# Close Encounters: Alternative Pornography, Cinematic Aesthetics, and Cultural Activism

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# Abstract

This dissertation examines the cultural activism of contemporary alternative pornography through a focus on its cinematic aesthetics. In recent years, a category of alternative pornography has solidified that stakes a claim to pornography as a potential vehicle for recognition, affirmation, self-definition, and community building. As a way of opening up the visual vocabulary of pornography, these films adopt a range of formal techniques and conventions from outside the realm of pornography, drawing primarily from experimental and documentary film. As a way of accounting for what constitutes the alternative in alternative pornography, this dissertation takes a two-fold approach: on the one hand, it interrogates how alternative pornography intervenes and positions itself against mainstream pornography, and on the other hand, it examines how alternative pornography draws on and engages with wider trajectories of feminist and queer filmmaking. In doing so, this dissertation brings to the fore how alternative pornography negotiates issues and concerns that are both familiar and novel to the genre of pornography and traces some of its different historical and generic lineages. Through a close analysis of a selected corpus of case-studies, this dissertation explores a variety of formal techniques and conventions, ranging from self-reflexivity, interviews, observational filmmaking, and subjective voice-over narration, to poetic and associative imagery and haptic visuality, and connects them to some of the wider themes that have informed the scholarship on pornography from the perspective of film studies, referring to topics like spectatorship and visual pleasure, the documentary impulse of pornography, and the role of fantasy and utopia in pornography. Besides film studies, the dissertation engages with feminist and queer theory as a way of accounting for the connections between the cultural activism of alternative pornography and feminist and queer politics. With its cinematic aesthetics allowing for the production of different knowledges of sex, this dissertation proposes that alternative pornography expands the possibilities of what pornography might look like, what it might say, and, finally, what it might do.

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# Introduction

## Introduction

Although there is still some green left in them, the leaves on the trees are already starting to turn red and yellow and the air smells of autumn. It is October 2014, and I am walking over a wet cobbled street in the direction of Moviemento, a small cinema located in the district of Kreuzberg in Berlin. I have just started my PhD and I am excited to be back in Berlin and visit the Berlin Porn Film Festival, a festival I visited before in previous years. Over the next week, I will spend many hours in the dark space of the cinema, watching a lot of pornography and listening to filmmakers and performers talk about their work. Since its first edition in 2006, the Berlin Porn Film Festival has been one of the leading festivals to focus on alternative and independent pornography and it is through this festival that I was first introduced to the kind of feminist, lesbian, and queer pornography that I focus on in this dissertation. In the years following my initial visit in 2007, the film festival has grown exponentially and has gained increasing popularity, to the extent that cinemas have become so cramped that curators and filmmakers had to climb over audience members sitting in the aisles in order to be able to get to the front of the screen for the Q&A. This huge interest is indicative, not only of the publicity of the festival, but also of the growing notoriety of alternative pornography itself, which has seen an immense expansion in the last decade, as well as the increased social acceptance of engaging with pornographic material among young urban audiences. Whereas in the early days of the festival, some of the Q&A sessions were characterised by friction between the white middle-aged male 'raincoaters' in the audience and the feminist and queer producers of these films, in recent years, the festival has found a keen audience for these artistic and alternative approaches to pornography, featuring feminist and queer perspectives on gender, sexuality, and politics. In this dissertation, I seek to account for this recent wave of alternative pornography by approaching it as a form of cultural activism, focusing specifically on the role of cinematic aesthetics. This introduction accounts for the main parameters of the project and consists of two parts: in the first section, I present the aims and scope of the project and explain the theoretical framework and methodology. In the second section, I introduce the cultural activism of alternative pornography by connecting it to the broader context of feminist and queer theory and politics.

## 1.1 The Project

### 1.1.1 Aims and scope

This dissertation examines the cultural activism of contemporary alternative pornography through a focus on its cinematic aesthetics. In recent years, a category of alternative pornography has solidified, consisting primarily of feminist, lesbian, and queer pornography, which stakes a claim to pornography as a potential vehicle for recognition, affirmation, self-authorisation, self-definition, and community building. As a way of opening up the visual vocabulary of pornography, these films adopt a range of formal techniques and conventions from outside the realm of pornography, drawing primarily from experimental and documentary film. As a way of accounting for what constitutes the alternative in alternative pornography, this dissertation takes a two-fold approach: on the one hand, it interrogates how alternative pornography intervenes and positions itself against mainstream pornography, and on the other hand, it examines how alternative pornography draws on and engages with wider trajectories of feminist and queer filmmaking. In doing so, this dissertation brings to the fore how alternative pornography negotiates issues and concerns that are both familiar and novel to the genre of pornography, tracing some of its different historical and generic lineages.

### 1.1.2 Methodology

This project makes use of qualitative analysis of a selected corpus of films, which have been released in the last fifteen years and together offer a cross-section of the range of feminist and queer available in terms of its different aesthetics, styles, approaches, and iconography. Through the close analysis of case-studies, this dissertation explores a variety of formal techniques and conventions, ranging from self-reflexivity, interviews, observational filmmaking, and subjective voice-over narration, to poetic and associative imagery and haptic visuality, and connects them to some of the wider themes that have informed the scholarship on pornography from the perspective of film studies, referring to topics like spectatorship and visual pleasure, the documentary impulse of pornography, and the role of fantasy and utopia in pornography. Overall, this project is underpinned by a concept-driven methodology, and is part of a mode of research dedicated to the close reading of texts and the distillation of concepts with which the films will be put into dialogue. Located in the intersection of film studies and cultural studies, the dissertation also draws on feminist and queer theories as a way of accounting for the connections between the cultural activism of alternative pornography and feminist and queer politics.

### 1.1.3 Theoretical framework

In their anthology *The Feminist Porn Book* (2013, 9), the editors describe how feminist porn 'seeks to unsettle conventional definitions of sex, and expand the language of sex as an erotic activity, an expression of identity, a power exchange, a cultural commodity, and even a new politics,' and add that 'ultimately, feminist porn considers sexual representation—and its production—a site for resistance, intervention, and change.' Although the editors also refer to the ways in which 'feminist pornography creates alternative images and develops its own aesthetics and iconography to expand established sexual norms and discourses,' they do not use the umbrella term of alternative pornography; instead, they privilege the blanket term of feminist porn, even if many of the films discussed in the book, as well as many of the performers and filmmakers discussed in the book, would be more accurately described as belonging to the category of queer pornography. Whereas it is true that the two are not easily separated, and overlap in many cases, with many filmmakers and performers identifying themselves and their work as feminists as well as queer, I nevertheless maintain the importance of reserving a space for feminist and queer pornography to exist in their own right, not only because it is possible to distinguish different historical trajectories, but also because of the historical friction that exists between feminism and queer and trans* politics, allowing some people to express some unease and reluctance with regards to an identification with the term queer. This ambivalence is expressed, for instance, by genderqueer porn performer Jiz Lee, who is also a contributor to the anthology, in an interview at the Feminist Porn Awards, when they reflect on their own identities, stating that "my first word is queer" and that the identity of "feminist is not high on the list," and explains how feminism has often been perceived in a bad light by women of colour as well as referring to issues of class (Questions for Jiz Lee, 2013). Therefore, I believe it is important to recognize some of the overlap as well as the discrepancies that exist between these different forms of alternative pornography. Below, I engage with the theoretical framework that informs my discussion of queer pornography

## 1.2 Queer Pornography and Sexual Publics[1]

### 1.2.1 *Been too long at the FAIR*

In their documentary *been too long at the FAIR* (Verow and Lum 2016), filmmakers Charles Lum and Todd Verow take as their subject the FAIR Theatre in Queens, one of the last remaining porn theatres in New York City, and one of the longest continuously running gay establishments. The short film combines queer history with nostalgic recollection, as the narrator of the film recounts the history of the theatre itself in the voice-over, tracing the screening of adult film there back to the 1970s, and recalls some of the erotic encounters he experienced there over the span of those years. As the sole narrator, the patron is only aurally present in the film, describing the particular form of relationality and intimacy he experienced while having sex with other men at the theatre, accompanied by superimposed images of the theatre and its surrounding neighbourhood, porn films, and a staged sexual encounter of the kind described by the narrator (Fig. 1-2). As a whole, *been too long at the FAIR* makes up a striking example of what Ann Cvetkovich describes as 'an archive of feelings,' in that the film not only documents the history of this particular XXX theatre, demonstrating its significance to the queer history of New York, but also captures something of the affective experience of cruising itself, offering an account of the queer pleasures associated with the publicity of these sexual exchanges, thereby illuminating the way in which cultural texts come to function 'as repositories of feelings and emotions' (2003, 7). Importantly, the sense of nostalgia that characterises the overarching tone of the film also suggests something of the passing nature of these forms of public sex, indicating that these pleasures are gradually becoming a thing of the past, with opportunities for cruising becoming sparser, as sites for public sex are closed down and casual hook-ups are increasingly organised through dating apps such as Grindr, PlanetRomeo, and Scruff.[2]

*Been too long at the FAIR* not only offers an intimate portrayal of the comings and goings in one particular theatre in New York, but also presents a particularly illustrative example of the

[1]A more condensed version of this literature review can be found in my chapter on male intimacies in queer film 'Documenting Everyday Male Intimacies in Contemporary Queer Cinema, which appeared in the edited collection *Intercourse in Television and Film: The Presentation of Explicit Sex Acts* (eds. L. Coleman and C. Siegel, 2017).

[2] See the collaborative project *The End of Cruising* (Verow, Hickling, et al. 2013) for a similar account of public sex as a lost moment in queer history, and *In Their Room: Berlin* (Mathews 2011) for some reflections on gay sex and intimacy in times of Grindr. See Warner (1999) for an account of the way in which zoning has had a severe impact on the culture of public sex in New York.

way in which queerness, public sex, and pornography have often been perceived of in tandem. Many queer theorists have focused on this relation, analysing how different forms of 'deviant' sexuality become culturally legible through processes of association. For instance, in her seminal essay 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sex,' Gayle Rubin sets out to describe how 'Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchal system of sexual value' (2011b, 149).[3] This value system, which differentiates between 'good, normal, and natural sex' and 'bad, abnormal, unnatural sex' is presented by Rubin in the form of a diagram, with the inner circle designating the so-called 'Charmed Circle,' which includes sex that might be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, private, and non-commercial, and the outer circle constituting the 'Outer Limits,' comprised of sex that might be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, and commercial (152). Rather than static or monolithic, Rubin argues that the sexual value system is characterised by 'continuous battles over the definitions, evaluations, arrangements, privileges, and costs of sexual behaviour' (165). Subsequently, the categories of 'good' and 'bad' sex are not set in stone, but instead are subject to constant negotiation, as arguments are 'conducted over "where to draw the line," and determine what other activities, if any, may be permitted to cross over into acceptability' (151). If some forms of sex are far removed from the Charmed Circle, and therefore firmly rooted on the side of 'unhealthy' and 'abnormal' sex, other sexual identities and practices are located within an area of contestation, and therefore are able to cross the imaginary boundary between 'bad' and 'good' sex. Two examples that Rubin notes are unmarried couples and masturbation. Both were once positioned on the side of 'sinful' and 'unnatural' sex, but over time have been able to move into the realm of respectability. For other forms of sex, however, it has proven much more difficult to escape to the category of 'bad' sex, most notably those more closely associated with non-heterosexuality. Finally, the different components of the category of 'bad' sex should not be understood as radically distinct, but instead often inform and reinforce each other, intersecting with other markers of difference, such as gender, race, and class (164).

According to Rubin's account, then, Western culture 'always treats sex with suspicion,' and considers all sex 'guilty until proven innocent,' with marriage, reproduction, and love making up some of the most acceptable excuses' (148). Thus, if homosexuality has been able to slowly inch across the border into the category of 'normal', 'healthy', and 'natural' sex, it has only

[3] The paper was originally presented at the Barnard conference and published in the anthology *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Vance 1984), which will come up later in this dissertation as an important benchmark in the 'sex wars' of the 1980s.

done so by disassociating itself from other forms of 'bad' sex and appealing to a certain politics of respectability. As such, homosexuality has become affiliated with familiar forms of 'good' sex—particularly monogamy and marriage—with gay sex becoming reassuringly affirmed as private and non-commercial. This effort to transpose homosexuality into the realm of acceptability, for instance through the push for gay marriage, has been explained by some scholars as a form of homonormativity, privileging a white, male, and often neoliberal subject at the expense of other marginalised groups (Warner 1999; Duggan, 2002; Stryker, 2008). Homonormativity, in their opinion, does not so much eradicate the harmful distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' sex, as it aids in placing the burden of embodying 'bad' sex even further on marginalised groups, such as people of colour, transgender people, and sex workers. As Rubin explains, labelling certain forms of sex as 'unnatural', 'unhealthy' or 'abnormal' comes with dire consequences, as those on the Outer Limits of the sexual value system are 'subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, economic sanctions, and criminal prosecution' (2011, 149). Moreover, people who practice forms of 'bad' sex are 'considered utterly repulsive and devoid of all emotional nuance' and are viewed as 'unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness, or transcendence' (151). This lack of subjectivity stands in stark contrast to those considered part of the Charmed Circle, who are 'acknowledged to exhibit the full range of human experience' (154).

### 1.2.2 Porn in Public

Over the years, Rubin's concept of the sexual value system has had a lasting impact on the theorisation of sex, functioning as a proto-queer text, shaping the subsequent development of queer theory in significant ways. In particular, it demonstrates how the close association between same-sex desire and other forms of 'deviant' sex—including pornography and public sex—can be understood as mutually constitutive and reinforcing. However, as queer became appropriated as a positive and defiant category of self-identification, from the 1980s onwards, this relation between homosexuality and deviancy has also been embraced and celebrated, rather than denied, as evidenced by the reclaiming of a word that habitually constitutes a derogatory slur. Rather than trying to adhere to a particular form of 'normalcy,' queer signals a rejection of the norms imposed by the 'Charmed Circle,' instead subverting its position on

'the Outer Limits'.[4] In doing so, the distinction between public and private takes on a particular significance, becoming a central focus in much of the scholarship following 'Thinking Sex,' as it refers to the pervasiveness of heteronormativity, and the transformative potential of queer public cultures. One of the most influential essays that demonstrates this two-fold approach is 'Sex in Public' (1998), written by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. In this essay, which clearly builds on some of the insights of 'Thinking Sex,' Berlant and Warner take as their starting point 'sex as it is mediated by publics,' stating that:

> Some of these publics have an obvious relation to sex: pornographic cinema, phone sex, 'adult' markets for print, lap dancing. Others are organized around sex, but not necessarily sex *acts* in the usual sense: queer zones and other worlds estranged from heterosexual culture, but also more tacit scenes of sex like official national culture, which depends on a notion of privacy to cloak its sexualisation of national membership (547).

Throughout the text, Berlant and Warner describe some of the ways in which the normalization of heterosexuality is effectuated through a privatization of citizenship and sex, positing first and foremost that 'heterosexuality is not a thing,' referring instead to the construction of heterosexual culture, which they argue 'achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through ideologies and institutions of intimacy,' making 'sex seem irrelevant or merely personal' (550-53). By associating a complex cluster of sexual practices with 'the love plot of intimacy and familialism,' as part of a much broader project of private citizenship that is 'imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship,' Berlant and Warner argue that 'a whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality,' constituting a privatised sexual culture that 'bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy,' and conclude that 'this sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex—is what we call heteronormativity' (554).[5]

In an earlier article, 'Live Sex Acts (Parental Advisory: Explicit Material),' Berlant engages more directly with the links between national heterosexuality, privacy, and pornography, as

[4] One telling example of this sentiment is voiced by filmmaker Bruce LaBruce in the documentary *Queercore: How to Punk a Revolution* (Leyser 2017), in which he states that 'my philosophy of homosexuality has always been to embrace the things that make you different, to embrace the criminality of homosexuality.' Another example is the popular slogan 'Not gay as in happy but queer as in fuck you.' However, this celebration of the association of queer with deviancy also explains why many gays and lesbians reject the label of queer as a positive form of self-identification, and why queer should not be understood as a simple synonym for LGBT (Jagose 1996).

[5] See also Berlant, in which she describes how our understanding of intimacy is guided by normative ideologies, influencing the ways in which 'certain 'expressive' relations are promoted across public and private domains—love, community, patriotism—while other relations, motivated, say, by the 'appetites,' are discredited or simply neglected' (Berlant 1998, 285), and assesses how 'public institutions use issues of intimate life to normalize particular forms of knowledge and practice and to create compliant subjects' (288).

she focuses specifically on 'the conjunction of sexuality, mass culture, and mass nationality' (1995, 380). Although the article was originally meant to comprise of a review of feminist writing on pornography, Berlant refrains from rehashing some of the feminist arguments for or against pornography, instead discussing pornography as a 'live sex act' (391), which contrasts with a form of national identity described by her as 'dead citizenship' (382). By discussing this form of citizenship as akin to the workings of a 'dead metaphor,' in which imagery loses its metaphorical force through excessive and repetitive use, Berlant gives an account of heterosexual national culture in which 'citizens aspire to dead identities—constitutional personhood in its public sphere abstraction and suprahistoricity; reproductive heterosexuality in the zone of privacy. Identities not live, or in play, but dead, frozen, fixed, or at rest' (382-83). At the core of this form of 'dead citizenship' Berlant locates changes in U.S legislation, which amount to 'the rezoning of the bedroom into a nationally protected space of privacy' (382). Importantly, this 'zone of privacy' is intrinsically tied up with national heterosexuality:

> Insofar as an American thinks that the sex she or he is having is an intimate, private thing constructed within a space governed by personal, she or he is having straight sex, straight sex authorized by national culture; she or he is practicing national heterosexuality, which makes the sex act dead, in the sense I have described, using a kind of metaphor that foregrounds the ways heterofamilial American identity reigns as a sacred national fetish beyond the disturbances of history or representation, protected by a zone of privacy (401).

Berlant does not explicitly historicise this particular form of 'straight sex,' however, her description of the way in which the rise of sexualised mass media coincides with an emphasis on the notion of privacy in the construction of a national identity, is in line with the historical account presented by Eric Schaefer, in which he traces the increased publicity of sex and the emphasis on privacy back to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s (2014). At the same time that sex becomes more public, then, the concept of privacy undergoes a fundamental change, shaping our understanding of the relation between sexuality and space in significant ways.

If Berlant focuses on drawing a distinction between 'live sex acts' and 'dead citizenship,' as a way of critiquing the latter, she is concerned with pornography only to the extent that it makes up a telling example of the kind of public sex that refuses to comply with 'straight sex,' illustrating how public sex is presented as a threat to national culture. Rather than defending mainstream pornography from this plight, Berlant is more interested in the ways in which the dichotomy between public and private proves detrimental to those who are not able to live up to the demand of privacy and abstraction prescribed by 'straight sex.' Thus, if some 'live sex

acts' 'counter an ideology of dead citizenship' (401), this is not always voluntary or a matter of choice, with Berlant arguing that 'there is no deep shadow for gay sex in America: deep shadow is the protected zone of heterosexuality, or dead citizenship, and meanwhile all queers have is the closet' (386). In contrast to sex 'that aspires to iconicity or deadness,' live sex acts posit a threat to national culture 'because they do not aspire to the privacy protection of national culture, nor to the narrative containment of sex into one of the conventional romantic forms of modern consumer culture,' instead asserting 'a sexual public sphere' (385). Rather than seeking to defend mainstream pornography, Berlant's argument is ultimately geared towards affirming the transformative potential of public sex cultures, stating that 'the scandal of sexual subculture in the contemporary American context derives in part from its assertion of a noninfantilized political counterpublic that refuses to tie itself to a dead identity; that sees sexuality as a set of acts and world-building activities whose implications are always radically TBA' (402).

Despite the suggestive title, Berlant does not directly engage with pornography in her article, instead focusing on some of the reactions to pornography. A more concrete example of the way in which pornography functions as a 'live sex act,' however, thereby complicating the abstract and fixed heterosexuality of 'dead citizenship,' is the pornographic peep show arcade. Focusing on the oscillation between public and private in the peep show arcade of the 1960s and 1970s, Amy Herzog argues that:

> The peep arcade is an anomalous space within the realm of porn studies precisely because of the manner in which public and private become enfolded. Peep shows are social environments, sites of exchange between off-screen performers and cameras, between spectators and texts, and, in certain cases, between spectators in the arcade. Moreover, the system of surveillance and regulation that attempt to police these exchanges indicate the degree to which peep arcades pose a threat to privatized, normative notions of sexuality (2008, 31).

In different ways, the space of the peep arcade refuses clear demarcations between public and private and straight and queer sex. Loops consisting of male-female pornography are presented alongside male-male pornography, with the space of the arcade allowing patrons to subvert 'the role of passive spectator to partake in sexual acts that are deemed doubly perverse in their nonprocreative nature and in their public staging' (36). Despite the heterosexual content of much of the pornography shown, and the assumed self-identification of many of the patrons, the peep arcade escapes the fixed and abstract heterosexuality of 'dead citizenship,' instead

foregrounding the messy and contradictory lived experiences of sex that make up 'live sex acts'.[6]

If the construction of heterosexual culture largely depends on making sex private, Berlant and Warner assess how queer culture constitutes itself in ways that do not comply with 'the privatized forms normally associated with sexuality,' but rather cultivate 'what good folks used to call "criminal intimacies"' (1998, 558). Precisely *because* some queer forms of relationality and sexual practices do not adhere to this ideology of private citizenship—with Berlant and Warner referring to 'girlfriends, gal pals, fuckbuddies, and tricks' (560) as well as the kinds of (semi-) public sex that is performed in tearooms, streets, and parks as part of gay male culture—they are often perceived as anonymous by heterosexual culture, and stigmatised as non-intimate, despite the fact that many of these relations and narratives are recognised as forms of intimacy within queer culture.[7] *Been too long at the FAIR* serves as a telling example, as the narrator describes the recurring sexual encounters between himself and another regular patron of the theatre. After sharing a particular "soft, light, sweet, loving encounter" between himself and this patron, in which they just "kissed and kissed and sort of breathed each other breath while we're were jacking off," the narrator realises that he probably had sex with this patron more than any other person in his life, and shares how he adores this 'sweet loving bear' even if he cannot remember his name. As such, the film offers an alternative account of cruising, one that counters the more common representations of this practice as anonymous, detached, and perverse.[8] To reiterate, then, homosexuality is not excluded from what Rubin calls the Charmed Circle of 'good' sex solely because it involves same-sex relations, but rather because it is so closely associated with forms of sex that are perceived as public and promiscuous, prohibiting them from being understood as intimacy, and as part of a 'normal', 'healthy' and 'natural' sexuality. Contrastingly, Berlant and Warner argue that the particular intimacies that are part of queer culture function as a 'context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation' (558). In doing so, they seek to promote queer culture as a world-making project that explores the 'changed possibilities of

[6] However, Herzog also makes clear that 'the peep arcades were undoubtedly deeply compromised venues, and often relatively closeted—even as sites for cruising, the arcades were difficult to romanticize, seemingly a world apart from the West Side Piers or Paradise Garage in the 1970s' (2015, 76). As such, peep arcades might prove a less productive example for Berlant, who is actively seeking to assert the radically transformative potential of public sex cultures.

[7] The description of cruising in *been too long at the FAIR* serves as only one example of how queer people themselves experience and narrate these kinds of 'criminal intimacies.' See also Delany (1999) for a particularly powerful account of the intimacies and forms of relationality allowed for by the practice of cruising.

[8] An example from Hollywood is the film *Cruising* (Friedkin, 1980), starring Al Pacino.

identity, intelligibility, publics, culture and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture' (548).

If, so far, the distinction between public and private forms of sex has been discussed as relatively clear and self-evident, the connections between pornography and queer public sex demonstrate how these boundaries are anything but clear-cut. Ten years prior to the publication of 'Sex in Public,' Jeffrey Weeks points to the issue, stating that 'for a long time, we have cherished sex as the most private of secrets. We talked about it incessantly but shrouded its details with a discreet veil' (1985, 219). Writing about the 'shifting and ambiguous divisions between public and private life,' Weeks argues that 'homosexuality has always posed a threat to these distinctions' (220) and assesses how 'most ostensibly public forms of sex actually involve a redefinition of privacy—a definition based not on received distinctions built around the home/work dichotomy but on a tacit but firm agreement about the conditions for entry and rules of appropriate behaviour' (222). This point is further illustrated by Herzog, who describes the spaces of peep arcade as 'not fully public, but they are anonymous, penetrable, liminal spaces with their own rites of entry,' concluding that the peep arcade makes up 'a highly ritualized space, one governed by its own sets of customs, a space in which the norms of everyday behaviour are deviated and new roles are activated' (2015, 77). This push towards a more complex understanding of the dynamics between publicity and privacy point is also expanded upon by Michael Warner, who in his book *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of a Queer Life* (1999) engages with some of the competing definitions of public and private. Warner argues that none of these definitions should be approached as simple oppositions, stating that 'it requires no stretch of the imagination to see that pornography, 'public sex', cruising, sex work, and other elements of publicly accessible sexual culture are public in some ways and private in others,' and pointing out that even if '"public sex" is public in the sense that it takes place outside the home, it usually takes place in areas that have been chosen for their seclusion, and like all sex involve extremely intimate and private associations' (173). Alternatively, then, Warner assesses how these practices are considered public because they are conceived of a 'matter out of place, and in a way that triggers disgust' (174). Focusing specifically on the interrelation between private and public, Warner sees queer cultures as involving 'not only a world-excluding privacy but also a world-making publicness' and states that as a form of culture 'they have their own knowledges, places, practices, languages, and learned modes of feeling' (177). He concludes:

> When gay men or lesbians cruise, when they develop a love of strangers, they directly eroticize participation in the public world of their privacy. Contrary to myth, what one relishes in loving strangers is not merely anonymity, not meaningless release. It is the pleasure of belonging to a sexual world, in which one's sexuality finds an answering resonance not just in one other, but in a world of others (179).

If queer cultures produce specific knowledges about sex, intimacy, and relationality, Warner contends that these knowledges are seldom heard in conflicts over queer public cultures because of 'hierarchies of shame and memory in official speech' (180). Instead, Warner proposes that queer culture should be considered a counterpublics, where 'its openness, accessibility, and unpredictability are all marks of its publicness' (178).

The argument that public sex cultures offer some privileged site of queer resistance or transformation has also been criticised. For instance, Jack Halberstam problematises how much of queer theory has taken white gay masculinity as its privileged subject position, arguing that the literature on sexuality and space 'often takes white gay male sexual communities as a highly evolved model that other sexual cultures try to imitate and reproduce' (2005a, 12-13). Subsequently, Halberstam laments 'the absence of gender as a category of analysis in much of the work on sexuality and space' (15).[9] Moreover, Jane Juffer criticises the tendency in academic scholarship on pornography to focus exclusively on the most transgressive and politically progressive examples, stating that 'many prosexuality feminists assume that the only progressive sexual representation is that which occurs in a seemingly liberated, undifferentiated public sphere' (1998, 171). Referring explicitly to Berlant's article, Juffer laments the emphasis on transgression in sex-positive feminist and queer theorising, as it excludes a lot of 'tamer' material, which is marketed towards women, making invisible some of the ways in which women have gained access to pornography. If the bedroom is presented by Berlant as the space where 'straight sex' takes place, Juffer seeks to reclaim the privacy of the bedroom as an important site for the consumption of sexually explicit material by women.

Both Halberstam and Juffer raise some important issues when it comes to the often-uncritical celebration of public sex culture, foregrounding male gay culture as the privileged locus through which to imagine a transformative politics, without taking into account questions of access and agency. In contrast, many of the people involved in alternative pornography, both as producers and consumers, have a very different relation to public sex culture, with spaces for women, lesbians, and non-binary and transgender people much more precarious and sparse

[9] This critique of queer theory as being overly white, gay, and male, is not restricted to the work on space and sexuality but is part of a much wider critique (Jagose 1998, Halberstam 2005b).

than those for gay men. Moreover, the lack of access to pornography has often posed an important barrier, most notably for women, as they have been evoked in relation to pornography predominantly as those who need to be protected from the public threat of pornography. As a form of visual pornography, alternative pornography has a much shorter history and is much less ingrained in an existing public culture than gay pornography.[10] This is not to say, however, that there are not some limitations to these critiques as well, as they tend to obscure the ways in which women *have* claimed a stake in public sex culture, creating spaces for the exploration of sex that move beyond the privacy of the bedroom. Importantly, these spaces cannot and should not be perceived as mere imitations or reproductions of male gay culture, but need to be evaluated in their own right. While there are undoubtedly some important differences when it comes to the ways men and women are allowed to take up space, and the way they position themselves in relation to the public sphere—an insight which has been long established in feminist scholarship—it has also been the case that the participation of women in public sex cultures has often been obscured, sanitised, and dismissed, thereby negating the ways in which women, especially queer women, have found power in unapologetically claiming a space for the assertion of their sexuality, sharing the messy, contradictory, and exciting experiences of 'live' sex.[11] An important function of alternative pornography has been the documentation of these experiences. When the women in *Much More Pussy* walk topless through the streets of Paris, or when they discuss their shared experiences of (internalised) sexism and homophobia, their relation to their bodies, and the complexity of their sexual fantasies, they are asserting a particular sexual counterpublics. While this certainly is not the only—or privileged—way of resisting the abstraction and fixity of 'dead citizenship,' it is an important one, and one that should not be ignored, precisely because it has been so much more difficult for women to establish these spaces and move safely in the public sphere. In emphasizing the way in which alternative pornography functions as a counterpublic, my argument is very much in line with a later statement by Halberstam, who describes counterpublics as 'spaces created and altered by certain subcultures for their own uses' and argues that 'since lesbians and women generally partake so little in public sex cultures, we, much more than gay men, need to develop and protect counterpublics for subcultural uses' (2005a, 186). In the following paragraphs, I argue that alternative pornography functions as a

[10] However, scholars have pointed to lesbian pulp novels (Strub 2015; Cvetkovich 2003) and written erotica (Juffer 1998) as functioning in a similar way, as media of acknowledgement.
[11] For some examples of feminist scholarship on the public and private sphere, see Landes (1998); Fraser (1990); Pateman (1983); Pollock (1988).

counterpublics on several registers: through images of queer public sex, by claiming a cultural space for the production and consumption of images of queer sex, and, finally, by exhibiting these images in the physical space of the movie theatre.

### 1.2.3 Queer Pornography as Counterpublics

As a counterpublics, alternative pornography foregrounds a world-making potential, by opening up a space for the recognition and affirmation of queer intimacies and knowledges. In doing so, alternative pornography seeks to reject the objectification and fetishization that characterises much of mainstream pornography, instead working towards self-identification, self-sexualisation, and sexual autonomy. Countering the pathologisation of bodies and practices, alternative pornography demonstrates an investment in showing queer sex as positive and life-affirming. Although alternative pornography refuses to adhere to a politics of respectability and often embraces the 'smuttiness' associated with pornography, it also seeks to undermine the habitual representation of queer sex as 'bad sex,' in the way Rubin describes it, by rejecting normative expectations of gender and sexuality, and refuting the understanding of queerness as 'unnatural' or 'perverse,' instead emphasising its humanity, playfulness, and intimacy. One of the most important ways in which alternative pornography opens up a space for queer sex, then, is by making it visible in the first place, foregrounding some of the places and spaces in which queer sex takes place. Clearly, alternative pornography does not consist exclusively of representations of public sex; however, this imagery is notable as it emphasises some of its particular pleasures and forms of relationality, acknowledging its centrality to queer culture. One example is the film *Shutter* (Green 2014), which makes use of a mosaic patterning, by loosely connecting several independent sequences. Shot in Berlin, each sequence takes place in a different location, most of them inside the home—the bedroom, the kitchen, the dining room—with two sequences taking place outside: a bondage scene occurring in a green, semi-urban location, and the opening sequence, which takes place in the woods.[12] As a whole, *Shutter* is characterised by a lack of narrative, with most of the sex scenes commencing without much introduction and including little to no dialogue, a recurring element in alternative pornography. The opening scene is no different, and without any accompanying music, the only sounds to be heard are those of the wind in the microphone and a distant motorway, as well as the sounds made by the two women as they engage in sex—the rustling of clothes, the moans, the laughter, and the sounds of the latex glove and lube. However, the narrative framing of the sex is notable,

[12] For a discussion of the significance of private spaces, most significantly apartments, in lesbian filmmaking, see Ryberg (2013) and Wallace (2009).

for however brief, it suggests that we are looking at a cruising scene. The film opens with a black frame, accompanied with the sounds of footsteps and crunching leaves before we cut to a shot of the back of one of the performers—Green herself—walking through the woods (Fig. 3). For the first forty seconds or so, she searches her surroundings, intermitted by the opening credits, until the film cuts to another black frame. The next shot consists of a closeup of the legs of the two performers, with the other performer, Tia, taking off her gloves behind her back and the two kissing against a tree (Fig. 4). The sex then takes up the majority of the sequence, about eight minutes. The shot of the two women kissing against the tree is one of the few wide shots in the scene, with most of the scene shot with a handheld camera, making use of closeups and extreme closeups. Although some of these shots comply with the demand for maximum visibility, as a way of gaining visual access to genitals and the sexual acts, many work instead towards establishing a sense of proximity and immersion, concentrating on the sensate experience of the encounter, as the camera lingers on the faces of the women, focuses on the goose bumps that start to appear as skin is revealed, and a hand squeezing a butt with jeans pulled halfway down their legs. Notably, the scene does not adhere to the conventional narrative progression of pornography, working towards a clearly marked climax of one of the performers. Instead, the scene ends with the women laughing and kissing before they put their clothes back on and say goodbye, walking in opposite directions, an ending consistent with the cruising theme.

When it comes to cinematic aesthetics, *Shutter* makes use of some of the visual strategies discussed at length in the following chapters of this dissertation, referring to its lack of narrative and use of (extreme) closeups (discussed in Chapter 1) and its documentary quality (discussed in Chapter 2 and 3). However, for the purpose of this chapter, I am especially interested in the way the sequence thematises queer public sex. Similar to her photography project 'The Catalog,' in which Green portraits lesbian-queer women in poses borrowed from gay pornography magazines, after being disappointed by the representations provided by lesbian porn magazines (Natale 2011), the first sequence of *Shutter* references gay male culture, making use of some of the iconography of cruising familiar from gay porn. Not only does the rudimentary narrative allude to this form of public sex, so does the mise-en-scène, including both the outdoor setting and the androgynous performers themselves, who wear heavy boots, leather and denim jackets, and flannel shirts, with wife beaters and boxers underneath. Furthermore, the cinematography emanates some of the framing familiarised by gay porn, as evidenced by the shot in which the camera focuses on the builders' crack and the boots as Tia

kneels before Goodyn (Fig. 5). Rather than constituting a pale imitation or reproduction of gay male culture, this sequence of *Shutter* appropriates some of the iconography of cruising for its own purpose, as a way of affirming and developing the existence of queer-lesbian culture, representing the particular pleasures associated with 'belonging to a sexual world' and developing a 'love of strangers,' described by Warner, but which have not often been acknowledged or represented as part of a lesbian sexual culture. Precisely because lesbian sex has often been rendered invisible or misrepresented—brought to the screen as either a male fantasy or a desexualised image of 'womanly' love—alternative pornography cannot readily rely on or make use of an established visual language of its own, with cultural examples of lesbian public sex sparse to find. By making use of existing iconography from gay pornography, Green helps to make space for a queer-lesbian counterpublics, undermining the assumption that lesbians do not cruise, and that these forms of public sex are reserved to gay male culture. With this, I do not mean to suggest that these images should be approached as a form of documentary evidence, as this sequence can be said to depict a sexual fantasy as much as it offers an authentic representation of lesbian sex—issues explored in more depth in Chapter 1 and 2 of this dissertation—rather, I argue that these kinds of examples of alternative pornography trace a particular affiliation between queer culture and these (semi-)public forms of sex.

The opening sequence of *Shutter* provides a fairly reflexive example of the representation of public sex in alternative pornography—presenting a self-conscious exploration of ways in which an existing queer-lesbian sexual culture can be represented on screen. At other times, however, the choice of locations is as much motivated by necessity, as filmmakers with little to no budget are forced to become creative when deciding where to shoot their porn. As a result, queer porn is often filmed in parts of the city and its outskirts that are (relatively) easily accessible, but offer enough seclusion to allow for the filming of explicit material, without getting into trouble with neighbours or the authorities, adhering to oscillation of public and private mentioned above. A central role can be attributed to the club in the imagery of queer public sex, presented as a privileged space for sexual exchange, constituting the kind of 'queer zone […] estranged from heterosexual culture' described by Berlant and Warner. For instance, in the opening sequence of *One Night Stand* (Jouvet, 2006), a film I discuss in Chapter 1, the camera follows one of the protagonists as she enters the dark space of the club, moving across the crowded dancefloor, before she finds her way to the bathroom where she watches two other women having sex in one of the cubicles. Following the woman through the club, the camera

captures some of the 'conditions of entry and rules of appropriate behaviour' described by Weeks, including the sexually charged intensity of the exchanging looks and modes of engagement. Similarly, in *Much More Pussy* (Jouvet 2011) and *When We Are Together We Can Be Everywhere* (Östberg 2015), a film I will explore in-depth in Chapter 3, the queer club is presented as a utopian space, defined by its central role in queer sexual culture, and a space that is inherently sexual, due to the sexual explicit performances on stage, the dancing and flirting on the dancefloor, and the sexual activities performed in play areas, dark rooms, and secluded corners of the club. However, where the club in *Much More Pussy* refers to actual spaces, as the film follows a group of performers on their tour through Europe, in *When We Are Together* this space is construed of as an imaginary place, capturing some of the promise that these spaces hold for those who visit them. Finally, the toilet is a recurring location in alternative pornography, as a poignant example of the kind of spaces that are not fully public, but not wholly private either, an example of which is Green's more recent film, *The Toilet Line* (2017), and the sequence from *One Night Stand* I analyse in the following chapter.

If alternative pornography contributes to a queer counterpublics by creating imagery of the actual and imagined spaces in which queer public sex can take place, alternative pornography can also be said to constitute a counterpublic in and of itself, irrespective of the fact if it is showing public or private sex, as it develops and protects a cultural space for the recognition and affirmation of queer sex, contributing to a sexual culture in which people can see themselves and their desires reflected. Historically, pornography has played an important role in establishing a space for the enjoyment and exploration of queer sex, especially at a time where other representations were either not available or else represented queerness as inherently perverse or leading to a tragic demise, with Strub arguing that gay pornography 'contributed to the rise of a shared gay consciousness by validating gay sexuality, by providing sexual outlets to isolated men, and by establishing a communications infrastructure' (2015, 150). Although this function of gay pornography has long been tied up with the existence of actual physical spaces, such as the sex shop, the peep arcade and the porn theatre, in the last decades these spaces have been transposed in great part to the virtual space of the Internet, with Strub stating that:

> The legacy of erotic expression to queer civil rights is extensive, ranging from the personally empowering, to the community building, to the lifesaving. In the 21st century, the niche-marketing afforded by the Internet has opened cultural space for groups previously marginalized into near-invisibility, with smut often staking out those spaces (160).

In more recent years, then, pornography has taken on a similar function for other marginalised groups, including women, lesbians, queers, and transgender people. Combined with technological advancements, which have made it easier to produce, distribute, and consume these images, the Internet has allowed alternative pornography to grow into a more or less codified and coherent film culture. Interestingly, though, this culture of alternative pornography has an important grounding in actual physical spaces, rather than merely virtual one, which is a point I return to below.

To a certain extent, the ability of pornography to make sex visible can be said to make up a central component of *all* pornography, bringing to the fore that which usually remains veiled, hidden, hushed, and silenced in culture at large (Kipnis 1996). Thus, if mainstream pornography can be said to offer a formulaic and standardised representation of sex, geared towards the graphic display of sexual organs and acts, and targeting a predominantly male audience, it also offers some insight into the sheer range of sexual fantasies, fetishes, preferences, and practices that are part of our collective sexuality, resisting the abstract and ahistorical account of heterosexuality captured in the notion of 'dead citizenship.' Moreover, this function of pornography to open up a cultural space for the recognition and affirmation of certain types of sex holds a particular weight for marginalised groups, precisely because these forms of sex have often been made invisible or stigmatised. Warner discusses the role pornography plays in creating a sexual publics, arguing that 'pornography and adult businesses jeopardize the amnesias separating sex and public culture because of their physical orientation towards an indefinite public; they are media of acknowledgement' (1999, 184). Reflecting on the role gay pornography played in his own life, helping him to recognise and accept himself as a gay man, he states:

> In order for porn to exist, not only did some of its producers have to have gay sex, they and many others had to acknowledge that they were having it. What is traded in pornographic commerce is not just speech, privately consumed; it is publicly certifiable recognition. This is part of the meaning of every piece of porn, and what is difficult to communicate in the dominant culture is that the publicity of porn has profoundly different meanings for nonnormative sex practices. When it comes to resources of recognition, queers do not begin on a level playing field (184-185).

Describing the camera as a 'witness' (184), I return to the issue of documentation in Chapter 3. However, this is not to say that all pornography is necessarily made for this purpose, with most gay pornography consisting first and foremost as a commercial product, nor does it

suggest that pornography captures the sexual lives of people in a truthful or authentic way.[13] As a form of cultural production, however, alternative pornography foregrounds an acute awareness of this potential of film to function as a medium of acknowledgement, with many of its producers and performers appropriating the genre of pornography as a means of validating marginalised identities, bodies, experiences, and practices, as well as battling stigma and shame. This pleasure of seeing queer sex represented also extends beyond the category of porn, with Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover arguing that 'the representation of same-sex or other dissident sex acts is for many spectators a defining pleasure of queer cinema' and asserting 'that sex sells is not exactly news, but the organization of cinema's sexual pleasures can help us to understand the affective force of queer film cultures' (2016, 11), and in Chapter 3, I discuss queer pornography as part of queer cinema.

This ability of queer pornography to function as a counterpublics is central to its sex-positive ethos, as it opens up a space or the visibility and recognition of non-normative sexualities, avoiding the objectification and fetishization characterising much of mainstream pornography. Moreover, and contrasting not only mainstream pornography but commercial gay pornography as well, the affective force of alternative pornography is intrinsically tied up with the pursuit of authenticity, which is a point I discuss at-length in the following chapter.[14] For instance, in their chapter for the anthology *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure,* genderqueer performer Jiz Lee voices some of their reasons for doing porn, describing how they want to share their sexual expression with others: 'I like it, it feels liberating, and I know it helps others to feel free too. I want to show more representations of people like me' (2013, 274). They state:

> As a queer performer, I strive to be as authentic as I can, celebrating visibility and using porn as a tool to educate and validate our lives. When Hollywood rewrites and recasts our experiences, and schools ignore our histories and sexual education, queer porn is one of the few mediums that can explicitly tell our stories. As I explore my role in the industry, from indie to mainstream, I question the ways in which I can do porn and be visible while continuing to be myself (275).

After starting out in queer porn, which Lee describes as 'performing for my community,' they now also perform in mainstream porn, which they approach as an opportunity for educating

[13] For an account of the models, patterns, and themes that make up some of the industrial categories guiding gay pornography see Mercer (2017).

[14] This is not to say, of course, that alternative pornography is necessary successful in achieving its goals; rather, it suggests that these issues are central to its feminist and queer politics, making it the locus of passionate investment, as well as constant negotiation.

traditional porn audiences and changing problematic structures of representation from within (277). This sense of community is not only felt in the production of queer porn, which Lee describes as 'performing with lovers and friends, for lovers and friends' (276), but also extends to the reception of queer porn, as audiences turn to pornography to find a representation of sex and gender that resonates with their own experiences, which is a point I return to in Chapter 2.

In her book *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture,* Berlant introduces the concept of 'intimate publics' as an alternative to that of 'counterpublics,' which she feels is too confined to the strictly political, arguing that 'most nondominant collective public activity is not as saturated by the taxonomies of the political sphere as the counterpublic concept would suggest,' and stating that intimate publics 'elaborate themselves through a commodity culture' (2008, 8). Contrasting the forceful rejection of dominant forms of institutionalised knowledge and the active creation of counter-discourses, which mark the political work undertaken in establishing counterpublics, Berlant describes intimate publics as follows:

> Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x* (viii).[15]

Leading on from Lee's previous statements, it becomes clear how alternative pornography constitutes such an intimate publics, positing queer pornography as a locus of social belonging and affirmation. One example of this affective force of queer pornography is the short film *Dear Jiz* (Ms Naughty 2013). Shot in black and white, the film makes use of a simple premise, with Lee filling up a bath, slowly sliding into the water, and masturbating to climax. What sets the film apart, however, is the voice-over, which consists of Lee reading out letters they received from fans. In these letters, fans express their admiration and gratitude, as they describe how seeing Lee on screen helped them to recognise and accept their own gender identity and sexuality. Together, the letters give insight into the feelings of consolation and encouragement that audiences experience through their engagement with Lee's performance on screen, as they share their experience of living as a genderqueer person in the world, giving a sense of its potential for enjoyment and pleasure it feeling good in one's skin, a point I return to in Chapter 3, where I discuss the role of voice-over in queer pornography.

[15] To a certain extent, Berlant's conceptualisation of 'intimate publics' can be compared to Nancy Friday's understanding of a 'weak' counterpublics, although there are still some important differences, most importantly Berlant's emphasis on the subjective and affective (1990).

Overall, *Dear Jiz* foregrounds the profound effect that queer pornography, as a form of cultural production, can have on its audiences, with Berlant stating: 'what is salient for its consumers is that it is a place for recognition and reflection. In an intimate sphere emotional contact, of a sort, is made' (ibid.). This emotional contact makes up the central theme of *Dear Jiz*, expressing a certain poetic quality, and combining black and white imagery with a melodic score, as the camera zooms in on Lee's every movement and gesture. The rhythmic repetition of the phrase 'dear Jiz,' in the opening minutes of the film, together with the recurring technique of overlapping several recordings of Lee's voice, creates a kind of aural palimpsest, as the multiplicity of voices are brought together in the single narration. Furthermore, as Lee reads out excerpts from the letters, their voice becomes increasingly laden with emotion. The interplay between the film's narration in the voice-over and the sexually explicit imagery suggests a particular affective exchange between performer and audience, which is intimately tied up with, yet not constricted to the habitual function of pornography to elicit sexual arousal and release, as images of Lee getting off are accompanied by the narration of spectator's journeys of self-acceptance and sexual exploration, expressing feelings of joy and consolation. Thematising the sense of validation and empowerment that queer porn can offer, *Dear Jiz* serves as a testament to the community-building potential of alternative pornography, creating an intimate publics that foregrounds the emotional experience of belonging and recognition, reconfigures the genre of pornography as a space for working through feelings of negativity and shame, and expresses a utopian world-making tendency by positing queer pornography as a space for the affirmation of joy, self-love, and sexual agency. I return to this issue in Chapter 3, where I discuss queer pornography as an archive of queer feelings.

However, if Berlant conceptualises 'intimate publics' in opposition to the notion of 'counterpublics,' as a way of addressing the collective engagement with commodity culture that appeals more to affective exchanges and points of identification, Ingrid Ryberg argues that alternative pornography combines elements of the two, as she writes about the alternative public sphere of feminist, queer, and lesbian pornography as one that involves 'a multiple and dynamic transaction between the spaces of *counter public* activism and *intimate public* affirmation' (2013, 147, emphasis original). Alternative pornography, then, makes up a cultural space connecting a more defiant and explicitly politically charged attitude—for instance by actively critiquing some of the oppressive socio-cultural norms that govern gender and sexuality and contributing to some of the counter-discourses—with an emphasis on the sensate, embodied experience of living on the 'Outer Limits' of the sexual hierarchy—thereby inviting

recognition and reflection. In her article, Ryberg explores some of the conflicts, negotiations, and connections between the collective mode of viewing that occurs in settings like the Berlin Porn Film Festival and the 'phantasmagoric space on the screen,' discussing the contemporary film culture of queer, feminist, and lesbian porn as 'an arena where new sexual discourses can be articulated and expressed' (ibid.), which brings me to the third and final way in which alternative pornography can be said to appeal to a counterpublics, namely via the physical space of the movie theatre.

Increasingly, public screenings of pornography are considered a thing of the past. In fact, in narrating the history of pornography, scholars have consistently emphasised how in the last decades, pornography has increasingly found its way into the home, allowing for a privatised engagement with pornography. For instance, scholars like Juffer (1998), Schaefer (2004), and Jacobs (2007) have all discussed how technological advancements, such as 16mm film, VHS, and the Internet allowed pornography to be consumed in the privacy of one's home, making it accessible to groups of people who were previously excluded from pornography, contributing to the democratisation of pornography. However, if the influence of the Internet on contemporary pornography cannot be underestimated, I argue here that public screenings constitute another way in which alternative pornography establishes a queer counterpublics, redirecting attention from the politics of representation to modes of reception. Previously, scholars like John Champagne and Thomas Waugh have played a pivotal role in emphasising the importance of reception studies in academic considerations of pornography. For instance, in his discussion of stag films, Waugh discusses how the collective viewing procedures of stag films allow for a certain 'homosociality' amongst the male members of the audience (2001). Champagne's article focuses specifically on gay pornography, and makes up a polemical charge against the ubiquity of the method of close analysis in the discipline of film studies, arguing that close analysis 'particularly obscures both the social and historical conditions in which certain kind of texts circulate and the everyday uses to which subjects put such texts' (1997, 76). In contrast to reading films, a methodology that focuses on questions of interpretation and the intelligibility of the text, Champagne proposes an alternative approach to studying gay pornography, referring to a reception study that 'seeks to understand the porno viewing experience as part of a set of cultural and social rituals and practices' (81). *Been too long at the FAIR* foregrounds some of these practices, as it demonstrates that often patrons are not actively paying attention to the images on the screen at all, but instead are engaging in

sexual activity of their own, with the exhibition of gay porn on screen constituting what Ryan Bowles Eagle refers to as 'ambient porn screens' (2015).

However, when it comes to alternative pornography, public screenings take on somewhat of a different form, adhering to viewing procedures more closely affiliated with traditional film exhibition. Rather than exhibited in gentlemen's clubs or porn theatres, alternative pornography is mostly shown in the context of the film festival, either as part of a dedicated programme of sexually explicit film in LGBT and Queer film festivals, such as the annual Fringe! Queer Film and Arts Fest in London and the bi-annual TranScreen Film Festival in Amsterdam, or as part of an international group of film festivals that focus primarily on the exhibition of pornography, for instance the Berlin Porn Film Festival, La Fête du Slip (Switzerland), the London Porn Film Festival, and Perv Queerotic Film Festival (Sydney). This context in which alternative pornography is exhibited appeals to a particular institutionalised framework, which aids in adding a certain credibility to pornography as a legitimate and serious form of filmmaking, with curators introducing the different programmes and chairing Q&A's with the filmmakers, and award ceremonies and 'filmmaker in focus' programmes celebrating the filmography of a particular performer or director, attributing filmmakers with an auteur-like status and elevating pornography from a mass-produced commodity to a piece of art, deserving of audiences' appreciation. Moreover, as part of the institutional framework of the film festival, alternative pornography is made subject to a very different set of viewing arrangements, adhering to the kind of cinephilic gaze that is usually reserved for non-pornographic filmmaking, characterised by silence and attentive scrutiny, judging the film as an original and individualised piece of work, inviting audiences to evaluate the artistic merits of each film, and reflect on its individual use of aesthetic and narrative features. In doing so, these modes of reception bear some resemblance to the erotic film festivals of the 1970s, as described by Elena Gorfinkel, as they 'strove to present a sense of cultural refinement and sophistication to around the screening of sexually explicit film, while also trafficking in the currency of utopian, liberationist ideals to legitimate their events as a form of personal, political, and aesthetic enlightenment' (2014, 145). Film festivals like the Berlin Porn Film Festival celebrate pornography as a valuable discourse on sex, on par with documentary and experimental film, often blurring the boundaries between these different categories of film, thereby ascribing pornography with a social and cultural significance far beyond its habitual function to elicit sexual arousal and release. The Berlin Porn Festival aims to show the sheer breath of sexual expression through the medium of film, from the light-hearted and the ridiculous, in programmes like 'fun porn,' to the defiant

and explicitly political. The Berlin Porn Film Festival also functions as an incubator for the development of alternative pornography, presenting a place for filmmakers, producers, and performers to meet, network, and forge relationships and collaborations, as well as allowing them to find an audience for this type of imagery. Through the format of the film festival, curators and organisers have been able to appeal to a different kind of audience, distancing themselves from the traditional porn consumer, instead attracting a predominantly urban, young, and middle-class audience, of different genders and sexual orientations. This shift is again consistent with Gorfinkel's description of 1970s erotic film festivals, which were 'as much about a refashioned adult cinema, renamed 'erotica for its potential for aesthetic innovation, as about distancing themselves from the presumed and perceived audience of 'lowbrow' pornography—heterosexual, working-class, middle-aged men' (144). Understood in this way, then, the space of the movie theatre plays an important role in attributing a certain credibility and legitimacy to the category of pornography, discussed in previous section.

## Conclusion

After introducing the aims and scope of my PhD project in the first section, as well as my theoretical framework and methodology, in the two sections that followed it, I discussed the cultural activism of alternative pornography within a wider framework of feminist and queer theory and practice. Throughout these two sections, moreover, I alluded to the importance of paying attention to the context of production and reception, which informs the circulation of alternative pornography. For the most part, however, these issues are beyond the scope of this research, although I return to some these issues throughout the dissertation, to the extent that they intersect with my area of interest, namely cinematic aesthetics. However, let me take this opportunity to emphasise the centrality of these issues for the politics of alternative pornography, even when they are not always the most visible or discussed, as they cannot be readily 'read' from the screen. In the following chapters, my primary focus will lie on the images on the screen, as I engage with the ways in which alternative pornography seeks to widen the visual vocabulary of pornography, by incorporating a range of formal techniques and conventions more commonly associated with experimental and documentary film. My approach will be two-fold: on the one hand, I will examine how the appropriation of these techniques and conventions can be understood as responding to some of the perceived failings and limitations of mainstream pornography. Examining some of the interventions proposed by alternative pornography will, therefore, allow me to engage with more general issues and concerns that have shaped porn scholarship, referring to aesthetics, spectatorship, and the

politics of representation. On the other hand, I am interested in exploring some of the ways in which an interrogation of the documentary and experimental components provides insight into the connections between these pornographies and a wider trajectory of feminist and queer filmmaking. In the first chapter, I will focus on the role of spectatorship and visual pleasure in feminist pornography. Through a discussion of the role of the male gaze and the principle of maximum visibility in feminist pornography, I engage with the ways in which feminist pornographers have appropriated the haptic quality of the image as a way of conveying to the viewer the sensations and intensities, or the *feel,* of sex. In the second and third chapter, I turn to the subgenre of queer docu-porn as a way of accounting for the documentary impulse of pornography. In Chapter 2, I examine the role of indexicality and documentary realism in pornography, as a way of convincing the viewer that they are watching 'real,' that is, unsimulated sex. Turning to a discussion of the role of authenticity in alternative pornography, I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the role of self-reflexivity in queer pornography, as a way of drawing attention to the artificiality of the pornography. In the third and final chapter of this dissertation, I engage with the role of fantasy in pornography by connecting the documentary function of queer pornography to its utopian impulse.

# 1 Sensate Vision:

# Spectatorship and Haptic Erotics[16]

## Introduction

In 2009, *Dirty Diaries* was released. A benchmark in the development of alternative pornography, the collection consists of thirteen vignettes, each filmed by a different filmmaker. Individually, the vignettes are highly diverse in both content and style and in the accompanying manifesto, the filmmakers express many of the issues and concerns discussed throughout this dissertation as central to alternative pornography, including the advocacy of a DIY attitude, the affirmation of female sexual pleasure, and an insistence on the necessity of keeping the conversation of sexuality open, allowing different voices to be heard. One of the vignettes included in the collection is *Skin*, directed by Elin Magnusson. The opening shots of the short feature two bodies, each covered from head to toes in flesh-coloured nylon, as they kiss and caress each other (Fig. 6). Ambiguous at first, their bodily particularities slowly become more apparent, for instance when the shape of a penis protrudes against the barrier of the nylon material in reaction to contact with the mouth of the other person (Fig. 7). As the scene progresses, the nylon fabric becomes increasingly stained with saliva, sweat, and other bodily fluids, at which point the performers begin to cut open the bodysuits with a pair of scissors, gradually liberating themselves from their constraints (Fig. 8). Starting with mouth, eyes, and genitalia, the holes in the fabric gradually become larger, exposing their naked bodies, with hands alternatively moving over and under the fabric and the camera lingering on hands and tongues as they are finally able to touch the other person's skin (Fig. 9). Although the performers engage in penis-in-vagina penetration once the fabric is removed, the scene does not end with the typical shot of male external ejaculation. Instead, the camera closes in on hands and feet gliding over naked skin, with scene eventually fading out as the performers continue to have sex, lacking any significant marker of conclusion.

[16] In this chapter, I pick up some of the ideas I first wrote about in my chapter 'Intimate Encounters in *Fuses* and *One Night Stand'* in the edited collection *Everyday Feminist Research Praxis: Doing Gender in the Netherlands* (eds. K. Leurs and D. Olivieri., 2014) but key arguments are now thoroughly revised and expanded and differently contextualised. For a further elaboration of my ideas on feminist pornography and haptic visuality, see my recently published article 'Sensate Vision: From Maximum Visibility to Haptic Erotics' in the online journal *Feminist@Law* (2016).

By obscuring optimal visual access to the performers and eroticizing the tension between visibility and invisibility, seeing and not-seeing, *Skin* constitutes a metacommentary of one of the most contentious and elaborately discussed features of hardcore moving-image pornography, namely the principle of maximum visibility (Williams, 1999). For the most part, scholars have referred to this tension as a way of delineating the difference between erotica and softcore pornography on the one hand, and hardcore pornography on the other, where the latter is defined by its 'goal-oriented compulsion' to show 'it' all (Williams 1993b, 249). In *Skin*, contrastingly, this tension between visibility and invisibility is evoked, not as a way of distinguishing between more or less acceptable or tasteful forms of representing sex, but rather as a way of experimenting with different ways of bringing sex and sexual pleasure to the screen, thereby opening up what pornography can look like and what it might be able to say about gender and sexuality. With optimal visibility in *Skin* initially compromised, the vignette instead draws attention to other sensations accompanying the sexual encounter, including the auditory—by focusing on the sounds of the nylon fabric as the bodies embrace—and the tactile—with closeups of wetness on skin and the two bodies rubbing against each other as they are finally able to touch. However, *Skin* is not the only example of alternative pornography to focus on other sensations besides the optical; rather, the vignette is part of a wider corpus of feminist pornography that sets out to express the visceral intensity, or 'feel' of sex, adopting what Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka describe as a 'carnal aesthetics' (2013). In doing so, these films employ a range of visual tactics that have previously been explored in experimental film, contributing to what Laura U. Marks refers to as a 'haptic visuality' (2002).

Taking *Skin* as my starting point, in this chapter, I focus specifically on feminist pornography. Specifically, I am interested in tracing some of the ways in which the negotiation of the demand for visual evidence intersects with a desire to represent female sexuality 'on its own terms'. Firstly, I engage with feminist film theory, and particularly the immensely influential concept of the male gaze, as introduced by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' as a way of demonstrating how feminist pornography is wrapped up with, as well as exemplary of, a wider set of issues and concerns relating to film as a *visual* medium, making the representation of the female body a particularly fraught endeavour. Then, I move to a discussion of Williams' discussion of the principle of maximum visibility, which she sees as highly problematic when it comes to the representation of female sexual pleasure. Whereas the place of maximum visibility in feminist pornography has often been presented by scholars as an either/or issue, limiting the options to either an enthusiastic embrace or a radical rejection

of the demand for visual evidence structuring mainstream pornography, here, I argue that we need a more complex and sophisticated analysis of the ways in which filmmakers have negotiated this issue, as they have sought to develop alternatives to the graphic display of 'the mechanics of sexual action' (Williams 1999, 49). Whereas both Mulvey's concept of 'the male gaze' and Williams' concept of 'maximum visibility' approach the issue of spectatorship through the lens of the visual, in the last section, I turn to feminist theories of embodied spectatorship, as a way of accounting for the ways in which filmmakers respond to the limitations of the mediation of sex and apply them to two very different examples of feminist pornography, namely the short film *Touch* (Aven Frey, Hyperballad, Gala Vanting, 2013) and the feature-length film *One Night Stand* (Emilie Jouvet, 2006).

## 1.1 Spectatorship and Feminist Film Theory

### 1.1.1 Visual Pleasure and Moving- Image Pornography

In the booklet to the DVD of *Dirty Diaries*, each of the filmmakers involved in the project reflects on their respective contribution to the collection. These individual texts are introduced by Mia Engberg, producer and initiator of the project, who ties the depiction of female sexual pleasure in feminist pornography to the wider representation of the female body in visual culture, stating that 'through the history of art the image of the woman has been created by men to please the male gaze […] Now, as we create our own explicit images, we face many questions. Is there such a thing as a female gaze, and if so, what does it see?' (2009). By now a familiar critique of the representation of women in Western art and culture, the point expressed by Engberg in her introduction can be traced back to the 1970s, specifically to John Berger's discussion of the category of the female nude in the tradition of European oil painting in his television series and book *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Comparing the conventions and compositions associated with the female nude in art history to those found in 'girlie' magazines and advertisements, Berger's argument is two-fold: on the one hand, he refers to the arrangement of the female body in these paintings, describing how its turns women 'into an object—and most importantly, an object of vision: a sight' (1990, 47). On the other hand, he refers to the role of spectator, stating that: 'the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he presumed to be a man […] It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger with his clothes still on' (54). Particularly relevant to my discussion of pornography here, is Berger's reference to the sexual component of the relationship between representation and spectatorship, which functions

almost as a side note in his writing. Pointing to the exchange of looks between the female figure in the picture and the male spectator, Berger argues that these representations are produced first and foremost 'to appeal to *his* sexuality' and thus have 'nothing to do with her sexuality' (55). With the advent of second-wave feminism, however, the reclamation of the female body, the affirmation of female sexual autonomy, and the address of the female spectator became important themes in feminist theory and practice, with Engberg's introduction demonstrating the lasting legacy of these questions in relation to feminist pornography, which is a point I return to below.

The issues and concerns addressed by Berger in *Ways of Seeing* in many ways anticipate the complex analysis of the connections between vision, power, and sexuality developed by feminist art historians like Linda Nochlin (1988), Griselda Pollock (1989), and Lynda Nead (1992). However, Berger's discussion of the female nude also extends beyond the disciplinary boundaries of art history, as he is not so much interested in making claims about the objectification of women in some far and distant past, but rather aims to demonstrate how the values and assumptions that inform the depiction of the female nude continue to shape the representation of women in the present. Even though the original publication of *Ways of Seeing* predates Engberg's introduction to *Dirty Diaries* by roughly three decades, the quote mentioned above shows that the central premise of his argument over the years has lost little of its relevance and immediacy. That Engberg refers to the male gaze in order to make her point, a concept originating from the discipline of film studies rather than art history, might hardly be called surprising; ever since its initial introduction in Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), the concept quickly traversed the boundaries of film studies as well as academia, gaining widespread popularity and functioning as a shorthand for the sexual objectification of women in everything from film and television to music videos and advertising, as well as—evidently—pornography. This far-reaching influence of the concept is also acknowledged by Mulvey herself, who describes how in the years following its original publication, the essay seemed 'to take on a life of its own' (2009b, xxvii). Before I discuss the function and relevance of the male gaze in relation to pornography, a more careful consideration of the historical specificity of her argument is in order.

Fuelled by the politics and energy of the women's liberation movement, Mulvey explains how she wrote the essay 'polemically and without regard for context or nuances of argument' (ibid.), an attitude that clearly comes across in the essay, for instance when she defends her methodology by stating that 'psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political

weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' (2009c, 14). Together with Claire Johnston's previously quoted essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema' (1973), Mulvey's essay is one of the first examples of feminist writing on film to incorporate structuralist frameworks like psychoanalysis and semiotics, as a way of accounting for the 'the all-pervasive power of patriarchal imagery' (Smelik 2007, 491). In doing so, Mulvey's essay marks a break with previous feminist film criticism, which focused primarily on stereotypes of women in Hollywood film and called for positive images of women in film (Smelik, ibid.; i.e. Haskell 1973; Rosen 1973; Artel and Wengraf 1978; Waldman 1978). Engaging with the underlying structures of patriarchal cinema, Mulvey first of all asserts that 'the magic of the Hollywood style' is intrinsically tied to 'the manipulation of visual pleasure' (2009c, 16). Drawing on psychoanalysis, particularly the theories of Freud and Lacan, Mulvey argues that there are two 'contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking' contributing to the cinematic experience, namely 'scopophilia,' or the pleasure of looking, which involves 'using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight' (18), and narcissistic identification, which is connected to the constitution of the ego and relies on 'identification with the image seen' (ibid.).

There are some striking similarities between Mulvey's attempt to account for the fascination with cinema and Berger's discussion of the category of the female nude. Despite some notable differences in corpus and methodology—with Mulvey focusing on classical Hollywood film instead of art history and adopting a psychoanalytic framework—both share an interest in practices of looking, which they describe as organised along the axes of gender, according to a binary logic. Thus, where Berger states that '*men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (1990, 47), Mulvey echoes this observation when she posits that 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female' (2009c, 19). According to Mulvey, then, the male gaze comprises the organizing principle of classical Hollywood film, affecting everything from narrative to cinematography and editing, and contributing to the spit between narrative and spectacle. For instance, where the male character in the film is presented as an active agent, whose actions drive the narrative forward, the female character, contrastingly, brings forward 'an indispensable element of spectacle,' with her presence drawing the goal-oriented narration temporarily to a halt, as she 'freezes the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation' (19-20). Because the male character is the one who makes things happen and actively contributes to the story line, he is the one with whom the spectator identifies; however, the

male character is also the 'bearer of the look,' with his gaze functioning as a surrogate for that of the spectator in auditorium, whereas the female character is presented as an 'alien presence,' with Mulvey stating that 'women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness'* (19). The separation between narrative and spectacle also has significant implications for the cinematography of the classical Hollywood film, with Mulvey explaining how the erotic objectification of the female character is implemented through a whole range of cinematic techniques, including framing and depth of field, with the female body isolated in the frame or fragmented by closeups of distinct body parts, such as face and legs, in contrast to the male character, who is presented as 'a figure in a landscape,' which means that he is 'free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action' (20).

With the erotic objectification of women in film effectuated through a whole range of narrative and cinematic techniques, Mulvey argues that 'cinema builds the ways she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself' (26), with the concept of the male gaze actually referring to three distinct looks, namely that of the male character within the diegesis, that of the camera as it is filming the action, and that of the audience as it watches the film. Furthermore, because this male gaze functions as the organizing principle of classical Hollywood film, Mulvey maintains that these films teach us nothing about women themselves; rather, her presence on screen can only be explained by virtue of what she means to him. Again, her use of a psychoanalytic framework is of central importance to Mulvey's argument here, for she states that if visual pleasure is central to cinema, 'in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem,' as her presence in the diegesis 'implies the threat of castration and hence, a form of unpleasure' (22). In order to overcome this castration anxiety, Mulvey poses two possible avenues of escape: the first consists of voyeuristic scopophilia, which is associated with sadism and depends on the subjugation of the object to a controlling gaze, and the second refers to fetishistic scopophilia, which 'builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself' (23). Whereas the erotic instinct of sadism can also be exerted on the level of narrative, with Mulvey referring to the *film noir* as a primary example of the way in which 'the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty subject' is incorporated into the narrative structure of film (23), voyeurism and fetishism, on the other hand, are intrinsically wrapped up with the pleasure of looking. Indeed, it has been this sadistic-voyeuristic gaze that has most often been associated with the pleasure of looking in moving-image pornography.

Despite Mulvey's focus on the classical Hollywood film, as mentioned above, the concept of the male gaze was soon applied to all sorts of imagery, not in the least pornography, considered by many the patriarchal cinema *par excellence*. During the late 1980s and 1990s, there not only started to emerge a first wave of alternative pornography, but at the same time, the first scholarship started to take shape of what has become known as the field of porn studies, and which moved beyond the moralism and anti/pro dichotomy of the previous feminist debates on pornography, in order to examine more closely pornography's iconography and use of generic conventions. A small but significant section of this scholarship deals with the growing corpus of feminist and lesbian pornography at the time, with many scholars referring to Mulvey's essay as a way of accounting for the problems of mainstream pornography (Patton 1989; Smyth 1990; Bensinger 1992; Johnson 1993; Conway 1997). One representative of this scholarship is Anne McClintock, who describes pornography as a 'boys-own affair' and asks 'is it any wonder, then, that women voice unease at the spectacle of our sexual agency and desire managed on male terms for male affirmation' (1993, 113). Whereas McClintock is particularly optimistic about the prospects for women's possibilities of self-representation, stating that 'now, however, women are beginning to stage and speak pleasure on our own terms' (130), other scholars express a more sceptical attitude, including Cindy Patton, who points out that if, in the case of mainstream pornography, 'the mode of cinematic address seemed to equate looking with the male position,' it is nevertheless unclear 'what a female position of looking might mean, where that position might be' (1989, 101). In many ways, then, the issues and concerns raised in relation to pornography echo some of the wider debates on the female spectator and the potential and conditions of the female look in film theory and cultural studies in the decade after the publication of Mulvey's essay (i.e. Doane 1982; Stacey 1987; DeLauretis 1987; Kaplan 1988; Bobo 1995). The manner in which the male gaze in Engberg's quote above is introduced as a given, whereas the notion of the female gaze is presented as a question is telling, since it demonstrates the extent to which this issue remains unresolved. In the following section, I return to this issue, when I discuss how filmmakers have experimented with different ways of representing female sexual pleasure and as well as encouraged different modes of looking. Before I do so, however, I first want to pay attention to some of the limitations of Mulvey's theory when it comes to the analysis of pornography.

In one of the chapters in her book on online pornography, Susanna Paasonen offers a helpful overview of some of the limitations that arise from the generalization of Mulvey's theory and states that 'the notion of the gaze is too easily used as a conceptual template for analyzing

representations and ways of encountering them across a range of media' (2011, 175). Her first point of critique refers to this tendency of adopting the concept of the male gaze as a kind of catch-all for sexist wrongdoing in contemporary culture, with Paasonen arguing that 'the historical specificity of Mulvey's analysis is lost if and when the male gaze is seen as a general visual order and dynamic of looking' (ibid.). Not only does Mulvey point to a particular tradition of film, namely classical Hollywood cinema, then, she is also responding to a particular moment in time, which gives her argument a particular grounding that is obscured by the suggestion that the male gaze is the only available mode of looking available in our engagement with images. Secondly, Paasonen argues against the basic dichotomy on which Mulvey's argument rests and the restricted room this allows women, as she states that 'given that the gaze is always gendered male, the female is left with the position of exhibitionist and masochistic object of a spectacle' (ibid.). The problem with Mulvey's binary opposition becomes especially apparent when applying it to pornography, according to Paasonen, where objectification cannot automatically be equated with the representation of the female body, as 'pornography is about depicting people as both sexual subjects and objects—and also as assemblages of anonymous, interpenetrating flesh in motion' (ibid.). Contrasting Mulvey's theory, then, in which the fragmentation of bodies through the convention of the closeup can only ever be understood as contributing to a process of objectification by means of the visual pleasure of fetishistic scopophilia, Paasonen argues that 'objectification is merely one possible mode of encountering and experiencing these images, and it does not exhaust all available options' (ibid.). Pointing towards a more fundamental problem with Mulvey's theory of the gaze, Paasonen diagnoses her use of a psychoanalytic framework, which allows for a restrictive understanding of the range of visual pleasures afforded by cinema, as Mulvey's concept of the gaze identifies looking with 'control, distance, and mastery through the psychoanalytical notions of voyeurism and scopophilia,' whereas for Paasonen, 'it is in no way given that the pleasures of looking need to involve control, let alone sadism' (176). While Paasonen acknowledges that some of these pleasures can be part of the consumption of pornography, as she refers for instance to the ubiquity of depictions of voyeurism in online porn, she warns against conflating these depictions with an encompassing theorization of porn spectatorship, stating:

> Recognizing voyeurism as a pornographic fantasy and trope is one thing. Associating all online porn with voyeurism in a wholesale embrace of a psychoanalytical framework is a different matter altogether. It may just as well be that viewers do not want to be in control of the image unfolding but take more pleasure in being overwhelmed by them (180).

In the last section of this chapter, I engage with some of the ways in which feminist pornography invites its audience to let go of the desire for control and possession in favour of other pleasures, with the pleasure of being overwhelmed only one possibility. Furthermore, over the years, many scholars have argued for an investigation of the diverse range of visual pleasure that cinema is capable of (i.e. Williams 1995). One example is Elizabeth Grosz, who also emphasises the need for vision 'to be freed from the constrictions that have been imposed on it by the apparatus of the gaze' (2006, 199). As a way of opening up our understanding of spectatorship beyond the two modalities of looking that psychoanalytic discourse has allowed for, namely that of the look the voyeur and the desire to be looked at of the exhibitionist, Grosz endeavours to develop a typology of looking and argues for the viability of an investigation of the plurality of possible visions, stating that:

> In addition to the gaze, for example, there is the seductive fleeting glance, the glance the overviews without detailing; there is the laborious observation, a slow penetration inspection that seeks details without establishing a global whole, there is a sweeping survey, there is the wink and the blink, speed up perceptions that foreclose part of the visual field to focus on elements within it, the squint which reduces the vertical to the horizontal, and many other modalities (ibid.)

Writing specifically about the ways in which viewers engage with images and representations of bodies, Grosz argues that these modalities of looking are neither monolithic or singular and describes how one can 'inspect, survey, peer, glance, peek, scour, one can focus on or look through' (ibid). While the typology of looking suggested by Grosz can be of great value, especially in thinking about representations of the female body, which have been so overdetermined by this notion of the mastering male gaze and the female body as spectacle, unfortunately, Grosz' account remains somewhat schematic and lacks a rigorous understanding of the relationship between these different modes of looking and the specific media, technologies, and genres that structure our engagement with these images and representations of bodies. In the final section of this chapter, then, I return to these different modalities of looking, when I engage with the concept of 'haptic visuality,' but before I do so, I examine the practice of looking typically invited by pornography, focusing specifically on the principle of maximum visibility.

### 1.1.2 Maximum Visibility in Alternative Pornography

Visibility has long been recognized as central to hardcore moving-image pornography, for instance by Lesley Stern, who, as early as 1982, argues that 'the appeal of pornography would seem to have to do with its visibility, its being-there-ness, its explicitness' (39). Indeed, it has

been precisely this emphasis on visibility, which led many critics to refer to pornography as a metaphor for the 'unprecedented graphic realism' of the medium of film itself (Williams 1993a, 9). Examples of this rhetoric include Stanley Cavell, who argues that 'the ontological conditions of the motion picture reveal it as inherently pornographic' (1979, 45), and Frederic Jameson, who states that 'pornographic films are […] only the potential of film in general, which asks us to stare at the word as though it were a naked body' (1990, 1). More to the point, however, is Williams' discussion of the principle of maximum visibility in her book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (1999), in which she studies hardcore moving-image pornography as a genre of film with its own distinct history and set of generic conventions and audience expectations. Adopting a Foucauldian framework, Williams proposes that pornography constitutes a *scientia sexualis,* as part of the modern Western organization of the knowledge of sex, and is aimed at 'eliciting the confession of the scientific truths of sex' (3). Central to the overarching thesis of her book, is William's assertion that the genre of film pornography is guided by the 'principle of *maximum visibility*,' as she states that 'it is no accident that visual pornography […] has consistently maintained certain clinical-documentary qualities at the expense of other forms of realism or artistry that might actually be more arousing' (48, emphasis original). In the following two chapters, I engage extensively with the documentary aura of pornography, discussing its reliance on the transparency of the image as a way of convincing the spectator that the sex they are watching is somehow 'real,' in that it is not fabricated, simulated, or faked. In order to sustain its production of the 'truth' of sex, the principle of maximum visibility operates on several levels, affecting everything from formal features, such as the use of lighting and the framing of the shot, which sets of out to show the most of bodies and genitals, to the choice of sexual positions and practices, contributing to the development of generic conventions like the 'meat shot' (a closeup of vaginal penetration), the 'money shot' (which consist of a shot of external penile ejaculation), and 'cream pie' (which constitutes a shot of ejaculate in vagina or anus), and the variety of sexual 'numbers.' In doing so, hardcore pornography takes off at precisely the moment where the camera in the Hollywood sways away and the image dissolves as the characters kiss and embrace, a point that is also recognized by Williams as she states that:

> In contrast to both mainstream fictional narrative and soft-core indirection, hard core tries *not* to play peek-aboo with either its female or male bodies. It obsessively seeks knowledge, through a voyeuristic record of confessional, involuntary paroxysm, of the 'thing' itself (49).

Moreover, moving beyond an assurance that the sex took place in front of the camera at the moment of recording, with the image providing a visual trace of the pro-filmic event, the

principle of maximum visibility expresses an obsessional investment in providing the spectator with visible evidence of sexual pleasure. In the case of male sexual pleasure, the convention of the money shot produces 'the visual evidence of the mechanical "truth" of bodily pleasure caught in involuntary spasm; the ultimate and uncontrollable—ultimate *because* uncontrollable—confession of sexual pleasure in the climax of orgasm,' according to Williams (101). However, when it comes to the representation of female sexual pleasure, the principle of maximum visibility proofs less secure, as Williams argues that female sexual pleasure proves elusive in terms of the cinematic will-to-knowledge defining hardcore pornography, due to its supposed invisibility. Moreover, according to Williams, it is precisely this problem of the invisibility, and therefore unknowability, of female sexual pleasure within this visual economy that has structured hardcore visual pornography from the 1970s onwards. Within this 'regime of the visual knowledge of pleasure,' which fails to uncover the secrets of female sexual pleasure, Williams argues that the 'spectacle of ejaculation' is offered as a solution, serving as a substitute 'for what is not there: the invisible female orgasm' (1993a, 243). She states:

> Hard core desires assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance of feminine pleasure, but its involuntary confession. The woman's ability to fake the orgasm that the man can never fake (at least according to certain standards of evidence) seems to be at the root of all the genre's attempts to solicit what it can never be sure of: the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core "frenzy of the visible." (1999, 50)

The fact that the male sexual pleasure can be made visible, and therefore knowable, thereby contrasting the presumed invisibility of female sexual pleasure, has many implications for the the representation of male and female sexual pleasure in pornography, affecting everything from its iconography to its mode of narration.

Despite popular opinion that pornography is typically devoid of narrative and instead expresses a preoccupation with the spectacle of the sexual act, Richard Dyer argues against this position in his article 'Coming to Terms: Gay Pornography' (1992, 125), stating that 'narrative is at its very basis.' However rudimentary, Dyer argues that hardcore pornography is driven by a classic goal-oriented narrative, starting with titillation, then moving to penetration, and, finally, concluding with ejaculation. Focusing predominantly on the representation of male sexuality, he states that 'it seems to me that male sexuality, homo or hetero, is socially constructed, at the level of representation anyway, in terms of narrative; that, as it were, male sexuality is itself understood narratively' (127). If male sexuality is socially constructed as goal-oriented, then, the goal that is being pursued is to ejaculate, to have an orgasm. In filmic terms, this goal is

visualised in pornography through visible male ejaculation. However, if Dyer argues that the 'emphasis on seeing orgasm, then, is part of the way porn (re)produces the construction of male sexuality', he also goes on to ask the inevitable question: 'Could it be otherwise, could sexuality be represented differently? So dominant are masculine-centred definitions of sexuality that it often seems as if all representations of sexuality (pornographic or otherwise) are constructed as driven narratives' (ibid.). Rather than offering examples from pornography, Dyer points to art cinema in his search of alternative representations of sexuality that do not rely on a goal-oriented narrative drive or visual equivalent of the visible male orgasm, referring specifically to Chantal Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1976), which he feels depicts 'sexuality as more dissolving and ebbing than a masculine thrusting narrative' (128). However, Dyer does not further engage with the depiction of female sexual pleasure in pornography, which is a point that is picked up on by Cindy Patton, who, in her article 'Hegemony and Orgasm—Or the Instability of Heterosexual Orgasm' (1989), focuses on heterosexual pornography and compares the depiction of female and male sexual pleasure and argues that the sexual narratives of male and female sexuality are constituted through very different systems of punctuation. In her discussion of the male orgasm, Patton largely echoes Dyer's analysis and states that:

> Male orgasm is *cinema vérite*; extending it would require repetition of a narrative sequence of stimulation, erection, ejaculation. The male sexual narrative moves from multiple angles of him fucking or being sucked, to withdrawal, masturbation, orgasm; a movement from body to genitals. Female sexual pleasure is lushly photographed but the shots are incoherently related to her orgasm. The female sexual narrative moves from genitals, to full body shots, to facial expressions; careening dizzingly from genitals to body to face (2002, 106).

Whereas the visual economy of pornography 'fixes' male sexual pleasure through the visible evidence of male orgasm, which functions as the punctuation that accentuates the conclusion of the sexual narrative, the narration of female sexual pleasure constructs it as always fleeting, without goal or end. Commenting on this gendered difference in the way that male and female sexuality are brought to the screen, Patton links this mode of representation to a broader analysis of the way in which male and female sexuality are culturally understood. Male sexual satisfaction, Patton argues, is synonymous with the orgasm, 'there is no question that men have orgasms, the proof is ejaculation' (105). This contention is reasserted in pornography, where 'male orgasm is taken as accomplished or not, an essential and essentialist punctuation of the sexual narration. No orgasm, no sexual pleasure. No come shot, no narrative closure' (104). However, the same does not go for female sexual pleasure, with Patton stating that 'there is still much cultural anxiety about what constitutes female sexual pleasure' (105). Rather than fixed or synonymous with orgasm, Patton argues that 'female sexual pleasure is still depicted

through facial expressions: the transcendent glazed-over eyes, lips glistering and slightly parted, head thrown back' (ibid.). Contrasting the 'proof' of the male cum shot, where the male orgasm is represented as 'real, essential, indisputable' (107), the female orgasm is understood as 'constructed, a signification in the face of an event occurring elsewhere, if at all' (108).

In early discussions of feminist and lesbian pornography, the question of how to speak of female sexual pleasure on 'its own terms' in pornography becomes a central concern, with Claire Johnston asking how pornography 'might speak to women of their sexual pleasure if the standard of authentication is visible, genital orgasm' (1993, 30). How, then, does alternative pornography attempt to move beyond 'the cultural paradigm of cum worship' (Patton 1994, 180), and produce a knowledge of sex that does not negate but rather affirms and promotes female sexual autonomy and pleasure?

While it is important to acknowledge, along with Williams, that different types of 'minorities pornographies' should not be bracketed as distinct from the confessional mode of mainstream pornography, for 'they too belong to the overall "speaking sex" phenomenon in modern Western societies' (1993b, 7), it is also necessary to interrogate how they might 'speak sex' differently and how they negotiate the demand for visual evidence of sexual pleasure that structures mainstream pornography's 'frenzy of the visible' (1999). Rather than radically new, then, this concern with women's control over their own bodies and the exploration of female sexual autonomy and self-definition through the medium of film fits with a longer trajectory of feminist video and film (Juhasz 1999). Whereas McClintock once again expresses an optimistic view about the potential of alternative pornography to do so, as she argues that the dyke porn of Fatale Media 'usefully debunks the notion that a woman's orgasm is somehow "unrepresentable;" it is unrepresentable only on male terms' (127), others have expressed a more moderate and nuanced reading of alternative pornography.

In her article 'Maximizing Visibility' (2008, 72), Ingrid Ryberg adopts Williams' concept of maximum visibility, and focuses on the problematic notion of visibility within alternative pornography, stating that within this subgenre of pornography, 'the notion of visibility turns out to be two very different, if sometimes conflated and confused, notions'. On the one hand visibility in pornography relates to the aforementioned scientific will-to-knowledge through an explicit cinematic language aiming at revealing all the body's secrets and sexual pleasures; on the other hand, visibility is central in various identity politics projects aiming at rendering visible marginalized subject positions (ibid.). If the aim of alternative pornography is to render

certain groups and practices visible, Ryberg asks, 'how can this aim be achieved without repeating patriarchal assumptions that take maximum visibility as the only satisfying way to represent sex'? Whereas the money shot is the reference point for most pornography, as the ultimate expression of pornography's demand for maximum visibility, female sexuality is a 'problem' within this framework of visibility, and does not comply with that demand, for the female orgasm takes place inside the body, and is usually without visible 'evidence.' So, what are some of the strategies that have been adopted in order to visualize female sexual pleasure in feminist pornography?

As mentioned above, the representation of female sexual pleasure in alternative pornography intersects with ongoing debates about what exactly constitutes the female sexual pleasure and the female orgasm, with the first example of the iconography referring to the emphasis on clitoral imagery. According to Richard Dyer, the significance of the clitoral orgasm lies in great part in its potential to assert an autonomous female sexuality (2002b, 184), tracing the emphasis on clitoral imagery back to the lesbian cultural feminist film of the 1970s, particularly the work of Barbara Hammer, as a way of celebrating the female body and reclaiming women's genitals for women. Rather than adopting the documentary realism associated with pornography, films like *Multiple Orgasm* (1976) adopt a more poetic and associative style of filmmaking, as a way of visualising female sexual pleasure, with Dyer describing how 'female bodies are positioned *in* nature as well as associated *with* nature through ways of editing, camera techniques, and the use of superimposition, emphasizing feelings of merging and blurring' (176). In *Multiple* Orgasm, for instance, (extreme) closeup images of female genitalia are positioned in an 'all-female circuit of pleasure' (183), with Dyer explaining how lesbian cultural feminist film, by aiming to create an erotic space for women *as* women, these films evoke a particular feminine aesthetic, which has often resulted in these films being accused of essentialising female sexuality. In these films, then, the value of the clitoris resides in its ability to signify female embodiment in a way that does not automatically associate it with nature, motherhood, and nurturing, a viewpoint that is also expressed by Gayatri Spivak, who argues that the clitoris 'escapes reproductive framing' (quoted in Williams 1999, 102). Rather than understanding female sexuality through an emphasis on the vagina, as the passive receiver of male pleasure or as the passage for life, this approach expresses the view that a celebration of the clitoris allows women to claim an autonomous female sexual pleasure, independent from heterosexual penetrative sex. Whereas Williams in her discussion of the representation of female sexual pleasure in pornography underlines this potentially liberatory value of the clitoris, she also

draws attention to some of the important limitations associated with the embrace of clitoral imagery, understood as an escape from the dominance of phallic sexuality, stating:

> While celebration of the clitoris thus might constitute one way to begin to challenge the power of a phallic economy of pleasure, it could do so only if the goal were not to set up an alternative organ of fetishistic worship but rather to dismantle the hierarchy of norm and deviation and so create a plurality of pleasures accepting of difference (1999, 102).

Although clitoral imagery is not awarded quite the same status in contemporary alternative pornography as in these earlier feminist films, it is certainly prevalent, in particular in the form of female masturbation. Of course, female masturbation is also present in mainstream pornography, where it functions less as a way of affirming female sexual pleasure, and refers more as a spectacularisation of the female body in service of a male pleasure of looking, with Annette Kuhn arguing that this imagery either evokes the voyeuristic pleasure of 'lawless seeing,' invoking a 'Peeping Tom' fantasy where the woman in the scene is caught unaware by the camera in a moment of autoeroticism (1985, 29-35), or lures the spectator in by means of a teasing invitation, where the woman directly acknowledges the spectator in a display of exhibitionism, suggesting 'that the woman is purposefully displaying her body for the spectator, that she knows he is there and is inviting him quite openly to take a good look' (42). In feminist pornography, however, female masturbation has been presented as a way of re-appropriating the female body and privileging female fantasies and pleasures for their own sake, rather than the pleasure of the male spectator. One example if this move in alternative pornography is the series of shorts produced by Ms Naughty, which consists of several solo scenes, including *Transported* (2014), which features Gala Vanting, *Dear Jiz* (2013) and *Instructed* (2014), featuring Pandora Blake. Rather than inviting the voyeurism or the 'come hither' exhibitionism described by Kuhn, these films shift the focus to the subjectivity of the performers themselves, primarily through the use of voice-over narration, in which they, in very different ways, share something of their sexuality with the viewer. However, rather than presented as an equivalent of the money shot, this emphasis on clitoral imagery does not necessary solve the demand for visual evidence in pornography, and as Ryberg discusses, if anything, it can be argued to *underline* the assumption that female sexual pleasure is something that happens internally and therefore somehow beyond visual representation, leaving the status of the money shot unchallenged.

A second example of the iconography deployed by alternative pornography in order to make female sexual pleasure visible, and which addresses head-on the truth claim of the money shot, is the practice of female ejaculation—'by now something of a lesbian pornographic trope along

with the dildo' (Ryberg 2008, 74, see also Smyth 1990; Rhyne 2007). In her account of the development of lesbian pornography from 1968 to 2000, Heather Butler uses the term 'dyke pornography,' to designate a representation of lesbian sexuality that emerged in the late 1980s onwards, and which diverted from earlier depictions of lesbian sexuality as 'erotic in nature', representing lesbian sexuality as natural, wholesome, and sensual, instead incorporating representations of rough sex, dirty talk, butch/femme role-play, the use of dildos and vibrators, and female ejaculation scenes (2004, 181). With these films evoking the kind of aura of authenticity discussed at length in the following chapter as a central component of alternative pornography, by adopting a Do-It-Yourself aesthetic, female ejaculation is often hailed as a practice that not only defies the invisibility of female sexual pleasure, but also troubles the status of the male money shot as the only conclusive proof of sexual pleasure imaginable in pornography. Female ejaculation is seen as troubling a myriad of deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about the difference between male and female sexuality, where male sexuality is understood as active, external, and fixed, and female sexuality as passive, internal, fragmented and fleeting. For instance, Kathy Daymond, in an intimate account of her motivations for making *nice girls don't do it* (1990), a short experimental documentary film demonstrating female ejaculation, states:

> Long denied, ridiculed, marginalized, and pathologized, female ejaculation is, I think, one of the most powerful dimensions of female sexuality. It contests the claim of the phallus to dominance in the visual field and renders female sexuality visible by extending it from internal to public space [...] In its radical potential to displace the phallus and male ejaculation from their privileged positions, female ejaculation is about as *queer* it gets (1998, 62, emphasis original).

In her chapter 'Feminist Ejaculations' (1991), Shannon Bell wonders why female ejaculation has not gained more currency in feminist discourse as a powerful intervention in the struggle to appropriate and reclaim the female body and affirm an autonomous and active female sexuality, in a similar way to that of the clitoris. Even though the female body and bodily fluids take up an important role in feminist theorisations of female sexual autonomy, Bell argues that feminism's revaluation of female sexuality has been too invested in upholding sexual difference by privileging the maternal body and the power of women's reproductive ability. Ejaculate, as a 'fluid that shoots, fluid that sprays—has been given over to the male body,' whereas the fluids that are re-appropriated in feminist sexual discourse are the fluids of 'the mother-body: fluids of the womb, birth fluids, menstrual blood, milk: fluids that flow' (163).

In order to accept female ejaculate and female ejaculation, Bell concludes, 'one has to accept the sameness of male and female bodies' (ibid.).

However, if the depiction of female ejaculation makes for a radical and powerful assertion of female sexual autonomy in alternative pornography, expanding existing knowledges of what the female body is capable of, when it comes to offering an equivalent to the visual dominance of the money shot, the practice of female ejaculation might be less stable then Bell's discussion above allows for. For instance, Chris Straayer points out in her discussion of the work of Annie Sprinkle that female ejaculation is continually at risk of being confused, misidentified, or blurred with the practice of 'golden showers,' that is, 'the art of urination during sex-play,' even if it often 'pierces a culturally constructed and enforced boundary between males and females' (1996, 250). Thus, as important as it is to affirm the pleasures of female ejaculation, and for women to reclaim their bodies and define their pleasures for themselves, the practice of female ejaculation is a long way from shedding its arbitrary status and posing a real threat to the dominance of the money shot in the visual economy of pornography. More importantly, however, is Ryberg's analysis of the way in which the discourse of visibility in pornography is conflated in alternative pornography with an identity political project of visibility, through which the appropriation of the convention of maximum visibility becomes a double-edged sword.

> If, on the one hand, female ejaculation can be seen as a challenge to a dominant male-oriented account for sexuality where no other measurement of pleasure than male ejaculation has been imagined, on the other hand it can be seen as an adjustment to this very norm, where women are now trying to be as good as or the same as men, instead of being represented on other or their own terms. (75)

In the case of female ejaculation, it can be argued that the tactic of maximum visibility remains unquestioned and unproblematised, and that there still is not question of representing female sexuality on its own terms, since it simply repeats existing strategies of representing sex and sexual pleasure and does not trouble the emphasis on vision and visibility as a prerequisite of the knowledge of sex, where the motto is seeing is believing. The question arises if the celebration of female ejaculation as visible proof of female sexual pleasure does not actually pose a serious threat to the affirmation of female sexual autonomy, when it means entangling even more intimately the 'truth' of women's sexualities with the principle of maximum visibility. By replacing male ejaculation with a female one, alternative pornography runs the risk of repeating a phallic visual economy of pleasure, without questioning 'the frenzy of the visible' that takes maximum visibility as the only acceptable means of acquiring knowledge of

the ‘truth’ of sex. Moreover, when it comes to conflating the sexual practice of female ejaculation with the authentication of certain identities, its value can only ever be limited, since it is confined to the parameters set by the paradigm of maximum visibility, negating any other means of exploring and validating female sexuality. There seems something inherently unsatisfactory about the solution of substituting one examples of visual proof for another, if it means that the principle of maximum visibility would still remain unquestioned and unproblematized. However, adopting an opposite strategy of resisting maximum visibility by decentring of the female genitals is equally problematic, Ryberg concludes, for it runs the risk of representing female sexuality in stereotypical terms, as somehow more romantic and less straightforward than men’s sexuality, implying an alignment with a traditional view on femininity as less sexual and more sensual than masculinity (77). However, this leaves feminist, lesbian, and queer pornography in a conundrum. For how to resist the persuasive demand for maximum visibility in the representation of sexual acts, and avoid representing female sexuality through a masculine lens, without hiding it behind the veil of romanticized metaphor or distraction, and rendering female pleasure invisible all over again?

Before I engage with an alternative approach to this question, which shifts the focus from issues of iconography towards cinematic aesthetics, and towards a broader consideration of the politics of visibility in pornography, I would like to briefly mention another element of iconography in alternative pornography. Whereas previously, much focus has been placed on the trope of the dildo (Butler 2004; Case 1988; Conway 1996; Findlay 1995; Hamming 2001; Reich 1992; Smyth 1990), as a way of addressing its potential disruption of the dominance of phallic sexuality in pornography, in the last decade the practice of vaginal fisting has increasingly acquired much of a primary status and significance as the privileged mode of providing visual evidence of female sexual pleasure. Only sporadically discussed in the scholarship, fisting nevertheless makes plays a distinctive feature in much feminist, lesbian, and queer pornography, with Jiz Lee, queer porn performer and frequent contributor to the queer porn website series The Crash Pad, noting that ‘fisting is more common on our site than cunnilingus is’ (Alptraum 2014). The increased interest in fisting has also led to the production of the *Crash Pad’s Guide to Fisting* (2014), a cross-over between sex-education and a porn film, featuring fisting as a sensual and consensual act. However, by including fisting scene in their pornographies, many of these filmmakers have had to struggle with systematic censorship and obscenity laws. As Michael Warner argues in his book *The Trouble with Normal* (1999), Western culture is deeply ingrained with ‘a rhetoric of shame’ (25). Drawing on Gayle Rubin’s

seminal essay 'Thinking Sex,' previously mentioned in the introduction, Warner assesses how some identities and practices come to carry the burden of shame and stigmatisation, according to hierarchies that sort the 'good' sex from the 'bad.' Needless to say, pornography has been positioned firmly on the side of what is considered abnormal and perverted. In his book, Warner is interested primarily in queer identities, however, he does acknowledge the burden that is placed on female sexuality, referring to the ways in which women are blamed for the sexual violence that is inflicted on them and are made responsible for the prevention of sexual harm and violence, and are denied sexual subjectivity by upholding an ideal of femininity as passive, complaisant, and demure, punishing women who do not comply with this ideal. One example of this culture of stigma and shame is the recent change in UK legislation, which concern the distribution of sexually explicit material, targeting pornography that deals specifically with (nonnormative) female sexual desire (Blake 2014, Quinn 2014). Fisting, then, has often been presented as inherently transgressive or violent, rather than associated with sexual pleasure or autonomy, motivating Jiz Lee and Courtney Trouble to organize the first annual International Fisting Day in 2011, calling for the recognition and emancipation of fisting as a healthy and empowering sexual practice. Fisting is also described as a powerful and affirmative expression of female sexual autonomy by Zahra Stardust in the short film *Fists are for Fucking, not Fighting* (2013):

> They never told us how brave you need to be to open up and invite a hand into your body. They never told us that vaginal muscles and sphincters were so powerful that they could potentially break somebody's wrist. They never told us how active you need to be to breath, to relax, and envelope a body part into your warmth. They never told us how strong you need to be to let yourself love fiercely, cry deeply, and open greedily.

Whereas female ejaculation is said to offer visible proof in a similar way to that of the money shot, vaginal fisting can be described as a practice that is as visually spectacular as it is corporeally intense, matching the visible evidence of the involuntary spasm of the male orgasm without adjusting to the normative representation of the money shot. In other words, fisting can be said to offer visible proof of female pleasure in a way that does not resemble or repeat the climactic spectacle of the male ejaculation, but rather offers a visual impressive spectacle in its own right. Rather than relying on a phallic visual economy, fisting constitutes a practice that troubles dichotomously understood distinctions between active and passive, giver and receiver, hard and soft, and rough and gentle. However, the risk of substituting one mode of visual evidence for another remains, which is why below, I return to the question of the visual pleasure

of pornography, exploring some of the ways in which different ways of visualizing sex, as a way of opening up the ways in which pornography can 'speak sex.'

One the one hand, the great diversity that is displayed in alternative pornography in relation to the exploration of female sexualities, as well as a whole range of other sexualities, gives rise to a feeling of optimism about the possibility of pornography to move beyond the limited and formulaic conventions of mainstream hardcore pornography, rendering visible a variety of identities, bodies, practices, and pleasures which were previously left unacknowledged. As such, pornography can become a place of recognition and affirmation, opening up and expanding our knowledge of sex, and introducing us to desires and pleasures of which we were previously unaware, or which we did not feel safe enough to explore. This potential of pornography is also expressed by filmmaker and performer Gala Vanting when she states: 'What I'm so amazed with, with the feminist porn community, is that we obviously want to see so many different things and that's really heartening: to know that people's desires expand beyond the hegemonic mainstream paradigm' (Ms Naughty, 2014). However, even if this diversity in representations of sexual experiences, practices, and pleasures opens up the pornographic imaginations in unprecedented ways, they also run the risk of establishing a new set of conventions that become prescriptive rather than descriptive, creating a new normativity. As different niches move from emergent and unstable entities to stabilized and categorizable subgenres, the repertoire of sexual practices that once signified diversity, now become can a 'to do' list that needs to be checked off in order to become intelligible as a sexual subject, closing off other ways of seeing and being. Moreover, it does not allow for an understanding of the ways in which alternative pornography speaks to the body, offering pleasures that cannot be accounted for through a focus on issues of visibility, knowledge, and truth, Thus, it again renders invisible a whole range of approaches, techniques, and aesthetics, that a focus on visibility fails to address.

## 1.2 Embodied Spectatorship and Alternative Pornography

### 1.2.1 Feminist Porn as a Body Genre

'We all know what sex looks like. Many movies have tried to capture the magic but most can only bring home the tricks.' This blurb from the feminist porn film *Skin.Like.Sun* (Murielle Scherre and Jennifer Lyon Bell, 2010) illustrates a much-heard criticism of the representation of sex in pornography, namely that it focuses primarily on exposing the mechanics of sex. Described as an erotic documentary, *Skin.Like.Sun* documents the sexual encounter between a

real-life couple on a sunny afternoon in an old house in Belgium. Here, the so-called 'magic' of sex is conveyed through a focus on authenticity, an issue I discuss at length in the following chapter, but also through the narration of the film, with the film edited to make it seem like we are watching the sexual encounter in real time, conveying the slowness of the sexual encounter as it gradually unfolds, offering an alternative to the heavily edited and compressed depiction of sex in commercial pornography. In the last decades, however, a collection of feminist pornography has emerged that instead emphasizes the tactile and visceral dimension of the sexual experience. Rather than going through the motions of a standardized and formulaic repertoire of sexual positions and actions, focusing on the graphic depiction of the technicalities of the sexual act, these films experiment with different ways of visualizing sex and bringing to the screen female sexual pleasure, by blurring the boundaries between erotica and hardcore as well as between art and pornography, opening up not only conventional notions of what pornography is supposed to *look* like, but also what might be able to *say* and do. Besides the a-fore-mentioned film *Skin.Like.Sun*, this corpus of films also includes Maria Beatty's *Belle de Nature* (2008), Goodyn Green's *Shutter* (2014) and *Alchemy* (2014) produced by Four Chambers, as well as the two case-studies I engage with in this section, namely the Australian poetic short film *Touch* by Sensate Films and the scene 'Red Fetish Bathroom,' from the French DIY lesbian-queer film *One Night Stand*, made by filmmaker and photographer Emilie Jouvet. Together, these films represent a wide array of body types and gender expressions, and depict straight, lesbian, and queer sex, as well as incorporating kink and BDSM. In the following section, I interrogate some of the formal strategies applied by these films in order to make the spectator *feel* as much as *see* the sex depicted onscreen. In particular, I discuss the way in which these films appeal to a 'haptic erotics' (Marks 2002), thereby troubling the demand for visual evidence that characterises mainstream pornography. Rather than discussing their aesthetics in terms of a wholehearted rejection or naïve embrace of maximum visibility, I am interested in the way in which these examples of feminist pornography *negotiate* visibility by oscillating between proximity and distance, transparency and opacity, visibility and invisibility, as a way of complicating the typical 'ocularcentrism' (Jay 1993) of film in favour of a form of embodied spectatorship that engages more with the affects and intensities afforded by the visual and aural qualities of film. In doing so, these films aim to do justice to the rhythms, sensations, and intensities that are part of the lived experience of sex, but which have often been ignored by pornography, due to its reliance on vision and visuality.

Importantly, this engagement with the embodied spectatorship of feminist pornography does not mean returning to some naïve or essentialist belief in female sexuality as somehow more natural, erotic, elusive, or closer to the body than male sexuality, creating some sort of feminine aesthetics. Rather, it entails a *feminist* strategy that complicates the connections between pornography, visibility, and the production of truth. Hence, this visual strategy allows for an alternative pleasure of looking, one that does not comply with voyeurism and a controlling and possessive gaze, but instead establishes an intersubjective relation between spectator and image. Engaging with the cinematic aesthetics of these individual examples of feminist pornography, I argue that this interest in expressing the 'feel' of sex also calls for a critical reappreciation of the genre of pornography as a 'body genre' (Williams 1991), allowing for a much needed analytical shift away from the focus on politics of representation in pornography, drawing attention primarily to *what* is shown, towards a discussion of the affective qualities established by the 'non-representational signs' (Dyer 2002a, 20) that shape our experience of these images, focusing more on *how* sex is shown. In order to make sense of these films in a way that not automatically refutes pornography as a potentially productive site of knowledge production with regards to female sexual pleasure, then, means first and foremost engaging with the many paradoxes that characterise the genre of pornography. One the one hand, visual pornography has often been condemned for being *too close* to the body, luring the spectator into the image and creating a 'leaky body,' in a similar way to other 'low' genres, such as horror and melodrama, thereby eradicating any distance that would allow the spectator to critically, morally, or aesthetically reflect on the images in front of him or her (1991). On the other hand, pornography has also been fiercely attacked for creating *too much distance*, by inviting a voyeuristic and sadistic gaze that objectifies women and denying them any (sexual) subjectivity (Kuhn 1985).[17] Hence, these pornographies are wrapped up with a range of issues and concerns involving the problem of vision and practices of looking in film, which have been used to define film as a *visual* medium.

Although considerations of the body are certainly prevalent in academic texts dealing with pornography, they have often remained limited to discussions of the representation of gender, race, and class, or otherwise reflected on issues of taste, transgression, and cultural distinction. However, it has proven much more challenging to directly engage with, as well as adequately account for, the affective pull of pornography and the embodied effect this imagery can have on the spectator, including the porn scholar. To a certain extent, this lacuna may be connected

[17] See Chapter 3 for a more in-depth of the feminist critique of pornography.

to the assertion that these affective registers are not easily captured by language, and might even resist language (Paasonen 2011, 200-203, see also Scarry 1985 and Massumi 2002), with Annette Kuhn noting how 'the capacity of pornography to evoke gut reactions—of distaste, horror, sexual arousal, fear—makes it particularly difficult to deal with analytically' (1994, 21). Other scholars suggest that the interpellation of the body by cinematic images does not sit well with the ideal of the objective and distanced researcher (Sobchack 1992, 23-24; Williams 1993, 57; Paasonen 2011, 192-195). Exceptions are Williams' forementioned discussion of pornography as a 'body genre,' as well as Dyer's discussion of gay pornography, where he states that 'porn, like weepies, thrillers, and low comedy, is realized in/through the body' (1992, 122), and Laura Kipnis' assertion that 'porn grabs us and doesn't let go. Whether you're revolted or enticed, shocked or titillated, these are flip sides of the same response: an intense, visceral engagement with what pornography has to say' (1999, 161). This capacity of pornography to transpose some of the bodily intensities and affects displayed onscreen to that of the spectator is also explored by Gaines (2004), and more recently Paasonen's work on pornography and affect (2011). So, what is it that alternative pornography has to say? Even though pornography aims to convey something of the sensations and intensities of sexual experience depicted onscreen, by allowing the spectator unfettered visual access to the bodies of the performers through the convention of maximum visibility, ultimately. this aim is always doomed to fail, with Paasonen stating that:

> Porn mediates the intensity of bodily sensations and interactions. In terms of the sensory experiences of sex, this mediation is necessarily partial and lacks the tactile, gustatory, and olfactory. The warmth, smoothness, or hairiness of skin, the heat of the breath and bodily cavities, the feeling of body weight, the stickiness and taste of sweat—and the smell of this all—are represented through visual, textual, and audiovisual means. Mediation cuts down the range of the sensory (what can be mediated) and also creates a sense of distance by displaying the acts performed on the screen. Compared to the physical proximity (and possible intimacy) involved in sex, mediation thereof ultimately falls short (201).

However, even if the experience of watching pornography can never be quite the same as actually experiencing it in the flesh, as a 'whole range of sensory stimuli escape simulation,' nevertheless, it is also the case that 'some of the intensity stubbornly seeps through in audience sensations of sexual arousal, amazement, or disgust' (Morris and Paasonen 2014, 554). Even though the limitations of the medium of film will necessarily entail that the bodily sensations of sex are reduced to what can be represented through audiovisual means, there is also something that escape that reduction, as some affect and sensations are distributed from the

image to the spectator, even if this is a matter of degree, and it is not necessarily the case that spectators will share the same affects and intensities as the performers onscreen (Gaines 2004).

In porn, Paasonen argues, 'the stickiness, heat, smell, and touch that are integral to physical acts become mediated through visual and auditory means as movement, rhythm, and sound. Thus, mediation creates a degree of "hygienic" distance while the other senses linger on as synesthetic traces and echoes' (2011, 203). Despite the immense influence of maximum visibility in pornography, which makes it very difficult to imagine a perspective from which alternative ways of visualising sex might be imagined, feminist pornography has experimented with different ways of addressing the limitations of mediation. Even if they are to a certain extent always doomed to fail, for some of the reasons outlined above, these films explore other ways of overcoming its distancing effect of mediation and creating an experience of proximity, and, at times, intimacy, often at the detriment of optimal visibility. One of the ways in which feminist pornography has done so is by drawing quotation marks around the truth-claim of mainstream pornography, as exemplified by Sensate Films, an independent production company of feminist pornography. On their website, they introduce the notion of 'slow porn' as a way of describing their films, stating:

> Many are not 'explicit' in the traditional sense of the word, yet they reveal more about human desire and vulnerability than many more categorically XXX films can endeavour to. They also allow our audiences to look beyond the mainstream pornographic tropes for the eroticism of an experience.

Whereas other forms of pornography in recent years have turned to the hyperbolic in order to intensify the resonance viewers experience in watching sexual images, for instance in examples of gonzo porn and extreme pornography, with the former utilizing the POV shot as a way of bringing the viewer a sense of proximity, feminist pornography like that of Sensate Films experiments with alternative ways of expanding resonance in their viewers. Whereas some of the strategies adopted by these films have often been discussed in terms of the distinction between erotica and pornography, or art and porn, in the section below, I focus instead on their engagement with the synesthetic quality of vision, thereby invoking a way of looking that is haptic rather than optical. Feminist pornography has, in different ways, sought to express something of the lived experience of sex, as a way of moving beyond the primary focus of pornography on the mechanics of sex and in Chapter 3, I describe how queer pornography functions as an archive of feelings that extend beyond those of titillation and arousal. For the purpose of my discussion here, however, I am interested in the way in which feminist

pornography like that of Sensate Films sets out to capture something of the vulnerability and emotions that accompany sex through cinematic means, as a way of producing different knowledges of sex.

Whereas conventional pornography usually adopts the conventions of documentary realism, and appeals to the transparency of the image in order to create resonance in its viewer, these pornographies, in contrast, embrace and adapt the conventions of experimental film, appropriating avant-garde techniques that often disturb unhindered access to the image, depicting images that are often *opaque* rather than *transparent,* thereby troubling pornography's characteristic demand for visibility. In doing so, these films experiment with an 'aesthetics of touch' previously explored by feminist filmmakers such as Barbara Hammer and Carolee Schneemann (Lebovici 2012). As such, they move away from precisely the kind of 'inherent transparency' which make photography the medium *par excellence* for the objectives of pornography, according to philosopher Jerrold Levinson (2005, 232).[18] As pornography is to be characterized, according to Levinson, in terms of 'the facilitation of sexual fantasy in the name of sexual arousal and release,' the image through which it seeks to achieve this purpose should be as transparent as possible: 'they should present the object for sexual fantasy vividly, and then, as it were, get out of the way' (233). I am extending his argument here to film, a medium that equally relies in great part on the transparency of the image, which is a point I return to in the next chapter. Rather than getting out of the way, however, the feminist pornography I explore below deliberately gets *in the way* of the sex itself. Whereas Levinson states that 'transparency of medium is all to the good of arousal, and is thus a virtual *sine qua non* of pornography' whilst 'opaqueness of medium is all to the good of art, but invariably weakens, and sometimes even wholly undermines, arousal,' in haptic pornography the regular opaqueness of the image does not weaken arousal, but instead is part of the *enhancement* of arousal, appealing to the mimetic quality of film and inviting a resonance in the viewer by making him or her feel like they are part of that encounter, rather than an outside observer (ibid.).[19]

[18] Reversely, the fact that this kind of pornography adheres more to an avant-garde approach of cinema, which does not comply with a realist notion of film as a transparent window to the world, also complicates the appropriation of pornography as a metaphor of the medium of film itself, as described earlier by theorists like Cavell and Jameson.

[19] In the words of Levinson, then, haptic pornography might be described as a 'complex mode of pornography, aimed at a cognitively atypical viewer.' However, this is not route I want to follow here, first of all, because it relates to the distinction he makes between art and pornography, which is not what concerns me here, although I will come back to his point that transparency is necessary for pornography to induce sexual arousal and release,

The assertion that guides this final section, then, is that while it certainly is the case that porn tries to mediate the intensity and the *feel* of sex, as a way of finding resonance with the spectator, it does so in a specific manner, which is neither objective nor self-evident. Thus, it is not just the fact that the bodily sensations of sex are mediated by a visual medium, which makes the translation of these images of 'fleshy sensations' necessarily partial, but also the fact that this mediation is informed by an organisation of vision which should be understood as a particular historically and culturally situated 'scopic regime' which is itself limited and restrictive, as it is based on a patriarchal understanding of sex. As such, pornography entails the invocation of a *particular* organization of vision, a *particular* practice of looking, which then becomes naturalized and normalized to the extent that it becomes very hard to imagine it being different, or being able to find resonance with the viewer in another way. However, this also means that there is a possibility of pornography being otherwise, and these recent examples of feminist pornography, which I will come to describe as haptic pornography, instead seek to appeal to the body of the viewer in a different way. Instead of finding resonance with their viewer by appealing to visual pleasures that depend on a distanced and controlling gaze, these films de-privilege, but do not completely abandon, the exposition of the mechanics of the sexual act by experimenting with the erotics associated with the oscillation between visibility and invisibility, proximity and distance, transparency and opacity. In order to make the viewer *feel* the intensities and sensations, these films try to express something of the sexual experience that is not easily captured by vision and visibility, including sensations of touch, taste, and smell, but also the intersubjective bodily experience of the blurring of boundaries which are also part of the lived experience of sex, but which an interest in visibility fails to address. Although this approach sometimes results in films not being hardcore anymore in the traditional sense—as they are not necessarily concerned with extreme closeups of body-parts and sexual acts or the choice of sexual positions that enable optimal visual access—this need not automatically be the case, for haptic pornography does not need to compromise on explicitness at all and many of these films are equally explicit in their visibility of sexual acts as conventional pornography. Nor does it mean that female sexuality is represented in an essentialist way as more natural, soft or romantic or that these films simply represent a wave of "pretty" or "tasteful" pornography. As will become apparent, examples of haptic

even if I do not think that arousal and release are to be considered objectives that necessarily define pornography and second, because I find his formulation of a cognitively atypical viewer unproductive because of its referral of viewing positions and strategies that do not fit the bill of the stereotypical male heterosexual porn viewer.

pornography range from soft lighting, high production values, an emphasis on narrative, and a lot of kissing and caressing, to DIY aesthetics, rough sex, power play, and fisting, and an absence of dialogue. What these pornographies share, is that they begin to shed light on the diverse ways in which the pervasive demand for maximum visibility in pornography may be resisted, and the representation of female sexual pleasure through a masculine lens may be avoided, without automatically hiding it behind the veil of romanticized metaphor or distraction, by taking up what Laura Marks calls a *haptic visuality* (2002). Thus, the distinction between haptic and conventional pornography should not be conflated with hardcore versus softcore, or realistic versus romantic, but points to the way in pornography has tended to privilege one organization of vision of others.

### 1.2.2 Haptic Erotics in *Touch* and *One Night Stand*

After years of feminist film theory focusing primarily on the ideological strategies at work within mainstream cinema, with Laura Mulvey's analysis of the gaze (1975) as a definite benchmark, in the last decade there has been a shift towards ways of thinking the relationship between the body and film and the cinematic experience in terms of embodied spectatorship (Shaviro 1993; Sobchack 2004; Barker 2009; Beugnet 2013). In this final section, I propose that this focus on embodiment and affect, and in particular Laura Marks' understanding of the erotic quality of haptic visuality (2002), may prove productive in moving beyond the conundrum of maximum visibility and to think through some of the formal strategies adopted by feminist pornography in order to explore ways of depicting female sexual pleasure beyond the 'frenzy of the visible'. Describing the differences between optical and haptic images, Marks explains how 'cinema's optical images address a viewer that is distant, distinct, and disembodied,' whereas haptic images 'invite the viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image' (13). However, this distinction between optical and haptic images might not completely hold up when taking into account pornographic images, as even the controlling and possessive gaze that has often been associated with the mainstream pornography, it cannot be argued that pornography invokes a disembodied spectator, as these images are—for the most part at least—aimed at evoking an embodied response in the spectator, namely sexual arousal. Rather, I suggest that we might locate the difference between optical pornography and haptic eroticism in the will to mastery, on the one hand, and a kind of 'interacting up close with the image' on the other hand (ibid.), as a way of

becoming attuned to the way in which haptic pornography troubles visibility by drawing the viewer 'close, too close to see properly, and this in itself is erotic' (16). Marks describes the erotic capacities of the haptic as two-fold: first, 'it puts into question cinema's illusion of representing reality by pushing the viewers back to the surface of the image' and second, 'it enables an embodied perception, the viewer responding to the video as responding to another body and to the screen as another skin' (2002, 4). Specifically, then, Marks describes the 'invitation of a small, caressing gaze' as an alternative economy of looking, which is directed at all the intimate details of the image, drawing attention to its surface, and argues that this look might be more in line with the notion of 'glance than the "deep" mastering gaze' (6).

One striking example of feminist pornography that makes use of this haptic visuality is the film *Touch* (2013) by Sensate Films, as one of a series of three shorts that focus on female fantasies, which is an issue I explore in more depth in Chapter 3. While *Touch* troubles the principle of maximum visibility, it also gives something in return, as the film opens with a closeup of a woman's facial features, as she looks into the camera (Fig. 10), with the image almost already disappearing from view before we can properly make out what it is that we see, fading in and out of focus so that only shapes and colours remain. Different images are superimposed so that we see something that looks like a hair on skin, but we cannot be sure; we see fingers, moving, touching, but they are too close to make sense of; is it her fingers we see, or someone else's fingers on her? Finally, the images make out a woman, lying on the bed, with her hands moving over her body as she describes the sensation of touching herself in the voice-over narration (Fig. 11). With the editing following the rhythm of her voice, a sequence of images is created that function as 'tactile, sensuously saturated caresses' (Marks 2015, 15), with closeups focusing in on fingers, the fabric of silk and cotton moving and sliding along skin, evoking texture more than form. Because of the shadows and the superimposed layering of these multicoloured images, it is difficult to make out the contours of her body or establish which and how many hands are actually touching her body at a given time. Moving in and out of focus, at times, the transparency of the images allow for immersion, making it possible to make out her face, her chest moving up and down as she breathes heavily, her head tilted back and her eyes closed, with her body visible through the white fabric of her dress. In other moments, however, the images push us to the surface of the image, making it possible only to discern shapes, textures, and colours (Fig. 12). With visual access compromised, in these moments, the film draws attention to the sounds of her panting and breathing heavily, increasing as her excitement grows, as we are trying to visually grasp what is moving her in this way. By

engaging with these haptic images, the spectator has to give up visual control and instead is invited to 'fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces that the image leaves' (Marks 2002, 13).

Not only does haptic visuality shift the attention to the surface of the image; it also calls attention to the intersubjective dimension of spectatorship, with Marks assessing how 'rather than witnessing cinema as through a frame, window, or mirror […] the viewer shares and performers cinematic space dialogically' (ibid.). Looking, in this sense, is no longer an act of distance, initiated by a pre-existing subject but rather a mutually constitutive exchange. It is precisely this shifting between proximity and distance, between the grasping and the giving up of visual control that marks the relationship between image and spectator in the viewing experience of *Touch*, allowing for what Marks describes as an 'intersubjective eroticism,' which is characterised by 'a kind of visuality that is not organised around identification, but is labile, able to move between identification and immersion' (17). Although Marks is describing a haptic erotics, this does not mean that images cannot be both erotic in the way Marks' describes it as well as sexually explicit, allowing her to argues that 'the fact that some of these are sexual images is, in effect, icing on the cake' (14). Referring to the potential of haptic pornography, Marks states:

> Pornography is usually defined in terms of visibility—the inscription of confession of the orgasmic body—and an implied will to mastery by the viewer. The erotic relationship I am identifying in haptic cinema depends on limited visibility and the viewers lack of mastery over the image. Haptic visuality suggests ways that pornography might move through the impasse of hypervisibility that by this point seems to hinder rather than support erotic representation (15).

However, does not mean that haptic pornography needs to be softer or more erotic, although Touch seems to suggest that. Below, I offer an example of the way in which DIY aesthetics can allow for a similar effect, by looking at the scene 'Red Fetish Bathroom' from *One Night Stand* (2006), the first feature film by alternative pornography French filmmaker and photographer Emilie Jouvet.

A no-budget film, Jouvet used a simple DV-camera to shoot *One Night Stand*. Rather than using a professional crew and actors, as well as a pre-written script, Jouvet invited her friends and acquaintances from the Parisian lesbian and queer community to share their fantasies with her and bring them to life in front of the camera. The final product consists of six independent vignettes that each show a different sexual encounter. The vignettes contain hardly any narrative or dialogue and make elaborate use of handheld camerawork—a popular convention

in alternative pornography, especially queer porn—with the action unfolding in dimly lit staircases and toilets, the film expresses a raw, punk-like attitude and aesthetic. Overall, the vignettes are characterised by the thoroughness with which the film seeks to document the diversity within the lesbian-queer community, demonstrating the kind of investment in authenticity discussed in Chapter 2 as central to alternative pornography, with the vignettes showing a wide range of body-types and gender expressions—from girly-girls, girls next door, and femme *parisiennes* with long hair, garters, and stockings, to a *boi* with shaven head and dog collars and a transgender guy with fetlock and leather jacket—as well as sexual practices, including fisting, dildo play, and female ejaculation, incorporating all of the representational practices described in the previous section as part of the iconography of alternative pornography. While the style of filming adheres for the most part to the imperative of visibility, the camera also captures some of the spontaneity, energy, and fun that is part of the sexual exchanges, as well as the occasional clumsiness and uneasiness that goes along with it, focusing on the dynamic that is established between performers as much as the physical aspect of sex itself, as the camera focuses on the looks exchanged, the rosy cheeks that start to appear, the trembling and contracting of the body and the glistering sweat. This desire for authenticity is also expressed in the interviews that accompany the sexual scenes, Carmen, one of the performers, describing her motivation to participate in the film as follows:

> Because I'm fed up with all the taboos on lesbian sex, which is supposed to be very soft, as velvet, that we slightly touch. 'Oh! It's so good!' It's nothing that I have experienced in bed. So, I wanted to be part of this project and say that lesbian sex is also sex and it's not only touching a nipple and small neck-licking.

*One Night Stand,* then, perfectly illustrates Heather Butler's description of the way in which dyke pornography attempts to 'authenticate lesbian sexuality through representation' by 'proposing alternatives to the representation of lesbian sexuality in mainstream pornography as simply "taking it" or "faking it" (2004, 167-168). Hence, alternative pornography becomes something more than imagery that wants to simply titillate and arouse; rather, it becomes part of 'an identity political project aimed at strengthening and rendering visible marginalized subject positions and experiences' (Ryberg 2008, 72).

For the most part, then, *One Night Stand* is consistent with the demand for authenticity and the documentary aura discussed in Chapter 2 and 3 of this dissertation, with the use of haptic images reserved to the last scene of the film, 'Red Fetish Bathroom,' which portrays the scene between Cameron and Shadow. Prominent music sets the mood and rhythm of the first half of the scene. But as the sex increases in intensity, only the sounds of moaning and breathing

remain. This absence of music in the latter part of the scene is significant, as Martine Beugnet argues that diegetic sounds during sex scenes are usually replaced with the unifying effect of music 'as a way to cover over what might appear as the tasteless grunts and moans of sex' (2013, 176). However, in this scene, the lack of music adds to the sense of proximity and intensity of the scene, an experience that is substantiated by the camerawork, with Cameron, Shadow, and the camera all moving around within the cramped space of the red-tinted bathroom, making the camera almost a participant in the sexual action (Fig. 13). There are hardly any wide shots, and more often than not, the images consist of (extreme) closeups, filling the shot with indistinct body parts. At times, it is difficult to distinguish what part of the body it is that fills the frame, and whose body it belongs to. Rather than having a distancing effect, however, this lack of visual control, which often makes it difficult to discern what exactly is going on in terms of the sexual acts that are performed, has precisely this overwhelming effect suggested by Paasonen in the first section of this chapter. This confusion is further intensified in those moments when the camera zooms in to the extent that only blurry spots of colour remain, trading the typical transparency of the image for opacity and pushing the look of the spectator to the surface of the image (Fig. 14). Paradoxically, then, the use of low-fi techniques adds to the textural quality of the image, allowing for a sense of immediacy and unmediation, suggesting a rawness and directness that adds to its visual pleasure. Through its DIY aesthetics, the image achieves a tactile quality, and while the images still contain hardcore sex, the affective quality of the scene is effectuated by the attention that is drawn to the energy of the scene, the sweat, the shaking, the breathing that quickens or stops, the harsh lighting combined with the red walls and cramped space of the bathroom, they all contribute to an experience that gives the viewer the feeling of being part of the sexual encounter, inviting an 'intersubjective relationship' that requires an active engagement, with these images 'calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction' rather than calling for a gaze that is passive and controlling (Marks 2002, 16). Although maximum visibility is no longer the central concern, the scene does not fall back on the stereotypical representation of female sexuality as soft, romantic, and sensual, of which Ryberg warns, for hardcore sex very much is at the core of this scene; it is overt and intense while at the same time relying on the viewer to fill in the blanks. The haptic visuality of the scene emphasizes the rhythm, the variety in speed and the slowness of the sexual encounter, rather than the technicalities of the sexual acts that are performed, allowing for an engagement with the blurring of boundaries that are part of the experience of sex, but which maximum visibility fails to grasp.

## 1.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have engaged with some of major concepts that have shaped the discussion of spectatorship in pornography, namely that of visual pleasure and the male gaze, on the one hand, and the principle of maximum visibility on the other hand. As a way of opposing the formulaic and repetitive depiction of sexual actions in mainstream pornography, I have discussed how feminist pornographers have reimagined pornography as a vehicle for the affirmation and promotion of female sexual autonomy and self-definition. In carving out a space for explicit images and representations of the female body and female sexual pleasure, which do not rely on the controlling and objectifying male gaze theorized by Mulvey, the issues and concerns of feminist pornography echo long-standing debates on the possibility of representing female subjectivity 'on its own terms.' Rather than treading the familiar path of interrogating the conditions and possibilities of a female gaze, in this chapter, I have instead opted for a different route, by arguing for the breadth of visual pleasures afforded by the cinematic image and engaging with some of the specific pleasures afforded by haptic pornography. In the second section, I pointed out some of the limitations of framing the discussion of the representation of female sexual pleasure in terms of maximum visibility. In particular, I examined some of the iconography appropriated by alternative pornography in order to make female sexual pleasure visible, but with Ryberg, I argue that the value of these representations will always be limited as long as they continue to be judged by the standards of visual evidence set by mainstream pornography. As a way of moving beyond the conundrum of the demand for visibility, then, in the third and final section, I turned to a particular corpus of haptic pornography, demonstrating how the appropriation of experimental formal features in feminist pornography allows these filmmakers to complicate familiar notions of hardcore and erotica, visibility and invisibility, proximity and distance. By attempting to convey something of the *feel* of sex, I have argued that these images rely on 'an embodied intelligence' of the viewer and allude to the pleasures of 'thinking with your skin' (Marks 2002, 18). Importantly, it is not my intention here to point to haptic imagery in feminist pornography as a way of arguing that these films present a truer or more authentic representation of female sexual pleasure. Rather, I propose that appealing to haptic erotics might allow for a feminist strategy, by carving out possible avenues through which other ways of visualising sex in pornography can be explored. Here, embodied spectatorship and cinematic aesthetics are appropriated as tactics for developing different ways of speaking, seeing, and feeling sex, reconfiguring familiar notions of what pornography is supposed to look like and what it might do.

# 2 Documenting Sex:

# Authenticity and Documentary Impulse

## Introduction

Morty Diamond's feature film *Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papí and Wil* (2007) counts as one of the benchmarks of queer and trans pornographic filmmaking and is a primary example of the interest of queer pornographers in incorporating documentary conventions into their filmmaking. The film focuses on real-life couple Papí and Wil and includes three extensive sex scenes, bracketed by interviews in which they reflect on their identities and their relationship. *Trans Entities* opens with a shot of the couple sitting next to each other, with Wil stating that "I identify as a trans entity. I feel very much in touch with both my male and female side… I just, you know, found a word for it." Addressing the off-screen interviewer next to the camera (Fig. 15), images of the couple are interspersed with footage of the two hanging out, trying on clothes in a vintage shop and kissing on the subway. The film consists of three extensive and intense sex scenes, each highlighting an element of their relationship, with all of the scenes thematically connected to the interviews that precede them. The first interview focuses on their trans identities and relationship, describing their gender and sexual expression as continuously in flux, or "shifting" as Wil states it, with Papí describing their changing relationship status as "fuck buddies, and then as lovers, and now as primaries." The interview then moves into a rough sex scene of the two of them together, consisting of slapping, choking, and ejaculation. For the majority of the scene, the cinematography is consistent with pornographic conventions, including extreme closeups of genitalia as they fuck, interspersed with images of Papí's face as they experience multiple orgasms. The second interview focuses on polyamory and the role that race plays in their relationships, politics, and sexual play, and includes their mutual partner Chris, who is white, deaf, and submissive. The three of them take out their diaries to set a date for their next play session, which comprises the next sex scene of the film and includes BDSM as well as racial play. In the final interview, the couple talks about their love of roleplay, and the importance of taboo and boundaries in their sexual relationship, followed by a negotiation of the interrogation scene and the rape play that makes up the final sex scene of the film. Instead of concluding the film as soon as the sex scene ends, *Trans Entities* lingers on the intimacy between the couple as Wil holds Papí and takes care of them as they recuperate from the scene

(Fig. 16). Running as a red thread through the interviews and sex scenes, *Trans Entities* bears witness to the love between Papí and Wil, with the film drawing to a close as the couple reflects on their love for each other and their hopes for the future—with Wil describing the strength of their relationship as the ability to "flow together," thereby echoing his earlier statement in the introduction of the film that "in our relationship, we know that things are gonna change"—accompanied by post-sex imagery of the couple kissing, holding each other, and talking and laughing in bed.

*Trans Entities* is not the only example of queer pornography to incorporate documentary elements. Rather, it is part of a subset of alternative pornography that has been labelled 'docu-porn,' mixing documentary conventions—including voice-over, interviews, and observational filmmaking—with porn sequences. Whilst docu-porn is not the exclusive terrain of alternative pornography, the instalment of the category of 'Most Dazzling Docu-Porn' at the Feminist Porn Awards in 2015 (now the Toronto International Porn Awards), serves as a testament to its increased prevalence and popularity among feminist and queer pornographers and audiences. Besides *Trans Entities*, other examples of docu-porn include feature films like *Much More Pussy: Feminist Sluts in the Queer X Show* (Emilie Jouvet 2011), a sex-positive road movie about an international group of artists and activists touring through Europe, discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, and *When We Are Together We Can Be Everywhere* (Marit Östberg 2015), discussed at length in Chapter 3. Docu-porn also consists of shorts, including *BED PARTY* (Shine Louise Houston 2014), analysed later in this chapter, as well as Antonio da Silva's *SOLOS* (2014) and Jennifer Lyon Bell's *Headshot* (2007). Finally, several examples of docu-porn explore seriality, including *In Their Room* (Travis Matthews 2009-2012), a multi-city series about gay men, bedrooms, and intimacy, and *Doing It Online* (Tobi Hill-Meyer 2012-present), a web series exploring trans women's sexuality.

Blurring the boundaries between pornography and documentary, the representation of sex in docu-porn ranges from a kind of artistic eroticism to a compliance with the hardcore principle of maximum visibility, discussed at length in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Although docu-porn explores different kinds of sex, from vanilla to kinky, none of the films mentioned above mimic the kind of spectacular and hyperbolic sex that is often associated with pornography, nor do they rehearse the formulaic and goal-oriented narration that makes up the staple of mainstream pornography. Rather than highlighting the achievement and endurance of particularly strenuous and acrobatic sexual positions and practices—as a way of appealing to audiences that have 'seen it all' in an increasingly oversaturated market—the depiction of sex

in docu-porn is embedded within the everyday experience of sexuality. Accordingly, and in line with its documentary aim, the people depicted in docu-porn are presented as subjects rather than as performers. Moreover, and consistent with its interest in the quotidian, the representation of sex in docu-porn is often complimented by those moments that are typically precluded from pornography, including pre-sex negotiations and post-sex aftercare. Contrasting the spectacle of 'real' sex presented in mainstream pornography, docu-porn presents sex within the context of a shared intimacy between the performers—however fleeting and provisional—prioritising the emotional complexity and psychological dimension of lived sexuality.

So far, there has been little scholarly work that deals directly with docu-porn, as part of the wider category of alternative pornography. For the most part, scholars have engaged with the fascination with pornography by documentary filmmakers (Kleinhans 2007; Smaill 2010; Brylla, 2018). Insofar as scholars have addressed the use of documentary conventions within the genre of pornography, they typically focus on individual films and refer to their generic hybridity only in passing, an example of which is Eliza Steinbock's discussion of the representation and embodiment of trans sexuality in *Trans Entities* (2014a, 2015; see also Steinbock and Davy 2012; Noble 2013), or engage with different types of pornography, such as gonzo and gay bareback porn (Lehman 1999; Dean 2009). Both this chapter and Chapter 3 fill this gap by taking queer docu-porn as their primary focus. In this chapter, I argue that the incorporation of documentary conventions is symptomatic of the documentary impulse that characterises queer pornography more broadly, in which the genre of pornography is re-imagined as a means of documenting marginalised sexualities. In contrast to other types of pornography, where the use of documentary features contributes to a more generalised eroticization of the real, as part of an increased interest in 'reality genres' (Barcan 2002; Hill 2005), the use of documentary conventions in queer pornography positions the camera as a witness, testifying to those lived experiences of sexuality that have been routinely ignored and rendered invisible within culture at large. In Chapter 3, I engage more closely with what makes these films queer, focusing specifically on the role of fantasy. In particular, I argue that queer docu-porn makes up what Ann Cvetkovich strikingly describes as 'an archive of feelings' (2003), pointing towards a paradoxical knotting of past, present, and future that has recently been discussed under the header of queer temporalities.

Whilst the documentary function of alternative pornography has not gone unnoticed, so far it has been discussed primarily through the lens of authenticity. Focusing specifically on queer

pornography, I argue that the concept of authenticity not only falls short in accounting for the imaginative and *utopian* qualities of queer docu-porn—an argument that extends to the next chapter—but is antithetical to queer as a political category, which seeks to undermine notions of identity, authenticity, and truth. Importantly, it is not my intention here to negate or denunciate the desire for authenticity expressed by producers, performers, and audiences of queer pornography, as it relates to the pursuit of recognition, self-definition, and the formation of community. Rather, I explore some of its limitations and argue that the lopsided interest in authenticity obscures some of the ways in which pornographers themselves have negotiated and problematised the demand for authenticity in alternative pornography, referring specifically to the generic hybridity of the short film *BED PARTY*.

In the first section, I assess how the qualification of moving-image pornography as a record of the real echoes longstanding debates in film theory with regards to the indexical bond between image and actuality, the construction and limitation of cinematic realism, and the relation between image and spectator. In the second section, I shift my focus to the exponential growth and diversification of contemporary pornography and engage with the desire for authenticity that characterises much of alternative pornography. In the third section, I turn to my case-study and discuss how *BED PARTY* appropriates strategies like reflexivity and visual irony in order to put the credibility of the pornographic image at risk. Through its playful utilization of documentary conventions, the film not only comments on the aura of authenticity that haunts alternative pornography but also puts forward a critique of the documentary impulse guiding the genre as a whole. One preliminary remark: it is not my goal in this chapter to offer an extensive overview of documentary theory, nor do I take a definitive stance in the debate on what constitutes a documentary. Rather, I engage with documentary theory to the extent that it will allow me to trace some of the connections between documentary and pornography and account for queer pornography as a form of documentation.

## 2.1 Documentary Impulse in Moving-Image Pornography

### 2.1.1 A Record of the Real

In order to accurately assess the specific function and meaning of queer docu-porn, it is imperative to first trace some of the wider connections between pornography and documentary. On first glance, the links between these two categories of film might seem few and far between, with pornography's sexual mechanics and flimsy narratives about horny pizza delivery guys seemingly far removed from documentary's earnest and sincere form of truth-telling. Indeed,

porn directors and performers themselves, both mainstream and alternative, have been keen to assert that pornography constitutes fiction, and depicts sexual fantasy, not reality.[20] Despite the fact that attempts to define documentary have been as divisive and trepidatious as those trying to define pornography, influential accounts of documentary film as a 'discourse of sobriety' (Nichols 1991, 3) and 'scientific inscription' (Winston 1993) are far removed from the general perception of pornography, understood as a form of escapist entertainment pur sang, expressing a preoccupation with spectacle and hyperbole rather than documentary evidence. Film scholars, however, have on different occasions and for different reasons referred to the affinities between pornography and documentary. For instance, Linda Williams notes that 'the very conventions of pornography work to enforce a realism that is similar to that of documentary film' (1999, 203), whereas Peter Lehman contrasts the documentary quality of pornography with the realm of make-belief that characterises fiction film (1999).[21] Comparing feature-length pornography to Hollywood storytelling, Lehman states:

> In a sense, the hard-core narrative feature has always been a kind of documentary. Narrative and character development have always occupied a much less significant place in the films than in the classical Hollywood film […] What little characterisation there is in the porn film quickly falls by the way when the fucking starts (362).

The idea that the representation of sex in pornography makes up some sort of documentary record is also expressed by documentary theorists Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham, and Bill Nichols, who argue that 'documented sex seeks to reduce the narrative to a mere pretext' and state that 'the ambivalence or oscillation between narrative progression and documentary evidence makes it extremely difficult, if not unhelpful, to treat pornography as a subset of fiction and narrative texts' (1991, 214). This sentiment is echoed by Richard Dyer, who, in one of his writings on gay pornography, states that 'it is only ever the narrative circumstances of porn, the apparent pretext for sex that is fictional' (2004, 109). Finally, Chuck Kleinhans states: 'even when presented as dramatic fictional narrative or as freewheeling fantasy, pornography

[20] See, for instance, porn performer Lorelei Lee, who argues that 'pornography—like other forms of consumable narrative—is ultimately a genre of fantasy, and the vast majority of its viewers are entirely aware of its unreality. In fact, the reason why so much of pornography is even sexy is because it strays so far from what most people expect or even want in their real lives' (2013, 201-202). See also the following interview with porn performers (Iris 2018) as well as an interview with porn director Erika Lust, who argues that pornography constitutes 'an exaggerated fiction of sex' (2017). It is important to note, however, that many of these comments are made in the context of the debate around pornography and/as sex education (see Albury 2014), as well as constituting a defense against the anti-pornography feminist position that pornography constitutes the documentation of harm. For a discussion of this position, see the section 'Not a Love Story' in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[21] For a philosophical review of pornography and fiction, see Uidhir and Pratt (2012) and Liao and Protasi (2013)

has a fundamental core of documentation: this is it, this is sex, this is what it looks like' (2007, 97). All of these scholars, then, in some shape or form, argue that there is something about the representation of hardcore sex that makes it very difficult to speak of pornography as anything other than—if not a documentary per se—a form of documentation. From a slightly different perspective, Cindy Patton argues that:

> Highly explicit material is probably interpreted by some decoders as closer to lived experience not because it is mistaken for 'real' or because the viewer accepts the truth claims of documentary elements of style, but because porn contrasts obvious fantasy scenes with representations of the body unenhanced by special effects or stunt men, the body with all its scars, stretch marks, lopsided balls, and unmatched breasts. Porn is simultaneously fantasy and direct cinema (1991, 384).

Pointing to the particular oscillation of documentation and fantasy, Patton locates the reality effect of pornography in its embodied experience of sex, arguing that 'pornography constantly oversteps the distance generally produced by the text and the producers (actors) of the text' (383). For Patton, then, the performance of sex in pornography is something radically distinct from conventional film acting, where the viewer does not tend to conflate the display of emotions on the screen with those of the actual actors themselves.[22] Thus, if film scholars mostly agree that there are connections to be noted between pornography and documentary, there has been much debate on what exactly constitutes the documentary quality of pornography.

In the following section, I take as my starting point the assertion that there is something about the pornographic image that not only gives way but actually *insists* on the proximity between representation and reality. In particular, I explore how the discourse of pornography is able to authoritatively assert 'This *is* sexual activity,' which is a point raised by Chris Straayer (1996, 109). Construed as the *presentation* of sex, rather than as its *representation*, moving-image pornography depends on a particular truth-claim and an assurance that the image presented on screen is not somehow fabricated, simulated, or faked but rather constitutes an evidentiary trace of a pro-filmic event. Not only is the transparency of the image thought to be perfectly suited for the objectives of pornography, moving-image pornography is marked as significantly different from other types of pornography. For instance, Steven Marcus notes in his discussion

[22] See Smith (2012) for a very different perspective on the status of the performance of hard-core sex. Contrasting the popular perception of pornography as the representation of 'actual sex by actual people,' Smith argues that 'rather than view sex as an inert property of the filmic process, I examine the sex scene as performed through the actor's body, with the potential for carrying dense and significant meaning,' and proposes that porn performers can shape their performance in terms of gusto, technique, and the embodiment of excess (194).

of pornographic literary fiction of the Victorian era that film was what pornography 'was all along waiting for,' with language constituting only a 'bothersome necessity' (1974, 208).[23] Marcus' remarks illustrate a widely held intuition about the filmic medium itself, namely that it allows us to document our experiences in an immediate and direct manner, or what Minette Hillyer describes as 'a kind of generic idealization of recording technology' (2005, 51). Relying on the transparency of the filmic image, as well as its inherent realism, this intuition can be traced back to the early days of film theory, in particular to the collected writings of French film critic André Bazin. As one of the most important contributors to early classical film theory, Bazin is interested primarily in isolating and defining the essence of cinema and refers to what he calls the 'guiding myth' of cinema, which he argues points towards an 'integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of the interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time' (1967a, 21).[24] Rather than drawing on a distinction between film and literature, as Marcus does, Bazin contrasts film with the plastic arts, describing film as 'objectivity in time' and ascribing to the mechanically produced image 'a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making' due to the 'instrumentality of a non-living agent' that is the camera, which contrasts with the 'inescapable subjectivity' of the hand of the artist (1967b, 13-14). According to Bazin, then, much of the presumed authenticity of the image is located in the indexical bond between the image and the pro-filmic event, carrying something 'from the thing to its reproduction' (14).[25]

[23] Of course, the opposite can also be argued by stating that literary pornography holds a particular appeal over moving-image pornography, precisely because it involves the imagination of the writer as well of the reader. In this sense, language is not so much a 'bothersome necessity' as it is something that can incite and intensify sexual arousal. This contrast between filmic and literary pornography has often been discussed in gendered terms, see for instance Juffer 1998, Paasonen 2010)

[24] As film theory came into its own, this strand of film theory was replaced with what Tom Gunning refers to as 'contemporary film theory,' which focuses more the relation between image and spectator, relying on semiotics and psychanalysis (2007, 34).

[25] Although the concept of indexicality has often been discussed as central to the realist theory of Bazin, he does not use this term himself. Rather, it was Peter Wollen who exploits the semiology of Charles Sanders Peirce for an understanding of cinema in his book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1972). Peirce posits the trichotomy of signs, describing their division into index, icon, and symbol. Firstly, the index is a sign by virtue of an existential, physical, or material bond between itself and the object. Examples of indices are a footprint in the sand, a weathercock, smoke, or a photograph. The index can also be understood as an imprint or a trace (Doane 2007b, 132). Second, the icon is a sign 'which represents its object mainly by its similarity to it; the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not arbitrary but is one of resemblance or likeness' (Wollen 1972, 122). Lastly, the symbol 'depends on a 'contract' by virtue of which the symbol is a sign' and 'demands neither resemblance to its object nor an existential bond with it' (123). Rather than referring merely to the index, Wollen argues that the cinematic image may actually be said to refer to an intertwining of icon and index (as well as, to a lesser extent, symbol) as it not only refers to a causal or 'physical' relation between sign and referent, but also relies on a similarity and resemblance between the two (141, see also Gunning 2004; Doane 2007a).

In one of the foundational texts of documentary studies, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bill Nichols claims that all representations of the real make use of evidentiary strategies to a certain extent, or what he calls the 'sticky stuff' that secures the relation between film and the historical world (1991, 153). Positing the indexical relation between image and object as only one of the privileged strategies for tying the documentary image to actuality, Nichols also lists direct address labelling, subjectivity and identification, and the recognition of specific social actors as other tactics available to non-fiction film (149-164). Nichols refers to pornography as one example of non-fiction film that seeks to secure its relation to reality and argues that the evidentiary strategies of pornography depend in great part on a strong indexical bond between image and object, due to pornography's representation of unsimulated sex, as well as, to a lesser extent, on a subjective rendering of experience, stressing feelings and tone (163). In a later chapter in the book, Nichols, together with Cristian Hansen and Catherine Needham, engages even closer with the interconnections between pornography and documentary, focusing in particular on pornography's similarity to the documentary genre of ethnography, stating that 'both rely on a documentary impulse, a guarantee that we will behold the "the thing itself," caught in the indexical grain of cinematic sound and image' (211). According to Nichols, Hansen, and Needham, pornography and ethnography share a preoccupation with questions of knowledge, truth, and the body, and both adopt a series of evidentiary strategies to assure their audience that what they see on screen actually took place in the historical world. In particular, they argue that pornography and ethnography share a discourse of power and domination, representing 'impulses born out of desire, the desire to know and possess, to know by possessing and possess by knowing' (209). Overall, their account of the connections between pornography and ethnography takes a critical, and often explicitly negative stance towards pornography, discussing it as a type of film that is objectifying, dominating, and ultimately harmful to women. I will return to this relationship between pornography, knowledge, and power in the next chapter, where I discuss the evidentiary technique of confession in relation to pornography.

The conception of the filmic image as a record of the real explains—at least in part—the attraction of moving-image pornography. We believe the sex on screen to be 'real' insofar as the pornographic image offers us an evidentiary trace of an event that took place in the historical world, with the transparency of the image allowing for a sense of presence and proximity that is difficult to achieve in other media. This attraction is illustrated by Richard Dyer, who states that 'when I say that porn makes porn exciting, I mean, for instance, that what

makes watching a porn video exciting is the fact that you are watching some people make a porn video, some performers doing it in front of the camera, and you' (2004, 102). Even though a porn video may include a flimsy narrative—with the performers pretending to be certain characters—what makes a porn flick exciting, at least for Dyer, is the knowledge that its production required performers to have sex on set in front of the camera, with the image serving as a residual trace of that event: 'it is the thought and evidence (the video) that is exciting' (ibid.). While Dyer happily accepts that other people may experience porn differently, as they enjoy the 'willing suspension of disbelief, the happy entering into the fantasy,' he also states that 'I do not believe that I am alone or even especially unusual in being more turned on by the thought of the camera, crew, and me in attendance' (ibid.).

Dyer's account of the excitement of pornography illustrates how it might not only be the representation of hardcore sex itself, which accounts for the particular attraction of moving-image pornography, but also the idea that the sex actually took place, that it 'really' happened, even more so than the fantasy scenario enacted by the performers onscreen. His account, therefore, highlights both the process of production, referring to the connection between the image and the pro-filmic event, and the experience of the spectator, referring to this feeling of presence and participation.[26] However, if moving-image pornography is characterised by a particular investment in the proximity of the image to reality, this relation is ambiguous and complex rather than immediate and straightforward. For instance, Carl Plantinga points out that 'no art form can transpose reality to its reproduction without human intervention, even if the

[26] If Dyer discusses this experience of pornography in positive terms, Bazin himself gives similar account of the representation of sex precisely in order to explain why he opposes the representation of explicit sex in the cinema. Indeed, it striking how much of what Bazin brings forward in opposition to sexual imagery chimes with Dyer's description of the excitement of pornography. The sense of immediacy and directness that is related to the transparency of the image is precisely what Bazin objects to when it comes to the representation of sex, stating that 'the one censorship cinema cannot dispense with is imposed by the image itself' (1971, 172). For Bazin, much of the problem lies in the obscenity of the filmic image itself, comparing the depiction of explicit sex to that of actual death, which he describes as 'an ontological pornography' (173). Eroticism in cinema is thought to unreel 'an imaginary space which demands participation and identification,' thereby compromising any critical distance in favour of a proximate relation to the image, which turns the spectator into 'an accomplice after the fact' and, according to Bazin, 'gratifies me by proxy' (174). In part, Bazin's objections to sexual imagery in film can be explained by taking into account his overarching project, which is to establish film as an art form. If the objective recording of reality determines the particular value of film as an art form, in the case of pornography, this quality gives way to a kind of implicating sensationalism that is considered antithetical to the reflective distance required for the appreciation of art. Thus, Bazin asserts that any acceptable depiction of sex can only occur 'on the condition that one resorts to the capacity of abstraction in the language of cinema, so that the image never takes on a documentary quality,' meaning that 'the cinema can say everything, but not show everything' (ibid.). In contract to Marcus, then, Bazin privileges the abstracting nature of language and the role of the imagination in literary pornography over the capacity of the camera to record graphic sex, as he sees language as offering precisely the level of abstraction that is needed to keep the implicating influence of the pornographic image at bay.

language of film is able to suggest otherwise' (2006, 106). Writing on Bazin in the context of documentary, Plantinga argues that 'the rhetoric of authenticity' in film can often be misleading and states that 'reality does not speak for itself and no film, and no technique or set of techniques that merely 'reproduces' reality guarantees truth or accuracy' (ibid.). Instead of something that is inherent to the medium of film, a *given,* the status of the image as a record of the real should be considered a *construction,* or an *effect* of the use of certain realist techniques. This argument is further substantiated by Nichols, who argues that 'the primary importance of this indexical quality to the photographic image (and magnetic sound recording) is less in the unassailable authenticity of the bond between image and referent than in the *impression of authenticity* it conveys to a viewer' (1991, 150, emphasis original).

Because of his investment in the indexical relation between image and object, as well as his trust in the objectivity of the image, Bazin has often been presented by his critics as a naïve realist and attacked for his apparent denial of the subjective nature of filmmaking.[27] Moreover, from a more radical perspective, feminist film scholars of the late 1970s and 1980s rejected the supposed neutrality and objectivity of film, expressing a passionate distrust of the transparent image, and criticising the manner in which it obscures its constructed nature, and—even more importantly—denies the role of ideology in its construction.[28] In what has become known as the feminist realist debates, anti-realist scholars targeted documentary practices like cinéma verité and direct cinema, attacking their presumed objectivity and promise of non-intervention. Objecting to feminist realist documentaries of the early 1970s, which aimed to bring the voices of women to the screen and document their lived experiences, these scholars accused their makers of a naïve belief in the capacity of the camera to record the reality of women's oppression. In an early intervention into the debate, Eileen McGarry takes issue with the idea that documentary is able to straightforwardly capture reality, stating that 'to ignore the manner in which the dominant ideology and cinematic traditions encode the pro-filmic event is to hide the fact that reality is selected and altered by the presence of the film workers and the demands of the equipment' (1975, 51). This point is pushed even further by Claire Johnston in her famous essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema' in which she argues that 'the "truth" of

[27] More recently, scholars have aimed to offer a more nuanced reading of his work, arguing that Bazin's own writing on cinematic realism is more sophisticated than he is often given credit for (Morgan 2006, Friday 2005, Grosoli 2011). For instance, the complexity and ambiguity of cinematic realism has also been noted by Bazin himself, such as when he writes about realism as more of a psychological attitude than a direct relation between the image and actuality, stating that 'if film is able to fulfil itself aesthetically we need to believe in the reality of what is happening while knowing to be tricked' (quoted in Plantinga 2006, 103).

[28] For a comprehensive overview of this debate and critique of the anti-realist position, see Juhasz (1994).

our oppression cannot be captured on celluloid with the "innocence" of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured' (1973, 27). Formulating an alternative to the illusion of realism in documentary, Johnston argues for a formalist approach that foregrounds the constructed nature of the image and troubles passive spectatorship, stating that:

> Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality: it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the context of the film: the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated so that the break between ideology and text is effected (29).[29]

Proposing a self-reflexive approach to documentary filmmaking, Trinh T. Minh-Ha even goes so far as to polemically assert that 'there is no such thing as documentary—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, and approach, or a set of techniques' (1990, 76). With this assertion, Minh-Ha aims to illuminate how since 'reality runs away, reality denies reality,' filmmaking can only ever be a 'question of 'framing' reality in its course' (90). Insisting that 'reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction,' she argues for the practice of self-reflexivity, not out of an interest in formalistic experiment, but rather as a way of recognising and counteracting 'the naiveté of a development of cinematic technology that promotes increasingly unmediated access to reality,' concluding that 'a documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction' (88-89).

Contrasting this radical rejection of realism, a more modest position is taken by Christine Gledhill, who concludes that 'in the end it is difficult to see how if a radical ideology, such as feminism, is to be defined as a means to providing a framework for political action, one is not going to put one's finger on the scale, enter some kind of realist epistemology' (1978, 492). Additionally, E. Ann Kaplan states:

> While it is essential for feminist film critics to examine signifying processes carefully in order to understand the way in which women have been constructed in language and in film, it is equally important not to lose sight of the material world in which we live, and in which our oppression takes concrete, often painful, forms (1983, 140).

[29] For a similar argument towards avant-garde in relation to narrative fiction film, albeit more focused on the destruction of visual pleasure, see Laura Mulvey's argument in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' is which she argues that 'the alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive of a new language of desire' (2009c, 16). Additionally, in 'Film, Feminism, and the Avant-Garde' she states that 'there is a drive to forge an aesthetic that attacks language and representation, not as something naturally linked with the male, but rather as something that soaks up dominant ideology, as a sponge soaks up water' (2009a, 33).

This acknowledgement of the political significance of cinematic realism lies at the core of much queer docu-porn, with *Trans Entities* presenting itself as the sincere and honest portrayal of its two main protagonists. Thus, whereas Papí and Wil narrate the love that they feel for each other and their embodied experience of gender and sexuality as a continuous shifting, representing 'the subject as a matter of process' rather than as defined by static identity markers (Steinbock 2015, 40), the realist aesthetics adopted by the film itself work to underscore its status as documentation, capturing the 'truth' of its subjects' lived reality as well as their negotiation of normative ideologies of gender, sexuality, and race. In doing so, the camera is positioned as a witness as they incorporate and subvert these ideologies through their erotic practice. Within this context, however, the ideology of transparency remains mostly unchallenged, as *Trans Entities* deploys a realist epistemology, as a way of affirming and recognising how 'the affective force of the aspects of trans sexuality—transness, brownness, kink and polyamory—enhances their loving practice of becoming trans entities' (43), with the combination of documentary and pornography working to 're-model sexual stereotypes of black and brown bodies, to which the affect of nasty seems to stick and pornography typically reinforces' (41). Contrastingly, the short film *BED PARTY* adopts practices like self-reflexivity and visual irony as a way of commenting on the ways in which pornography routinely effaces its own artificiality, thereby complicating the suggestion of immediate access to reality in pornography and drawing attention to the role of ideology that underpins the representation of gender and sexuality in pornography, which is a point I explore in the final section of this chapter.

Over the years, documentary theory has emerged as an area of inquiry that offers a complex understanding of the relation between representation and reality. Moreover, and counteracting popular perceptions of documentary, filmmakers themselves have consistently expressed an awareness of the constructed nature of the documentary image and argued against the status of documentary as a form of truth-telling that is neutral and objective, as evidenced in John Grierson's famous definition of documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality.' However, if the relation between documentary and reality is anything but straightforward, this does not mean that this relation has no bearing at all on the way filmmakers and audiences engage with documentary, as Alisa Lebow tellingly argues in a footnote to her chapter on fake documentary:

> Clearly not all documentaries claim to represent reality, or at least they don't all claim to represent it in the same way, yet there is something that can be said to link documentary practice across the board, and that is perhaps the arrogation of authenticating discourses that have

> aspirations to represent reality, even if there may be a knowing stance (in self-reflexive documentaries, for instance) of the impossibility of the claim (2006, 236, n1).[30]

Rather than dispersing with the evidentiary status of the documentary image altogether, documentary theory thus demonstrates the need to scrutinise the relationship between image and reality even more closely, allowing for an ever more complex understanding of the meaning and function of the 'real' in film. If documentary theory has done precisely that, discussions of pornography, in contrast, have often relied on a reductive and simplistic understanding of the relation between image and actuality, with concepts like reality and fantasy and fact and fiction often presented as mutually exclusive, rather than relational and recursive. With pornography comprising a genre of film that is characterised in important ways by its proximate relation to the real, it has only been with the advent of the discipline of porn studies that a more rigorous engagement with these issues has started to emerge. In the following section, I engage closely with this scholarship in order to further tease out how pornography presents itself as a record of the real, focusing on its use of stylistic and narrative techniques.

### 2.1.2 The Spectacle of the Real

So far, I have discussed pornography's relation to the real in terms of the assumed capacity of the camera to record reality. As I have demonstrated in the final paragraphs of the previous section, this idea that the medium of film provides some sort of direct access to reality has come under increased scrutiny, not in the least from (feminist) documentary theorists. Moreover, with the advent of digital media, the indexical relation between image and reality has become even more unstable, as 'the digital offers an ease of manipulation and distance from any referential grounding that seems to threaten the immediacy and certainty of referentiality' that characterises photography and film (Doane 2007a, 1). The impact of the digital has important consequences for the consideration of contemporary pornography, including alternative pornography, as the majority is shot on digital cameras rather than on celluloid. However, as Mary Ann Doane notes, the shift from 'the photochemical to the digital image' has not necessarily lead to a demise of the centrality of the index in our appreciation of film, despite the severing of the existential bond between image and object, but rather highlights the extent to which the image depends on its iconic and symbolic qualities, as it

[30] Lebow argues against the label of 'fake documentary,' precisely because it posits documentary's 'truth' against fake documentary's 'false, a binary she does not find helpful. Instead, she proposes the term 'mockumentary,' which she argues more effectively signals a scepticism toward documentary (2006, 224). I will return to this point in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

works to 'extend and prolong the aura of that indexical authenticity' (2007b, 142). Rather than making investigations into the indexical quality of the image redundant or anachronistic, the rise of digital media has seemed to revitalise them, as the notion of the index continues to 'haunt' the way we as spectators engage with these images. Furthermore, the increased destabilisation of the image as a trace of the real also suggests that we as film scholars have to become even more attentive to the way in which pornography comes to speak for reality, to paraphrase Plantinga, and investigate how porn exploits the possibilities of the medium in order to do so. Even if moving-image pornography typically requires some sort of pro-filmic event to occur, it is clear that this mode of production alone does not suffice in securing pornography's status as a record of the real. In the following section, I discuss some of the ways in which pornography utilises a rhetoric of authenticity through its appropriation of certain realist techniques. If cinematic realism depends as much on the adoption of a range of aesthetic and narrative tactics as it does on the indexical bond between image and object, then what constitutes pornographic realism and how does alternative pornography either perpetuate or break away from this type of realism? In the following section, I revisit the idea that the transparency of the pornographic image informs an experience of presence, proximity, and participation, but rather than relating this observation to an ontology of film, I argue that this experience is the outcome of a particular use of cinematic techniques and generic conventions, with pornography appealing to a particular spectacle of 'real' sex.

In the previous section, I already referred to the chapter by Nichols, Hansen, and Needham, in which they compared pornography to ethnography. Despite their porn-negative stance, a more productive aspect of their work consists of their insistence that pornography does not offer its viewer any direct or immediate access to the real, stating that 'it is not reality that is at stake but the *impression* of reality, the impression conveyed by the conventions of historical realism' (1991, 216, emphasis mine). Unfortunately, they do not further elaborate on this idea, which was first introduced by film theorist Christian Metz in his chapter 'On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema,' where he argues that 'films give us the feeling that we are witnessing an almost real spectacle' (1974, 4). According to Metz, the impression of reality in film accounts for much of its attraction, stating that 'films have the *appeal* of a presence and a proximity that strikes the masses and fills the movie theatres' (5, emphasis original). Rather than providing some immediate or direct access to reality, Metz explains how the impression of reality first and foremost makes up a psychological phenomenon, one that presents the viewer with a 'feeling of credibility' (ibid.). The fact that film's privileged relation to reality is no longer

located in the process of production, does not make it any less central to the specificity of the medium, however, with Metz arguing that 'there is a filmic mode, which is the mode of presence,' indicating some important implications for the film experience:

> Films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual *participation* in the spectator […] they spontaneously appeal to his sense of belief—never, of course, entirely, but more intensely than the other arts, and occasionally films are, even in the absolute, very convincing. They speak to us with the accents of true evidence using the argument 'It is so' (4, emphasis original).

Not only does Metz' account of the impression of reality in film chime with Straayer's and Kleinhans' description of the way in which pornography asserts 'this *is* sex,' it also traces a lineage to Bazin. However, there are also some crucial differences to be noted, as Metz offers an account of the film experience instead of attempting to distil an essence of film. In doing so, his discussion of the impression of reality in film allows for a more productive account of moving-image pornography, illuminating how the discourse of pornography suggests the *presentation* of sex, rather than the *representation*. This argument is put forward by Pasi Falk, who states that hardcore pornography is informed by an 'anti-representational logic' (1993,1) and relies on an 'evidential presentness' (28). Quoting Baudrillard, Falk then concludes: 'if there is fantasy in pornography, it is not of sex but of the real' (34).

If the theory of Metz provides a more productive account of the way in which film allows for the experience of presence, proximity, and participation, then how might we reconsider Dyer's fore-mentioned article on the excitement of pornography, in which he describes pornography as 'a record of people actually having sex' (2004, 109)? Rather than relying on the indexical relationship between image and pro-filmic event, his comments are more accurately understood as pointing towards an 'illusion of presence' (Williams 1981, 218) and the 'almost real spectacle' described by Metz. Indeed, Dyer himself points to the ways in which pornography 'mobilises the conventions of realism and "classical cinema"' in order to create this sense of presence and participation (2004, 102). Through close analyses of gay porn videos, Dyer demonstrates how the impression of reality is effectuated through a whole range of stylistic choices that work as evidentiary strategies, from the use of location shots and hand-held camera work to the harsh quality of lighting and the performance of genuine excitement, which demonstrate 'a feeling of abandonment and sexual hunger' (103). In particular, Dyer is interested in the use of self-reflexivity, pointing to texts that 'draw attention to themselves as porn, that is, as constructed presentations of sex' (105). I return to this point in the next chapter, and discuss the issue of self-reflexivity in my own analysis of *BED PARTY* below, but for the sake of the discussion here, I am especially interested in Dyer's description of his own

experience of watching these videos, in which he refers to 'some performers doing it in front of the camera, *and you*' and 'the camera, crew, and me *in attendance'* (102, emphasis mine), which chimes with Metz' account of the film experience as involving a sense of proximity and participation. This aspect of the film experience is also noted by Roland Barthes, who in his essay 'The Rhetoric of the Image' (1977), refers to this kind of temporal and spatial proximity as a way of differentiating between photography and film:

> The distinction between film and photography is not a simple difference of degree but a radical opposition. Film can no longer be seen as animated photographs: the *having-been-there* gives way to a *being-there* of the thing (45, emphasis original).[31]

Bringing these writings into conversation, it becomes apparent how viewers may experience some images as having a particular proximity to the real, even if they are acutely aware that what they are watching has been fabricated and staged in such a way as to elicit sexual arousal, an awareness that is further enhanced by the artificiality of much pornography. However, the question remains: what exactly accounts for the impression of reality in pornography?

In his chapter 'The Reality Effect,' Barthes points towards those 'insignificant notations' in modernist literature that do not seem to have any direct narrative function and argues that these apparent 'useless details' add to the overall sense of realism of the work (1986, 142). In his book *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning* (2007), Murat Aydemir takes up this concept as a way of investigating the particular reality effect of feature-length narrative pornography. He argues that it is precisely the contrast between the 'theatricalized sex' of the sexual number and the 'dreary realism' of the narrative that adds to the sense of realism in pornography and contributes to its expressive power (147).[32] According to Aydemir, the sexual number is precisely what makes pornography break away from the 'normalizing background' of the storyline, with pornography's reality effect relying rather on 'the separation of and interrelation of the two, the precise maintenance of the switch between story and number' (143). In order to support his argument, Aydemir points out how the sexual number in feature-length pornography often takes place outside of recognised reality, in that it is daydreamed, fantasised, or hallucinated, a narrative feature that is supported by cinematic devices such as 'fades, dissolves, dreamy music, and close-ups of intensely watching or closed eyes' (144). Moreover, he argues that 'the imperative of visibility makes many numbers come across as

[31] Barthes' comments here not only convey something about the proximity and presence that is evoked by the filmic image but also allude to the filmic image as existing in the present tense. For more on the temporality of pornography, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[32] Aydemir's argument is informed in significant ways by Williams' analysis of the sex scenes in hardcore pornography as analogous to the song-and-dance scenes in musicals (1999)

excessively staged,' influencing the mise-en-scène of the sexual number by avoiding certain sexual positions that obstruct visibility, and female performers looking directly into the camera as a way of addressing the spectator (ibid.). However, rather than taking away from the sense of realism, Aydemir argues that the alternation between 'improbably theatrical and acrobatic renditions of sex in the numbers' and the 'seemingly redundant story lines' precisely makes for pornography's verisimilitude (143-144).

Aydemir's discussion of the reality effect of pornography stands in stark contrast to how most scholars understand it, with his description of 'theatricalized sex' painting a very different picture of pornography than the documentary quality foregrounded by Lehman, Dyer, and Patton earlier in this chapter. It is not without reason, then, that Aydemir focuses on feature-length narrative pornography, as his discussion of the reality effect in pornography does not travel well to other types of pornography, which do not rely so strongly on the oscillation of story and number and the evidentiary strategy of maximum visibility. Although Aydemir himself maintains that his discussion of pornographic realism can be extended to other pornographies, Tim Dean also questions this extension of Aydemir's argument, stating that Aydemir's discussion of the reality effect in pornography fails to account for the gay bareback videos he is concerned with in his book, which are structured as documentaries rather than narrative features (2009, 106, n.11). Similarly, Aydemir's discussion also falls short in accounting for the reality effect of queer docu-porn like that of *Trans Entities,* which does not include a similar oscillation of narrative and spectacle. Thus, while the film does alternate between sex scenes and interviews, these two components are put into direct conversation, rather than separated by formal features, with Steinbock demonstrating how 'the film's composition arranges the sexual scenes adjacent to the personal interviews with slow dissolves, voice over, and musical bridges, which help the viewer to switch from one format to another as smoothly as possible' and arguing that 'the viewer is thus encouraged to see the continuities between how Papí and Wil experience their sexuality and reflect on it' (2015, 42-43). Rather than taking place outside of recognised reality, the sex in *Trans Entities* therefore is very much secured in the lived experience of sexuality as embodied by the two protagonists of the film. Even though the film continuously emphasises the 'nastiness' of Papí and Wil's love, and adheres to the principle of maximum visibility, the depiction of the sex does not comply so much with Aydmir's description of 'theatricalized sex'; instead, the film presents 'nastiness' as intrinsically bound up with their shared intimacy and love for each other, which is a point I return to in my analysis of *BED PARTY* below. Of course, this does not mean that the reality

effect is of no concern to queer docu-porn; rather it suggests that it is asserted through different means, with most scholars referring to the reality effect of alternative pornography through an emphasis on authenticity.

Whereas Aydemir focuses on the oscillation between spectacle and narrative in pornography, as a way of accounting for the impression of reality in pornography, Tanya Krzywinska (2005) draws a distinction between the spectacle of 'real' sex presented in pornography and the type of realism evoked in art cinema. Describing the qualification of 'real' sex in each respective category of film, Krzywinska argues that art cinema utilises the 'rhetoric of cinema,' as a way of differentiating itself from 'the episodic, what-you-see-is-what-you-get form of hard-core' (226). She states:

> By being placed in a psychosexual context, the spectacle of 'real' sex is given an emotional and philosophical colouring very different from the more superficial and immediate spectacle of the real found in hard-core cinema. The inclusion of the psychosexual dimension, borrowed in part from melodrama, makes the designation of the 'real' a relative and complex affair (227).

Art cinema privileges psychological realism in its depiction of sex and makes use of specific narrative and cinematographic techniques in order to demonstrate how 'real sex between real people is a messy and alienating business, worlds apart from the formalised images of sexual ecstasy found in hard-core' (231). Rather than presenting the performance of explicit sex in front of the camera as automatically real in and of itself, Krzywinska draws attention to the specific way in which the real becomes signified in pornography through the appropriation of a whole range of conventions particular to the genre and argues that in art cinema 'the inherent spectacle of hard-core sex is drained from its power to signify the real' (ibid.).

Overall, the contrast that is drawn between pornography and art cinema by Krzywinska illustrates the extent to which the spectacle of 'real' sex in pornography makes up only one of the possible avenues through which a sense of realness and authenticity might be secured, an insight that is shared by Linda Williams, who contrasts 'the hydraulics of sex' (2008, 5) in pornography with the type of 'psychological revelation' (304) characterising the representation of sex in art cinema. Insofar as the verisimilitude of pornography depends on the spectacle of 'real' sex, however, it does not hold the same credibility outside the parameters of the genre, with art cinema relying rather on psychological realism and character development as ways of assuring its audience of its authenticity. What remains obscured in Krzywinska's discussion, however, are the differences between different pornographies. Relying on a highly prescriptive and formulaic repertoire of sexual positions and practices and on a rudimentary and goal-

oriented narrative, mainstream pornography typically privileges standardisation and predictability, allowing for narrow understanding of how 'real' sex might be visualised and offering very little in terms of emotional complexity and psychological depth. In the following section, I argue that the qualification of 'real' sex in alternative pornography differs in significant ways from that of mainstream pornography, with alternative pornography actively rejecting many of the conventions that typically contribute to the verisimilitude of pornography. Like art cinema, docu-porn incorporates psychological realism and shares an investment in the emotional dimension of sexuality, but rather than borrowing from melodrama, alternative pornography draws on documentary features. Finally, where the view on sexuality expressed by art cinema tends to be rather bleak and cynical, that of alternative pornography is generally more uplifting and hopeful, a point I return to in the following chapter in relation to the utopian pull of pornography.

## 2.2 The Aura of Authenticity in Alternative Pornography

### 2.2.1 A Fantasy of the Real

In the section above, I have discussed the role of the camera and the process of production as a way of accounting for the documentary impulse of pornography, as well as engaging with the role of cinematic realism, relying on a more or less generalised understanding of moving-image pornography, notwithstanding some incidental references to mainstream and alternative pornography. In the following section, I take a closer look at the role of historical and generic variables in relation to the reality effect of pornography, pointing to the particular status that authenticity holds in alternative pornography. Rather than arguing for an inherent pornographic imagination, then, I propose that the meaning and function of the 'real' differs from one type of pornography to the next, allowing for different connections to be drawn between pornography and documentary. Thus, while it may be argued that feature-length pornography of the 1970s shares a documentary impulse with contemporary amateur and gonzo pornography, insofar as they all seek to bring to the screen 'real' sex, there are also some important differences to note in the way that these pornographies insist on their proximate relation to reality. Thus, if classics like *Deep Throat* (Gerard, 1972), *Behind the Green Door* (Mitchell Brothers, 1972), and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (Damanio, 1973), exemplify how pornographers at the time increasingly incorporated evidentiary strategies like the money shot in their films, they also serve as a testament to the ambition of these pornographers to bring pornography and mainstream filmmaking closer together by combining big budgets, proper

scripts, elaborate staging, and cinematic experimentation (i.e. Schaefer 2004; Lehman 1998; O'Toole 1998). By properly integrating sex within the narrative, these films downplayed the rudimentary documentary quality of the preceding stag films in favour of an emphasis on their artistic qualities, introducing the notion of the *porn auteur*.[33]

As the Golden Age of Porn dwindled and pornography moved from the semi-publicity of the movie theatre into the privacy of the home, pornography diverted once more from mainstream fiction filmmaking.[34] With the rise of video, the adult industry grew exponentially, turning it into an increasingly lucrative business and introducing new forms of pornographic realism. With the number of porn productions on the rise, production values dropped and the quality declined, with narrative features giving way to the dominance of formats like the compilation tape. As a result, narratives became less ambitious and more predictable and repetitive and were often reduced to a formulaic set-up to the sexual action (Kleinhans 2006, 161). With more screen time devoted to the depiction of hardcore sex, the documentary aura of pornography became more prominent at the expense of psychological realism and character development (ibid.). However, if video pornography further reinforced the status of pornography as the documentation of 'real' sex, it also yielded a new porn aesthetic, defined by its heightened artificiality. This shift from celluloid to video is narrated by Laurence O'Toole in his short history of moving-image pornography, as he contrasts the 'porno-chic' of the 1970s, which 'tried to communicate the feeling of having sex,' with the video pornography that succeeded it, which he describes as 'more fantastic, where the sex seems less real' (1998, 80). As sexual practices and positions became increasingly standardised and informed by considerations of optimal visibility and easy categorisation, a prescriptive model of 'porno sex' consolidated, characterised by its tendency for spectacle and hyperbole. This porn aesthetic also extended to the bodies of the performers, with images of limp and semi-flaccid penises in films like *The Devil in Miss Jones* replaced by the exclusive depiction of the penis in a state of instantaneous and continuous erection (98). The fantastic and artificial quality of video porn also became

[33] Of course, there were also loops and wall-to-walls at the time that did not share this artistic ambition. Moreover, it is important to note that the move towards mainstreaming pornography was not only informed by artistic ambition, but also functioned as a sort of 'alibi' for potential censors, protecting the filmmakers against accusations of obscenity as well as being part of a commercial attempt to attract a broader audience than the so-called 'rain coaters,' most importantly couples and women (Schaefer 2004, 384). Moreover, as Kleinhans notes, during the 1960s 'pornographers tried to evade censorship by presenting sexual images as factual documentation' and pointing to their educational value (2007, 97).

[34] For one critique of the term 'Golden Age' see Paasonen (2011, 183).

associated with the look of the female porn star, described Sanna Härma and Joakin Stolpe as follows:

> As a figure, the porn star is often understood as plastic and fake, constructed by fantasy, unnaturally endowed and giving a false impression of how sex is performed and experienced. A porn star look—perma-tanned, waxed, bleached, artificially enhanced with silicon—emphasizes this sense of artificiality (2010, 113).

Not only were the bodies of female performers themselves considered to be fake, so were their performances of sexual pleasure, with scholars referring to images of heads tilted back in apparent ecstasy and sounds of exaggerated moaning and screaming (Patton 1989; Johnson 1993).[35] In many cases, descriptions of this shift from celluloid to video are permeated by nostalgia, not in the least in the case of O'Toole, who argues that the rise of video marks a shift from 'porn being about 'real' people having hot sex to body sculpted, silicone enhanced superhumans 'performing' hot sex' (81).[36] Similarly, Patton attributes 'a documentary aura' to pornography of the 1970s, due to the 'appearance of real penises and vaginas, complete with wrinkles and wayward pubic hairs,' which she contrasts with the 1980s, when 'sex lost its reality' (1991, 375). Despite its abandonment of artistic ambition, then, the artificiality of video pornography compromises any direct claim to the real, with Susanna Paasonen stating that its fantastical qualities 'conflict with the claims for documentary and the authentic' (2011, 83).

In many ways, the porn aesthetic introduced in video pornography of the 1980s and 1990s has come to function as a blueprint, shaping our cultural imagination of what moving-image pornography looks like. However, a lot has changed over the last few decades, with media scholars associating the rise of subgenres like amateur and gonzo porn with a desire for realness and authenticity and a rejection of the artificiality and performativity of mainstream pornography (i.e. Barcan 2002; Patterson 2004; Hardy 2008; Dovey 2010; Van Doorn 2010). This tendency is noted as early as 1999 by Lehman, who discusses the video porn of John Stagliano and Ed Powers and argues that they 'didn't just make cheaper copies of narrative theatrical porn with lower production values; they innovated entire new forms more closely linked to documentary than fictional narrative films' (1999, 359). Overall, however, the interest in realness and authenticity is typically associated with the advent of the Internet. For instance, Feona Attwood, in her chapter on online pornographies, argues that subgenres like amateur and

[35] See Chapter 1 for a more elaborate discussion of the performance of female sexual pleasure, in which I discuss this issue of performance in relation to the demand for maximum visibility that guides the genre of pornography.
[36] For a discussion of pornography and nostalgia, see Paasonen and Saarenma (2007).

gonzo porn position themselves in direct opposition to commercial mainstream pornography, stating that 'the older version of the pornographic "real" has come to be understood as formulaic and predictable [....] becoming associated with performance, the spectacular and artificiality, unconvincing representation and "fake" sex' (2010, 239). In a similar vein, Paasonen points towards the glossy and stylised aesthetics of mainstream commercial pornography, arguing that 'the raw, grainy, and mundane imageries of gonzo, reality, and amateur porn have countered these aesthetics with their claims to the nonspectacular and real' (2011, 81; see also Patterson 2004, 116). With the introduction of new technologies and increased access to these technologies—a development that has accelerated with the arrival of the Internet and Web 2.0—the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography has radically transformed, with scholars referring to the democratisation of pornography (Jacobs 2007). For instance, Kevin Esch and Vicky Mayer describe how 'amateur pornography grew independently as an outgrowth of the video revolution of the 1980s, when millions of people bought their first home video camera and budding filmmakers decided to make their own pornography' (2007, 101), whereas Paasonen points to the changes that the Internet has made to the distribution of pornography, from the initial swap-to-buy services and peer-to-peer exchanges to 'easy-to-use and mostly free video sharing sites modelled after YouTube,' resulting, in the last decade, in 'a radical increase in the available volume and forms of online pornographies' (2018, 177).

Not only has the increased access to modes of production and distribution allowed for more and different kinds of people to produce and share their pornographies with the rest of the world, it has also led to an increased prominence of notions of 'realness' and 'authenticity.' One of first scholars to recognise this development, Ruth Barcan points to 'the growing interest in watching 'real people' rather than the glamorous bodies and stilted scripts of traditional pornography' (2002, 87). She argues that the reality porn she is concerned with is characterised by a 'taste of the ordinary,' as part of a broader interest in 'reality and confessional genres' (88). Expressing a voyeuristic interest in seeing 'real' people and 'real' pleasure, then, reality, amateur, and gonzo pornography foregrounds such notions as 'spontaneity', 'liveness', and 'rawness' (i.e. Barcan 2002; Chun 2006; Russo 2007; Dovey 2010; Paasonen 2011). In doing so, these pornographies depend on familiar as well as new modes of authentication. For instance, scholars have pointed to the ways in which amateur pornography depends on the documentary aura of the filmic image, with Esch and Mayer stating that 'grainy images, poor lighting and shaky camerawork have been standard to the look of the genre' (2007, 102) and

Hillyer arguing that 'what amounts to an apparent deprofessionalization of the image also renders the image less cinematic, less subject to artistic conventions, and, by association, apparently more concerned with the presentational act than its representation' (2004, 65). Finally, Paasonen discusses how 'amateur representations are invested with some documentary value, as their authors are assumed merely to record things with the technologies available to them rather than skilfully manufacture or manipulate them' (2010, 1303) and states that 'in online amateur porn, these notions of realness and directness are mapped onto the notions of directness that are associated with both pornography as a genre and the Internet as a medium' (2011, 80; see also Chun 2006), illuminating how familiar attributes of the pornographic image gain new prominence when transferred to a different medium.

If, on the one hand, amateur pornography utilises familiar evidentiary strategies in order to achieve a feeling of immediacy and directness, it also introduces new ways of substantiating its claim to the real, for instance through its introduction of non-professional performers and choice of locations, with Paasonen arguing that amateur pornography 'bridges the gap between the everyday and the fantasy world of pornography by depicting the most mundane spaces as potential grounds for arousal and copulation' (2006, 413), whereas Kristina Pia Hofer emphasises the performed domesticity of amateur pornography (2014). One of the most effective ways in which amateur pornography appeals to realness and authenticity, is by contrasting its own amateurism with the professionalism of commercial pornography, with Paasonen stating that 'to a degree, amateur productions have come to connote a better kind of porn that is ethical in its principles of production, but also more real, raw, and innovative than commercially produced (i.e. mainstream pornography)' (2010, 1302; see also Ruberg 2015). Thus, if 'professionalism connotes skill and quality […] amateurism implies the opposite' as it is coded in terms of 'spontaneous, more truthful, and less-manufactured representations' (1303).[37] Not only is the realness of amateur pornography pitted against the professionalism of mainstream pornography in terms of skill and quality, it is also contrasted by a focus on motivation and (the lack of) monetary exchange, where 'amateurs apparently do what they do for the love of it whereas professionals do it for the money' (1305; see also Paasonen 2011, 2018; Hillyer 2004, 55; Esch and Mayer 2007, 102; Attwood 2010). However, these kinds of divisions are 'slippery constructions' at best, with Esch and Mayer arguing for 'the clarification of 'amateur' as less a production category than a generic signifier' (103; see also Zecca 2016).

[37] A same kind of rhetoric underpins Cindy Gallop's Make Love not Porn project, which uses the slogan 'Porn World versus the Real World.'

The recurring emphasis on realness and authenticity should not be taken as an indicator that these pornographies are in any way closer to the everyday experience of sex than their predecessors; rather, the particular configuration of the 'real' in amateur and gonzo pornography comes to function as its own 'erotic stimulant' (Barcan 2002, 93). Instead of presenting some sort of unmediated 'reality,' then, the claims of realness and authenticity in these pornographies are discursively produced, with Niels van Doorn arguing that much of amateur pornography depends on the reification and reiteration of the same hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality that also inform mainstream pornography (2010), making any claim that these pornographies are in any way more 'real' naïve at best and harmful at the worst. Even though amateur porn exudes a certain 'aura of authenticity' (414), paradoxically by drawing attention to the medium itself, through its use of 'blurry, grainy, and often underexposed footage' (420), the representation of sexual practices and positions continues to be structured by a '"normative pornscript": a prescriptive set of performances and camera shots that have gradually become a staple of pornographic visual production' (423). Notwithstanding that many of the people represented in amateur pornography may look like your next-door neighbour, then, van Doorn explains how the depiction of sex often perpetuates the same conventions typically found in mainstream pornography, including the 'money shot', 'cream-pie', and 'facial,' with bodies opening up to the camera combined with a disproportionate amount of visual scrutiny of the female body (425-426).

The dubious status of the real is made particularly evident in gonzo pornography, which is 'largely dedicated to and shot by the people performing it and makes extensive use of point-of-view (POV) shots that allow the viewer first-person access to the action taking place' (Paasonen 2011, 73). However, if the lack of narrative and scripted dialogue, the use of mundane locations, and the unenhanced bodies of the performers—which are shown in extreme closeups with all their pimples and blemishes—aid in securing its claim to realness and authenticity, gonzo is also considered one of the genres of porn that offers the most excessive and extreme representations of sex and gender, with Paasonen referring to gonzo's reputation for 'male domination, female degradation and blatant misogyny' and its inclusion of such tropes as 'human (female) toilet bowls, cum swapping, double penetrations, and overall roughness,' concluding that 'gonzo, then, stands for the truly hardcore' (ibid., see also Maddison 2009). If realness in gonzo porn is expressed through an appeal to amateurism, both on the level of cinematic aesthetics and mise-en-scène, the performance of sex in these types of pornography appeals rather to spectacle, hyperbole, and 'nastiness,' with its female

performers functioning as ‘sexual athletes’ (Smith 2012, 194), undermining any easy conflation of gonzo and the quotidian. Rather excessively, then, gonzo epitomises the ambiguity of authenticity that characterises contemporary pornography more generally, resulting in ‘an awkward balance between hyperbole and documentary as porn both lays claim to realness and draws quotation marks around the images that supposedly function as documentation’ (Paasonen 2011, 81).

As the discussion above demonstrates, recent years have seen a proliferation of the ‘real’ in pornography, with different subgenres relying on realness and authenticity in order to substantiate its ‘promise of the real’ (Andrejevic 2004, 87). What these studies of reality, amateur, and gonzo porn demonstrate, then, is how the qualification of the ‘real’ in pornography is never fixed, but instead is relational, conditional, and often paradoxical. This point is illustrated by Attwood, as she describes the multiple meanings of ‘realness’ in contemporary pornographies:

> Realness may be expressed by the extent to which the action is divorced from emotion or everyday life, or conversely the extent it is connected to these; it may be held to depend on the authenticity of the producers or the direct responses of the consumer; on conventions of ‘liveness,’ ‘nastiness,’ or lack of aesthetic and technical varnish; on the effective staging of conventional and recognizable porn elements; on psychologization, personalization, or politicization; on how faithfully it represents the desires of individual performers, communities, or subcultures; on interactivity; on how boldly it asserts or refuses sex and gender difference, or on how dramatically it upholds or transgresses representational and sexual norms and categories (2010, 240)

In the following section, I address the specific role of realness and authenticity in alternative pornography. Like amateur and gonzo porn, feminist and queer pornographies mostly reject the artificiality of mainstream pornography in favour of the use of low-fi cinematic techniques and an emphasis on ‘real’ people and ‘real’ bodies, however, there are also some notable differences, referring to the desire to show genuine female sexual pleasure, the preoccupation with representing marginalised sexual identities, subcultures, and communities, and the connection of pornography and sexual politics.

### 2.2.2 The Holy Grail of Authenticity

As one example of the proliferation of pornographies in the last few decades, alternative pornography has been largely enabled by the increased access to technologies, with Lynn Comella stating that ‘with the advent of the VCR, video technology, and desktop publishing in the early 1980s, feminists had access to affordable means of production, which they used to

create new kinds of sexual imagery for straight women, lesbians, and couples' (2013, 80), a point that is further illustrated by Susie Bright, co-founder of *On Our Backs* magazine, who states that 'video changed everything […] video offered a way in for artists, entrepreneurs, and sex radicals—who for better or worse, never would've made a movie before' (2013, 38). The significance of this access to technology is also noted by contemporary filmmakers, such as feminist pornographer Mia Engberg, who states that 'everyone can afford a video camera now and that has definitely contributed to the expansion (or explosion if you like) of alternative porn […] it is a democratisation of the porn genre and it is also a change in the types of bodies displayed' (Andrin 2014, 214). As part of this expansion of different pornographies, alternative pornography is structured by a desire for authenticity, a point that is illustrated by Dylan Ryan when she describes her initial collaboration with queer porn director Shine Louise Houston:

> When Shine and I first talked, we both believed that the majority of mainstream porn was inauthentic and not in agreement with what we knew to be true of our sexualities and the sexualities of those around us. 'Authenticity' took on a somewhat mythological quality and became the Holy Grail in our vision for pornographic filmmaking: if we could achieve it, we truly would have transcended the existing constraints of the known porn world (2013, 125).

In the following section, I engage more closely with the aura of authenticity that haunts alternative pornography. If expressions of authenticity in pornography are often convoluted and differ from one subgenre to other, this begs the question: how exactly is the desire for authenticity expressed in alternative pornography?

Like amateur and gonzo porn, authenticity in alternative pornography depends in great part on a rejection of the artificiality of mainstream pornography. As such, authenticity in alternative pornography is often expressed through its do-it-yourself (or DIY) aesthetics, a convention particularly prevalent in queer pornography. Combined with the use of real locations and harsh lighting, the handheld camerawork and low production standards stand in stark contrast to the stylised imagery of studio-produced commercial pornography.[38] The authenticity of alternative pornography is also contrasted with the artificiality of mainstream pornography through an emphasis on 'real' people and 'real' bodies, as opposed to the 'fake' porn stars of mainstream pornography. Contrasting the glamorous makeup, long fingernails, big hair, and the surgically enhanced and fully shaven bodies that have come to connote the porn star look privileged in mainstream pornography, the performers in alternative pornography often wear little to no makeup and various degrees of body hair and represent a wide variety of body types and sizes.

[38] See the analysis of *One Night Stand* in Chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion of this DIY aesthetics in the context of haptic visuality.

This rejection of the artificiality of mainstream porn is illustrated by feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino, who argues that 'feminist porn moves beyond pigtailed virgins, sex kittens, and hyperorgasmic nymphos, towards more complex and varied representations of femaleness and femininity, including what constitutes beauty, desirability, and sexiness' (2013, 262). Furthermore, feminist porn performer and director Madison Young laments the 'assemblage of fast-food pornographic sex' in mainstream pornography and asserts that 'we are not a series of buttons and formulas, we are not a face and body of airbrushed sameness; we are a celebration of difference' (2014, 188). Moving beyond a mere rejection of the artificiality and reductive representation of femininity in mainstream pornography, Young's comments point towards the ways in which the emphasis on 'real' bodies and 'real' people is also part of a politicised desire for inclusivity and diversity, consisting of an investment in 'body-positivity' as well as a dedication to the wide variety of identities, expressions, and embodiments that are part of the lived experience of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity (i.e. Hill-Meyer 2013; Lee 2013; Ryan 2013; Taormino 2013; Houston 2014; Comella 2015). This desire for diversity is also exemplified by *TheCrashPadSeries.com*, which states:

> CrashPadSeries.com has long been recognized by lesbians as a dyke porn site, though much like a reflection of queer women's community, we feature people of many genders and sexualities, as well as diverse ethnicities, body types and abilities, and experiences (such as amateur or professional). You'll find queer women (cis and trans) as well as trans men, cisgender men, genderqueer and other gender-variant people; performers who are femme, butch, or other gender expressions; people of color; people of differing abilities; people who are fat, thin, athletic, and/or otherwise; people aged 18 to over 50; people with and without tattoos or piercings; and more ('About')

Finally, the emphasis on 'real' people in alternative pornography also results in emphasis being placed on what Attwood describes above as psychologization and personalization, for instance through the extensive use of interviews, with Taormino stating that 'It's important to give sex workers an opportunity to speak for themselves, something mainstream media rarely does […] Suddenly they are three-dimensional beings, instead of glossy sex robots' (2014, 259)

Moving beyond the emphasis on 'real' bodies and 'real' people, authenticity in alternative pornography is also expressed through a focus on female sexual pleasure, where the 'fake' performance of female sexual pleasure in mainstream pornography is contrasted with the depiction of 'real' orgasms in alternative pornography.[39] Signifiers of authenticity are also

[39] This is a point I discuss at length in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, where I engage with the authentication of female sexual pleasure in alternative pornography as well as the negotiation of the principle of maximum visibility, as one of the evidentiary strategies that sets out to convince the viewer of the authenticity of sexual pleasure in mainstream pornography.

central to the ways in which audiences assess pornography, according to Emily E. Crutcher, who argues that markers of performativity in mainstream pornography are generally evaluated negatively whereas the experience of 'genuine female pleasure' in feminist porn is evaluated positively (2015, 321). This rejection of the performativity of mainstream pornography also seeps into considerations of the professionalism of mainstream porn performers, which is pitted against the 'authentic' sexual chemistry between performers in alternative pornography. As a consequence, alternative pornography often privileges 'real' couples, broadly interpreted, with the queer porn site *TheCrashPadSeries.com* calling for 'couples, play-partners, friends with benefits, and mutual crushes.' Finally, the renunciation of performativity in alternative pornography amounts to a rejection of the normative 'pornscript' of mainstream pornography in favour of an emphasis on the 'spontaneity' of the sexual encounter, which is presented in the context of the everyday lived experience of sexuality of its performers. Critiquing the prescriptive and standardised narration of sex in mainstream pornography, Taormino argues that feminist porn 'challenges what constitutes sex itself and the heteronormative depictions of penis-in-vagina (or ass) intercourse as the ultimate climatic act and everything else as some sort of inconsequential window dressing' (2013, 262). By focusing on the 'authentic' representation of sex, alternative pornography also moves away from the interest in spectacle and hyperbole that characterises other contemporary pornographies, most importantly gonzo porn, and relies less on the fantastical qualities of the genre. This does not mean that the depiction of sex in alternative pornography is necessarily 'soft', 'erotic', or 'vanilla,' as alternative pornography often includes practices that are generally considered 'transgressive' or 'obscene,' such as BDSM, fisting, and female ejaculation. However, rather than connoting some sort of excessive 'nastiness,' in alternative pornography these practices are presented as consistent with the authentic experience of sexuality by the performers and as contributing to their shared intimacy. *Trans Entities* serves as a particularly interesting example here, as the title explicitly refers to the 'nasty love' of its two main protagonists, both of whom foreground the term repeatedly in the narration of their sexuality and their relationship. However, rather than trying to emulate some kind of hypersexualised and racialised pornographic ideal, Steinbock argues that 'with the assertion of nastiness, and refutation of feeling normatively masculine and white, the film offers a processual subjectivity in the affective form of feeling excessive layered in brown, kinky, and trans experiences' (2015, 41). This form of feeling excessive is what connects the intensity of the sex scenes with the reflections of the two protagonists on the political as well as spiritual significance of their 'nasty love' in the interviews, as they discuss their sexual expression as intrinsically bound up with their

experience of navigating through the world as transmasculine people of colour. As such, a significant different meaning of 'nastiness' is foregrounded in the film, which prioritises the authentic expression of Papí and Wil's sexuality, while still intrinsically tied up with notions of transgression of taboo.

By prioritising the desires and fantasies of the performers themselves, alternative pornography also rejects the formulaic tropes and scripts of mainstream pornography, with film scholar Mireille Miller-Young assessing how mainstream pornography 'has standardised the filming of sex scenes to the extent that actors often feel they are handled more as automatons than real people, and directed to have sex that is mechanical, perfunctory, and even unerotic' (2013, 112). Not only does this expression of authenticity affect the representation of sex onscreen, it also shapes the process of production, with most producers of alternative pornography taking the fantasies and desires of their performers as guidance when deciding on sexual practices and positions, intervening as little as possible during filming. For instance, Taormino states:

> Ultimately, I want the performers to participate in creating their own representation. Women and men are given choices: they choose who they will have sex with, they choose the positions they want to be in, they choose the toys they want to play with, all based on what feels good to them, all based on their actual sexuality, not a fabricated script. I want to capture complex. Three dimensional beings, rather than simplistic stereotypes. I want to create an open environment that's safe for everyone—and especially women—to take charge of their pleasure and be able to express their desires freely. I'm trying to capture some level of authenticity, a connection between partners, and sense that everyone's having a good time. Think of it as organic, fair-trade porn (2013, 261).

This emphasis on choice and sexual agency is echoed by genderqueer performer Jiz Lee, who argues that 'if there's one thing that makes queer porn different, it's respecting the performers' choice—the choice to safely fuck how they want and to look how they believe is sexy' (2013, 277). The emphasis on the authentic sexuality of the performers also affects the way in which alternative pornography is marketed and distributed. The representation of sex in mainstream pornography relies heavily on standardisation, allowing for the easy categorisation of porn scenes into 'tags,' which enable the viewer to navigate through the multitude of acts, bodies, positions, tastes, preferences, and fetishes available on the major porn tube sites. Not only does this process of standardisation limit the representation of sex, as it necessitates the adherence of porn scenes to a set of easily recognizable and repetitive positions and practices, the labels that are used to describe these scenes often do not align with the self-definition of the performers. For instance, Lee describes how they are usually described as 'lesbian' in mainstream pornography, even though they identify as genderqueer, and states that 'queer porn

doesn't usually tag like mainstream porn does, which is why that's where I feel most comfortable' (2013, 277). Contrasting the obsession with labels of mainstream pornography with the diversity of queer porn, Lee concludes that 'there is too much to categorize, boxes fly out of the window' (ibid.).

As the comments by Lee illustrate, the emphasis on the authentic sexuality of the performers in alternative pornography is not only directed at the repetitiveness and predictability of mainstream pornography, as well as its normativity, but also extends to a critique of the fetishization of marginalised bodies and identities, with alternative pornography instead prioritising self-definition, self-sexualisation, and sexual autonomy. For instance, Tobi Hill-Meyer focuses on the representation of trans women in mainstream pornography and argues that 'with rare exceptions, trans women are not cast in any genre of mainstream porn (gonzo, features, girl/girl, and so on) except 'tranny/shemale porn,' the derogatory phrase used to market trans women in the mainstream industry,' and states that:

> Mainstream producers have a very specific list of conventions that they expect their 'shemale' performers to follow. These include wearing makeup and high heels, shaving one's legs, appearing traditionally feminine, getting and keeping a strong erection, ejaculating, and either penetrating someone with your genitals or being penetrated (2013, 157)

Describing her own experiences of working in mainstream porn, Hill-Meyer argues that mainstream porn producers 'sacrifice authenticity for conventions' and states that 'mainstream sex work requires that the work conform to someone else's desires rather than express their own' (ibid.). Taking her own dissatisfaction with the adult industry as a motivation to start producing her own pornography, which seeks to capture something of the authentic experience of gender and sexuality, Hill-Meyer states that 'there has to be an audience that values diversity over cookie-cutter scenes, pleasure over fluids, and authenticity over façade—it must exist because that is the kind of porn my friends and I wanted to watch' (ibid.).

Whereas Lee and Hill-Meyer focus on the representation of trans and genderqueer people in pornography, others have addressed the problematic representation of race and ethnicity in mainstream pornography. For instance, Miller-Young has written extensively on the racial hierarchy that structures mainstream pornography, both on the level of representation, referring to the 'mythic racialized hypersexuality of its black female performers'—and the process of production, referring, among other things, to the discrepancy in monetary compensation between black and white performers (2013, 111; see also 2014). Thus, whereas mainstream pornography features people of colour mostly as a way of appealing to a racialised fantasy,

which is geared towards a white male audience, the desire for authenticity in alternative pornography also extends to an investment to represent people of colour on their own terms, with Houston not only emphasising the importance of creating sexual imagery that differs from the fetishized and exoticized representations of race and ethnicity in mainstream pornography, but also referring to producers themselves, stating that 'there is power in creating images, and for a women of color and a queer to take that power … I don't find it exploitative; I think it is necessary ('About Shine Louise Houston', n.d.).'[40]

Moving beyond its contrast to the artificiality of mainstream pornography, authenticity in queer pornography is also connected to its ability to function as a site for self-representation and self-sexualisation, also affecting the relationship between this imagery and its target audience, as evidenced by the queer porn site *IndiePornRevolution.com,* which presents itself as porn 'by queers, for queers'. This particular configuration of authenticity can be traced back to the early days of dyke pornography in the 1980s, with Suzie Bright describing the initial motivation for producing pornography aimed at their community as follows: 'At *On Our Backs,* we were inventing everything from scratch […] how about making videos of real butches and femmes and punks, people who looked like us, out dykes with real faces, having sex like real women do? Let's do it!' (2013, 33). Additionally, in her short history of lesbian pornography, Heather Butler argues that the subgenre of dyke pornography can be characterised by its attempts to 'authenticate lesbian sexuality through representation, as well as interpellate the potential lesbian viewer' (2004, 165). In this way, dyke pornography differs significantly from the 'fake' representation of lesbianism in mainstream pornography, where it typically functions as the 'the lesbo-jelly in the hetero-donut' (174). Butler describes several strategies adopted by dyke porn to appeal to a sense of authenticity, including DIY cinematography, locations, and the representation of butch/femme dynamics and dildo play. Finally, she discusses how companies like Fatale Media and SIR Videos co-opt an already existing dyke community in San Francisco, where the 'authentic dyke presence is portrayed as a little slice of reality predicated on a pre-existing dyke cosmos already in full orbit' (2004, 186), a point that is corroborated by Jackie Strano, one of the producers of SIR Videos, who states that 'we think of our lesbian movies as love letters to San Francisco' (2015, 173). This emphasis on existing communities is also part of the Crash Pad Series website, which is described as the 'Bay Area hotbed of queer sexuality.' According to Butler, then, what proves most compelling about dyke porn—and this statement

[40] Another example is the workshop 'Reclaiming My Image', which was organised by porn performers and producers Jasco Viefhues, Bishop Black, and Lina Bembe during the Berlin Porn Film Festival of 2017, which focused on ways of overcoming stereotypes and gaining access to the means of production for POC.

can be extended to contemporary queer pornography as well—'is the attempt to create a fantasy of authenticity—utopian in scope, yet strangely admirable, always optimistic, and almost believable' (2004, 189).

In her chapter on queer online pornographies, Julie Levin Russo discusses the different types of realness that pornography appeals to in order to secure its privileged relation to the real (2007). In particular, Russo refers to the 'realness of social context' in queer pornographies, in addition to a more widely shared realness of production, representation, and reception (239). Russo assesses this kind of 'contextual realness' as the most productive form, as it relates to queer pornographies understood as 'a project to intervene, through porn, in the broader socio-political field of gendered sexuality' (248). She states:

> When the regulation of pornography becomes a means of defining and policing sexual subcultures, the production of pornography becomes an important means of self-defining identity and community. This is the most significant sense in which 'real' queer porn is valuable and politically vital project: rather than allowing the anti-porn forces to monopolize the interpretation of the real in sexuality and 'deviance,' queer porn strategically reclaims the label 'real' for images that are connected in their production and consumption to material networks and collective experiences (248-249).

Despite the fact that queer pornography makes use of some of the same aesthetic qualities and iconography as amateur pornography, then, the function and effect of this expression of realness and authenticity is very different, as it less concerned with a voyeuristic interest in the ordinary and the mundane, with the viewer positioned as a Peeping Tom looking in on the everyday lives of ordinary people, and more with aspirations of recognition, affirmation, and community-building. If Russo argues for the political viability of the real in queer pornography, this does not mean that she believes that this imagery is necessarily any more accurate or truthful than the claims of realness and authenticity expressed by mainstream pornography; rather she describes 'contextual realness' as a configuration of 'a strategic real that is mean to participate in the protean dynamics of community and identity building, not a pre-given real that appears transparently in the image' (249). In describing realness as something that can be used strategically, Russo's argument echoes some of the arguments put forward during the feminist realist debates, where feminist scholars and filmmakers describe their investment in cinematic realism as a political tool in the face of structural oppression. This understanding of queer pornography as a form of identity and community building is also expressed in the prevalence of the description of queer porn as a form of documentation, for instance by Lee, who states:

> I really love sharing my sexuality and the love I have with others on screen. I also value having this documentation — like a scrapbook but even better! In addition, for queers, there's very little representation (or authenticity) of our sexuality. So being a part of pornography for me is a radical thing. Bringing our sexuality to the screen is a chance to share with one another, to educate, to validate our life! For so many of us it is terrifying to come to terms with our sexuality. It's not well-documented, it's not reflected in media, it's not taught in schools, it's often shamed and hidden and criminalized. So to have visible pleasure is an extremely empowering thing ('An Interview with Jiz Lee, 2010).

I will go into this documentary function of queer pornography in the following chapter, where I connect it to the utopian quality of queer pornography and its status as an archive of feelings. Before I do so, however, I engage with some of the critiques of authenticity and conclude with a discussion of the use of self-reflexivity and visual irony in *BED PARTY*.

### 2.2.3 Manufacturing Realness

From its initial expression in the dyke porn of the 1980s and 1990s to it manifestation in contemporary queer pornography, the desire for authenticity in alternative pornography has often been discussed as contributing to a more ethical process of production and consumption, as opposed to the 'fast-food' attitude of mainstream pornography, with Madison Young stating that 'within the feminist movement we have clung to the terms "authentic" as a consistent ethical ingredient in what makes feminist porn, well, feminist' (2015, 187). However, others have treated claims of authenticity in alternative pornography with more scepticism, arguing that the demand for authenticity merely replaces one set of norms with another. As early as 1990, Cherry Smyth offers a critique of the claims of authenticity in dyke pornography, which she accuses of adopting a 'false realism,' resulting in 'badly constructed work' with 'poor direction, acting and cinematography limiting what it can ultimately achieve' (157). Rather than attributing to the DIY aesthetics of dyke porn an inherent authenticity, Smyth argues that it merely attests to a lack of skill and expertise, which prohibits the filmmakers from creating work that is truly creative and transformative. Beyond these aesthetic concerns, Smyth also refers to the representational politics associated with the demand for authenticity. Specifically, she points to the prevalence of female ejaculation in dyke porn, stating that the representation of such practices as 'real' or 'authentic' to lesbian sexuality can result in feelings of anxiety on the part of the lesbian viewer, with these acts 'presented as a visual goal, which we must strive for, thereby creating inadequacy in the lesbian viewer who have never achieved such an awe-inspiring feat' (156). Written during the first wave of feminist and dyke pornography, the kind of normativity Smyth describes seems to have strengthened in more recent iterations of alternative pornography, rather than diminished, with the growing popularity of queer

pornography, resulting in a new queer porn aesthetics and normativity, complete with its own porn stars and set of tropes and conventions. Moreover, with the majority of the performers in alternative pornography still white, thin, and able-bodied, the desire for authenticity has not prevented the exclusion of certain bodies and sexualities. For instance, Hill-Meyer writes about the slow inclusion of trans women in feminist and queer pornography, attributing this lack of representation to 'the unique intersection of transphobia and misogyny called transmisogyny' (2013, 158). A similar tendency is noted by Steinbock, who states that 'the trans pornographic ideal appearing in most queer porn has become mainly aligned with either transmasculine or post-operative transfeminine bodies' and refers to the so-called 'cotton ceiling' in queer erotic communities, arguing that 'a new queer normativity set by porn conventions continues to exclude certain forms of trans sexuality' (2014b, 154).

Additionally, critics have pointed to the way in which the appeal to authenticity in alternative pornography has come to function more as a marketing tool and generic signifier than as a reliable indicator of the ethics of production and the treatment of the performers. Understood in this way, claims of authenticity allow pornographers to tap into new markets and reach new audiences, with authenticity comprised of primarily an issue of taste (Attwood 2012; Smith 2004). Similarly, in her work on authenticity and porn work, Heather Berg argues that the celebration of authenticity in alternative pornography points to 'an undercurrent of classicism,' as the explicit rejection of the 'offensive features of mainstream production' make feminist and queer pornography appear as a 'respectable upmarket alternative' (2017, 680). Moreover, if the desire for authenticity in alternative pornography creates 'an illusion of less manufacturing,' according to Berg, this illusion 'has particular currency when considered alongside sex-worker stigma and attendant anxieties around purchasing sexual products and services,' stating that 'there is an air of ethical consumerism in seeking out authentic porn. The shame of selling and buying sex is not quite as heavy, perhaps, when performers appear to be there "not just for the money"' (674). For audiences who feel excluded by the address of mainstream pornography, the demand for authenticity serves as a stamp of approval, marking the consumption of sexual imagery not only as socially acceptable but even beneficial and politically progressive. Opposing the view that claims of authenticity automatically make for a more ethical product, Berg complicates the notion 'that there is such a thing as authentic sexuality and that authenticity is necessarily a social and political good' (669). Rather, Berg describes the demand for authenticity in alternative pornography as a form of emotional and intimate labour, and accounts for the different ways in which authenticity is manufactured and produced. Berg

points out that 'the 'discourse of authenticity can obscure matters of the material,' effacing some of the labour politics and worker's rights that lie at the heart of the production of authenticity in alternative pornography (680), with the demand for authenticity in alternative pornography actually requiring additional work, while typically paying less than mainstream pornography. Echoing the criticism previously expressed by anti-realist feminist scholars, Berg refers to the ideological erasure that occurs when the pornographic image is presented as unmediated and states that the discourse of authenticity erases the status of workers as *workers* (2015, 29). Rather than contributing to a more ethical product, then, Berg argues that 'from a critical perspective we can see management and consumer's perceived entitlement to workers' "authentic" self as symptomatic of the process by which late capitalism demands access to every part of workers' time, bodies, and affects' (27).

In recent years, a growing group of performers and filmmakers have shared similar concerns regarding the demand for authenticity in alternative pornography. For instance, Arabelle Raphael states that 'the emphasis on authenticity in feminist porn can be problematic. It erases the fact that performing is labor' (2014), whereas Siouxsie Q refers to the way in which authenticity functions as a marketing tool in alternative pornography, stating that 'I'm beginning to wonder if 'authentic' is just another genre of porn, like 'MILF' or 'casting couch,' that places performers in a box for marketability' (2014). Although Q argues that feminist pornography not always accurately represents the actual desires and fantasies of the performers, especially when they are deemed too transgressive or off-putting to the target audience, she does not necessarily find this a problem, stating: 'Performing is a job and I certainly don't need every scene to be the hottest event of my life in order to deliver an engaging performance that can be read as "authentic"' (ibid.). Furthermore, Gala Vanting points to the problematic relation between authenticity and ethics, as she describes how signifiers of authenticity can be easily coopted by companies wanting to cash in on the increased interest in alternative pornographies, without necessarily taking on board the ethical concerns that inform the desire for authenticity in feminist and queer pornography (2013). Vanting assesses how 'realness' and 'authenticity' have become tropes of their own, complete with its own set of 'repetitive visual, verbal, and auditory signifiers,' and discusses how authenticity 'can be manufactured, packaged, and sold, with or without the willingness of the performer,' drawing on her own experiences of working for websites that market themselves as being all about 'genuine, unscripted, natural orgasm.' What these accounts by producers and performers illuminate is the way in which the ethical production of pornography is not something that can be read from the screen or determined

through markers of authenticity. Moreover, conflating a certain representation of authenticity with ethical pornography runs the risk of policing which sexual representations, fantasies, and desires are deemed 'authentic', 'appropriate' and 'morally acceptable,' and which are 'fake', 'exploitative' and 'morally objectionable.'

Increasingly, performers and producers have developed a set of industrial standards that foregrounds the ethical production and consumption of pornography. For instance, in her opinion piece 'Ethical Porn Starts When We Pay for It,' Lee argues that 'paying for porn is the most direct way to ensure key ethical production values' and states that 'to be honest, the only time I've ever felt exploited, as a performer, is when my work is pirated' (2015). Moreover, performers and producers also have become more vocal about their opposition to the differentiation between mainstream pornography and alternative pornography along the lines of ethics, with many performers working in both industries and pointing towards an ethics of consumption that moves beyond an easy conflation of 'good' and 'ethical' because 'authentic' alternative pornography, on the one hand, and 'bad' and 'exploitative' because 'raunchy' mainstream pornography, on the other hand. Much of the investment in ethics on the part of producers has been focused on labour standards that improve the conditions of the performers. However, these efforts cannot necessarily be seen on the screen. For instance, Zahra Stardust writes about ethics of production as a form of 'sex-worker activism through creating performer-centred spaces and pioneering best-practice labour standards' and describes how production companies like Sensate Film are developing an 'ethics of care,' by offering performers a high level of control and choice, with formal directors playing 'the role of facilitator,' listing performers as directors and writers in the credits, and offering performers 'joint ownership of the final product, ongoing royalties, or content share, performers gain more control over not just their representation but its revenue' (2015). Despite the apparent radicalism of its DIY aesthetics, Stardust argues that, for the most part, queer pornographies are integral to capitalism, rather than opposed to it, and posits that 'if we want to serve, empower and benefit our vibrant communities, and use porn as medium to do so, then a shift towards collective ownership of the product, profit and decision-making is a way to ensure that no-one is left behind. Bring on the worker-owned DIY porno cooperatives!' (2017).

In her artist statement, feminist pornographer Vex Ashley argues against the emphasis on authenticity in alternative pornography, expressing a similar awareness of the artificiality of the image as previously expressed by documentary filmmakers, for instance when she states that 'sex on film is dishonest like anything on film is dishonest. Even without post-production,

the camera frames, manipulates, and corrects. Images have no authenticity' (2016, 188). However, Ashley also expresses a more principled objection to authenticity, positing that 'there is value in fantasy' (190), and argues that the demand for authenticity in alternative pornography restricts the creativity and sexual expression of the filmmakers:

> To eradicate artifice altogether is to give up the idea that ethical sex can be anything and say anything other than un-curated documentation. Instead of rejecting fantasy and performance, it can be expanded; more voices, more ideas, exploring the potential of sex on film in both a more realistic and allegorical way. Making more exciting and varied work possible, rather than simply swapping the constraints of tradition and misogyny for the constraints of the assumed 'authentic' (ibid.).

From a slightly different perspective, Houston also argues against the applicability and usefulness of authenticity in pornography, focusing specifically on queer pornography. Like Ashley, Houston presents a similar awareness of the artificiality of the filmic image, with the notion that the camera can straightforwardly capture reality striking her as incredibly naïve (2014, 118). More importantly, however, Houston argues that the notion of authenticity is antithetical to queer as an anti-normative concept, which seeks to resist practices of labelling and categorisation in favour of a more fluid understanding of identity, gender, and sexuality, stating that 'part of our joy in the work that we do is the chaos we hope we're throwing in the face of any idea that sexuality and gender are a fixed or predetermined inner essence, as if the functions of our holes are inscribed on our DNA' (ibid.). Rather than appropriating pornography as a way of discovering 'real' sexuality, then, Houston proposes that pornography might be utilised as a 'queer discourse of sexuality,' where representations do not offer the 'genuine reality of queer sexuality' but rather account for its 'incredible potential,' stating:

> I see our pornography as offering sites for self-invention for performers and viewers, arenas for people to explore different and queerer ways of experiencing their sexuality, and a space for queer possibilities to thrive. Queerness in this sense is not who we are but what we can do and what we make together. Our pornography in this sense is queer love on screen (119).

Houston's artist statement shares an emphasis on relationality, mutability, and love as the expression of trans sexuality in the film *Trans Entities* with which I opened this chapter. However, rather than referring to a singular relationship, Houston is highlighting the relationship between queer communities and pornography, as a privileged form of documentation, which nevertheless needs not necessarily rely on notions of authenticity or realness. Indeed, a film like *Trans Entities* precisely points to a configuration of erotic relations that do not depend on such fixed identity markers, an argument that is highlighted in Steinbock's analysis of this film. In the following chapter, I discuss the relationship between

queerness and fantasy, in which pornography can be understood as a locus of world-making, expressing a form of utopianism that is very different from the one typically associated with pornography. Thus, while I seek to affirm queer pornography as a form of documentation, insofar as it is wrapped up with issues of recognition and self-definition, I argue that this documentation need not depend on evidentiary strategies such as indexicality or authenticity in order to substantiate its relation to the real and can more productively be analysed in relation to concepts like fantasy and utopia. Before I do so, however, I discuss how filmmakers themselves have problematised the desire for authenticity in alternative pornography, ironically by incorporating documentary conventions, turning to the short film *BED PARTY*, co-directed by Shine Louise Houston and Shae Voyeur.

## 2.3 'We Don't Need a Pop-Shot:' Resisting Authenticity in *Bed Party*

> *BED PARTY* flips the porno script with a 'Porno Vérité' documentary style look behind the private doors of porn's public performers. Well-known within the kink community, Eden Alexander and Sebastian Keys have found love and beautifully sordid sex in their queer and pansexual relationship. Director Shine Louise Houston and co-director Shae Voyeur break down the fourth wall with direct on-camera performer interactions. The result is an all access and unfiltered glimpse into the personal life of the couple. When's the last time you saw a loving exchange of anal fisting and multiple orgasms? Puppy play, foot jobs, squirting, cum swapping and loads of dirty talk are woven together with an honest yet playful tenderness. It's in the comfort of their own home where they express a deep intimacy and appreciation for each other ('BED PARTY', n.d.).

In 2014, the short film *BED PARTY* was released, winning the 'Best Boygasm Award' at the Feminist Porn Awards of that year. Looking at the marketing blurb from the PinkLabel.tv website, the premise of the film seems consistent with the aura of authenticity described in the previous section, with the text referring to the short film as the portrayal of a real-life couple, contrasting the authenticity of the sexual encounter displayed in *BED PARTY* with the performance of sex that characterises their work as professional porn performers, with Eden featuring in fetish porn whereas Sebastian works primarily in commercial gay pornography. Opposing the publicity of their onscreen personae as porn performers with the sex they themselves say to enjoy in the privacy of their own bedroom, the documentary style adopted by the film promises to deliver unfettered access to the authentic pleasures of queer straight sex, which in this case includes anal fisting, rose budding, squirting, puppy play, and cum swapping. Whereas the representation of these practices might appear consistent with the preoccupation with a particular mode of spectacular and hyperbolic 'nastiness' in contemporary pornography, in the case of *BED PARTY* these non-normative sex acts are

presented within the context of an intimate and loving encounter between two real-life lovers, with Sebastian stating during the interview that "the type of sex we always have, just in our normal bedroom and everything, is a lot dirtier than most porns out there." On first glance, then, the use of documentary features in *BED PARTY* shares some important characteristics with *Trans Entities*, insofar as the film combines interviews with sex scenes. Although the depiction of sex in *BED PARTY* is largely consistent with the visual style of pornography, adhering to the principle of maximum visibility, the sequencing of sexual practices and positions diverts from the normative porn script of mainstream pornography, encapsulating the promise that the film depict the 'authentic' sexuality of the performers, and in doing so, makes visible and affirms queer pleasures. However, there are also some important differences to note between *Trans Entities* and *BED PARTY*, referring in particular to the self-reflexivity and use of visual irony in the latter film.[41] Below, I use documentary theory as a way of analysing these particular features of *BED PARTY*, proposing that they allow for a different tone and attitude with regards to the documentary impulse of pornography and the status of authenticity in alternative pornography.

In his typology of documentary modes of representation, Nichols differentiates between the expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive mode of documentary (1991). Although Nichol's typology has been widely criticised for its implied chronology and rigid distinction between different documentary modes, I argue that his theory proves helpful in making sense of the ways that *BED PARTY* incorporates and combines documentary techniques in order to foreground a commentary of pornography as a record of the real.[42] The opening sequence of the film is consistent with the interactive mode, which Nichols proposes 'stresses images of testimony or verbal exchange' (44), and often 'revolves around the form known as the interview' (47). After the opening shot, which is almost spoofy in its instalment of actuality, including a caption that marks the date and time of the encounter, the opening sequence follows the structure of a documentary portrait, with the camera gliding over photographs and other personal belongings in the apartment, intercut with images of Eden and Sebastian hanging out in their apartment, cuddling and kissing, as the couple reflects on their sexual identities and relationship in the voice-over (Fig. 17). In contrast to expository mode, in which interviews consist primarily of expert testimonies, Nichols describes how the interactive mode construes

[41] I take this notion of 'visual irony from DeRoo (2014).
[42] One of the most explicit critics of Nichols' typology of documentary modes of representation is Bruzzi (2006).

interviews as pieces of testimonies, 'rooted in individual perspectives or personal recollections' (56). Overall, the interviews included in the first half of the film, work to introduce the couple to the audience, familiarising them with the life Eden and Sebastian share together. Extending from the narration of their relationship and their sex life in the voice-over to the subsequent interviews, this part of the film introduces 'a sense of partialness, of *situated* presence and *local* knowledge that derives from the actual encounter of filmmaker and other' (44, emphasis original). Through the technique of the interview, *BED PARTY* presents its subjects as three-dimensional beings, reflecting their thoughts, impressions, feelings, and memories, with the rhetoric of documentary adding precisely the type of psychological and emotional colouring previously denied by Krzywinska in her discussion of hardcore pornography. As discussed in the section above, however, this interest in the personal lives of the performers might be considered consistent with the imperative of the real that makes for desire for authenticity in alternative pornography.

Overall, the tone of the scene evokes a kind of joyful innocence and almost sentimental romanticism, as the naked couple is depicted jumping up and down the bed to a score of light classical music (Fig. 18). Nichols uses the term 'social actors' to refer to the subjects of documentary as a way of stressing 'the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others; this can be construed as a performance' (42). In *BED PARTY*, Eden and Sebastian actively perform their love in front of the camera, with the camera zooming in on the faces of Eden and Sebastian as they eye each other adoringly during the interviews, alternating descriptions of their mutual appreciation of non-normative sex with exclamations of love, with Eden stating that "he's just a playground and I love to get on every single ride," a performance that becomes even more prominent—as well as problematic—in the second half of the film. *BED PARTY* not only focuses on the dynamics between Eden and Sebastian but also foregrounds the relation between subjects and filmmakers, as interactive texts 'draw their social actors into direct encounter with the filmmakers' (47). During the interview, this encounter is structured as a formal component of documentary filmmaking, with the aural presence of the filmmakers acknowledged when they pose the questions from behind the camera and the couple looking straight into the camera as they answer (Fig. 19). At other times, however, this encounter between filmmakers and subjects is incorporated as a way of drawing attention to the production process itself, addressing the 'ethics or politics of encounter' (56). As will become clear, the politics of encounter becomes a primary concern of *BED PARTY* in the final

moments of the film, but first, I turn to the use of self-reflexive elements in the first half of the film

Presented as a Porno Vérité, the opening sequence of *BED PARTY* also incorporates self-reflexive features that reveal the process of production and convey to the viewer that they are watching a particular artifice, a construction of the real. Although Nichols himself does not differentiate between the French tradition of cinema vérité and the American school of direct cinema in his account of the different modes of documentary representation, this difference becomes significant when accounting for the use of self-reflexivity and visual irony in *BED PARTY*, and the contrast between the first and second half of the film. Albeit often conflated, Plantinga argues that there are some important methodological differences between the two traditions of documentary filmmaking, arguing that 'cinema vérité often takes an active role in provoking the events it films, whereas direct cinema aims to remain as unobtrusive as possible in recording a subject' (1997, 116). Many films that are part of cinema vérité 'openly flaunt their constructedness, are highly reflexive, exhibit obtrusive techniques, and openly influence the profilmic event' (ibid.). Rather than attempting to mirror reality or present an objective recording of a spontaneous event, these films 'may be highly reflexive and may take an idiosyncratic or ironic perspective towards their subject' (117). Whereas during the interviews, the presence of the filmmakers makes for an appropriate component of documentary filmmaking, at other moments in the first part of *BED PARTY*, acknowledgement of their presence is more intrusive, with the filmmakers clearly drawing attention to themselves, such as when Houston follows Sebastian around with the camera while filming (Fig. 20). Both the aural and visual presence of the filmmakers, demonstrates an interest in foregrounding the process of filmmaking itself, such as when the filmmakers ask Eden and Sebastian to look straight into the camera, demonstrating the construction of the pro-filmic event for the purpose of construction, supported by the inclusion of film equipment in the shot—showing cables, microphones, and lighting stands.

From the outset, then, *BED PARTY* is as much a film about the making of a porn film as an authentic portrayal of the relationship between Eden and Sebastian.[43] As mentioned before, there are other pornographies that incorporate self-reflexive elements, with Dyer pointing to examples of gay pornography (2004), whereas Lehman discusses his feature in relation to gonzo porn (1999). Both Dyer and Lehman argue that self-reflexivity in pornography works to

[43] This is the most significant way in which *BED PARTY* differs from the docu-porn of *Trans Entities*, which offers little acknowledgement of the presence of the filmmakers and process of production.

further reinforce the eroticisation of the real; however, with regards to *BED PARTY*, I argue that the intrusive—and often humorous—presence of the filmmakers works to undermine the promise of the real in pornography, demonstrating how reality is selected and altered by the presence of the film crew and structured by the possibilities and limitations of the film technology. In particular, I propose that what separates the self-reflexivity of *BED PARTY* from these other pornographic examples, is the authorial commentary and ironic stance discussed by Plantinga as part of the tradition of cinéma verité, thereby actively complicating the transparency of the pornographic image. This function of irony is also noted by Nichols in his discussion of the reflexive mode of documentary representation, when he states that the use of irony—together with satire and parody—allows for a tone and attitude that provokes 'a heightened awareness of previously taken-for-granted style, genre, or movement,' thereby undermining the 'solidity and sobriety of documentary' (74). In the reflexive documentary, Nichols argues, 'we can now see or hear the filmmaker also engage in metacommentary, speaking to us less about the historical world […] than the process of representation itself' (56), resulting in an awareness on the part of the audience that 'every representation, however imbued with documentary significance, remains a fabrication' (57). In contrast to the interactive documentary, which draws attention to the encounter between filmmaker and social actor, the reflexive documentary expresses a concern with the encounter between audience and text, with the latter working to 'make the familiar strange and draw attention to the terms and conditions of viewing' (65). Describing the reflexive mode as 'the least naïve and the most doubtful about the possibilities of communication and expression,' Nichols concludes that 'realist access to the world, the ability to provide persuasive evidence, the possibility of indisputable argument, the unbreakable bond between an indexical image and that which is it represents—all these notions prove suspect' (60).

Incorporating a playful and often parodic appropriation of documentary techniques, *BED PARTY* cites the most recognizable features of documentary filmmaking, not to raise doubt about the sincerity of documentary representation, but rather to comment on the claims of authenticity that lie at the core of the genre of pornography. Complicating the promise of pornography that it offers the audience unmediated access to 'real' sex, the utilisation of self-reflexive components contributes to an emphasis on the artificiality of the pornographic image, rather than the documentary image. Thus, if Russo argues that 'there is always an ideological erasure at play when images are described as unmediated' (2007, 249), the authorial commentary of *BED PARTY* precisely attacks this ideological erasure, problematising the

promise that pornography offers unfettered access to the 'real' through the depiction of 'real' sex and the indexical quality of the image. As such, the authorial commentary of *BED PARTY* has more in common with the feminist anti-realist position outlined in the first section of this chapter than with the eroticisation of the real described by Dyer and Lehman. Even though *BED PARTY* incorporates elements of the interactive documentary, most significantly the convention of the interview, it is not the relationship between filmmaker and social actors, which characterises this first half of the film, but rather the ironic slant and authorial commentary, foregrounding the encounter between text and audience. At several points, the self-reflexivity of the film actively interferes with the performance of 'authentic' love by Sebastian and Eden, with crewmembers disrupting moments of the couple kissing and embracing when they barge into the frame, accompanied by the sounds of the filmmakers deliberating from behind the camera. Additionally, during the interviews, the duration of the shot is often extended so that it captures some of the awkward silences and moments of insecurity, which are regularly part of the recording process, but which are typically excluded from the final product, allowing for a discrepancy between the performance of authenticity by Eden and Alexander, and the authorial commentary that is expressed on the level of film form. Effectuated through the peculiar combination of light classical music, self-reflexive imagery of the production process, and the portrayal of the couple's 'authentic' relationship, the film's ironic slant is communicated from the text to the audience, but is not shared by the couple themselves, who are kept out of the loop. Self-reflexivity and ironic commentary take a backseat once the sex commences; however, the issue of authenticity returns all the more potently towards the end of the film, through a focus on the ethics of encounter between the filmmakers and the social actors.

Once the interviews are done, the couple moves into the bedroom, where the interactive and self-reflexive mode of representation is replaced with a style of filmmaking that is more consistent with the characteristics of direct cinema and the observational mode of documentary representation. Plantinga states:

> Direct cinema practitioners remain unobtrusive in filming a scene. The purpose is to represent a subject, as much as possible, apart from the mediating subjectivity of the filmmaker. The direct cinema filmmaker refuses to arrange the profilmic event, and in postproduction avoids use of the omniscient voice-over narrator or nondiegetic music […] Direct cinema implies a method of filmmaking, a stance toward representing reality, and an attitude towards the spectator (1997, 117).

That this shift occurs once the sex commences, however, is not surprising for this style of documentary filmmaking is most directly associated with the style of filmmaking in pornography. Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the documentary aura of pornography as depending to a great extent on the presentation of the filmic image as a record of the real. While the use of handheld camerawork and synchronous sound in *BED PARTY* contributes to the experience of being a 'fly on the wall,' which makes up a familiar characteristic of observational cinema, these techniques are also central to much contemporary pornography, and the extensive use of closeups of genitalia and other body parts in *BED PARTY* clearly demonstrate its reliance on pornographic conventions when depicting explicit sex, with the style of filmmaking adhering to the principle of maximum visibility (Williams 1999). During the sex scene, the acknowledgement of the presence of the filmmakers is sidestepped in favour of a mode of filming that 'stresses the non-intervention of the filmmaker' (Nichols 1991, 38), Perfectly suited to the objectives of pornography, and contrasting the interactive mode of documentary representation, observational documentary depends on the work of realism and 'hinges on the presence of the filmmakers or authoring agency as an absence, an absent presence whose physical presence remains not only unseen but also, for the most part, unacknowledged' (43). In doing so, the observational mode of representation allows for a different set of audience expectations, as it conveys 'the sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world,' with the audience expecting 'to have the ability to take the position of an ideal observer' (ibid.).

Initially, the shift to an observational style of filmmaking in the latter part of *BED PARTY* reinforces the impression of reality that structures the genre of pornography more generally, omitting the self-reflexivity and irony characterising the opening sequence of the film, and appealing instead to the experience of immediacy and presence afforded by the transparency of the image. Moreover, on a representational level, the sex scene also complies with the desire for authenticity shaping alternative pornography, as Eden immediately and enthusiastically starts fisting Sebastian, privileging the expression of the 'authentic' sexuality of the performers over the predictability and goal-oriented narration of sex that characterises mainstream pornography. At this point in the scene, the sex is high in energy and is accompanied by a lot of giggling and intense eye contact. The scene is also characterised by extensive verbal exchange, consisting of affirmations of love and dirty talk. Halfway through the sex scene, however, the mood changes and the awkwardness and discomfort introduced in the opening sequence of the film find their way into the bedroom. Whereas in the opening sequence these

negative feelings were mostly the result of the process of recording, here, they are evoked instead through the performance of sex, drawing attention to the limits of authenticity and complicating the 'expectation of transparent access' (43). After the initial exuberance, the tone of the scene changes when Eden ejaculates and starts giving Sebastian a footjob, encouraging him to come on her face. With Sebastian apparently unable to climax, the giggles and talking slowly fade away and are replaced with silence, all the more noticeable due to the lack of extradiegetic music. At this point, Sebastian decides to take over and begins to masturbate with his eyes closed in apparent concentration, with Eden staring up at him. The discomfort becomes almost palpable until finally the presence of the filmmakers is acknowledged once more, and for the first time since the couple entered the bedroom, when Houston tells Sebastian from behind the camera that "also, for this project, you're, like, not obligated to pop, like, if…," referring to mandatory male cum shot in mainstream pornography. However, Sebastian quickly interjects, blaming his tired legs and stating "I'm there," after which he lies down on the mattress and continues to masturbate diligently, with Eden looking on from the sideline (Fig. 21). Finally, Sebastian feels that he is close to climaxing and urges Eden to take over, ejaculating in her mouth. With a clear look of relief, the original eye contact is restored as the couple smiles at each other as Eden drops the cum into his mouth. Marking the end of the scene, the camera turns to Houston, who is standing next to the bed and puts up her thumb, before the camera cuts to Voyeur, looking equally pleased (Fig. 22). As the credits start to roll, light classical music returns as we hear the directors commenting on the successful wrap of the film.

Whereas most of the sex scene complies with the standards of pornographic representation, the sudden interactive exchange between Houston and Sebastian brings to the fore the politics of encounter between filmmaker and subject. First introduced in the first part of the film, feelings of awkwardness and discomfort return with a vengeance in the sex scene, where they are not the result of self-reflexive editing or ironic commentary, but rather stem from the discrepancy between Sebastian's professionalism, on the one hand, and the desire for authenticity expressed by the filmmakers, on the other hand, allowing these negative affects to be shared by the filmmakers and the audience as well. This shift became particularly evident when I first saw the film at the Berlin Porn Film Festival, where the audience engaged regularly in laughter during the interviews, but became increasingly silent as the sex scene progressed, with the discomfort almost palpable to the extent that it became difficult to watch. Sebastian's insistence to climax, then, as a way of providing the kind of narrative conclusion and visual proof that has come to be associated with male external ejaculation, or the money shot, in mainstream

pornography, in this case is brought into direct tension with the objectives of the filmmakers and the expectations of the audience. With the investment in witnessing 'authentic' sex frustrated by Sebastian's insistence to 'perform,' the film raises questions about the status of authenticity, allowing the 'epistemological doubt' (61) associated by Nichols with the reflexive mode of representation to bleed into the actual depiction of sex, problematising not only the evidentiary status of the money shot, but also, and more importantly, the demand for authenticity in alternative pornography. That the 'confessional' status of the male cum shot—a convention that is often referred to when discussing the sexist nature of mainstream pornography—constitutes the central problem in this film about queer straight sex can be considered an irony in and of itself, but for the purpose of my discussion here, I am more interested in the way that Sebastian's apparent inability to accurately 'perform' the fantasy of authenticity, ironically, makes for the most authentic aspect of *BED PARTY*. Instead of functioning as an erotic stimulant, however, this experience of authenticity gives rise of awkwardness and discomfort, with the return of the score of light classical and the rolling of the credits offering a welcome relief from a representation of reality that might just be a little too close for comfort.

## Conclusion

Bracketed by discussions of the feature-length film *Trans Entities* and the short film *BED PARTY,* in this chapter, I have engaged with the category of queer docu-porn as a way of thinking through the documentary impulse of pornography, focusing specifically on the reinterpretation of 'real' sex in alternative pornography. In the first section of the chapter, I discussed how pornography is able to secure its privileged relation to 'reality,' first, by engaging with the indexical bond between image and pro-filmic event, and second, by looking at the role of cinematic realism. Drawing on the transparency of the image, the language of pornography promises the spectator unmediated access to 'the real thing,' with the bodies of the performers and the sexual action made available for visual scrutiny. Although the discourse of pornography relies heavily on the indexical quality of the image, I have argued that this in itself is not sufficient to qualify the sex depicted on screen as 'real,' with the verisimilitude of pornography instead relying on a variety of cinematic techniques and generic conventions. Because the impression of reality in pornography is not inherent to the medium of film, but rather is the outcome of a whole range of aesthetic, narrative, and representational choices, this also means that the credibility of the argument 'this *is* sex,' as presented by the discourse of pornography, is up for debate, with many alternative pornographers expressing dissatisfaction

with the version of the 'real' foregrounded by mainstream pornography. Mainstream pornography demonstrates a tremendous investment in the 'realness' of the physical act of sex, as a way of conveying to the spectator that they are watching 'actual' people having 'actual' sex. However, the evidentiary tactics deployed by mainstream pornography in order to convince the spectator that the sex depicted on screen is 'real' and not somehow fabricated, simulated, or faked, do not necessarily hold up when taking into account other types of film or subgenres of pornography. This does not mean that evidentiary tactics like the principle of maximum visibility and the convention of the money shot are of no concern in alternative pornography, and in Chapter 1, I explored some of the ways in which alternative pornography negotiates the demand for visual evidence and the conventions of mainstream pornography. What counts as 'realness' or 'authenticity,' then, varies from one type of pornography to the next and in the current landscape of proliferating pornographies, these claims have become even more convoluted and contradictory. Even when shared among different types of pornography, particular techniques can signify something completely different, with the utilization of handheld camerawork and low production standards in 'reality' genres like amateur and gonzo pornography associated with a sense of 'rawness' and appealing to the voyeuristic pleasure in looking at ordinary people having sex, whereas in queer pornography they appeal to a sense of radicalism by expressing more of a punk Do-It-Yourself attitude. Furthermore, in alternative pornography, emphasis is placed on the depiction of 'authentic' sexuality, which is often contrasted with the spectacular and hyperbolic rendition of 'fantastical' sex in mainstream pornography. In the second section of this chapter, I have discussed some of the criticisms that have been expressed with regards to the role of authenticity in alternative pornography. While I agree that claims of 'realness' and 'authenticity' can be taken up strategically, at this point in time, the appeal to authenticity in alternative pornography is often more debilitating than productive, as authenticity comes to function as a normative concept and is often conflated with a form of ethics, reducing legitimate concerns regarding the production and consumption of pornography to an issue of aesthetics. What makes *Trans Entities* successful, in my opinion, is the way in which the film strategically appropriates the solidity and sincerity of the documentary image, combining it with a pornographic style of filmmaking, as a way of documenting bodies, sexualities, intimacies, and experiences that refuse to be pinned down by categories of 'realness' and 'authenticity'. Whereas Dyer describes reflexivity in pornography as contributing to the excitement of pornography, by drawing attention to the way in which the production of the pornographic image requires people having sex in front of the camera, in *BED PARTY,* the incorporation of

cinematic techniques like self-reflexivity and visual irony allow for a more ambivalent stance towards the desire for authenticity, making for a far less comfortable viewing experience. Although much of the overall tone of film is humorous and lighthearted, as it parodies the rhetoric of documentary, it also raises some serious questions about the terms and conditions of alternative pornography, complicating the status of the image as a trace of the real and the tension between authenticity and performance. While the film does not provide any easy answers, I argue that the recent dismissal of authenticity has also obscured other possibilities for thinking about the role of alternative pornography as a form of documentation. In the following chapter, I return to this issue, by exploring other ways of engaging with the documentary impulse of queer pornography, without automatically reducing it to a question of 'realness' or 'authenticity.'

# 3 Queer Love:

# Fantasy and Utopian Longing

## Introduction

In *Annie Sprinkle's Herstory of Porn* (Sprinkle and Harlot, 1999), performance artist, sex educator, and former porn star Annie Sprinkle presents an overview of her career in porn. Not only does Sprinkle narrate her experiences in mainstream pornography during the 1970s and the 1980s, she also refers to her involvement in the development of alternative pornography, discussing her participation in the 'couples porn' of Candida Royalle as well as her own ventures into 'post-porn'.[44] In the final sequence of the film, Sprinkle invites her audience to make their own pornography, as a way of exploring their fantasies, and presents a little 'training film,' in which she explains and demonstrates the process of production. For one, Sprinkle suggests that the viewer might want to gather their friends as part of the crew and cast of performers, thereby evoking the sense of community discussed throughout this dissertation as a central component of the DIY ethos that guides much alternative pornography. However, she also explicitly refers to the necessity of an erotic theme around which to build the plot. Taking into consideration the familiar trope of the hot pizza delivery guy, as well as sex aliens from outer space, Sprinkle finally settles on an underwater mermaid theme. Throughout the training film, then, Sprinkle draws attention to the constructed nature of pornography, not only by foregrounding the technicalities and interruptions that inform its production process, making use of the some of the same reflexive features displayed in *BED PARTY*, including shots of the crew standing around the performers (Fig. 23), but also by reinforcing the artificiality of pornography through the introduction of an elaborate fantasy scene, combining extravagant costumes, multiple extras dressed as lobsters, fishes, and mermaids, and lots of bubbles, with superimpositions of sea imagery, swirling cinematography and dreamy music (Fig. 24).

Despite Sprinkle's officious status as the godmother of feminist and queer pornography, and notwithstanding her own enthusiastic encouragement in the sequence's commentary, the fantastical staging of sex suggested by Sprinkle has not found much footing in contemporary alternative pornography, which typically relies on a more naturalistic staging of the

[44] For more on Sprinkle's post-porn, see Straayer (1996) and Williams (1993b).

performance of sex. Although some films have risen to the challenge, such as the alien porn fantasy *We Cum in Piece* (Trouble 2015) and the queer vampire porn *Enactone* (Deep 2016), for the most part, these fantastical renditions serve as the exceptions proving the rule, making up only a marginal part of feminist and queer pornography. Consequently, discussions of alternative pornography, by both theorists and practitioners, have consistently emphasised issues of realness and authenticity, a point explored at length in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I argue that this interest in the relationship between pornography and reality has come at the detriment of a complex and in-depth understanding of the role of fantasy in alternative pornography, giving little weight to the status of pornography as a form of escapist entertainment. Contrastingly, I engage with the relation between utopia and fantasy in queer pornography. Rather than presenting my claims in this chapter as oppositional to the previous chapter, however, I propose that these chapters should be read in tandem, as the documentary impulse and the utopian impulse of queer pornography often go hand in hand. In doing so, my argument also diverts from scholars like Aydemir, who focus on the oscillation of reality and fantasy. Rather than clearly demarcating the difference between the two, I propose that in queer pornography reality and fantasy become entangled to the extent that they no longer can be easily discerned.

Taking the documentary impulse of queer pornography as my starting point, in this chapter, I engage with the question of what exactly makes these films *queer*. Constituting a form of documentation, I argue that queer pornography positions the camera as a witness, testifying to those marginalised sexualities that have routinely been ignored and stigmatised, both within mainstream pornography and culture at large. Furthermore, I propose that queer pornography makes up 'an archive of feelings,' a term coined by Ann Cvetkovich in her study of trauma and sexuality in lesbian public cultures (2003). Her work brings to the fore how cultural production comes to function as a way of recording and preserving sexualities that have otherwise been routinely excluded from official history and institutionalised forms of remembering. Relying more on ephemera and the affective attachment to subcultural objects than factual evidence and official recording, these archives blur the distinction between escapist entertainment and historical artefact. Bringing to the fore a paradoxical knotting of past, present, and future, which has recently been discussed under the header of queer temporalities, I seek to examine how queer pornography gives way to what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as 'utopian longing' (2009), engaging in a process of world-making that relies as much on fantasy—understood as the not yet—as it does on reality—referring to the here and now. Through a close analysis of

the feature-length docu-porn *When We Are Together We Can Be Everywhere* (Östberg 2013), I demonstrate how queer pornography displaces the present tense of pornography with queer feelings of nostalgia and hope. Engaging with this body of literature will allow me to further tease out the recursive relationship between reality and fantasy that informs queer pornography.

In the first section, I propose that pornography occupies a complex and often seemingly contradictory cultural space, which involves both an insistence on reality and an appeal to fantasy. Specifically, I engage with the legacy of the Feminist Sex Wars, discussing its ongoing influence on contemporary debates on pornography. While notions of reality and fantasy play an important role in these discussions, they have typically been presented as oppositional and mutually exclusive, with anti-pornography feminists foregrounding the relationship between pornography and reality whereas anti-censorship and pro-sex feminists emphasise the role of fantasy. While I acknowledge the strategic value of prioritising one of these terms over the other, I argue that these oppositional claims do little to further our understanding of the entanglement and interplay of reality and fantasy in contemporary pornographies. Contrastingly, then, I assess how, in queer pornography, the mediation of the real becomes infused with fantasy at the same time that the representation of fantasy is sutured with reality. In the second section, I discuss the layering of documentary practices in *When We Are Together,* with the film combining a self-reflexive and performative attitude with subjective narration and poetic imagery. Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, I examine how the visual and narrative strategies of this film are consistent with a much wider and longer trajectory of queer (documentary) filmmaking. Adopting a style of filmmaking that is subjective, partial, and intimately involved with the subjects it seeks to represent, the appropriation of documentary conventions in *When We Are Together* works to undermine the credibility, objectivity, and neutrality typically associated with the documentary image, thereby troubling the demand for visual evidence that structures both the category of documentary and pornography. Affirming queer pornography as a form of documentation, in the final section, I discuss how *When We Are Together* complicates the confessional mode of pornography in favour of a practice of 'bearing witness' (Hallas 2009). In particular, I argue that *When We Are Together* can be considered an example of queer cultural production, not only because it represents queer sex or because the filmmakers identify as queer, but also—and more importantly—because it gives rise to a queer sensibility. Moving beyond an analysis of the politics of representation, I am particularly interested in the significance of its cinematic aesthetics. Specifically, I propose that the film displaces an emphasis on the real in

pornography with a queer utopian gesture. Comprising an archive of queer feelings, this function is not oppositional to the habitual status of pornography as a form of escapist entertainment; rather, it is integral it, as it affirms fantasy and imagination as tactics of resilience, which allow for ways of dealing with the present while at the same time expressing a desire to move beyond the here and now, developing alternative ways of being together.

## 3.1 Not a Love Story: The Feminist Sex Wars

### 3.1.1 The Documentation of Sexual Harm

In the previous chapter, I engaged with the status of pornography as a record of the real, relating it to the indexical bond between image and object, thereby highlighting the process of production, as well as the experience of presence, proximity, and participation, referring specifically to the relationship between image and spectator. Throughout the chapter, I positioned my argument primarily within the discipline of film and media studies, with my discussion of the connections between pornography and documentary indebted to a whole tradition of film and media theory dedicated to demonstrating how the promise of the real in film ultimately makes for a convoluted and ambiguous affair. Indeed, many critics have argued that this premise has become commonplace in the current media-saturated cultural landscape, with Susanna Paasonen stating that 'any first-year media studies student will point out that pornography hardly just "records" the acts performed for the camera' (2011, 80). However, this scepticism about the credibility of the filmic image has not always translated to the public discourse of pornography. For the purpose of this chapter, I focus specifically on feminist debates on pornography, arguing that the anti-pornography feminist theorisation of pornography relies strongly on the assumption that the filmic image constitutes some sort of evidentiary trace of the real. An example of this position is expressed by anti-pornography feminist academic and activist Gail Dines, who in a round-table discussion talks about the value of anti-porn slide shows, insisting that 'the key thing is to remind the audience that the women in pornography are real people, they're human. Because pornography isn't just a representation, it's a documentation: this was really done to someone's body' (2010, 19). Only after facilitator Karen Boyle intervenes by pointing to the status of pornography as representation, arguing that 'it's not a documentation of women's sexual desires,' Dines slightly amends her original argument, adding that:

> It is a documentation (these things are actually being done by and to the people on screen) but it's not a reflection of reality (so just because she says she likes it doesn't make it so). If you

> read the threads on discussion boards where the guys are talking about porn, they have a real investment in the idea that porn is depicting some kind of reality and will go to quite elaborate lengths to protect that (ibid.)

Ironically, her final statement about the far-reaching investment in pornography as the depiction of reality also offers a succinct description of the anti-pornography feminist argument itself, which constantly conflates the distance between representation and reality.[45] This argument can be traced back to the Feminist Sex Wars and is reanimated in contemporary feminist discussions of pornography, focusing on the dangers of porn addiction, the corrupting influence of pornography on young people, and the overall pornification of culture. In response, porn performers and producers have typically foregrounded the relation between pornography and fantasy, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, an approach that echoes the reaction of anti-censorship and pro-sex feminists at the time of the Feminist Sex Wars. With the origins of feminist and queer pornography coinciding with the height of the Feminist Sex Wars, and contemporary alternative pornography continuing to be informed by these debates, below I engage with some of these oppositional claims, focusing specifically on their utilisation of notions of reality and fantasy.

From the late 1970s onwards, pornography increasingly became the focal point of a series of highly divisive and polemic debates known as the Feminist Sex Wars, succeeding a period of wider discussion of the role of sexual politics within feminism, which covered a diverse range of topics, including sadomasochism, sex work, and butch-femme roles, among other things (i.e. Bronstein 2011; Duggan and Hunter 2006; Vance 1992).[46] Tracing the emergence of anti-pornography feminism and the subsequent reaction by its opponents, Carolyn Bronstein seeks to explain 'why pornography was dangerous and unsalvageable in the eyes of one group, yet worthy of consideration to the other' (2015, 59). She argues that discussions of pornography initially emerged out of a frustration with the period that preceded them, stating that 'by the mid-1970s, the sexual revolution was a source of disillusionment for many women who perceived expanded rights for men, but not for themselves' (60). Recognising 'sexuality as a powerful locus of male control' (61), Bronstein describes how feminists turned to sexuality as the root of female oppression, focusing particularly on the widespread threat of male sexual violence as a means of subjugating women. Combined with the exponential growth of the pornography industry around the same time, Bornstein argues that 'radical feminists connected

[45] For alternative philosophical accounts of contemporary anti-porn feminism, see Eaton (2007) and Langton (2009).
[46] Alternatively, these debates are known as the 'Sex Wars' and the 'Porn Wars.'

pornography with the theoretic critique of male violence and began to regard it with hatred and fear as a potent teaching tool of patriarchy, and a set of texts that oppressed women and denied their basic humanity' (64). This point that is further illustrated in Carol S. Vance's reflections on the period, in which she argues that 'pornography, according to its critics, was now the central engine of women's oppression, the major socializer of men, and the chief agent of violence against women' (1992, xix), adding that 'what was needed—a complex and nuanced discussion of sexuality, was reduced to a critique of pornography, as if all of women's experience could be found there, or as if female viewers even agreed about the meaning of what they saw' (xx).

Over the years, many scholars have pointed to the affective charge of the anti-pornography feminist rhetoric, with some critics suggesting that the usage of visceral and highly emotive language by anti-pornography feminists can be considered reminiscent of the sensationalism and titillation informing pornography itself (i.e. Kipnis 1996; Segal 1998; Rubin 2011a). Writing about anti-pornography feminism in the context of her discussion of moral and sex panics, Janice M. Irvine argues that this process involves the 'mobilization of intense affect in the service of moral politics' (2007, 2), stating that these expressions of 'public feelings'—which can include fear, anxiety, anger, hatred, and, especially relevant in the context of pornography, disgust—make up 'transient social practices that are dramaturgically produced in a specific historical context' (16). Additionally, Paasonen demonstrates how anti-pornography feminist theorising relies on a '*discourse of negative affect* that is posed as the acceptable reaction towards pornography,' consisting largely of 'articulations of personal experience,' including such feelings as fury, grief, sorrow, and nausea (2007, 47, emphasis original). These public feelings not only rely on personal accounts of engaging with pornography, but are also projected onto the object itself, as well as its consumers, with Michael Warner describing how the 'rhetoric of antiporn activism is full of terms like "sleaze", "filth", and "smut"' (2000, 181), and Paasonen stating that 'this terminology aims to evoke shame in those consuming pornography and leaves very little space for articulations of different kinds of affect' (2007, 49).

With organizations like Women Against Pornography (WAP)—which was founded in 1979 and included such leading figures as Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan, Susan Brownmiller, and Gloria Steinem—growing in visibility and influence, Bornstein argues that 'pornography became the most central and contentious subject facing the women's movement in the 1980s'

(2015, 68).[47] Like most of her peers, Bronstein points to the 1982 'The Scholar and the Feminist: Towards a Politics of Sexuality' conference at New York City's Barnard College, better known as the Barnard Conference on Sexuality, as the moment signalling the beginning of the Feminist Sex Wars, 'bringing out into the open a deep schism over questions of sexuality, and initiating a period of personal and ideological conflict […] that still reverberates today' (59).[48] Importantly, these feminist debates were not limited to academia but rather were conducted as part of the public discourse on pornography, with documentaries like *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* (Klein, 1982) disseminating anti-pornography feminism to the wider public. Moreover, prominent anti-pornography feminists at the time advocated for legislative measures against pornography, resulting in the introduction of the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance in Minneapolis in 1983, which defined pornography as a form of sex discrimination, followed by various other localities, including Indianapolis, where it was enacted into law.[49] For the most part, the Feminist Sex Wars took place in the US, where they were conducted in a particularly vehement manner. However, feminist debates of pornography also extended to Europe, as feminist activist groups like Angry Women in the UK and Women Against Pornography in the Netherlands took direct action by targeting porn shops and theatres (Rees 2007, Veltman 2009).

Central to the anti-pornography feminist position is the work of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, both of whom foreground the relationship between pornography and the lived reality of women under patriarchy. Rather than focusing their critique on the patriarchal or misogynist representation of sex in pornography, their definition of pornography relies on an emphasis on the direct relationship between pornography and reality, with MacKinnon stating that 'pornography is not imaginary in some relation to a reality elsewhere constructed. It is not distortion, reflection, projection, fantasy, representation, or symbol either. It is sexual reality' (1987, 147). Even more strongly, Dworkin argues that 'pornography documents a rape, a rape

[47] Importantly, Bronstein also argues this was not the case for all feminists, stating that 'the idea that violent male sexuality and its cultural propaganda—pornography—were powerful agents of female oppression was a subject of conversation and debate everywhere that white, middle class feminists gathered,' adding 'many poor women and women of color across all socioeconomic classes, however, were less interested in the pornography question and antipornography organizing,' with Bornstein listing various of reasons, including the fact that many of these feminists felt that issues like poverty and racism were more pressing concerns (2015, 68).

[48] For a narration of the events that took place at the time of this conference, as well as its aftermath, see Wilson (1983); Vance (1992, 431-439); Comella (2008); Rubin (2011a, 194-123).

[49] For a timeline of the influence of anti-pornography feminism on conservative politics, examples of which include the Meese Commission, the attacks on the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), and the *R. v. Butler* ruling in the Canadian Supreme Court, see Vance (1992, xxiv-xxxiv) and Duggan and Hunter (2006, 15-28). For arguments in favor of anti-porn legislation see Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988), for critiques, see (Duggan, Hunter, and Vance, 2006, 43-64) and several of the essays included in Cornell (2000).

first enacted when the women were set up and used; a rape repeated each time the viewer consumes the photographs' (1981, 137). Understood in this way, the anti-pornography feminist position presents pornography as the *depiction* of harm, with the image serving as an evidentiary trace of the harm inflicted on the female performers at the moment of recording. However, the definition of pornography also extends beyond mere depiction, as pornography also *constitutes* harm, referring to a speech act that objectifies, silences, and subordinates' women. Finally, pornography *causes* harm, referring to the real-life effects that pornography has on its audience and society at large, with pornography normalising, eroticising, and promoting violence against women.

Relying on the assertion that pornography constitutes the documentation of sexual reality, the view on pornography expressed by MacKinnon and Dworkin diverts in crucial ways from similar denominations by film and media scholars in the previous chapter, as a way of describing the role of the camera and cinematic realism in presenting pornography as a record of the real. Whereas film and media scholars have been quick to assert the distance between representation and reality, the same does not go for anti-pornography feminists like MacKinnon and Dworkin, who instead advocate a literalist understanding of the relation between image and actuality. Although the two discourses mostly remain separate, they meet in interesting ways in the final report of the United States General's Commission on Pornography, better known as the Meese Report, which was published in 1983. Appointed by Ronald Reagan during his second term in office, Vance describes how the morally conservative members of the commission 'creatively experimented with updating and modernizing their traditional rhetoric, borrowing most successfully from anti-pornography feminism' (1992, xxviii). In a section on 'The Use of Performers in Commercial Pornography,' the authors introduce their argument by referring to the following quote by Bazin: 'The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality absent from all other picture-making […] The photographic image is the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it' (1986, 839). In the context of this section of the report, the quote is meant to illustrate the way in which the pornographic image allows for unfettered access to the pro-filmic event, the sex performed in front of the camera, which is captured in 'exact, vivid detail' (ibid.). However, in doing so, the authors fail to express an awareness of the ambiguous relationship between representation and reality. Alluding to the status of the image as a trace of the real, the authors of the report also refer to the quote as a way of substantiating their claims about the destructive effects of pornography on the lives of its—exclusively female—performers. Pointing to the reproducibility of the

mechanically produced image, they write about the inescapability of pornographic images for those women who come to regret their participation in pornography, as these images are circulated beyond their reach and control. In doing so, the report not only reiterates how pornography serves as evidence of the violence that occurred at the moment of recording, but also reverberates the victim narrative and gendered stereotypes developed as part of the anti-pornography feminist rhetoric, by referring to the violence enacted at the moment of consumption, 'with the women featured in pornography perceived as helpless victims of uncontrollable male lust, and the men who used these materials as predators, seething with violent intent' (Bronstein 2015, 62).[50]

At the time, many of the feminists that opposed the anti-pornography feminist position responded by pointing to its literalist and behaviourist underpinnings, arguing against the misinterpretation of the relationship between representation and reality. For instance, Gayle Rubin acknowledges that 'the pictures of sucking and fucking that comprise the bulk of pornography may be unnerving to those not familiar to them,' but adds that 'it is hard to make a convincing case that these images are violent' (2011b, 169). Criticising the appropriation of sadomasochistic imagery by anti-pornography feminists as evidence of the violence and eroticisation of female subordination they believe lies at the core of *all* pornography, Rubin argues that:

> Perhaps most significantly, in this model there is no concept of the role of artifice in the production of the image. We do not assume that the occupants of the vehicles routinely destroyed in police chases on television are actually burning along with their cars and that the actors in fight scenes are actually being beaten to pulp, or that western movies result in actual fatalities to cowboys and native Americans. It is ludicrous to assume that the level of coercion in an image is a reliable guide to the treatment of the actors involved. Yet this is precisely what is being asserted with regards to pornographic images (2011a, 267).

If anti-pornography feminists refer to pornography as the documentation of sexual violence, thereby equating pornography with sexual reality and conflating the distinction between reality and fantasy, feminists who opposed this definition predominantly responded by emphasising the role of fantasy in pornography, expressing 'an increased interest in exploring erotic diversity for women rather than focusing exclusively on questions of violence and danger in

[50] The sentiment expressed in anti-pornography feminist rhetoric continues to inform contemporary debates, especially those involving sex work and human trafficking, with sex worker activists instead asserting that they want 'rights not rescue.'

the sexual exchange' (Bronstein 2015, 69). In the following section, I turn to this theorisation of fantasy.

### 3.1.2 The Force of Fantasy

By the mid-1980s, it became apparent that the issue of pornography split the feminist community, with many feminists opposing the definition of pornography presented by anti-pornography feminists. These feminists disagreed vehemently with the anti-pornography feminist rhetoric and actions and wanted to counteract the impression that anti-pornography feminism constituted *the* authoritative feminist position on the subject. However, this did not mean that they were necessarily very enthusiastic about pornography; indeed, most of these feminists agreed with the basic premise that the majority of pornography presented a male fantasy of sex and included material that was objectifying, derogatory, and at times blatantly misogynistic. As a result, many feminists were hesitant to offer a defence of pornography per se and were not interested in pointing out some of its redeeming features. While anti-pornography feminists often referred to their critics as pro-porn, many of them are more accurately described as anti-anti-pornography feminists, anti-censorship feminists, and, in some cases, as pro-sex feminists. In particular, feminists worried about the dangers of censorship and stifling free speech; for them, pornography functioned as the canary in the coal mine, announcing the risk of the implementation of a range of measures that would negatively affect the lives of marginalised groups of people as well as obstruct transgressive artistic expression.[51] One example of this anti-censorship feminist position is expressed by Judith Butler, who traces 'a discursive alliance' between the New Right and anti-pornography feminism and argues that the latter presumes 'a logical or causal continuum among fantasy, representation, and action' (2000, 491). In her article, Butler seeks to undermine the causal relationship between fantasy and action and aims to offer an alternative to the efforts made by advocates of censorship to 'restrict practices of representation in the hopes of reigning in the imaginary' (490). Appropriating a psychoanalytic framework of fantasy, Butler argues that any attempt to restrict fantasy will ultimately lead to its proliferation, stating that 'efforts to enforce a limit on fantasy can only and always fail, in part because limits are, in a sense, what fantasy loves the most, what it incessantly thematises and subordinates to its own aims' (493). Rather

[51] Indeed, some critics have argued that pornography is playing a similar role at the moment, referring to changes in legislation that affect the production, distribution, and consumption of online pornography, focusing on the implementation of age verification in the UK as well as the global 'pornocalypse' that has snowballed as a consequence of the signing of the FOSTA/SESTA bills in the US (see Blake 2014; Naughty 2018).

than attempting to control the imaginary, then, Butler argues for the value of fantasy as a form of 'discursive excess,' which 'haunts and contests the borders which circumscribe the construction of stable identities' (491). A similar position is adopted by Elizabeth Cowie, who also adopts a psychoanalytic framework, presenting fantasy as the '*mise en scène* of desire, a staging of desire,' and argues that the role and function of fantasy in pornography is much more complex and less determined than the anti-pornography feminist position allows for (1993, 136). When it comes to pornography, Cowie states that 'the force of such representations cannot be understood without considering the nature of pornography as sexual fantasy, and the nature of the relation to fantasy of the social relations of sexuality' (133). Rather than expressing a concern with 'policing fantasy and its public circulation,' Cowie argues that feminism should emphasise the necessity of maintaining 'fantasy *as* fantasy, not allowing it to become the basis for social norms' (148, emphasis original).[52]

Both Butler and Cowie argue that anti-pornography feminism does not take seriously the role of fantasy in relation to pornography. However, their accounts allow little room for a defence of pornography in its own right, especially in the case of Butler. Contrastingly, in her book *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (1996), Laura Kipnis frames her anti-censorship argument through an explicit emphasis on the value of pornography in American culture. Instead of expressing a concern with pornography only insofar as subsequent censorship might also affect the circulation of transgressive art practices, Kipnis is interested in presenting a defence of pornography as a low form of culture, which centres precisely around this issue of fantasy, stating:

> Pornography is both a legitimate form of culture and a fictional, fantastical, and even allegorical realm; it neither simply reflects the real world nor is it some hypnotizing call to action. The world of pornography is mythological and hyperbolic, peopled by characters. It doesn't and never will exist but it does—and this is part of its politics—insists on a sanctioned space for fantasy. This is its most serious demand and the basis of much of the controversy it engenders, because pornography has a talent for making its particular fantasies look like destabilizing incendiary devices (163).

According to Kipnis, anti-pornography feminism continually overstates the real-life effects of pornography, thereby denying its status as a 'fantasy medium' (195). In contrast, Kipnis sees pornography as culturally complex and argues that it makes up an important locus of cultural

[52] A more recent account of the value of psychoanalysis in thinking through pornography and fantasy is the work of Tim Dean, who argues that 'attempts to regulate sexually explicit imagery always aspire to control the kind of erotic thoughts that people might entertain. Such efforts are rooted in the chronic anxiety about sexual variation, particularly the uncontrollable variety of sexual scenarios that proliferate at the level of the unconscious' (2009, 118).

critique. Furthermore, as a genre, pornography serves as an enclave for those fantasies for which there is very little room available in society and generally can count on little understanding. For Kipnis, then, the genre of pornography is not only thoroughly invested in pleasure and plenitude but—crucially—in sexual freedom.

While Kipnis presents one of the most rigorous inquiries into the role of fantasy in pornography, and offers a succinct critique of the anti-pornography feminist rhetoric, her book was not released until 1996. However, at the height of the Feminist Sex Wars, pro-sex feminists also expressed an interest in thinking through the possibilities of pornography, focusing specifically on its potential function as a safe space for women to explore their sexuality. Rather than focusing exclusively on pornography, pro-sex feminist were concerned with female sexual autonomy and self-definition, as illustrated by Amber Hollibaugh in her chapter 'Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure,' who states that 'feminism must be an angry, uncompromising movement that is just as insistent about our right to fuck, our right to the beauty of our individual desires, as it is concerned with the images and structures that distort it' (1992, 408).[53] In the landmark publication *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography, and Censorship*, originally published in 1986, the editors combine an extensive rebuttal of the rhetoric of anti-pornography feminism with a tentative investigation of the positive potential of pornography, exploring the ways in which an engagement with pornography might support the sexual agency of women as part of the women's liberation movement. In their introduction, Kate Ellis, Barbara O'Dair and Abby Tallmer point to the arrival of video technology, arguing that it allows for the increased availability of pornography, and stating that:

> For women especially, most of whom have had far less opportunity to take advantage, either as producers or users, of this profitable mass-market industry, pornography remains exotic, perhaps terrifying, perhaps banal or embarrassing, but in most instances, foreign (1992, 4).

One of their aims in the booklet, then, which consists of a collection of sexually explicit imagery as well as essays, is to make pornography more familiar and less threatening, with Ann Snitow arguing that 'we need to be able to reject the sexism in porn without having to reject the realm of pornographic fantasy as if the entire kingdom were without meaning or

[53] The chapter first appeared in the edited collection *Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Female Sexuality*, which was edited by Vance and included many of the papers presented during the Barnard Conference. As the conjunction in the title suggests, pro-sex feminism does not so much deny the dangers and restrictions that structure female sexuality, nor does it minimise the feelings of hurt and shame women; rather, it seeks to affirm sexuality as a potential locus of agency and self-determination, with Vance stating that 'to focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live' (1992, 1)

significance for women' (16). In one of the essays that deals most directly with the positive potential of pornography for women, Paula Webster states that 'I am convinced that pornography, even in its present form, contains important messages for women' (32) and argues that 'a stance of moralizing about sexual imagery, and by implication, practice, brings us no closer in defining how sexual activity and fantasy fit into our lives or our analysis of oppression' (35). Although Webster acknowledges that 'perhaps it is premature to call for a truly radical feminist pornography-erotica,' she maintains that 'to speak of our own desire and to organize for our own and our collective sexual pleasure would be a beginning,' concluding that 'it is time to organize our pleasures as well as our protection, to use pornographic images to raise consciousness about our desires and fears' (ibid.).

The caution with which Webster frames her argument illustrates some of the sensitivity that surrounded feminist inquiry into the positive potential of pornography. While this wariness can partially be explained by the prevalent sexism of pornography at the time, it also relates to the fierce opposition to those ideas by anti-pornography feminists, who saw pro-sex feminists as 'traitors to the movement' and were incensed that they 'had turned their backs on pornography's harms, choosing instead to focus on pleasure, a luxury that women could ill afford in the midst of a war for survival' (Bronstein 2015, 71). Furthermore, Webster's hesitancy is also indicative of the utopianism associated with pro-sex feminism, and their investment in sexual agency and female fantasy, at a time when very few examples of female sexual autonomy were readily available, as illustrated by Hollibaugh:

> Much is forbidden even to women's imaginations. We are deprived of the most elementary right to create our images of sex. It is a hard truth that far too many women come up blank when they are asked what their sexual fantasies look like. Sexual fantasies are the rightful property of men, romance the solid female terrain. Yet most of our ability to act on our desires rests in the possibility of imagining the feel and smell of the sex we want (1992, 405).

The promise of a feminist pornography soon came into reach, however, as the mid-1980s saw the emergence of two of the forerunners of alternative pornography, namely the 'couples erotica' of Femme Productions and the 'dyke pornography' of Fatale Media. Particularly the films of Candida Royalle's Femme Productions clearly express the pro-sex feminist ideals outlined above, conceptualising pornography as a safe space for the exploration of female sexual fantasy. Engaging with the then-novel category of 'female-friendly porn', Linda Williams states that 'the improved qualities include higher production values, better lighting, fewer pimples on bottoms, better looking male performers who now take off their shoes and socks, and female performers who leave on shoes *and* expensive-looking lingerie' (1999, 232).

Williams is especially interested in the way that these new forms of pornography address female audiences, taking as her starting point the assertion that 'pornography is perhaps one of the few popular genres in which women are not punished for knowing, pursuing, and finding their pleasure' (239). Discussing the representation of female fantasies in the films of Royalle, Williams rejects the accusation by male critics that this subgenre is 'too tame, not transgressive, taboo, dangerous, or exciting enough', arguing that 'this may be true, but perhaps only for men' (263). She states:

> If the new pornography for couples and women exemplified by Femme Productions seems safe, almost too legitimate for some masculine eyes, it could be that this legitimacy is needed to enable women to create for themselves the safe space in which they engage in sex without guilt or fear […] This much is clear, it is no longer for men alone to decide what is, or is not, exciting in pornography (264).

Within the contemporary landscape of alternative pornography, filmmakers who are indebted to Femme Productions include Petra Joy, Anna Span, Ms Naughty, Ovidie, Madison Young, Jennifer Lyon Bell, and Morgana Muses. Through the extra-diegetic discourse that surrounds their films as well as their representational practices, these filmmakers continue to affirm pornography's potential to function as a safe space for women to explore 'a desire of their own' (Williams 1999, see also Juffer 1998). Although some of these filmmakers actively support and promote the label of 'feminist pornography', others are more hesitant to describe their work as pornography, as they feel that the term is overdetermined with negative connotations and might potentially scare away female consumers, instead preferring to describe their work as erotic film. Moreover, while all of these filmmakers prioritise female sexual fantasy in their work, they do so in different ways. Some filmmakers, such as Morgana Muses, use pornography to live out their own fantasies, reimagining the genre as a form of autobiography. Not only does Muses star in all of her films, she appropriates several modes of filmmaking, ranging from documentary to experimental film, in order to capture her journey of sexual discovery and experimentation at middle age. Others set out to depict the fantasies of other women, such as Petra Joy, who states that she drew inspiration from fantasies shared by her friends for the *Female Fantasies* (2006), and Ms Naughty, whose solo series are typically based on fantasies provided by the performers, an example of which is the short film *Instructed* (2014), featuring Pandora Blake. Finally, Erika Lust foregrounds the fantasies of viewers in her ongoing series of crowdsourced shorts called *X Confessions,* which bring to the screen sexual scripts based on the 'anonymous confessions' submitted to her site. All of these films,

then, address the challenge of pro-sex feminism, namely how to imagine and explore female sexuality from within a patriarchal society that routinely denies and distorts it.

With the Feminist Sex Wars several decades behind us, Webster's suggestion of a feminist pornography no longer carries the hint of utopianism; instead, it has become a reality. This does not mean, of course, that the combination of feminism and pornography has been settled once and for all, or without difficulties and argument. Moreover, as a reality, these pornographies also bring to the fore new issues, questions, and problems. Indeed, many of the issues raised by these sex-positive feminists with regards to the policing of female sexual fantasy and the restriction of sexual autonomy continue to haunt the production and reception of alternative pornography, an example of which is the film *Taken* (Viva and Aven Frey, 2012), which explores an abduction fantasy. Whenever I attended a showing of this film, audience members reacted with disbelief, confusion, and sometimes outright anger in response to this otherwise aesthetically very pleasing film, due to the subject matter, demonstrating how little cultural space there still is, even in feminist spaces, for the exploration and discussion of female fantasies and desires that might be considered dangerous, transgressive, or complicated. In order to move forward on thinking through the tensions and connections between pornography, feminism, fantasy, and sexual agency, I argue that it is imperative that we let go of the oppositional claims that have framed feminist discussions of pornography in the past, and offer a more sophisticated account of the relationship between reality and fantasy in pornography. Certainly, I am not the first to propose this; by now, it has become somewhat of a tired cliché to agitate against the anti/pro dichotomy of the Feminist Sex Wars. Indeed, weariness and frustration with the divisiveness of the feminist debates on pornography in many ways ignited the development of the discipline of Porn Studies, with scholars positioning their work in direct opposition to the polemics of the Feminist Sex Wars, with Linda Williams' book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (1999) serving as a landmark publication in this development, followed by the founding of the journal *Porn Studies* in 2014 (Attwood and Smith 2014). As a contribution to this larger body of work, one of the objectives of this dissertation is to account for the ways in which alternative pornography fits within a wider framework of feminist and queer politics and cultural production, thereby shifting the focus from what pornography *is* to what it can *do* and *say*. In the introduction of this dissertation, I already alluded to the ways in which a film like *Much More Pussy* echoes the feminist activist practice of consciousness-raising, by affirming the pleasures associated with the expression of female sexuality and the exploration of sexual fantasy while also addressing feelings of shame

and fear that shape the everyday experience of women's sexuality, in the face of the constant threat of sexual harassment and violence. Guided by an effort to 'reconcile reality and fantasy, the everyday and the erotic' (Juffer 1998, 105), *Much More Pussy* seeks to make familiar what was previously foreign, thereby interpellating an audience previously excluded from the address of mainstream pornography. If Dines and Boyle preclude the possibility of pornography to serve as the 'documentation of women's sexual desires', to a large extent, this is precisely what constitutes the promise of alternative pornography, especially feminist pornography. However, this does not mean that this documentation is unproblematic, and in Chapter 1, I discussed some of the issues associated with representing female sexuality 'on its own terms', referring specifically to the negotiation of the convention of maximum visibility as an evidentiary technique.

If the connections between the pro-sex feminist investment in fantasy and the type of sexually explicit imagery produced by Royalle and her successors are fairly obvious and easy to trace, things become a bit murkier when turning to the corpus of queer pornography that followed in the footsteps of the dyke porn of Fatale Media, where the appeal to fantasy is less overt. Indeed, much of the previous chapter has been dedicated to demonstrating the extent to which queer pornography relies on a documentary aura, and is structured by a demand for realness and authenticity, as a way of making visible those sexualities, embodiments, intimacies, and communities that fall outside the scope of heteronormativity. This does not mean, of course, that fantasy is of no concern in queer pornography, nor does it mean that feminist and queer pornography can be completely separated. Rather, I suggest that we need to pay close attention to the way in which fantasy, as a form of 'discursive excess', is embedded within its documentation of queerness. Drawing on the status of pornography as a 'fantasy medium', which seeks to make a space for sexual freedom, I argue that that the allusion to fantasy in queer pornography is wrapped up with its utopian gesture. If queer pornography brings to the fore 'incredible potential of queer sexuality' rather than its 'genuine reality,' as Houston suggests in the previous chapter and is about 'what we can do and make together', in the following two sections, I seek to account for the centrality of fantasy in re-imagining pornography as 'a space for queer possibilities to thrive' by turning a discussion of my case-study, the film *When We Are Together We Can Be Everywhere.* Like the discourse of anti-pornography feminism, I argue that the discourse of queer pornography is concerned with the expression of 'public feelings' and the articulation of personal experience, but instead of seeking to *evoke* shame in its audiences, queer pornography sets out to *reduce* shame, with

fantasy playing a principal role in the articulation of different kinds of affect, referring not merely to feelings of titillation and arousal, but also those of hope, joy, fear, disappointment, and loss. Contrasting Sprinkle's underwater mermaid fantasy, moreover, the time and space of queer pornography are not radically divorced from the texture of the everyday but rather rely on a close affiliation between the fantasy realm of pornography and the lived experience of queerness. Instead of relying on the psychoanalytic theory of fantasy previously adopted by scholars like Butler and Cowie, in the final section, I turn to queer theories of affect and emotion, as a way of accounting for the capacity of the filmic image to function as a vector of queer feelings. Before I do so, however, I first discuss the structuring logic of fantasy in queer pornography as consistent with a wider trajectory of queer (documentary) filmmaking.

## 3.2 Queer Cinema, Queer Pornography

### 3.2.1 Documentary Layering in *When We Are Together We Can Be Everywhere*

In 2015, the feature-length film *When We Are Together We Can Be Everywhere* premiered at the Berlin Porn Film Festival after much anticipation, where it was met by the audience with rowdy enthusiasm. The film is a love letter, not only from the director, Marit Östberg, to her subject, the artist Liz Rosenfeld, as the tagline of the film suggests, but also to the queer community of Berlin, and includes many of the leading figures of the Berlin queer porn scene, such as Sadie Lune, KAy Garnellen, Paulita Pappel, and Goodyn Green, most of whom also attended the screening during the premiere. As another example of queer docu-porn, the film combines documentary and pornographic elements; however, in doing so, it follows a different logic from *BED PARTY* and *Trans Entities*. Instead of alternating interviews with sexual sequences—the standard formula adopted by most docu-porn—*When We Are Together* makes use of a layering documentary practices: firstly, the film makes use of self-reflexive and performative elements, as a part of its making-of format; secondly, the film constitutes a cinematic portrait of Rosenfeld, as she navigates sex in the queer community of Berlin; and finally, the film combines poetic and associative imagery with the subjective rendering of experience by Östberg herself, adhering to a personal style of filmmaking discussed by documentary theorists as the 'autobiographic documentary' (Renov 2004), the 'performative documentary' (Nichols 2010), and 'first-person documentary' (Lebow 2012).

In the following two sections, I engage with this layering of documentary practices as a way of tracing the particular alliance between queer pornography and the wider spectrum of queer (documentary) filmmaking. Rather than further reinstating the truth-claim and evidentiary

status of pornography, I argue that each of these modes of documentary representation alludes to the role of fantasy in identity formation and community building, blurring the boundaries between pornography and documentary, as well as complicating the distinction between reality and fantasy, documentation and fiction, real and fake. In the previous chapter, I already referred to the way in which the use of self-reflexive imagery in queer docu-porn can work to complicate the transparency of the pornographic image by drawing attention to its artificiality, thereby making a mockery of the supposed credibility of the genre. To a certain extent, this tactic is repeated in *When We Are Together*, as the film is presented—once again—as a film about the making of a porn film. In doing so, the film draws quotation marks around the documentary impulse of pornography, with the essence of moving-image pornography attributed to its capacity to function as 'the literal documentation of bodies and sexual activity', with Simon Hardy stating that 'there can be no literary devices or deceit here, just the plain facts recorded on film and preserved for unrestricted contemplation' (2009, 7). On another level, however, the film is entirely sincere in its documentation of queer sex and real-life communities, with the first-person address in the voiceover evoking a sense of intimacy and connection rather than ironic distance. As a form of documentation, however, *When We Are Together* does not necessarily rely on documentary realism, but instead makes use of an emotive and personal style of filmmaking, which complicates any strict demarcation between documentary and fiction. As documentary theorists have pointed out, documentary filmmaking does not necessarily exclude fictional elements, with Michael Renov stressing that in documentary, 'fictional and nonfictional forms are enmeshed in one another—particularly regarding semiotics, narrativity, and questions of performance' (1993, 2). Discussing the incorporation of 'fictive ingredients' in documentary representation, Renov points for instance to 'the construction of character' and the 'use of poetic language, narration, or musical accompaniment to heighten emotional impact' (1993, 2). Similarly, it would be difficult to argue that fictional ingredients are completely foreign to pornography, despite efforts made to by scholars to reject the fictional status of pornography, which is a point I discussed in the previous chapter. In the case of *When We Are Together,* however, I am interested in exploring how the visual and narrative tactics are consistent with the cinematic trajectory of queer cinema, with the elements such as reflexivity, performativity, and subjectivity drawing attention to the limitations of identity and authenticity, notions that—not coincidentally—help to shape the categories of pornography and documentary.

In the previous chapter, I already highlighted some of the ways in which feminist documentary theorists have taken issue with the transparency of the image, with Diane Waldman and Janet Walker assessing how feminist film theory and practice has been shaped by the advocacy of works that mix different modes of documentary and blur the boundaries between fact and fiction (1999, 10). Furthermore, Smaill summarises the history of feminist documentary as manifesting first and foremost 'a problem of realism' (2017, 175). Noting an increased interest among filmmakers in exploring the 'multidimensional issues, experiences, and institutions that expand around the socio-cultural formation of gender', Smaill points to their appropriation of 'self-reflexive and autobiographical modes, areas of concentration for women filmmakers concerned with feminist questions' (177). For the purpose of my discussion here, I am interested especially in the way that the hybridity and subjectivity of *When We Are Together* can also be attributed to queer filmmaking. For instance, in their introduction to their edited collection of lesbian, gay, and queer documentary, Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs point out how many of the films discussed in their book have been previously classed, funded, exhibited, and criticised under the header or avant-garde and experimental film, with most of these films falling outside of the discursive and institutional frameworks through which documentaries are typically distributed and affirmed (1997, 4). More importantly, they argue that there is something more intrinsic to the practice of queer filmmaking itself, and the way that queer documentaries treat their subjects, which prevents these films from being pinned down to a particular genre. Pointing to the way in which the films discussed in their book often explicitly blend documentary and fiction, as a way of documenting and reimagining subjects and experiences that are 'fluid, at risk, in flux' Holmlund and Fuchs asses how queer documentaries seek to amplify the voices of their subjects by affirming the subjective and the local over the objective and the historical (ibid.)

As a film that expresses a self-reflexive attitude and sheds light—as well as the camera—on the construction of the pornographic image, *When We Are Together* shares some important characteristics with *BED PARTY,* discussed in the previous chapter. However, there are also some important differences to note, with the most important difference referring to the role of the filmmaker. In *BED PARTY,* the interaction between filmmakers and subjects is limited for the most part to the opening sequence—notwithstanding, of course, one highly significant verbal exchange between Houston and Ryan during the final sex scene—consisting primarily of the formal convention of the interview. Rather than expressing an interest in the thoughts and feelings of the filmmakers, *BED PARTY* is primarily concerned with capturing something

of the experience of its subjects, and the relationship between filmmakers and subjects is characterised by a professional distance. It is only on the level of the ironic meta-commentary that some trace of authorial expression can be found. Contrastingly, the onscreen presence of filmmaker comprises one of the film's organising principles in *When We Are Together*, as the camera turns—sometimes literally—to the filmmaker herself (Fig. 25). In his book, *Introduction to Documentary* (2010), Bill Nichols presents a slightly amended version of his modes of documentary representation, replacing the interactive with the participatory documentary, as well as adding the performative documentary to his list. Although the interactive and the participatory documentary broadly overlap, the distinction between these two modes helps to illuminate some of the differences between *BED PARTY* and *When We Are Together*, despite their shared self-reflexivity. In comparison to the equal exchange between filmmaker and subject in the interactive mode of documentary representation, the participatory mode tips the scale to a primary focus on the filmmaker, as well as the influence they exert on the pro-filmic event and the subjects they seek to represent. Rather than construed as absence, allowing for the perception of the documentary image as neutral and objective, the onscreen presence of the filmmaker 'gives us the sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result' (181).

In *When We Are Together*, the dynamics between filmmaker, crew, and performers make up an important theme of the film, with the relationship between Östberg and Rosenfeld portrayed as one of deep connection and intimacy. Very different from the observational style of filmmaking and the practice of non-intervention that characterises the majority of porn, the overt presence of Östberg also allows for a less strict demarcation between documentary and pornographic sequences and often directly compromises the performance of sex as a spontaneous event, drawing attention, rather, to the 'reality of what happens when people interact in front of a camera' (184). The effect of the participatory mode of representation is most clearly illustrated during the three-way between Liz, Paula, and Kate, which takes place in one of the wagons at the queer squat at Schwartzer Kanal, located at the outskirts of Berlin. Overall, the scene demonstrates the type of awkwardness that can sometimes accompany real-life sex but which typically is precluded from pornography. This awkwardness is first introduced in the opening moments of the scene, when Paula accidentally bites Liz a little bit too hard, leading to some commotion and laughter. However, it continues to haunt the remainder of the scene, as breaking gloves and lost lube continue to break up the flow of the scene and the performer's freedom of movement is compromised by the limited space of the

wagon. Continuous talking contributes to the chaotic tone of the scene, referring not only to the exchanges between the three performers themselves but also to the constant interference of the filmmaker, as the camera turns to Östberg to capture her response to the scene (Fig. 26). Much of the chaos and the awkwardness of the scene, then, can be attributed to the behaviour of the filmmaker, as she keeps interrupting the performers with questions, suggestions, and directions. As Kate starts fucking Liz, while being simultaneously fucked by Paula, the intensity of the performance of sex and the chaotic exchange between filmmaker and performers gradually increase in tandem, until they finally culminate into a climax, as Liz reaches a screaming orgasm while Östberg is frantically looking around for a vibrator, followed by Liz's deadpan remark "Forget the vibrator" (Fig. 27).

In her book *New Documentary* (2006), Stella Bruzzi refers to this intrusive presence of the filmmaker as an indicator of the performative documentary. Although Bruzzi asserts that 'all documentaries are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performativity and performance' (1), she is especially interested in the recent investment of filmmakers and audiences in 'the performative documentary, a mode which emphasizes—and indeed constructs a world around—the often hidden aspect of performance, whether on the part of the documentary subjects or the filmmakers' (185). In the case of docu-porn, it is easy to discern how the social actors are involved in some sort of performance, often very explicitly, as they partake in the performance of sex, but also more implicitly, for instance during interviews, which have become the staple of alternative pornography. In the wagon scene, the issue of performance is foregrounded at the different points through the exchange between performers and crew, for instance when Liz looks directly into the camera and asks "Are you ready?" before she spanks Kate in the opening shots of the scene, or when she checks with Imogen, the camera operator, that she is actually shooting before fully engaging with her co-performers, making it clear from the onset that this is a performance for the camera. However, I am especially interested in the way in which the onscreen presence of the filmmaker can also be construed as performance and the manner in which this complicates the notion that pornography constitutes the recording of a spontaneous event. In her discussion of the performative documentary, Bruzzi specifically points to those documentary filmmakers who are active participants in their films, stating that documentary 'has established a tradition of the performer-director' (93). She states:

> The overt intervention of the filmmaker definitely signals the death of documentary theory's idealisation of the unbiased film by asking, categorically and from within the documentary

> itself: what else is a documentary but a dialogue between a filmmaker, a crew, and a situation that, although in existence prior to their arrival, has been irrevocably changed by that arrival' (ibid.).

This point is most clearly illustrated towards the end of the three-way scene in the wagon, when after each climax of the performers, elaborate deliberation between director, performers, and crew commences on if, when, and how to continue the scene, with Östberg declaring that she's "kind of hungry" until, finally, all of them decide to go eat instead (Fig. 28). Interestingly, in noting the reflexive components of the performative documentary, Bruzzi also traces 'an important synergy between the *faux* documentary and the performative documentary' (190), an observation that chimes with the ironic tone adopted by *When We Are Together* and other reflexive examples of docu-porn. Writing explicitly on the fake documentary, Alexandra Juhasz states:

> I use the word fake to mark a practice whose self-conscious play with form, made apparent in its very failure, effectively challenges its own integrity and that of its original object […]. The fakery of fake docs mirror and reveal the sustaining lies of all documentary, both real and fake, producing the possibility of the contesting of history, identity, and truth (2006a, 7).

Moreover, and particularly appropriate for the discussion of *When We Are Together,* Juhasz continues by stating that 'perhaps not surprisingly, a majority of fake documentaries are self-reflexive films about the making of (this one) documentary' (11). In many ways, Juhasz's description of the fake documentary seems to fit with the narrative and cinematographic tactics adopted by *When We Are Together.* Throughout the film, it is clear that some fictional elements are introduced, including the staging of events, the manipulation of the mise-en-scène, and scripted interaction, features that are mentioned by Juhasz as consistent with the fake documentary. Moreover, the self-reflexivity and performativity associated with the intrusive presence of the filmmaker also allow for an ironic tone, which contrasts with the typical sincerity and seriousness of documentary representation, as Östberg plays an elevated version of herself as this persona of the eager porn director. To the extent that the documentary aura of *When We Are Together* can be qualified as a form of 'fakery', then, the 'failure' of this scene refers not so much to its relation to documentary form, but instead involves the pornographic impulse, with the parodic quotation of the behind-the-scenes format taking a stab not only at the film's own integrity but also at the integrity of the genre, by satirising its desire for authenticity.

However, there are also some substantial reasons why the label of fake documentary fails to account for a film like *When We Are Together.* Indeed, the film demonstrates some of the

problems associated this distinction between fake documentaries and its implied other, the 'real' or authentic documentary, an issue that is also recognised by Alisa Lebow, who states that that the term 'too eagerly accepts and reinforces the binary (fake vs. real) from the outset' (2006, 225). Rather than qualifying the performativity and self-reflexivity in *When We Are Together* in terms of 'real' and 'fake', I argue that the film works to complicate such distinctions, bringing to the fore the artificiality of *all* pornography, not merely this individual example of queer pornography. More importantly, if the use of satire and parody in fake documentary is used to 'create relations among form, content, style, representation, and the recorded world' (Juhasz 2006a, 2), I am particularly interested in the way these relations in *When We Are Together* characterize it as a mode of queer cultural production. In his discussion of self-reflexive gay pornography, Dyer engages with the pleasure that some of these texts take in 'disrupting its own illusionism' (2004, 105). Evoking the broader investment of queer culture in 'modes like camp, irony, theatricality, and flamboyance' (108), Dyer argues that 'elements of parody and pastiche and the deliberate foregrounding of artifice in much gay pornography are within this tradition' (109). Although Dyer is quick to note that he does not mean to suggest that self-reflexive porn is somehow superior to other types of pornography, he also adds 'that being meta is rather everyday for queers' (108). Writing about the ubiquity of the 'obviously constructed fantasy scene' in the history of queer film, he states:

> This is characteristic of the way we inhabit discourse. We are constantly aware of the instability of our own discourses, their hold on the world still so tenuous, so little shored up by a network of reinforcing and affirming discourses, and yet our stake in them is so momentous (109).

While Dyer is referring specifically to gay culture, the affiliation between self-reflexivity and queerness is also expressed through the negotiation of 'fakery' and 'realness' in *When We Are Together*, bringing to the fore how the film draws attention to the artificiality of pornographic representation, thereby foregrounding the limitations of its own discourse in capturing the 'truth' of sex, while at the same time expressing a deep investment in the capacity of cinema to express something of the lived experience of queerness by its subjects, by drawing on fictional elements and imaginative fantasy scenes, one of which I discuss in the following section. Additionally, there might be another reason why the film is not easily categorizable as fake documentary, relating to its layering of documentary modes of representation. In her book *The Personal Camera* (2009), Laura Rascaroli engages with the documentaries that 'strongly articulate a subjective, personal point of view, and they set up a structure, largely based, as I will argue, on the address of the spectator' (3). In particular, Rascaroli suggests that subjective narration in documentary filmmaking makes use of 'strong enunciators, who produce an

audiovisual discourse that asks to be experienced by the viewer as eminently personal' (11). Similarly, in his discussion of the participatory mode of documentary representation, Nichols refers to those instances where 'we move away from the investigative stance to take a more responsive and reflective relationship to unfolding events that involve the filmmaker […] This latter choice moves us towards the diary and personal testimonial' (2010, 188). Pointing to those examples that express a more reflective stance towards the historical world, Nichols describes how the 'the first-person voice becomes prominent in the overall structure of the film' (ibid.).

Throughout this dissertation, I have pointed out how scholars deny pornography the status of fiction. In Chapter 1, I discussed the role of narrative but for the purpose of my discussion here, I would like to engage more directly with the issue of characters and characterisation, which play a central role in fictional narrative cinema, but are notably absent from pornography. Characterisation, then, has often been presented as antithetical to the objectives of pornography, as the use of fleshed out characters is thought to hinder, rather than intensify sexual arousal (Bell 2018). For instance, Paasonen argues that argues that 'pornography draws on and works through types, rather than complex characters with psychological depth,' adding that pornography 'also routinely exaggerates embodied differences by resorting to the cultural reservoirs of stereotyping' (2014, 136). While her discussion relies on a more generalised notion of pornography, I would argue that the argument about stereotyping applies specially to mainstream pornography, with Paasonen proposing that 'it is therefore not surprising that the imageries of pornography have been recurrently identified as sexist, racist, and classist, and as reproducing and supporting social hierarchies of power and subordination' (ibid.). However, even if feminist and queer pornographies endeavour to develop alternatives to the stereotypical portrayal of gendered and racialised differences in mainstream pornography, for instance by putting further emphasis on issues of 'realness' and 'authenticity,' this does not mean that they rely on the engagement with characters. Rather, I argue that personalisation and psychologization are mostly achieved in alternative pornography through the use of documentary techniques and conventions, with the interview among the most widely used in alternative pornography, as a way of allowing for a level of psychological depth and emotional complexity typically absent from other types of pornography. Moreover, a significant amount of films uses voice-over narration, as a way of gaining access to the performer's interior monologue, includes several of the case-studies discussed in this dissertation, such as *When We Are Together* and *Touch.*

In *When We Are Together*, the voice-over narration works as a cohesion device, tying different sequences of the film together. The film is divided in several chapters, which are marked by a simple white caption against a black background. In some cases, the caption refers to something that can be seen in the sequence, for instance the performers—as is the case in 'Paulita's Morning Pee' and 'Imogen'—or the location, such as 'The Wagon'. At other times, however, the titles are more associative, capturing something of the perceptual experience of the scene, for instance in 'Watching' and 'Listening'. Finally, the film is bracketed by two chapters that are named after books, namely 'A Room of One's Own', and 'An Archive of Feelings'. Here, the titles invite the spectator to reflect on the imagery of the film in the context of a history of feminist and queer theory and cultural production. Interweaved throughout the film is the first-person narration by Östberg, which is structured like a letter, with the filmmaker addressing her subject, Rosenfeld. This epistolary form is first introduced in the prologue of the film, which shows Östberg hanging a black and white photograph on the wall, picturing the film's crew and performers (Fig. 29), with the voice-over stating:

> Dear Liz. It's already four years ago since we met. I'm still thinking about that summer, often turning to the pictures from then. And one of my favourites is taken just before we shot the sex scene in the men's room. Do you remember? I couldn't even watch the scene when we were shooting it; the toilet was too small to fit us all. It was beautiful to listen in that dark corner where I was crouching. You came for me. Like many times that summer.

Not only does the filmmaker reflect on her own experience of making the film and her relationship to Rosenfeld, the expression of a personal point of view stand in stark contrast to the type of voice-over that is typically associated with documentary filmmaking, namely the impersonal and authoritative Voice-of-God. As Mary Ann Doane argues, the male voice in documentary filmmaking typically allows for a sense of neutrality and universality, which is further effectuated through its absence from the screen, stating that 'it is precisely because the voice is not localisable, because it cannot be yoked to a body, that it is capable of interpreting the image, producing the truth' (1980, 43). In contrast, the female voice in film connotes both subjectivity and embodied presence, with the individuality and specificity of the female voice standing in stark contrast to the generalised and objective male voice of the Voice-of-God.[54] Especially relevant to the embodied subjectivity of the narration in *When We Are Together*, however, is the fact that the voice is so clearly identifiable as that of the filmmaker, with Bruzzi arguing that this kind of personal narration 'allows for the acknowledgement that

[54] For further discussion of the relation between gender and 'voice' in the cinema, see Silverman (1988) and Plantinga (1997, 158-165).

"documentary", like fiction, is authored' (2006, 199). As such, it is not so much the fact that the voice is female that is significant, but rather that it is recognizable as the voice of the filmmaker, although the fact that the filmmaker is female *is* important. Indeed, as an example of first-person film, *When We Are Together* 'endeavours to articulate rather than occlude or supress the position of the filmmaker' (Lebow 2012, 2). Preferring the term 'first person documentary' over other labels, such as 'autobiographical documentary', Lebow states:

> They may take the form of a self-portrait, or indeed, the portrait of another. They are, very often, not a cinema of 'me' but about close, dear, beloved, or intriguing, who nonetheless informs the filmmaker's sense of him- or herself. They may not be about a person, self or other, at all, but about a neighbourhood, a community, a phenomenon or event. The designation 'first person film' is foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view from the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position (1).

Although to a certain extent *When We Are Together* might be considered autobiographical, it also constitutes a portrait of Rosenfeld, as well as being about the queer community of Berlin. In the last section of chapter, I discuss what happens when this first-person address is utilised in pornographic filmmaking, as the narration not only foreground the perspective of the filmmaker, but the proximity that is provoked through the intimacy of address and the personal testimony also stands in stark contrast to the voyeuristic distance commonly associated with the viewing experience of pornography, as well as the lack of individuality and preference for generalisation that is typically assumed to be crucial to its aim of sexual arousal.

Overall, then, the subjective narration of *When We Are Together* is more consistent with what Nichols—confusingly—refers to as the 'performative documentary'. Very different from Bruzzi's theorisation of the performative documentary, Nichols argues that 'the performative documentary underscores the complexity of our knowledge of the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions' (2010, 202). Rather than stressing the issue of performance, Nichols uses the term to describe those films that stress 'the emotional complexity of experience from the perspective of the filmmaker him- or herself', allowing 'an autobiographical note' to enter into documentary representation (ibid.) He states:

> Performative documentaries bring the emotional complexities of embodied experience to the fore rather than attempt to do something tangible. If they set out to do something, it is to help us sense what a certain situation or experience feels like. They want us to feel on a visceral level more than understand on a conceptual level. Performative documentaries intensify the rhetorical desire to be compelling and tie it less to a persuasive goal than an affective one—to have us feel or experience the world in a particular way as vividly as possible (203).

Structured like a love letter, the subjective voice-over narration of *When We Are Together* not only offers insight into the thoughts and feelings experienced by the filmmaker herself, as she shares some of her memories and reflections on the production process of the film, but also, and more importantly, sets out to make us, the viewer, feel something of the affective experience of sharing these experiences together. Instead of being exclusively preoccupied with expressing and evoking sexual affects and feelings, as to be expected in pornography, the affective register of *When We Are Together* also includes such feelings as joy, awkwardness, nostalgia, melancholia, frustration, and love.

In doing so, the film also moves beyond the evidentiary tactics of pornography, which rely heavily on the indexicality of the image, in favour of precisely those 'deceptive' techniques precluded by Hardy in the section above, which are more commonly associated with fiction filmmaking. Indeed, as I will further elaborate in the last two sections of this chapter, *When We Are Together* questions the credibility of the documentary image and the assumption that it might have a more intimate connection to 'reality' than fiction. In doing so, Nichols 'the world as represented by performative documentaries becomes, however, suffused by evocative tones and expressive shadings that constantly remind us that the world is more than the sum of the visible evidence we derive from it' (ibid.). The affinity between queer self-representation and the performative documentary is also recognised by Nichols, who argues that 'the emotional intensities and social subjectivity stressed in performative documentary is often that of underrepresented or misrepresented, of women and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians' (205). A similar alignment between subjectivity in documentary film and the self-representation of marginalised groups is noted by Michael Renov, who argues that 'public declarations of private selves have come to define acts of contemporary life, often imbued with great urgency' (2004, xvii). In particular, Renov points to the significance of autobiographic film for those groups who have had their subjectivity routinely denied, stating that this type of imagery can become a 'crucial medium of resistance' (vii). Describing this work as 'frequently engaged in community building and deeply dialogic', he states that it 'is not at all surprising that much current autobiographic film is produced at the margins of commercial culture by feminists, gays, people of color and mavericks of every stripe' (xvi-xvii).

### 3.2.2 What's Queer Here?

Although Holmlund and Fuchs focus primarily on documentary, many of the characteristics they discuss are applicable to a wider trajectory of queer cinema. Scholarship on this issue has

largely engaged with the watershed of independent films released in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which have become known under the narrower term of New Queer Cinema (NQC). This label was coined by film critic and theorist B. Ruby Rich in 1992 and refers to 'a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories' (2004, 15). Some examples of the films she discusses include *Edward II* (Jarman 1991), *The Living End* (Araki 1992), and *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990), as well as the experimental work of Sadie Benning. Referring to this work also as 'Homo-Pomo', Rich argues that 'there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructivism very much in mind', and concludes that 'these works are irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive. Above all, they are full of pleasure' (16). With much of this work shaped by the AIDS epidemic and rallying against the identity politics and the push for positive images that informed gay and lesbian film preceding NQC, Michele Aaron argues that what binds this eclectic group of films is best described as 'defiance', stating that 'in order to understand NQC fully, one must understand "queer" as a critical intervention, cultural product, and political strategy—and NQC as the art-full manifestation of the overlap between the three' (2004, 6). Moreover, Michael DeAngelis argues that NQC encompasses 'a body of films that renounces the realist aesthetics while highlighting pastiche, irony, and the blending of seemingly discordant genres' (2004, 42). Specifically, DeAngelis assesses the narrative strategies developed by Todd Haynes and argues that while Haynes openly rejected the notion of 'an essential gay sensibility', his films steer NQC towards 'a version of social constructivism that strives to express something integral to a uniquely queer perspective on human experience' (ibid.). Proposing that these films foreground the role of fantasy, as part of 'the imagination of new times and spaces that exist apart from, and in opposition to, dominant, patriarchal culture' (43), DeAngelis demonstrates how these films 'emphasize gay culture's political responsibilities of remembering its own past, as well as the associated implications of forgetting and disavowing' (42).

Of course, NQC did not exist in a vacuum; rather, it coincided with 'the emergence of "queer" as a concept and a community' (Rich 2013, xvi). Constituting a derogatory slur against gay and lesbian people, the term gained popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s when it was reclaimed as a 'positive marker of difference' (Hall 2003, 54), comprising a mode of self-definition as well as coalition building. Scholarship narrating the origin story of this affirmative appropriation of queer typically points to two pivotal and interrelated moments. One refers to the militant activism of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation, who expressed a brash, in-

your-face, and non-apologetic attitude and used provocative slogans and confrontational tactics in order to create visibility for LGBT people, address the lack of governmental response to the AIDS epidemic, and oppose the normalising and assimilationist rhetoric of the liberal gay rights movement (i.e. Cvetkovich 2003; Berlant and Freeman 1997; Duggan 1997). The other consists of the uptake of queer in academia, where it found fertile ground under the header of Queer Theory and was shaped by the work of such scholars as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (i.e. Hall 2003; Jagose 1996). Both moments, however, point to the utilisation of the term queer as a way of signalling a departure from identity politics and a rejection of the social and cultural norms that govern gender and sexuality, with queer describing a more fluid understanding of these markers of difference. Thus, while queer is often used as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community, in a more radical sense it refers to an anti-identitarian and anti-normative stance towards issues of sexuality and gender. Moreover, as a mode of critique that emphasises 'the disruptive, the fractured, the tactical and contingent' (Hall 2003, 5), queer also extends beyond the parameters of sexuality and gender, representing an opposition to the fixity of institutional and disciplinary boundaries, with the discussion of generic hybridity in queer filmmaking serving as yet another example.

Over the last thirty years, then, the term queer has sparked both insightful debate and continuous bickering and navel-gazing over the meaning of the term. For one, the indeterminateness of what queer exactly refers to has also been one of its most valuable and productive attributes, allowing for 'a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent' (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 1). Additionally, David H. Halperin offers the following definition of queer:

> Unlike gay identity, which though deliberately proclaimed in acts of affirmation, is nonetheless rooted in the positive fact of homosexual object-choice, queer identity need not be grounded in any truth or in any stable reality. As the very word implies, 'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence (1995, 62, emphasis original)

If there is nothing in particular to which queer necessarily refers, functioning as an anti-identitarian term rather than an identity in and of itself, the political potential of queer can instead be accounted for by its capacity to capture what Alexander Doty calls 'a militant sense of difference that views the erotically "marginal" as both (in bell hook's words) a consciously chosen "site of resistance" and a location of "radical openness"' (1993, 3). Moreover, there

seems to be a general agreement among scholars that the meaning of queer can never be determined once and for all, with scholars emphasising that queer does not function merely as a synonym for the non-heterosexual—where queer designates the binary opposite of straight—but rather refers to those practices, experiences, embodiments, and attitudes that are more accurately described under the header of anti-normativity and anti-normalisation. For instance, in one of the foundational texts of queer studies, Michael Warner argues that 'the preference for "queer" represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalisation, it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favour of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal,' and concludes that 'for both academics and activists, "queer" gets its radical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual' (1993, xxvi).[55] Finally, David Eng describes the critique of the normative in queer studies as 'its most important epistemic as well as political promise' (2011, 193). Rather than describing a particular sexual identity, or even a series of sexual practices, one of the most important outcomes of queer activism and academia has been its capacity to cross the boundaries of the multiple identity categories that make up the abbreviation of LGBT+, in favour of a sustained analysis of the multiple axes of difference that determine people's lives.

At the same time, however, the emphasis on difference over sameness has also been one of queer's utopian gestures. For one, the fact that queer does not name a particular sexual identity but instead is conceptualised as the strategic rejection of stable identity categories, has not prevented a significant amount of queer theory and politics of prioritising the experiences of white, gay, cis men, at the expense of other groups, including lesbians, trans people, and people of colour, thereby obscuring and erasing the specificity of their experiences. For some scholars and activists, this risk of generalisation has caused them to reject the term queer from the outset, while others have expressed this critique as a way of holding queer accountable to its own standards. An early example of this approach is the essay 'Punk, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics' by Cathy J. Cohen, in which she argues that

[55] Because queer does not necessarily name a particular sexual identity but rather constitutes a 'positionality vis-à-vis the normative,' Halperin wittily asserts that queer 'is in fact available to anyone who feels marginalised because of her or his sexual practices: it could be married couples without children, for example, or even (who knows?) some married *with* children—with perhaps *very naughty* children' (1995, 62). On a more serious note, because queer functions as this sort of positionality rather than an identity, several scholars have suggested that the term can only be used as a form of self-definition and does not work as a label that can be attributed to a particular person or whole group (Sedgwick 1994). This separation of queer from gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity markers allows for the 'straight queer,' a term that has been part of the debate on queer from its very beginning, and which has not been without controversy. For one example of straight queer sex, see *BED PARTY*.

'one of the great failings of queer theory and especially queer politics has been their inability to incorporate into analysis of the world and strategies for politics mobilisation the role that race, class, and gender play in defining people's different relations to dominance and normalization' (1997, 457).[56] Notwithstanding the crucial growing body of queer analysis of colour, which insists on the importance of interrogating social formations as 'intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and race' (Ferguson 2006, 149), and recent considerations of the intersection of queer with 'issues of race, migration, empire, subaltern communities, and geography' (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005; see also Ahmed 2006; Anzaldúa 2009; Muñoz 1999; Puar 2007; Rodríguez 2014), Cohen's question of 'how to build a politics organised not merely by reductive categories of straight and queer, but organised around a more intersectional analysis of who and what the enemy is and where our potential allies can be found' (457) remains as relevant now as thirty years ago.

With much of the discourse on queer politics and queer cinema discussed above now several decades in the past, the question arises how much currency they hold in making sense of the queer pornography currently produced. Indeed, despite all of its influence, a decade after the publication of Rich's article, NQC was already deemed a lost moment, with Rich chronicling its 'short sweet climb from radical impulse to niche market' in her follow-up from 2000, referring to NQC's critical and commercial success, its marketplace acceptability, and its entry into mainstream filmmaking. In a more recent reflection on NQC, Rich states:

> New Queer Cinema changed: first, it expanded into something, then nothing, and then everything—a relatively rapid transformation from the fringe to the center at the level of subjects and themes. Once taboo or titillating, queers were now the stuff of art films, cross-over movies, and television series (2013, 262).

For Rich, the expansion of NQC into the mainstream also coincided with the mainstreaming of queer politics, allowing her to lament 'Yes, I am happy to have more rights, but oh how I miss the outlawry of the old days' (ibid.). Despite the fact that the legacy of NQC has been debated from its very conception, with the re-emergence of NQC heralded every few years, for the most part, there is a consensus amongst scholars that queer cinema has continued to move in the direction of the mainstream, addressing a predominantly straight audience, with the Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) marking a definite turning point. Contrastingly, I argue that queer pornography marks another expansion of NQC, one that in many ways returns it to its

[56] This is certainly not the only reason that queer has been rejected as a viable term for self-definition and politics. For a discussion of the contestations of queer, see Jagose (1996).

underground roots. Rather than expressing an interest in gathering a place in the mainstream, or pleasing a straight audience, queer pornography echoes the early days of NQC through its address of a queer audience and its prioritisation of queer culture. In doing so, it also affirms Rich's assessment that 'a desire to bear witness is still intense, the need to sit with others of one's own kind for the shared experience of those stories and characters on screen' (xxvi). Rather than something radically new or provocative, sexual representation in queer pornography is consistent with a much longer tradition of sexually explicit imagery in queer filmmaking, tracing a lineage to the 'postporn' of Annie Sprinkle and the 'queercore' of Bruce LaBruce, as well as the proto-queer films of artists like Jack Smith and Kenneth Anger. As such, the explicit representation of sex has always been a formative component of queer culture, with the history of queer cinema taking place not merely in the sanctioned space of the movie theatre but also 'in the community center, the porn theater, and the lesbian potluck' (Galt and Schoonover 2016, 16).[57]

In the following section, I trace some of the resonances between NQC and queer pornography through a discussion of queer temporalities, which combine a backward glance with an orientation towards the future, referring to the principal role of fantasy in the expression of such feelings as pleasure, hope, nostalgia, and melancholia. Without wanting to erase the socio-historical specificity of the initial iteration of queer, and its cultural expression in NQC, I trace some of the resonances of its themes, narrative strategies, and aesthetics in queer pornography, and its relation to structures of feeling. At the same time, however, I also move towards a broader definition of queer cinema, consistent with the account offered by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover in their book *Queer Cinema and the World* (2016), in which they insist that 'queer cinema enables different ways of being in the world and, more than this, it creates different worlds' and argue that 'queer cinema elaborates new accounts of the world, offering alternatives to embedded capitalist, national, hetero- and homonormative maps […] and forging dissident scales of affiliation, affectation, affect, and form' (5). In recent years, scholarship has emerged on the intersection of queer theory and affect theory, including the work of Galt and Schoonover, who argue that 'cinema captures queer modes of belonging in the world by deploying feeling and affect' (33). While one might expect the feelings and affects deployed by queer pornography to be exclusively sexual, this need not be the case, with *When We Are Together* exploring multiple modes of relationality and positing sex along other queer

[57] See the introduction of this dissertation for more on queer spaces and the relation between queer and (public) space.

intimacies, including queer kinship, friendship, and community. Thus, if *When We Are Together* envisions alternatives to the world currently inhabited through the mixing of fictional and documentary forms, the role of fantasy in queer pornography is not exclusionary to its function as a form of documentation; rather, it is constitutive of it. No longer capable of being delineated along the lines of 'real' and 'fake', the blending of fiction and documentary in queer pornography presents fantasy as central to queer's world-making potential.

While the anti-normative gesture is still central to the politics of queer, I am especially interested in evoking affect and emotion as sites of queer potentiality. Rather than characterising *When We Are Together* as queer because of the representation of queer sex, I seek to account for the way in which the film expresses a certain 'queer sensibility' by focusing on its aesthetics rather than its politics of representation. In doing so, I align myself with a tradition of queer scholarship that seeks to detach queerness from sexual identity by approaching queer docu-porn as a mode of expression dedicated to what Judith [Jack] Halberstam refers to as a queer 'way of life' consisting of 'wilfully eccentric modes of being', which position themselves against institutions like the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality, rigidly regimented gender structures, and normative reproductivity (2005a, 1). Halberstam argues:

> Not all gay, lesbian, and transgender people live their lives in radically different ways from their heterosexual counterparts, but what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the last decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up different life narratives and alternative relations to time and space (1-2).

Referring to queer cinema, Galt and Schoonover also argue for a broader conceptualisation of queer, allowing the term queer cinema to refer not merely to films made by queer filmmakers or to films that include queer characters or storylines but also to include abstract work (2016, 10). Thus, if the queerness of *When We Are Together* cannot merely be attributed to the performance of non-normative sex, the self-definition of its performers, or the identity of the filmmaker, it is also the case that its queerness is never *not* related to sexuality in some way. Whilst queer is not to be taken as a synonym for gay and lesbian, it is also important to keep in mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's assertion that 'given the historical and contemporary force of prohibitions against same-sex expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or displace them from the term's definitional center, would be to dematerialise any possibility of queerness itself' (1994, 8). Understood in this way, sexuality is central to queer, even if it is also never enough.

## 3.3 Queer Temporalities

### 3.3.1 Bearing Witness

In the voice-over narration of the prologue of *When We Are Together*, Östberg reflects on the time of filming, three years prior. She states:

> It was the summer we all fell in love with each other. You were my star and I was your director, even if you directed a lot yourself. *You said you wanted me there as a witness*, that you wanted me to top you and I was so flattered. Proud to be the chosen one. You gave yourself to me that summer. *You let me be an extension of your body. Through you, I got closer to other bodies, to your body. We needed each other, to enter these rooms*.

Although in this monologue, Östberg recounts a personal memory and refers directly to the relationship between herself and Liz, the subject of the film, in the section below, I propose that her words can be extended to capture something of the appeal of queer pornography itself. Specifically, I argue that the concept of witnessing, as an embodied and affective practice, serves as a productive starting point in thinking through the documentary impulse of queer pornography, without, importantly, resorting to notions of 'realness' or 'authenticity' or referring back to the indexicality on the image. Queer pornography positions the camera as a witness, and in doing so, it reimagines pornography as a medium of resilience, privileging experiences of recognition, affirmation, and community-building, and serving as a counterpoint to feelings of shame, self-doubt, and invisibility. Certainly, I am not first to insist on the viability of the term, as a way of accounting for the place pornography might hold in the lives of queer people. However, my usage of the term diverts in important ways from other discussions, in that it seeks to make space for, rather than negate, the role of fantasy in pornography. Rather than considering the practice of witnessing as supporting and further reinstating the evidentiary strategies of pornographic representation, I discuss it in tandem with the utopian pull of queer pornography. In particular, I refer here to the work of Tim Dean, who foregrounds the role of witnessing in his discussion of bareback porn (2009). Accounting for the place of pornography 'in a subculture that graphically represents itself and aspires to create a visual archive of its actions' (104), Dean is interested in exploring the ways in which gay bareback porn relies heavily on a documentary aura, presenting itself as a form of 'visual ethnography,' despite 'progressive defenses of porn [who] have struggled hard to dissociate it from the literalist implications of the documentary genre' (119).[58] Founded in a realist

[58] I have discussed some of these defenses in the previous section, when referring to anti-censorship and pro-sex feminist engagement with pornography.

aesthetics, Dean argues that the appeal of gay bareback porn lies not in 'the voyeuristic thrill of seeing ordinary, nonprofessional couples fucking at home,' as is the case in amateur pornography, but rather, he relates it to the aspiration of representing a community 'to and for itself' (120). Specifically, Dean points to the desire to be witnessed, which he recognises as central to the subculture of barebacking, and insists that this desire 'should not be pathologized as exhibitionism since it manifests a wish for cultural rather than individual sanction that is particularly important in the case of nonnormative or stigmatized erotic activities' (129).

Dean's discussion of gay bareback porn chimes in important ways with my own analysis of queer pornography, insofar as he asserts that bareback porn expresses 'less a psychological than a cultural—or subcultural—desire for recognition' (ibid.). However, there are also some important limitations to his discussion, as his description of the act of witnessing is informed in crucial ways by the role it takes up in the erotic practice of barebacking itself, a role that cannot straightforwardly be transposed to other practices or pornographies. Connected to this point, his discussion of gay bareback porn depends in great part on an embrace of the principle of maximum visibility, with the desire to be witnessed intrinsically tied up with the visual exposure of the body's interiority and exteriority. However, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 1, alternative pornography expresses a much more ambivalent attitude towards maximum visibility. Finally, and particularly relevant to my discussion in this final section of this chapter, are Dean's thoughts on the documentary aura of gay bareback porn, which he argues precludes rather than affirms the role of fantasy, stating that 'when pornographers focus so intently in producing representations in which viewers can find themselves, they neglect porn's promise of an experience in which viewers can lose themselves' (123). However, I am not convinced that the two are as mutually exclusive as Dean suggests here; rather, I propose that queer pornography constantly complicates the strict demarcation between documentary evidence and escapist entertainment, creating a place for fantasy and imagination as much as documentation and recognition.[59]

In order to better account for the relationship between documentation and fantasy in queer pornography, I turn to a corpus of queer scholarship on trauma, which deals largely—although

[59] Linda Williams expresses a similar criticism of Dean's analysis, when she states that 'Dean want to convince himself that he is doing ethnography on a community through its pornography. In other words, he seems to believe the fantasy' (2014, 36). Williams herself, then, is much more skeptical about the connection between pornography and actuality, as she argues that 'the video may look like a documentary, it may engage real bodies penetrating and being penetrated in all sorts of ways, but it is also an erotic fantasy that depends on erecting the limits it wants to seem to transcend' (36-37). I agree with Williams, which is precisely why I focus precisely on the reciprocal relationship of documentary and utopia in my analysis of queer pornography below.

not exclusively—with the cultural production emerging out of the AIDS epidemic. Although the connections between queer perspectives on trauma and the orientation towards pleasure in queer pornography might not appear immediately obvious, I propose that the complex analysis of the social role of affect allowed for by this scholarship serves as a productive entry point into the documentary project of queer pornography, insofar as this imagery comprises a visual archive of queer feelings, as well as queer sex. Engaging with the relationship between trauma, sexuality, and queer cultural production, this scholarship allows me to trace the connections between documentation, imagination, and politics in queer pornography, by foregrounding the role of affect and feeling in the interplay between the personal and the collective, without, importantly, suggesting that these forms of queer cultural production refer to the same thing.[60] One example of this body of work is Roger Hallas' book *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (2009, 3), in which he specifically engages with the 'capacity of moving-image media to bear witness to the historical trauma of AIDS.' In particular, I am interested in exploring how his conceptualization of the act of bearing witness resonates with other queer moving images, with queer pornography having to negotiate similar risks to the ones posed by Hallas, when he explains that 'to bear witness to such trauma involves more than a straightforward representational act, for it must be performed in discursive spaces fraught with the risk of confession, pathologization, and depoliticization' (ibid.). Whereas Hallas engages with the kind of films and video that have been dubbed 'alternative AIDS media' (1995) by Alexandra Juhasz, as a way of distinguishing them from the representation of AIDS in dominant or mainstream media, queer pornography experiments with a range of visual tactics as a way of developing alternatives to the objectification and fetishization of nonnormative sexualities in mainstream pornography. Central to Hallas' argument is the distinction between the testimonial act of bearing witness and the disciplinary act of confession, a distinction that is particularly relevant to the genre of pornography, which has regularly been discussed by scholars as a confessional genre, if not *the* confessional genre, a dubious honour it shares—not coincidentally—with the documentary film.

[60] While I explore some of the connections between these forms of queer cultural production, most importantly the way in which they thematise around of identity, sexuality, and community, I do not mean to suggest, of course, that they are the same thing, as there are some clear differences between these examples of film video, and the way they engage with issues of loss, death, and the trauma of AIDS, and queer pornography, which is preoccupied first and foremost with sexual pleasure. At the same time, however, I do want to suggest that the themes explored in queer pornography are not always as far removed as might be expected, with films like *When We Are Together* acknowledging the complex entanglement of 'positive' feelings of pleasure, recognition, and love, and 'negative' feelings of invisibility, melancholia, and loneliness.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I already alluded to this confessional aspect of pornography when I referenced Williams' discussion of the principle of maximum visibility and the evidentiary status of the money shot. Like Williams, Hallas draws on the work of Foucault in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978, 59), in which he refers to the 'culture of confession' in Western societies. Foucault describes confession as a disciplinary technique that involves the production of truth, rather than an enunciation that allows people to express some inherent truth about their authentic selves. As modern subjects, Foucault states that we are guided by 'an obligation to confess [that is] so deeply ingrained in us that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constraints us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface' (61). In modern times, the technique of confession has enabled 'the transformation of sex into discourse,' with the procedures of confession disseminated across a whole range of institutions and domains and combined with scientific discourses, such as those of medicine, psychiatry, and pedagogy, allowing Foucault to argue that 'a great archive of sex was gradually constituted' (63). Williams, on her part, explores the place of pornography in this archive of sex, by pointing towards a 'continuity of a tradition that seeks knowledge of the pleasures of sex' (1999, 31). Specifically, Williams argues that the genre of hardcore moving-image pornography is part of the modern 'compulsion to make sex speak,' with the history of the pornography structured by the interrelation of pleasure and power: 'although the cinematic hardcore will present itself as the unfaked, unstaged mechanics of sexual action, the representation of movement is shaped […] by techniques of confession that are applied first and foremost to female bodies' (48). This notion that the genre of pornography makes for a *scientia sexualis,* which demonstrates an investment in uncovering the 'secrets' of the female sex through the deployment of the scientific 'truth-telling' capacities of the photographic image, is thematised in the opening shots of the wagon scene in *When We Are Together,* which show Paulita flicking through a book of vintage nude pictures (Fig. 30). Parodying the incessant search for the 'truth' of sex and the visual scrutiny of the female body in these pornographic photographs, the camera focuses in on these pictures through the lens of a hand magnifying glass. Alluding to this long history of the exchange of images of women among men, the camera then lingers on this one picture of a woman in a particularly unusual position, with a finger tapping the picture before the films cuts to Kate as she removes her torn multi-coloured fishnet stockings—the exemplary queer uniform—and occupies the same position on the bed, with Paulita pouring water over her vulva and anus, before Kate topples over and the two of them burst out in laughter as they kiss and embrace (Fig. 31).

So, how can we think of *When We Are Together* as developing alternative strategies for resisting the disciplinary technique of confession in pornography, and is this even possible? Although Hallas draws attention to some notable parallels between the act of confession and that of bearing witness, such as their shared involvement in the dynamics of power and their contribution to the production of 'truth,' he also points out some crucial differences, stating:

> [Bearing witness] produces a *centrifugal* effect with regards to power. The presence of an addressee for testimony functions not as a mediator directing power onto the subject, as in confession, but as a witness who participates in the horizontal dispersal of power onto other bodies, that is to say, in sharing the responsibility for the historical and social conditions that necessitate testimony. The truth produced by testimony is not the privatized and internalized truth of the subject generated in confession, but rather is a truth that locates the subject and his or her experience relationally and historically (11-12, emphasis original).

Applying this conceptual framework to the medium of film, Hallas is particularly interested in the way in which 'images themselves might bear witness' and the implications this might have for the self-representation of marginalised bodies and experiences, as he warns that 'behind the promise of cultural visibility and voice for any marginalized people hovers the potential threat that its publicized bodies merely become a confessional spectacle' (11). In this quote, Hallas might just as well have been describing some of the traps of queer pornography, so well does his argument fit some of its most pressing concerns.[61] Therefore, it might well be worth interrogating some of the visual tactics deployed by the films and videos that Hallas is concerned with, as a way of addressing the question of 'how, in attempting to bear witness, one avoids being spoken by the dominant regime' (19).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Hallas' discussion of these visual tactics coincides to a large extent with my own analysis of queer docu-porn, insofar as he points out some of the problems associated with the use of 'observational approaches that efface the presence of the camera and the relationship of the image-maker to his or her subject' and explains how these approaches 'risk performing a pathologizing gaze [in which] the bodily image "confesses" its truth of its subjects' (14). Hallas argues queer AIDS media both strategically appropriates documentary realism and incorporates a range of formal techniques more commonly associated with fictional and experimental modes of representation, such as 'self-reflexive performance, hand-held camera cinematography, doubled autobiographical subjects, musical spectacle, found footage, and sound design' (19). Similar to my own discussion of *Trans Entities* and *BED PARTY* in

[61] See Chapter 1 of an in-depth discussion of the relationship between the principle of maximum visibility in pornography and the desire for cultural visibility and recognition by marginalised groups, including women and queer people.

the previous chapter, then, Hallas argues that we need to 'consider the integration of realist and antirealist techniques […] rather than continue to dichotomize them as inherently conservative and progressive forms' (18). Rather than centred on generating objective evidence, then, Hallas explains how queer AIDS media constructs 'a very different visual mode of bearing witness, one in which the articulation of experiences as a form of embodied knowledge supersedes the production of evidence as a form of disinterested knowledge' (15).

Central to Hallas' understanding of the testimonial act of bearing witness, is the manner in which these formal tactics reshape the relationship between the camera and the subjects and events it seeks to document, with the camera functioning as 'an active participant' rather than 'the objectifying apparatus that produces the docile bodies of the other' (15), allowing Hallas to conclude that 'queer films and videos demonstrate how the camera can relate and connect as much as it can objectify. Proximity is as possible as distance' (17). The scene with Paulita and Kate mentioned above illustrates one of the ways in which the testimonial act of bearing witness can be understood in relation to pornography. Demonstrating an awareness of its own position in a genre of film that throughout its history has been involved in the production of objectifying, derogatory, and misogynistic images, the camera reframes this rhetoric of pornography, appropriating it for the purpose of queer pleasures and forms of relationality. Rather than presenting its bodily images as part of a confessional spectacle, *When We Are Together* fosters the encounter of bearing witness through the incorporation of voice-over narration and several montage sequences, which connect the different chapters of the film. In the scene above, for instance, these images of Paulita and Kate are interspersed with imagery of queer friendship, community, and kinship, with these fleeting images held together by the cohesion device of the musical score, which consists of rhythmic drumming accompanied by almost hypnotic chanting. Although Östberg's voice-over refers on the socio-historical specificity of the city of Berlin, alluding to the trauma of its past and current politics struggles, for the most part, the subjective narration evokes more of a tone, expressing feelings of displacement and longing, which is supported by the associative imagery of different people and locations, including the outskirts of Berlin and the flowers and greenery of Paulita's garden at the squat at Schwartzer Kanal. Together with techniques like handheld camerawork and the use of slow-motion and jump-cuts, these formal devices give the montage sequences something of a dream-like or other-worldly quality, which is intensified by the figure of the queer guardian angel, dressed in black tape and wings, who is introduced in the prologue of the film and runs as a red thread through the sequences (Fig. 32). With these images stripped from their

association with objective evidence, the incorporation of self-reflexive and fictional devices depicts the bodies and sex as part of a wider repository of queer intimacies. Rather than keeping the spectator at a distance, then, the camera as a witness invites the spectator into these queer spaces, which is a point I return to below when I engage with the utopian quality of queer pornography.

Favouring the embodied presence and aural proximity of Östberg's direct address in the voice-over over the distance associated with the visual scrutiny of the pornographic image, *When We Are Together* also draws into question what it means to provide evidence of the 'truth' of sex through the 'confession' of sexual pleasure in pornography. Although the film does include some spectacular depictions of orgasms, most notably the screaming orgasm of Sadie Lune in the bathroom scene in the beginning of the film, the utilization of self-reflexive formal devices and fictional elements undermines any straightforward claim to 'realness' or 'authenticity.' Rather, the film relies on what Muñoz refers to as 'queer evidence' (2009, 65). Since historically, 'queerness has an especially vexed relation to evidence […] as evidence of queerness has been used to penalize and discipline queer desires, connections, and acts' (165), Muñoz instead sutures the concept of queer evidence with that of ephemera, which he argues 'does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things' (1996, 10). Referring to queer evidence as an 'hermeneutics of residue,' Muñoz argues that 'for queers, the gesture and the aftermath, the ephemeral trace, matter more than many traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics' (2009, 81). In *When We Are Together*, traces and residues of queerness are captured in the voice-over narration, which is built from fragments of thoughts, impressions, and memories, and through the use of the visual, with the montage sequences comprises of loosely connected associative images of people and locations. In capturing these traces of the lived experience of queerness, I argue that *When We Are Together* functions as an 'archive of feelings' (Cvetkovich 2002). Of course, *all* pornography can be considered an archive to a certain extent, insofar as it documents sexual fantasies, actions, desires, and pleasures. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, this function might hold a particular significance for marginalised groups of people. This point that is also recognised by Tim Dean in his introduction to the book *Porn Archives,* in which he states that:

> Porn, too, is an archive of feelings. Certainly, this is a major source of pornography's significance for those whose desires depart from social norms […] By preserving traces of nonnormative pleasures, porn facilitates not only the tracking but also the reactivation of these pleasures; and it may well do so without requiring imaginary identification to experience them.

> Porn archives are important not least because sexual minorities use them as a form of cultural memory (10).

Whereas Dean celebrates the porn archive for focusing specifically on queer pleasures, in contrast to other queer repositories of affect and feeling, which focus primarily on 'negative' feelings of shame, loneliness, and despair, I argue that queer pornography like that of *When We Are Together*, as an archive of feelings, opens the genre of pornography up to other aspects of the lived experience of sex as well, suturing queer pleasures with the feelings of love, joy, and intimacy, as well as more complex and ambiguous feelings like those of melancholia and nostalgia. This feeling of nostalgia is expressed specifically through the voice-over narration, but also through visual means, with images of the winged figure evoking a similar sense of the transience of memory. Juhasz writes of the use of nostalgia in queer video and states:

> Video plus nostalgia looks not just to an indexical trace of the past but creates the possibility for an anticipated trace of the future. This is what I call "queer archive activism"—a practice that adds love and hope to time and technology. Because we once loved, and recorded it, we have proof that we did and that others will (2006b, 326).

It is in this way that I understand the documentary impulse of queer pornography, not as somehow related to the representation of 'real' sex but as proof of the viability and legitimacy of queer intimacies, some of which may be sexual, but not always and not exclusively. In the following section, then, I engage with the queer temporality of *When We Are Together* by connecting this trace of the future to its utopian impulse.

### 3.3.2 Utopian Longing

After the prologue of the film, the first scene of *When We Are Together* consists of the director and her subject entering a queer sex club. After a somewhat awkward announcement by Östberg that they will now be entering "this world", the diegetic sounds temporarily disappear and the musical score sets in, as the camera moves across around the club, taking all of it in. Flooded in different colours, the stylized use of cinematic techniques incorporates slow-motion and split screens as the handheld camera swirls across the bodies of the visitors of the club, with the camera cruising the area of the club, focusing momentarily on people kissing before moving to Kate and Sadie performing on the bar, and moving along the dark areas of the club until the first sex scene commences in one of the semi-secluded rooms of the club, with Liz watching the scene (Fig. 33). On first instance, the club scene in *When We Are Together* appears as almost a text-book illustration of the idealized and imaginative space of pornography, captured by Marcus' concept of 'pornotopia' (1974). In his chapter, Marcus discusses the

spatial and temporal framework in which the representation of sex is set, and, like previous discussions of the place of fictional features like narrative and characterization, his argument is that they need to defer as little attention as possible from the sex itself, with Marcus stating that 'in the kind of boundless, featureless freedom that most pornographic fantasies require for their action, such details are regarded as restrictions, limitations, distractions, and encumbrances' (269). When it comes to the space of pornography, then, Marcus explains that 'it may well be said to exist largely in no place, and to take place nowhere' and argues that 'whatever the imaginative location the premise of the story is set, it no longer matters as soon as the story proceeds to its real business, which is after all largely irrelevant to considerations of place' (268). Additionally, Marcus argues that pornotopia, like many other utopias, has a special relation to time, describing it as 'always bedtime' (269). Specifically, Marcus connects the issue of temporality to the idealized state of pornotopia, in which the performance of sex is detached from the social norms and inhibitions that restrain it in everyday, stating that 'it is always summertime in pornotopia, and it is summertime of the emotions as well—no one is every jealous, possessive, or really angry. All our emotions are perfectly fused with our sexuality, and the only rage is the rage of lust, a happy fury indeed' (273).

In the section below, I argue that queer pornography expresses very a different attitude towards the notion of utopia than the one presented in Marcus' description of pornotopia. Rather than existing 'outside of time' I argue that *When We Are Together* presents an 'everyday utopia' (Cooper 2009), in that is situated in a particular place and time, while at the same time exploring alternatives to the here and now. In the previous chapter, I discussed some of the ways in which the impression of reality in pornography imbues on the spectator an experience of presence, proximity, and participation. This emphasis, not only on presence but also on the presentness of the image—referring to a continuous state of being in the here and now—is actively resisted in *When We Are Together,* in favour of an intricate knotting of past, present, and future, which has recently been discussed under the header of queer temporalities.[62] For instance, in an early example of this body of work, Halberstam foregrounds queer subcultural spaces like the drag king show and the lesbian punk concert, as well as spaces for queer public sex, arguing that 'queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe

[62] For a summary of this debate see Dinshaw et. al. (2007). Key works in this debate include Dinshaw (1999), Jagose (2002), Edelman (2004), Halberstam (2005), Freccero (2006), Love (2009), Muñoz (2009.) and Freeman (2010). By aligning myself with Muñoz's concept of futurity, I also take a position in this debate, with many queer scholars arguing precisely against the alignment of queer with futurity, in favour of the present (Edelman 2004) and the past (Love 2009)

that their future can be imagined according to logics outside the paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death' (2005, 2). More to the point, Muñoz engages with the problem that the present poses for those who do not fit this model of 'straight time' and states that 'the present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and "rational" expectations' (2009, 27). If queerness refers to a resistance to the present moment, however, this does not mean that it is possible to simply turn away from the present for those people who do not feel at home there. Rather, Muñoz proposes that 'the present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds' (ibid.). Specifically, he presents the concept of hope as a critical methodology for overcoming the limitations of the present, which he describes as 'a backward glance that enacts a future vision' (4). *When We Are Together* demonstrates how queer pornography might allow for a space in which alternative worlds are imagined. Loosening the temporal ties of the genre of pornography to the present moment, the 'posits its remembrances and their ritualized tellings' through cinematic form, 'as having world-making potentialities' (35).

However, it is not just the utopian space of pornography that is portrayed in *When We Are Together* it is also explicitly portrayed as a queer club, with Liz even telling one of the visitors that they are looking for a "queer space". While the utopian has often been evoked in relation to queer as a way of criticizing its shortcomings, referring to the disparaging characterization of queer as an unproductive form of idealism, referring to the naivete of those who argue in favour of queer's transformative potential, the relation between queer and the utopian has also been understood in the affirmative sense, referring to the function of queer as a political promise. Rather than designating something that exists in the here and now, the affiliation between queer and the utopian is closely related to what Judith Butler refers to as the 'understanding of queer as a site for collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings' (1993, 19). Similarly, Halperin argues that:

> 'Queer,' in any case, does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes *a horizon of possibility* whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that is may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-constitution, and practices of community—for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire (emphasis mine, 1995, 62).

Both Butler and Halperin describe queer as something that can never be fully owned in the present but rather is oriented towards the future and might even have to be abandoned or substituted once it loses its critical edge and political viability. However, they do not refer directly to the concept of utopia, which is a move made by José Esteban Muñoz in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009, 11), in which he polemically asserts that 'if queer is to have any value whatsoever, it must be visible only on the horizon.' He states:

> Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future (1).

Muñoz's argument resonates with Houston's statements in the previous chapter, in which she refers to pornography as a way of exploring the incredible potential of queer, rather than its genuine reality. For the purpose of my discussion here, I am especially interested in the way in which the utopian potential of queer can be expressed through cultural production. Rather than presenting the audience with a particular blueprint, model, or program of alternative futures, Dolan engages with the impact of theatre and performance, as a way of explaining how cultural production can provide the audience with 'glimpses of utopia' (2004, 456). Drawing on the work of Dyer, I propose that queer pornography expresses 'what utopia would feel like, rather than how it would be organized' (2002, 20). Importantly, these are queer feelings that I am concerned with as I engage with the affective pull of the imagery and sounds of *When We Are Together*. In her chapter on queer feelings, Sara Ahmed writes how heteronormativity 'functions powerful not only as a series of norms and ideals, but also through emotions that shape bodies as well as worlds' (2004, 146). Describing queerness as an experience of discomfort or 'non-fitting' that is contrasted by the public comfort of heterosexuality, Ahmed analyses how the failure to live up to a heteronormative ideal comes with all kind of negative effects, involving pain, anxiety, fear, depression, and shame, which restrict bodily and social mobility' (154). However, Ahmed proposes that his form of queer discomfort can also be generative, rather than simply constraining or debilitating, as it opens up new ways of inhabiting norms differently, and gives rise to a sense of excitement that is geared towards future becomings, as she states that 'queer is not, then, about transcendence or freedom from the (hetero)normative […] Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with available scripts for living and loving, along with the excitement in the face of uncertainty

of where this discomfort may take us; (155). While some of these feelings might be sexual, this need not necessarily be the case, as Ahmed makes clear:

> Queer pleasures are not just about the coming together of bodies in sexual intimacy. Queer bodies 'gather' in spaces, through the pleasure of opening up to other bodies. These queer gatherings involve forms of activism; ways of claiming back the street, as well as the spaces of clubs, bars, parks, and homes. The hope of queer politics is that bringing us closer to others, from which we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others' (165).

Echoing my discussion of queer counterpublics in the introduction, I argue that *When We Are Together* allows for the pleasures of gathering bodies in two ways, first, by offering a representation of the utopian spaces in which queer bodies gather, referring to the queer sex club and the queer sanctuary at Schwartze Kanal, and secondly, through the film itself, allowing the viewer to become an extension of the camera, as well as the bodies presented on the screen, with director and subject taking the viewer along with them as they enter these rooms and places. If on first glance, the description of pornotopia as described by Marcus seems incompatible with the documentary function of queer pornography, they come together in a humorous way in the queer sex club scene, where the idealized presentation of the utopian space is interrupted in a few moments where the documentary registration focuses on the experience of Östberg as she complains about the difficulties of flirting in Berlin, resulting in a friction between the promise of this utopian queer space, on the one hand, and the everyday experience of queer spaces and the queer community. Rather than pointing towards the utopian quality of pornography, there film then refers also to utopian longing that is wrapped up with the queer community itself. These rooms, then, are both real and imaginary, which is a point that is picked up by Dolan, when she describes the utopian space of performance as 'imaginary territories that map themselves over the real' (Dolan, 457).

Rather than referring to fantasy as a way of engaging with the idealized space of pornotopia or referring to individualized sexual fantasies, my understanding of the role of fantasy in queer pornography is more closely aligned with what Judith Butler refers to as the 'critical promise of fantasy.' She states:

> Moreover, fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized and the not yet actualizable […] Fantasy is not the opposite of realty; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, where and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it

> establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home (2004, 29).

Rather than something that is radically divorced from the political or the social, for instance through the conception of pornography as a form of escapist entertainment, here, fantasy is located in the interstices of the personal and the collective, as it relates to the struggle of creating what Butler calls 'a new way of life, a more livable life' (2015, 217). As Rodriguez explains, this does negate or efface the relationship between fantasy and sex; rather it 'makes an argument for the political force of fantasy in all its psychic complexity as a necessary site for sexual fantasies, political fantasies, and utopian fantasies of futurity, survival, and pleasure' (2014, 26). Very different from the fantasy space of Marcus' pornotopia, then, Rodriguez argues that 'fantasy here functions not as an escape from the real-world materiality of living, breathing bodies, but as a way to conjure and inhabit an alternative world in which other forms of identification and social relations become imaginable' (ibid.). This is also what connects the concept of fantasy to the utopian impulse of queer, with Muñoz rejecting the 'stark distinction between escapism and radical politics' and stating that 'escape itself need not be a surrender but, instead, may be more like a refusal of a dominant order and its systemic violence. Queer fantasy is linked to utopian longing, and together the two can become contributing conditions of possibility for political transformation' (172). In *When We Are Together* this conjunction of queer fantasy and utopian longing come across especially in the portrayal of the queer sanctuary of Schwartze Kanal, towards the end of the film, as it celebrates the formations queer kinship that is part of the gathering of bodies in the process of making the film. The film shows the crew undressing and participating in a mud bath outside Kate and Paulita's wagon as well as people making music and dancing, with a feeling of joy and exuberance expressed as Paulita jumps naked over the camera. The scene turns into a montage of all the spaces and people that appeared throughout the film, until the film returns to the final voice-over by Östberg, in which she states: "The summer ended. Like all do. I keep returning to the footage. And to you. Looking back from across time. The film was reality when we were shooting it." Captured in this quote, then, is the oscillation of documentation and fantasy that lies at the core of queer pornography's utopian project, pointing to something that is simultaneously real and imagined.

## Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have aimed to demonstrate how feminist and queer pornography opens up the vocabulary of pornography as a way of developing alternative ways if speaking sex. With this emphasis on the documentation of queer feelings in queer pornography,

however, I am aware that I run the risk of once again rendering invisible or sanitizing queer sexual pleasures, however, this is a risk I am willing to take, not only because I think it accounts for the ways in which queer pornography re-imagines the genre of pornography as mode of recognition and community building, but also because I hope to have demonstrated that sexual feelings and feelings of hope, joy, exuberance, pain, awkwardness, loss, and nostalgia interact with each other in queer pornography, allowing insight into the ways in which fantasy and utopia are as central to the experience of queer as they are to pornography. In the first section. I engaged with the role of the feminist sex wars on the understanding of pornography. In particular, I pointed towards the emphasis on fantasy in anti-censorship feminism, as a way of responding to the conflation of representation and reality in anti-pornography feminist writing. In particular, I was interested in exploring the relation between fantasy and the investment in the documentation of marginalised sexualities in queer pornography, as a way of drawing the debate away from considerations of realness and authenticity and towards an acknowledgement of the role of the fantasy and the imagination in queer pornography. In section two of the chapter, I positioned queer pornography within a wider framework of queer filmmaking. Rather than relating the documentary impulse of queer pornography to the desire to 'real' sex, I referred to the documentary layering of *When We Are Together* as consistent with a queer mode of documentary filmmaking, which favours the personal and the subjective and blurs the boundaries between documentation and fiction. In the final section of the chapter, I engaged with the queer temporality of queer pornography, referring to it as constituting an archive of queer feelings, as well as queer sex, which is nevertheless characterised by a utopian longing, which brings into reach alternative ways of being in the world and being together, and which blurs the distinction between pornography as a fantasy medium and as a vehicle of documentation.

# Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the cultural activism of contemporary alternative pornography through a focus on cinematic aesthetics. Exploring the category of alternative pornography, consisting primarily of feminist, lesbian, and queer pornographies, which re-imagines pornography as a potential vehicle for recognition, self-definition, sexual autonomy, and community building, this dissertation has engaged with some of the different ways in which alternative pornography has broadened the visual vocabulary of pornography, by adopting a range of formal techniques and conventions from outside the realm of pornography, drawing primarily from experimental and documentary film. One the one hand, the different chapters have interrogated how alternative pornography intervenes and positions itself against mainstream pornography, whereas, one the other hand, it examined the ways in which alternative pornography draws on and expands wider trajectories of feminist and queer filmmaking.

In the first chapter, I engaged with some of major concepts that have shaped the discussion of spectatorship in pornography, referring to the diverse range of visual pleasures allowed for by pornography and the formative role of the principle of maximum visibility, as it relates to the production of the 'truth' of sex. In the first section, I approached feminist pornography through the lens of feminist film theory, proposing that feminist pornography carves out a space for images and representations of the female body that move beyond Mulvey's theorisation of the controlling and voyeuristic male gaze, exploring a range of visual pleasures. In the second section, I focused on the way in which feminist pornography reimagines the genre of pornography as a vehicle for the promotion and affirmation of female sexual autonomy and the exploration of female fantasies. In doing so, feminist pornography seeks to provide an alternative to the formulaic and repetitive depiction of sexual actions in mainstream pornography. Focusing on the place of orgasm in the narration of sex in pornography, I offered a typology of the iconography of female sexual pleasure in feminist pornography, I referred to some of the potential of this imagery as well as its limitations, discussing some of the problems of maximum visibility in relation to alternative pornography. In the third and final chapter, I introduced the use of haptic images of sex as one potential avenue of exploring different ways of visualising sex, which does not necessarily rely on the distinction between erotic and hardcore or between art and pornography. Referring to these examples of feminist pornography

as developing an aesthetics of touch, I explored some of the ways in which they adopt experimental cinematic techniques as a way of conveying the embodied experience of sex. Rather than presenting these formal features as more allowing for a more 'truthful' or 'authentic' representation of sexual pleasure, I proposed that haptic visuality can be described as constituting a feminist strategy, exploring different ways of producing knowledge of sex.

In the second and third chapter I engaged with the category of queer docu-porn, as a way of thinking through the documentary impulse of pornography. In Chapter 2, I focused primarily on the reinterpretation of 'real' sex in alternative pornography. First, I explored how the genre of pornography is able to secure its privileged relation to 'reality' by appealing to the image as an indexical trace of the real as well as adopting the conventions of documentary realism. Promising the viewer unmediated access to 'the real thing,' I argued that the verisimilitude of pornography relying on a variety of cinematic techniques and generic conventions. Within the context of alternative pornography, the evidentiary tactics deployed by mainstream pornography, as a way of convincing the viewer that the sex depicted on screen is 'real' and not somehow fabricated, simulated, or faked, do not necessarily hold up, with alternative pornography relying instead on the aura of authenticity. This emphasis on 'realness' and 'authenticity' is contrasted with the spectacular and hyperbolic rendition of 'fantastical' sex in mainstream pornography. Without wholeheartedly rejecting the way in which claims of 'realness' and 'authenticity' might be taken up strategically, I pointed to some of the problems with authenticity, arguing that we need different ways of engaging with the documentary function of queer pornography, where pornography is appropriated as a medium of recognition. By engaging with the use of observational and self-reflexive features in queer-docu porn, I pointed towards some of ways in which filmmakers themselves have negotiated and problematised the documentary aura of pornography.

Building on some of the insights of the previous chapter, in Chapter 3, I focused on the role of fantasy and utopia in queer pornography. First, I engaged with the debate of pornography, as part of the feminist sex wars of the 1980s. In particular, I focused on the role of anti-censorship feminists, as they relied to a great extent on a theorization of fantasy in their engagement with the potential of pornography, as a way of responding to the conflation of representation and reality in anti-pornography feminist writing. From there, I explored the relation between queer pornography and the trajectory of queer filmmaking, arguing that these films also blur the boundaries between fiction and documentation. Referring to the use of subjective narration and poetic imagery in queer pornography, I engaged with the question of what precisely makes

these films queer. Rather than relating the documentary impulse of queer pornography to the desire to represent 'real' sex, I argued that the documentary impulse of queer pornography re-imagines pornography as medium of recognition. In the final section of the chapter, I engaged with the queer temporality of queer pornography, referring to it as constituting an archive of queer feelings, as well as queer sex, which is nevertheless characterised by a utopian longing, which brings into reach alternative ways of being in the world and being together, and which blurs the distinction between pornography as a fantasy medium and as a vehicle of documentation.

# Appendices


*Figure 1 been too long at the FAIR: superimposed images of the theatre*

*Figure 2 been too long at the FAIR: public sex in the porn theatre*

*Figure 3 Shutter: cruising in the woods*

*Figure 4: Shutter: performing public sex*

*Figure 5: Shutter: gay iconography of cruising*

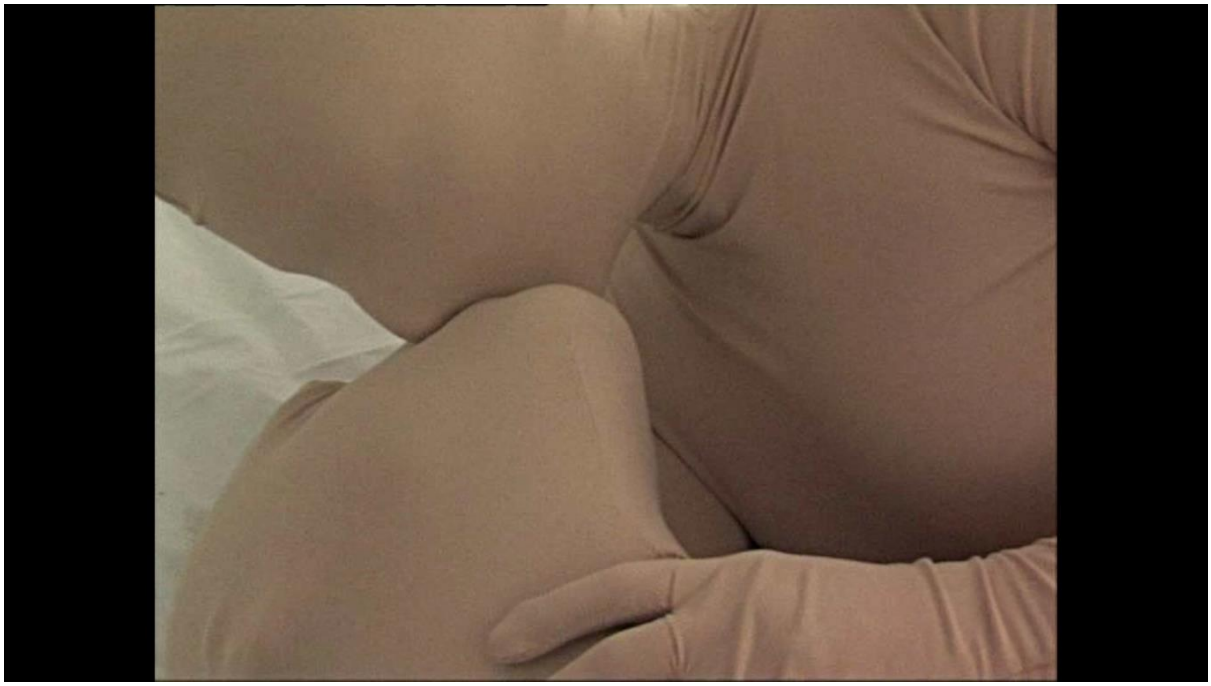

*Figure 6: Skin: figures kissing*

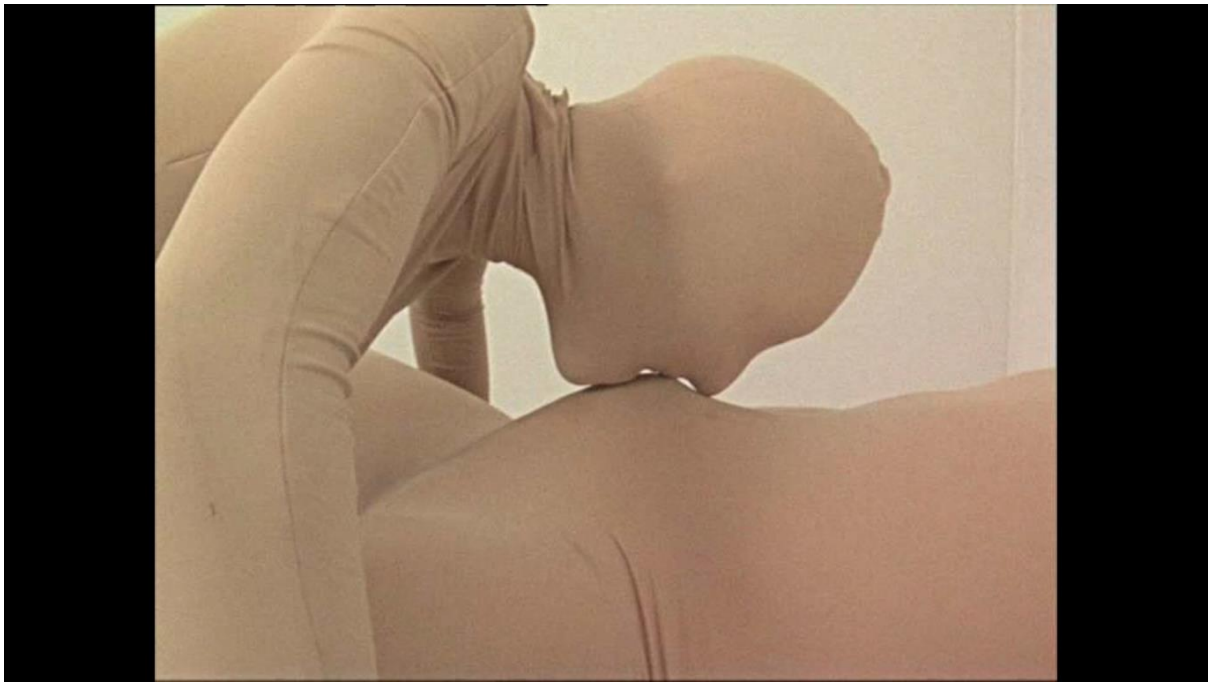

*Figure 7: Skin: penis protrudes against fabric*

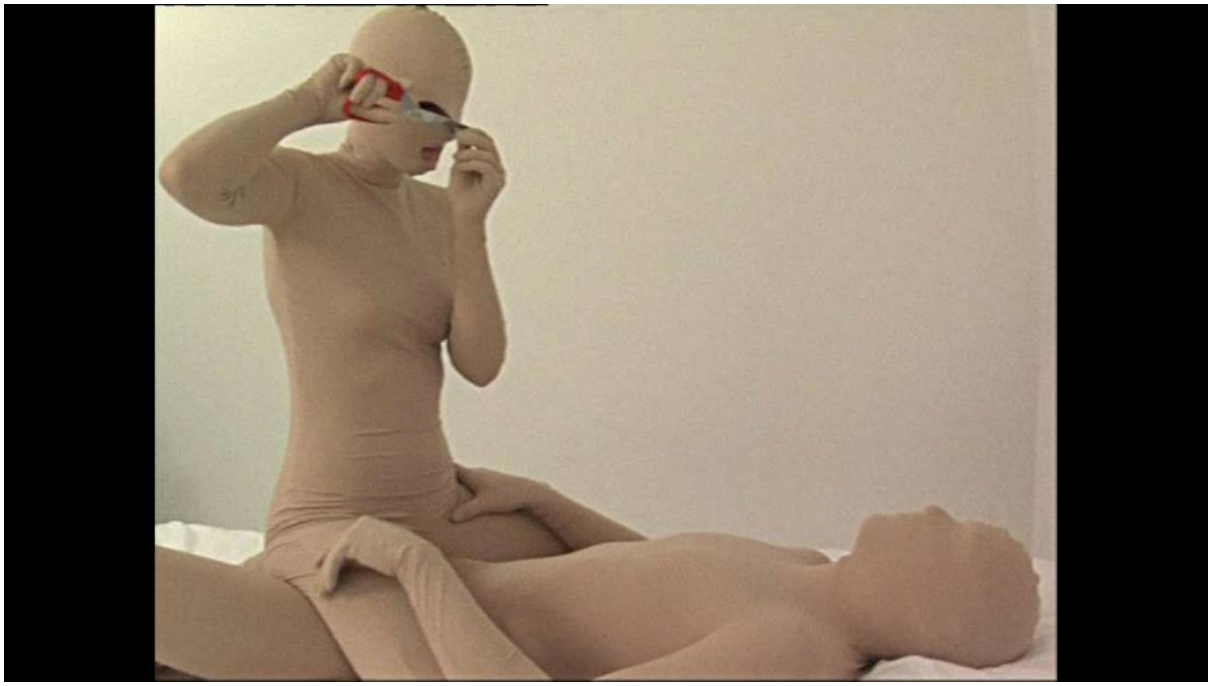

*Figure 8 Skin: performer cutting open the nylon fabric with scissors*

*Figure 9: Skin: hands moving under the nylon suit*

*Figure 10: The opening shots of Touch*

*Figure 11 Touch: superimposed hands touching*

*Figure 12 haptic images in Touch*

*Figure 13: One Night Stand: The camera and performers in the cramped space of the camera*

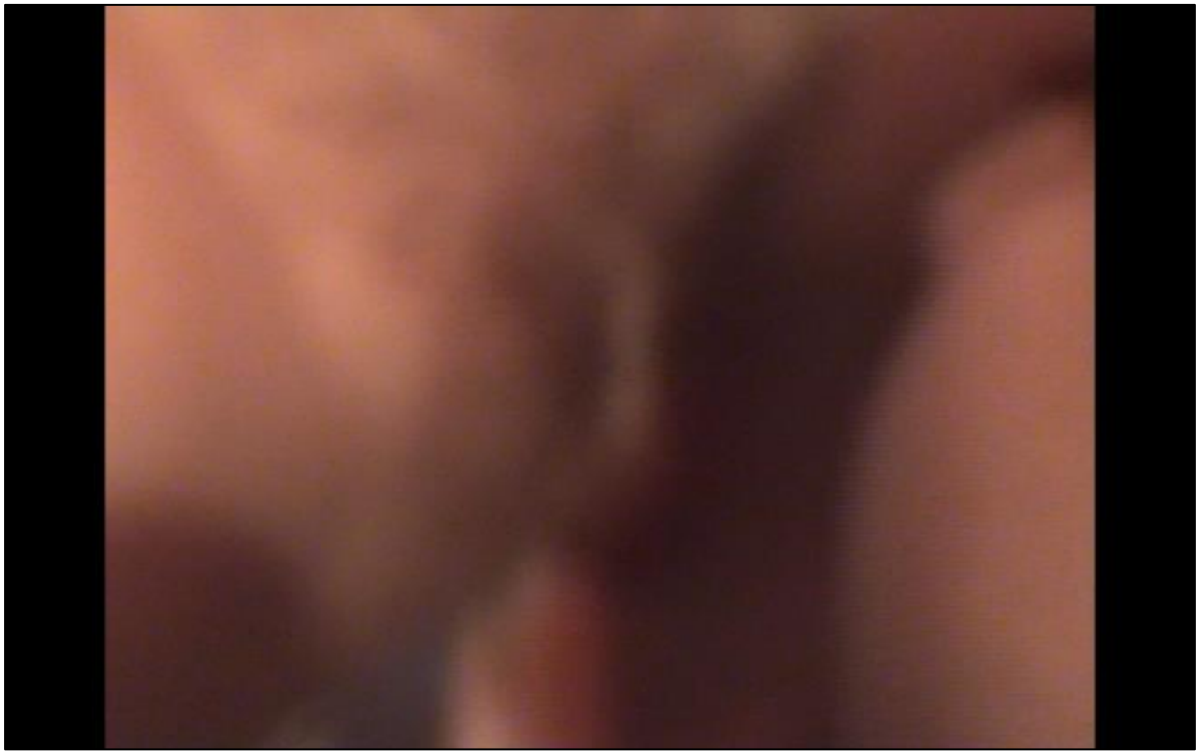

*Figure 14: One Night Stand: Low-fi techniques and the surface of the image*


*Figure 15: Trans Entities: Still from interview*

*Figure 16: Trans Entities: Wil caring for Papí*


*Figure 17: BED PARTY, camera gliding over the apartment*


*Figure 18: BED PARTY: Eden and Sebastian jumping on the bed*

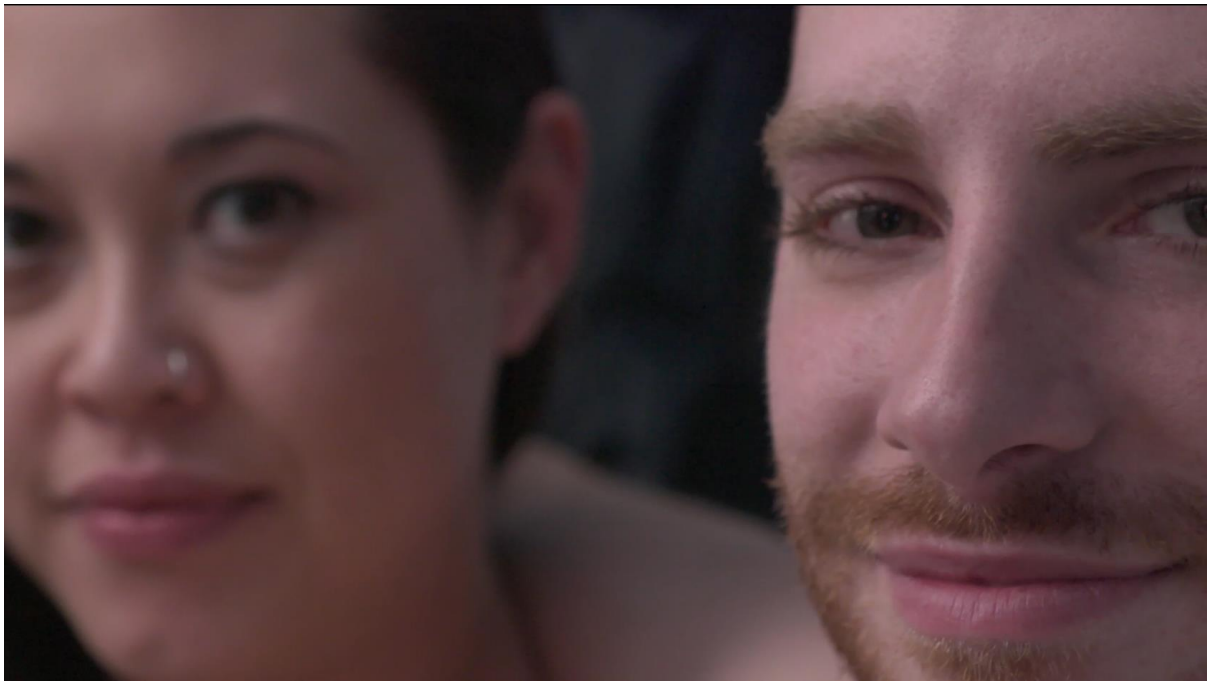

*Figure 19: BED PARTY: Eden and Sebastian being asked to look into the camera*

*Figure 20: BED PARTY: Houston following Sebastian around the apartment*

*Figure 21: BED PARTY: Eden looking on as Sebastian masturbates*

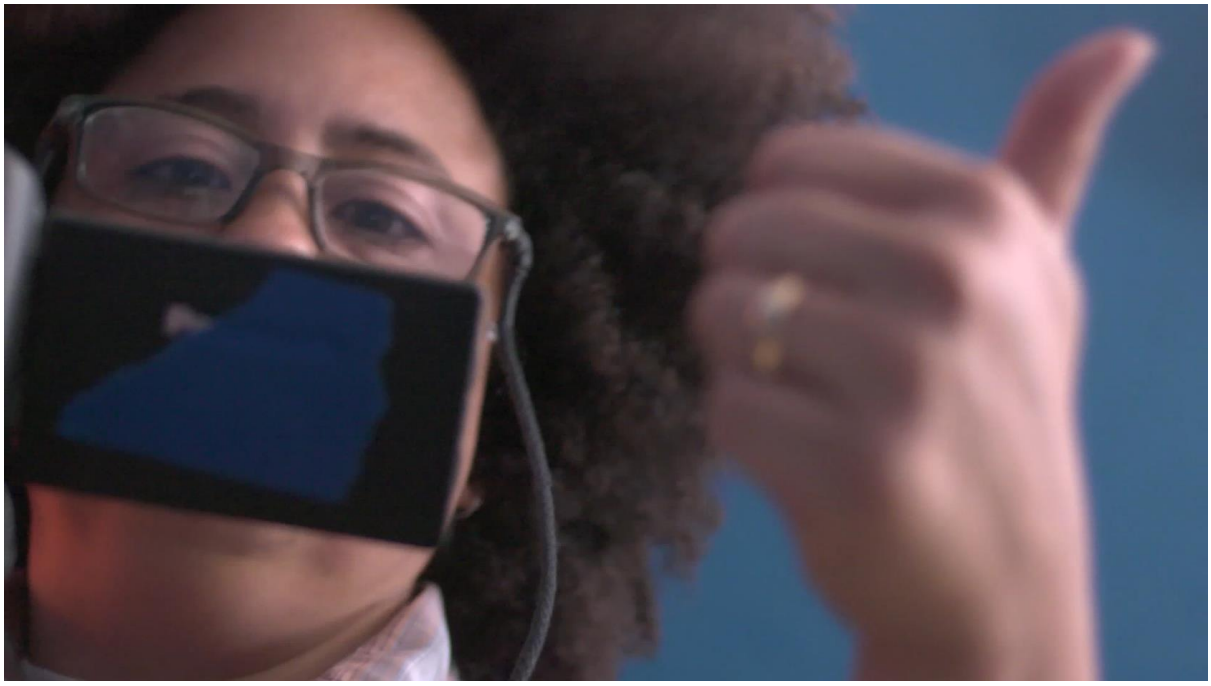

*Figure 22: BED PARTY: Houston gives the thumb up*

*Figure 23: Herstory of Porn: demonstrating the production process*

*Figure 24: Herstory of Porn: depicting the underwater fantasy*

*Figure 25 When We Are Together: The onscreen presence of the filmmaker*

*Figure 26 When We Are Together: Östberg looking on at the sex scene*

*Figure 27 When We Are Together: Östberg looking for the vibrator*

*Figure 28: When We Are Together: director and crew deliberating*

*Figure 29: When We Are Together: picture of crew and performers*

*Figure 30: When We Are Together: Paulita looking at old pornographic pictures*

*Figure 31: When We Are Together: Paulita and Kate playing together*

*Figure 32: When We Are Together: The queer guardian angel*

*Figure 33: When We Are Together: The utopian queer club*

*Figure 34: When We Are Together: queer joy at Schwartze Kanal*

# Filmography


*Alchemy.* 2014. [Film] Directed by Vex Ashley. UK: Four Chambers.

*BED PARTY: Eden Alexander and Sebastian Keys.* 2014. [Film] Directed by Shine Louise Houston and Shae Voyeur. USA: Pink and White Productions.

*Behind the Green Door.* 1972. [Film] Directed by the Mitchell Brothers. USA: Jartech.

*Belle de Nature.* 2009. [Film] Directed by Maria Beatty. France: Les Films du Dimanche.

*Deep Throat.* 1972. [Film] Directed by Gerard Damiano. USA: Arrow Productions.

*Dirty Diaries.* 2009. [Film] Directed by Ester Martin Bergsmark, Mia Engberg, Sara Kaaman, Pella Kagerman, Wolfe Madam, Elin Magnusson, Mårtens. Tora, Jennifer Rainsford, Nelli Roselli, Ingrid Ryberg, Joanna Rytel, Åsa Sandzén, Marit Östberg. Denmark : Njuta Films, Story AB, Swedish Film Institute.

*Doing It Online.* [Online]. Tobi Hill-Meyer <http://doingitonline.com/>

*Edward II.* 1991. [Film] Directed by Derek Jarman. UK and Japan: Working Title.

*Enactone.* 2016. [Film] Directed by Sky Deep Dietrich. Germany.

*Female Fantasies.* 2006. [Film] Directed by Petra Joy. UK: Cinema Joy.

*Headshot.* 2006. [Film] Directed by Jennifer Lyon Bell. Netherlands: Blue Artichoke.

*Herstory of Porn: Reel to Real.* 1999. [Film] Directed by Scarlot Harlot, Annie Sprinkle. USA.

*In Their Room.* 2011. [Film] Directed by Travis Mathews. Germany and USA: Naked Sword.

*Much More Pussy!.* 2010. [Film] Directed by Emilie Jouvet. France and Germany: Womart Productions.

*Not a Love Story: a Film About Pornography.* 1981. [Film] Directed by Bonny Sherr Klein. Canada: National Film Board of Canada.

*One Night Stand.* 2006. [Film] Directed by Emilie Jouvet. France: Hysterie Prod.

*Paris is Burning.* 1990. [Film] Directed by Jennie Livingston. USS: Miramax, Off White Productions, Prestige.

*Shutter.* 2015. [Film] Directed by Goodyn Green. Germany.

*Skin.Like.Sun.* 2009. [Film] Directed by Jennifer Lyon Bell. Netherlands and Belgium: Blue Artichoke.

*SOLOS.* 2015. [Film] Directed by Antonio Da Silva. Prtugal and UK.

*Taken.* 2012. [Film] Directed by Aven, Viva Frey. Australia: Sensate Films.

*The Devil in Miss Jones.* 1973. [Film] Directed by Gerard Damiano. USA: Pierre Productions .

*The Living End.* 1992. [Film] Directed by Gregg Araki. USA: Desperate Pictures and October Films.

*Touch.* 2013. [Film] Directed by Hyperballad, Aven Frey, Gala Vanting. Australia: Sensate Films.

*Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papí and Wil*. 2007. [Film] Directed by Morty Diamond. USA: Morty Diamond Productions.

*We Cum in Piece.* 2015. [Film] Directed by Courtney Trouble. USA: Trouble Films.

*When We Are Together We Can Be Everywhere*. 2015. [Film] Directed by Marit Östberg. Germany: Disorder Desire Productions.

*X Confessions* [Online] Spain: Lust Productions. <https://xconfessions.com>

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