances and expressions of criteria of the categories (Butler 688). What this means for gender is that there is no original gender identity that is intrinsic to any person and that the attributes that are associated with gender are developed through a social process. Through disconnecting gender from any internal characteristic or biological origin the risk for manipulation of gender identity through external content that contains strong gender performances, such as pornography, become a more serious threat to progress toward gender equality (or the total destruction of the gender system). Pornography acts on the performative nature of gender by enacting another model of gender. Pornography has the capability of injecting gender information into viewers because the performance appears to be consistent with the recognized categories of gender and therefore informs the viewer's concept of those categories.

Gender is by no means created and replicated solely in pornography. Pornography is only one of many vehicles for the construction and repetition of gender stereotypes. Pornography is problematic for gender identity because it provides mechanisms for oppressive systems to perpetuate themselves. While in public spaces gender equality may be emerging as a normative idea, the division of gendered roles in sexuality is highlighted in pornography. Changes in gender

relations and the diminishing presence of gendered sexual behavior are not represented in most pornography.

The regulation of gender to a binary system in itself enforces the sexual binary of the active and the passive that is observed and portrayed in pornography. The degree of sexual aggression is described in the social gender script. There exists the subject and the Other, in a relationship that is replicated in pornography in a similar way as gender is in society. The dynamics of sexual relationships are not often topics of social discourse and therefore the space in which internalized understandings of sexuality are informed is somewhat limited (Foucault 35). The availability of appropriate language to discuss sexuality is also a limiting factor in the informing of sexual concepts. There is only language for the masculine and feminine roles, everything else is absent from the discourse as a result of a lack of linguistic constructs to accommodate other roles. Attempts to expand the language are regularly repressed (Butler 1480). Pornography exists as one of the limited ways in which it is possible to gain sexual knowledge and as such the type of knowledge that is being presented in pornography can have an impact on the understanding of gender roles in sexuality.

A complicating factor of the social role of pornography is the increased accessibility of pornography as a result of the widespread availability of it through the Internet. Pornography has a larger reach than was previously possible when it was only a physical commodity. The new media forms available through the Internet have also diminished the reliance on systems of power by producers of pornography. The factors of production are somewhat different and there is a market and space for a marginalized pornography to exist. Even with the decreased reliance on support from the social majority for production of pornography, there is still pressure to reproduce gender norms in pornographic productions.

Gender being a social construct grants fluidity to gender performance and to the internalized gender identity, but such fluidity is often not acted on due to the presence of societal forces that police gender. Pornography takes part in the policing of gender by replicating gender stereotypes and displaying only a limited portrayal of the gender possibilities. As other institutions in society place less value on the distinction between genders and enforce less rigid standards of gender performance, pornography continues to eroticize masculine (or hyper-masculine) men and submissive women (or their male counterparts).

### **Social Construction of the Gendered Gaze**

The gaze functions through the power structures of gender to objectify women and subordinated men in pornography. Without the power of gender the gaze has no impact, but to those who embrace gender hierarchies the gaze is used as a tool. It is with this tool and others like it that power relations are maintained.

The gaze exists as a gender-less perspective when applied equally and is not constrained to serving one particular group more heavily than another. That gender-less perspective does not exist because there is a dominant group, it could perhaps be called the hegemon, which speaks as a voice for all due to social power that is conferred to its members. The hegemon represents social normativity and maintains its power through protecting normativity (Connell 1805). Power in the case of the hegemon is operationalized through suppressing non-normative ideas (Foucault 45).

One method of suppressing non-normative ideas is through the presentation of a male-centric and pro-masculine perspective in film and other cultural forms. This perspective is the

male-gaze that Mulvey describes. The focus on the bodies of women in an effort to render them as sexualized spaces ensures objectification, which reduces the overall agency of persons inhabiting the space of that physical sex or that is presented in its related gender classification. For women the psychological dimension of the gaze encourages adherence to gender norms and creates the awareness of being viewed. For men the psychological impact is the idea that women are to be viewed. Agency is reduced because women are not free to deviate from their gender roles without social repercussions. The same difficulty of agency also exists for men, but the constructs of masculinity remove deviant men from the space of masculinity, thereby creating a situation where masculine autonomy and agency are never challenged (Connell 1802-1803).

Performative theories of gender and the application of the psychoanalytic aspects of the gaze are very similar in their applied effect. Social performance of the roles of gender, for the benefit of the societal audience is almost indistinguishable from conforming to a culturally defined ideal role due to a perception of being always on display. Pornography informs gender through giving a gaze through a male perspective, which has the effect of conveying a particular type of gender performance. That performance is then interpreted by the viewer in relation to their own self concept and becomes a part of the gender repertoire for later performance.

### **A Queer Notion of Pornography**

Pornography is important to gender not because of what it does now, but because of what it is capable of doing. Pornography is not typically viewed for the purpose of being a transformative experience or to engage in a societal critique of gender roles. This does not mean that it is impossible for pornography to take those roles, but through societal and capitalist

systems pornography that fulfills such roles would be suppressed from reaching a popular or normative state.

Pornography in its current form is responsive to both patriarchal and capitalist systems of power, primarily serving the masturbatory needs of the hegemon. There is more potential for pornography though. As discussed earlier in the context of homosexual pornography, pornography is already in the business of “playing” with gender and eroticizing various interpretations and intensities of gendered performance. The pornographic genre could be utilized as an experimental space through which gender transgression could become normative and sexual equality could be allowed to emerge as an eroticized theme.

A possible “role” for pornography in a post-gender or at least post-patriarchy space is similar to the role currently occupied by mainstream art or literature. Pornography could be developed as a directly creative work which could inhabit the space and categories of art. There is also the potential of pornography taking a status of being an anthropological record, detailing various accounts of sexuality and sexual fantasy.

## **Conclusion**

The social system of gender is replicated in mainstream pornography of all types and as such is also a factor in influencing the gender and sexual identities of those that consume pornography. The gaze that is enacted by the creators of pornography is used as a social tool to convey their own perspective to the viewers. The psychological impact of being a recipient of the gaze of the creator is an awareness of being a social actor that is under surveillance of a gendered society. Judith Butler’s concept of performativity bridges the gap between the gaze, the

performance and the impact to the gender presentation of the viewer. As a creative space, pornography has the capability to escape the cycle of gender, but does not do so because of the disciplinary power of the capitalist system and the demands of a normative audience. These societal limitations confine pornography to replicating gender stereotypes, perpetuating sexist ideologies and promoting objectification as an erotic act.

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