

Bisexual and transgender potentialities in pornographic spectatorship

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a theoretical account of pornographic spectatorship that attends to the abundance, mutability, and unpredictability of the desirous and identificatory potentialities that constitute pornographic fantasy. In its privileging of multitude over singularity, and transformability over stasis, pornographic spectatorship has meaningful connections to bisexuality and transness, taken to be capacious modes of sexual desiring and gendered identification that refute notions of sexual immutability. In certain psychoanalytic formulations of spectatorship in film theory, we find an insistence on the spectator's sexual unfixity. These are put in dialogue with bisexual and trans media theories that stress the import of spectatorial unfixity qua bisexuality and transness themselves. In pornographic media's metatextual appeals for a spectator to desire and identify, these dynamics are heightened. Although individual experiences of pornographic spectatorship are unpredictable, it persists nevertheless as a process that is affirming of transformational sexual potentialities, wherein bisexual and transgender possibilities might be forged.

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Introduction

In Lisa Cholodenko's indie comedy-drama *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), we glimpse an allusion to a certain capacity in pornographic fantasy: for it to diverge from or even seem at odds with our professed sexual selves. The film follows the marriage between two women, Nic (Annette Bening) and Jules (Julianne Moore), who live a suburban family life with their teenage children. In one scene, the couple are in bed and Nic asks Jules whether she wants to watch a movie, to which Jules responds 'A movie, movie?' We skip forward to the movie in question: the all-male loop *Flatbed* (1976) by the pornographic studio Colt. In it, Paul Storr is stranded in the Mojave desert with a flat tyre, when Gordon Grant comes along to lend a hand; we watch as the two men begin to caress each other's chiselled and oiled torsos. We cut back to a reverse-shot, where Nic is being eaten out by Jules, whose head bobs beneath the duvet; a vibrator begins to whirl. Later, Nic and Jules's son Laser (Josh Hutcherson) is exploring his mothers' room with a friend, when

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they discover a DVD featuring another Colt loop: *Hot Cop* (1978). The titular cop (Brutus) wears a helmet and pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses as he massages his bare chest. When Jules catches the boys, she surmises that her son is gay, not recognizing the film as one from her own collection. Later, Jules and Nic sit down with Laser and ask him whether there is anything he needs to talk about, anticipating a coming out moment. Instead, Laser asks them a question: 'Why do you guys watch gay man porn?' After some deliberation, Jules offers Laser a response: 'Well, sweetie, you know, human sexuality is complicated ... and sometimes desire can be, you know, counterintuitive.'

While the depiction of queer women getting off to pornographic images of sex between men is not commonplace on film, this piece of narrative information speaks to something much more common, if less regularly acknowledged, in spectators' engagements with pornographic film: that neither the spectator's gender nor their sexuality need correlate 'intuitively' with the pornography they enjoy. The figural positions with which we might identify, the objects we might desire, and the modes of being and desiring characteristic of pornographic spectatorship are more abundant, more protean, and less predictable than common wisdom would suggest. This article proposes that pornographic film spectatorship can be particularized by an extensive capacity for forms of identification and desire, whereby movements across different positions and fluctuations between different objects constitute a central spectatorial pleasure.

Such a capacity, I suggest, is one in which modes of bisexual and transgender desiring and becoming are afforded fantastical space. My intervention is aligned with genealogies of activist and theoretical writing that have sought to explore structural similarities between bisexuality and transness as formations that contest binary organization (Nagle 1995; DuPlessis 1996; Hemmings 2002, 99–144; Meyer 2003; Eisner 2013, 235–259; Serano 2013, 81–98). My use of the term 'bisexual' works in the bisexual theoretical and activist tradition of perverting bisexuality's meanings away from its binaristic prefix to refer to the capacity to desire people of various genders. I will differentiate it from the term 'monosexual', describing formations of desire towards people of one gender (heterosexuality/homosexuality). My use of the term 'transgender' describes the capacity to understand one's gender differently from how it was assigned at birth. This, in turn, will be differentiated from the term 'cisgender', describing formations of gender in which one's gender is understood in alignment with how it was assigned at birth. In staging an interface between bisexuality and transness, I seek not to flatten historical, conceptual, and empirical differences between the two. Instead, I look to excavate pertinent *homologies* in the implicit challenge of each to binary structures of sexual organization; their invitation to think, at times, a binary's non-exclusivity and, at others, potentialities beyond a binary.

The implications of bisexuality and transness for a reconceptualization of pornographic spectatorship concern a fundamental entanglement of bisexual and transgender potentialities in the fantasies through which pornographic spectators' sexual selves are constituted. My theoretical intervention proceeds via a return to feminist and psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship that contain inchoate conceptualizations of the bisexual and transgender potentialities both in film spectatorship and in pornographic spectatorship more specifically. By bringing these into conversation with bisexual and transgender theory and media studies, I trace the ways these potentialities have been particularized in relation to critical conceptualizations of bisexuality and transness. I look next to

reactionary discourses around pornography's potential to 'turn' spectators trans or bisexual, identifying an anxiety around pornography's spectatorial invitations that our sexualities and genders might be otherwise. However, I eschew the censure inherent in these accounts, instead reframing these potentialities as expansive means of imagining possibilities of becoming beyond the confines of cisgender and monosexual being. Ultimately, I propose we consider pornographic spectatorship as a site that is coextensive with our sexual selves, and in which a potential lies for the fostering of more extensible, non-linear, and mutable forms of sexuality and gender.

Identification, desire, and pornographic spectatorship

Although the image of Nic and Jules in *The Kids Are All Right* getting off to 1970s all-male pornographic loops might have seemed strange to some – even a candidate for the 'Worst Lesbian Sex Scene in Cinema History' (Duggan and Stockton 2010) for others – similar processes of pornographic spectatorship are acknowledged uncontroversially in differently gendered contexts. It is, by now, cliché to note that many straight men derive pleasure from pornographic films featuring sex between women. With this phenomenon, it is unremarkable that such a male spectator takes pleasure in the depiction of sex between people who do not share his gender. Yet the queer women of *The Kids Are All Right* are certainly not alone in their enjoyment of pornographic films featuring sex between men. Lucy Neville's (2018) research attests to the popularity of this kind of pornography among queer and straight women alike, from boy love and *yaoi* comics to the types of 'gay man porn' that Laser was shocked to find in his mothers' collection. Also relevant here are the number of pornographic web series expressly positioned towards a gay male spectator that depict sex between men and women. Sites like Hot Guys for Gay Eyes and See Him Fuck operate via what Susanna Paasonen (2011) terms a 'focalization' of men in the scene, yet the sex acts that are depicted necessarily involve women. The inclusion of women troubles assumptions around what gay pornographic fantasy looks like and, even to protestations that these films depict the prized allure of masculine straightness, we should resist the functionalist assumptions herein. Do the women in the fantasy not matter to its structuring? Do our eyes not wander beyond that which is focalized? What these examples – men watching sex between women, women watching sex between men, gay men watching sex between men and women – attest to is the commonplaceness of a disalignment between people's sexual and gendered identities and the pornographic media they view. How might we account for such phenomena?

One productive route is to be found in film theory's accounts of spectatorship, which burgeoned between the 1970s and 1990s, mainly in spaces of feminist film theory, and often deploying concepts from psychoanalysis. In applying theories of film spectatorship to pornographic media, I am, in part, attesting to a continuum between these media forms, treating, in the tradition of much porn studies, pornographic media as part of moving image culture more broadly. My differentiation of pornographic moving images thus relies not on some exclusive ontology of the pornographic image; instead, I understand that which is produced industrially as pornographic as carrying with it a metatextual reflection on the image's desirous capacity. Pornographic media are differentiated, therefore, by an appeal towards the spectator's desire and a hyperawareness of

their own status as fantasy, qualities that render them particularly amenable to feminist film theory's explorations of the centrality of sexuality in spectatorship.

Feminist film theory's dialogue on these questions was initiated, to a large degree, by Laura Mulvey's (1975) polemical 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which identified, in classical Hollywood film, an assumed male viewing position whereby the spectator is invited to identify with the camera's masculinized look and with male screen surrogates, with the image of the woman connoting spectacle and 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Mulvey deploys psychoanalysis here to delineate a spectatorial process whereby images of men function as ideal egos, and the image of the woman functions as a phallic fetish object assuaging castration anxiety. Following criticisms that her initial theorization erased the possibility of a female spectatorial position, Mulvey penned some 'Afterthoughts', which describe women spectators' 'cross-sex identification' in 'borrowed transvestite clothes' (1981, 13). The discursive deployment of transness here is an issue to which I later return, but for now it will suffice to note this argument as an early attestation of a certain capacity inherent in spectatorship: to identify in film's fantasy space differently to how one identifies in the world.

It is worth pausing here to address how I will be using the term identification in my argument, as this is a concept that has different, sometimes incongruous, meanings for theorists. My understanding of identification is rooted in psychoanalytic accounts like that of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, who define it as a 'psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides ... the relationship of similitude – the "just-as-if" relationship' ([1967] 1973, 205). I use identification to describe those relationships of 'just-as-if' that we experience when we encounter images and take them, conceptually, to be a part of ourselves.¹ Importantly, this process is not necessarily permanent or totalizing, but a means through which perceptions of others effect a (mis)recognition of ourselves that we embrace. I also follow Mary Ann Doane's assertion that 'it is the character's [or, in the case of pornography, the performer's] body which acts as the perceptual lure for and the anchor of identification' (1980, 26). Pertinent here is the relation of these processes of identification to notions of subjectivity and sexuality. As D. N. Rodowick outlines: 'identification refers to processes where subjectivity and sexual identity model themselves through the incorporation of idealized images and relations from the outerworld' (1991, 43). This modelling of our subjectivities and sexualities through engagement with images is useful for a conception of identification stripped of associations with a whole, stable sexual self, that is, instead, a means through which such notions of self become unmoored.

The accounts of fantasy, desire, and identification from feminist-psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship that I find richest vis-à-vis pornographic film have been proposed by Elizabeth Cowie. Contra prior formulations of spectatorship as involving fixed positions, Cowie returns to the accounts of Freud, Laplanche, and Pontalis, which stress the unfixity of the subject's place(s) in fantasy. Cowie encourages us to

consider film as a fantasy, in Freud's sense of the term, as a *mise en scène* of desire which can be seen to have multiple places for the subject of the fantasy, and for the viewing subject who, through identification, may similarly take up these multiple positions ... Given the nature of the filmic text, which may construct meanings at several levels, identifications with these positions may be serial and/or simultaneous – even when they appear to be

contradictory ... these positions are not fixed by or dependent upon the gender of either characters or the spectator. (1989, 129)

Cowie's description of the spectator's engagement with film fantasy stresses two points: first, that identification with the fantasy is always as plural identifications involving multiple positional alignments; and, second, that these identifications need not involve a coherence between the gender of the spectator and that of an on-screen figure. Rodowick echoes Cowie's insistence that we cannot presuppose how lines of identification will play out for a spectator, writing: 'positions of identification and meaning ... exist only as *potentialities* that are ultimately undecidable with respect to any given spectator' (Rodowick 1989, 269; emphasis added). For Rodowick and Cowie alike, spectatorial identification involves arrays of possibility, not predetermined routes of singular attainment. A further point that Cowie takes pains to underscore is that fantasy is not a means through which the sexual object of one's desire is possessed or attained. She heeds Laplanche and Pontalis's reminder that 'in fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images' (Laplanche and Pontalis [1964] 1968, 17). Correspondingly, Cowie argues that 'the pleasure of fantasy lies in the setting out, not in the having of the objects' (1984, 79). This corrective – stipulating fantasy's pleasures as involving objects' *arrangement* – is central to Cowie's particularization of textual fantasies (which she terms 'public forms of fantasy') as distinct from the subject's intrapsychic fantasies. For these textual fantasies to work, Cowie argues, what is required are not 'universal objects of desire, but a setting of desiring in which we can find our place(s)' (1984, 87).

Cowie would later apply these ideas to pornographic spectatorship, where, similarly, 'the subject of the fantasy may take up more than one position within the scenario' (1992, 139). Rather than conceptualizing pornographic spectatorship as being geared towards particular objects in the image or towards the moment of orgasm, Cowie insists that 'what must be emphasized is ... the desire to desire which pornography represents. It is the wish to be aroused and the wish to fantasize a scenario of sexual activity which pornography serves' (137). Cowie's characterization of the spectator's draw to pornographic fantasy as being animated by the desire to fantasize reminds us, as Jacques Lacan did, that 'human desire is fixed, attached, and coopted not to an object, but always essentially to a fantasy' ([1958] 2019, 19). For pornographic fantasy to be pleasurable for a spectator, Cowie avers that it must provide 'a particular array, textually orchestrated as a limited set of oppositions, which the spectator must enter, and hence psychically be able to enter, or else the scenario will "fail" for him' (1992, 141). Cowie is not arguing that the pornographic spectator identifies willy-nilly, as if there is a menu of identifications from which they can pick. There are, instead, *structures* to pornographic fantasies, often articulated as oppositions – dominant/submissive, hidden/exposed, in/out, male/female, hard/soft, dry/wet, fast/slow, to name but a few – through which positional arrays are constructed and reconstructed. Identification in pornographic spectatorship involves our transitory taking on of the multiple positions rendered by our engagement with the pornographic text, that necessarily will change, oscillate, transform.

Consider what has become a commonplace subgenre in the proliferation of internet pornography: the solo jerkoff video. Watching a video from this subgenre, there are various structures of fantasy through which I might position myself as a spectator. I

might identify myself with the camera, taking scopophilic pleasure in watching the person jerking off. I might imagine myself entering the scene, perhaps interacting with or touching this person. Perhaps I imagine my lips on different parts of their body, or myself penetrating them. Perhaps I imagine their lips on different parts of my body, or them penetrating me. Perhaps I imagine myself *as* them qua my 'anchor of identification' (Doane 1980, 26), inhabiting their body. This body will differ from mine, as all bodies do: this body may have a vulva whereas I have a penis and testicles; this body may have breasts whereas my chest is flat; this body may have foreskin whereas I have been circumcised. These differences do not preclude my taking pleasure in the identification – we might even say that they may enable it. It is in positional alignment with this new body that I can entertain an additional sequence of possibilities I had previously imagined, but from a different position: *I* am displaying myself to a spectator, *I* am being interacted with or touched, *I* am interacting with or touching another. These possibilities are by no means exhaustive. I might envisage new fantastical scenarios, perhaps there are other people who take up various positions in the fantasy. Or perhaps, if we recall Laplanche and Pontalis's reminder that 'the subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a de-subjectivised form' ([1964] 1968, 17), we might recognize our potential to identify in relation to non-human positions: that of the aforementioned camera or apparatus, or even non-human objects like a dildo, a wand vibrator, or a bed-sheet. The possibilities proliferate, albeit in ways that are meticulously structured, set out. Two observations can be gleaned from this brief thought exercise. First, that even in what is a relatively pared down pornographic scene involving the representation of only one person, we can find the structuring material for a wide array of fantastical possibilities (in pornographic media featuring more than one person, these possibilities multiply further). Second, it is also clear that my position as pornographic spectator is anything but fixed. My potential to oscillate *between* positions *enables* my spectatorial engagement, comprising what Jennifer C. Nash terms the 'messy subjectivity ... of *all* pornographic spectators' (2014, 23; original emphasis).

Psychoanalytically informed accounts of spectatorship afford us rich frameworks through which to approach the messy forms that characterize pornographic spectatorship.² The theoretical models I have outlined stress the unpredictability of our desires and identifications when we interact with fantasy, their transience and transformability, and, importantly, the inherent potential for these to be positioned obliquely in relation to our sense of ourselves outside fantasy. As Rodowick reminds us, we must attend to 'the restlessness of identification and the contradictoriness of desire that traverses and problematizes any strict binary distinction between "maleness"/"femaleness" and activity/passivity' (1991, 11). In these theorizations' attestation of both desire and identification's non-singular potential to cross gender divisions, there is an implicit recognition of what are spectatorship's bisexual and transgender potentialities, multiplied in pornographic spectatorship by pornographic film's metatextuality. As forms of sexuality and gender that contest notions of binary organization, immutability, and teleology, bisexuality and transness are given affirmative space in spectatorship's embrace of both sides of an opposition, which, in turn, regularly precipitates movement *beyond* this opposition towards that which it cannot contain. These are spaces of transformability, unpredictability. Although bisexuality and transness have both been invoked in feminist and psychoanalytic accounts of spectatorship, these are, more often than not, brief metaphors that

do not engage with the work of bisexual and transgender theories. The forging of these connections enables a deeper analysis of the workings of desire and identification in spectatorship, and the potentials in pornographic spectatorship to desire and identify beyond ascendent forms of sexuality and gender.

Bisexual and transgender approaches to desire and identification

In 1987, Jackie Stacey offered a queer intervention into feminist film theory's discussions of spectatorship, attending to the homosexual desirous pleasures that can be compresent with or even co-constitutive of spectatorial identification. Her challenge to the prevailing psychoanalytic models disputes their 'rigid distinction between *either* desire or identification' that 'fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes' (1987, 61; original emphases). Stacey's corrective is not necessarily an anti-psychoanalytic position, given the attention paid in certain psychoanalytic accounts of spectatorship to interplays between desire and identification. What particularizes Stacey's intervention is the foregrounding of the queer dynamics inherent here: that the desires and identifications to which spectatorship gives rise need not adhere to culturally ascendent forms. A particularly queer phenomenon articulated by Stacey is that overwrought spectatorial space where the figure or position with which one may identify might, in turn, be the object of one's desire. More than three decades after Stacey, queer musician Lil Nas X (2021) would evoke the same phenomenon in his song 'Montero (Call Me by Your Name)', with the evocative line 'I wanna fuck the ones I envy'. Queerness troubles strict delineations between identification and desire.

I contend, however, that the theories of spectatorship most attentive to the *proteanism* of desire and identification can be found in bisexual and transgender film and media theory. These formulations attend to how, in spectatorial fantasy, our desires and identifications alike can involve multiplicity and vicariousness in ways that speak particularly to bisexuality and transness. It is not that the bisexual theories address desire while the transgender theories address identification: critical work herein reflects the interplay of both phenomena. The accounts of spectatorship I will explore foreground the bisexual and transgender import of spectatorship's capacity to imagine our desires and genders beyond oppositional binarism and stasis.

Let us begin with the bisexual theoretical accounts of spectatorship that emerged first with the 1990s development of bisexual theory. A particular focus developed in this theoretical tradition has involved analysis of the workings of 'monosexism' (Eisner 2016). This term describes the cultural norm stipulating that mature, civilized individuals are or should be either heterosexual or homosexual. Analysis of when, where, and how bisexuality is able to contest this norm has been a central aspect of bisexual theoretical work and, for scholars of film and media, such potentialities have been identified in spaces of film and media spectatorship. Maria San Filippo, for example, improvises on Richard Dyer's assertion that 'we are all in the closet when we're watching films' (quoted in Epstein and Friedman 1995) to propose, instead, that 'we are welcomed *out* of the closet by the cinematic experience ... screen media offer a liberating space for the accommodation of subjectivities and desires beyond monosexuality' (San Filippo 2013, 18; original emphasis). San Filippo reminds us that spectatorship is a site where we can explore identifications and desires without the sanctions of exploring them in the social world.

Her articulation of ‘desires beyond monosexuality’ illuminates how spectatorship is less constrained by the social rule that we must either be straight or gay; we have space to fluctuate between objects of desire, and between positions of identification in an ‘interstitial, fluid’ (17) fashion.

An earlier account of the bisexual potentials in spectatorship comes from Maria Pramaggiore, who describes the process of ‘reading a film bisexually’ in dialogue with Mulvey’s framework. Reading film bisexually, Pramaggiore argues, involves:

The spectatorial difficulty of clearly distinguishing between wanting to ‘be’ a character ... and wanting to ‘have’ a character ... Reading bisexually recognizes that culturally imposed binary sex and gender differences do not guarantee the ‘proper’ channeling of ego- or object-driven desire for characters or spectators: any character is a potential ego-ideal as well as a sexual object. (1996, 282)

While psychoanalytic scholars like Cowie and Rodowick would likely take issue with Pramaggiore’s characterizations of identification and desire as ‘being’ and ‘having’ – indebted, as they are, to a Mulveyan account they deem erroneous – there are useful alignments between their approaches and Pramaggiore’s. Both recognize that distinctions between desire and identification are difficult to forge, that these processes do not involve unidirectionality, and that the spectator’s samenesses or differences can neither predictably enable nor preclude certain desires and identifications.

With Pramaggiore’s and San Filippo’s contributions in mind, we can consider even the most standardized sexual configuration in pornographic film – sex between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman – as carrying with it bisexual potentialities.³ Identification with either performer’s positioning and desires towards either performer are rendered possible for any spectator. Less culturally dominant sexual configurations also possess these potentials: pornographic films featuring transgender performers, for example, might carry with them the potential to desire and to identify in ways that confound both cissexist conceptions of gender and conceptions of sexual desire predicated on cissexist assumptions (for instance, that desire towards a man involves desire towards a penis).⁴ While the social rule that stipulates ‘mature’, ‘civilized’ sexual subjects must fall into the categories of heterosexuality or homosexuality – that those affirming their bisexual desires are immature, confused, or deceptive – pornographic spectatorship carries with it the potential to unthink this doxa, and to explore desires deemed socially to be incongruent.

In feminist-psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship, bisexuality – insofar as it pertains to Freud’s conceptualization of it – has sometimes been put to use.⁵ Scholars including Janet Bergstrom (1985), Carol Clover (1992), Elizabeth Cowie (1989), Miriam Hansen (1986), Teresa de Lauretis (1987), and Gaylyn Studlar (1988) all, to varying degrees, have deployed a Freudian conception of bisexuality to attend to the gendered multiplicities of spectatorship.⁶ For Freud, all humans possess a bisexual disposition, which pertains to, first, the compresence of male and female physiological attributes in our bodies; second, the compresence of masculinity and femininity in us; and, third, the compresence of male and female object-choices in our desires (Rapoport 2019). Although Freud writes that, in the process of maturation, we are compelled to repudiate those aspects of our sexual selves that are deemed socially unacceptable ([1905] 1953), he insists that this bisexual disposition remains in us all, and is particularly discernible in those experiencing

psychic distress ([1908] 1959). For the film theorists mentioned earlier, it is the second sense of Freudian bisexuality that serves as a metaphor for how spectatorship carries with it the potential to transgress delineations of sexual difference, and to desire in ways that are socially prohibited. While I do not take issue with this use of bisexuality, we would benefit from developing it further, attending to the first and third articulations of bisexuality Freud makes, and putting these into dialogue with recent bisexual and transgender theory.

In a lesser discussed work of Freud's, he analyses the fantasies of psychoneurotics and their relation to bisexuality.⁷ Freud postulates the following:

The bisexual nature of hysterical symptoms ... is an interesting confirmation of my view that the postulated existence of an innate bisexual disposition in man is especially clearly visible in the analysis of psychoneurotics. An exactly analogous state of affairs occurs in the same field when a person who is masturbating tries in his conscious phantasies to have the feelings both of the man and of the woman in the situation which he is picturing. ([1908] 1959, 165–166)

Freud's description of the masturbator who appropriates the feelings of both the male and female objects of his fantasy has remarkable parallels with the potentialities I have been tracing in pornographic spectatorship, which often involve the spectator's own masturbation. Although Freud uses a male pronoun here [*seinen*], his subsequent example of a masturbating female patient suggests that this is not exclusively the domain of male masturbators. Freud's description of similarities between the fantasies of psychoneurotics and masturbators speaks to the potential in the person seeking sexual arousal through fantasy to identify with differently gendered figures.⁸

The potential in spectatorship to traverse gendered positions has also been expanded upon in transgender studies. Earlier, I briefly mentioned Mulvey's articulation of the female spectator's identification with a male ego-ideal as a 'cross-sex identification' in 'borrowed transvestite clothes' (1981, 13). Mulvey's deployment of the concepts of cross-sex identification and transvestism puts these to use as rhetorical models through which to account for a presumptively cisgender female viewing position. The significance of cross-sex identification or transvestism in and of themselves remains undeveloped. In their reconfiguration of Mulvey's ideas, Eliza Steinbock highlights how these have 'the potential to offer a trans affirmative understanding of trans-sex identification in which sex is an unsettled marker' (2017, 398). Against what they observe in Mulvey's argument as 'the presumption of a spectator's shame at adopting a queer or trans position in the film text' (2017, 398), Steinbock proposes that such positions can be embraced unrepentantly by the spectator in a way that is affirmative of trans potentialities. In this process, sex's becoming 'an unsettled marker' speaks to a potential in identifications across sex divisions as complicating dominant ideas about sex: that it is binary and immutable. Instead, spectatorship attests to the flexibility of this category. It perhaps reminds us that the forces that bifurcate two sexed or gendered positions, and render them oppositional, are more precarious than might have first been assumed.

In their development of Mulvey's ideas, Steinbock suggests that 'a "cross-identification" is less uncommon, possibly open to anyone' (2019, 4).⁹ Steinbock's ideas are (perhaps surprisingly) affirmed by Freud's account of the masturbator's fantasy wherein he observes the masturbator's efforts towards accessing the feelings of the fantasy's differently gendered figures. Cross-identifications that trouble binary gender have also

been explored in relation to pornographic texts. Judith Butler, for instance, writes that ‘pornographic representations as textualized fantasy do not supply a single point of identification for their viewers ... the possibility of a cross-identification spells a kind of gender trouble’ (1990, 114). For Steinbock’s account of *pornographic* spectatorship, the spectatorial potentials for cross-sex or cross-gender identification are ‘redoubled’ (2019, 65) in ways that unyoke cissexist assumptions of alignments between gender and body, the spectator becoming sutured to ‘an imperfect, wavering w/whole, not reducible to genitals’ (65). Pornographic spectatorship thus carries with it a unique quality pertaining to trans possibility: the potential for identifications across lines of gender binarism and beyond genital demarcations of sexed subjectivity.

The notion that our media spectatorship – pornographic and non-pornographic alike – might effect a trans-affirmative rethinking of our gendered selves has been outlined in some key auto-theoretical accounts in trans studies. Cael Keegan uses a phenomenological framework to outline his encounters with what he terms trans media objects, which:

illustrate how gendered perception can flash and thicken across points in ‘the flesh of the world’ ... the parallel lines of male/female *can become proximate, can meet. You can leap from one to the other, just as I always felt might be possible.* (2016, 27–28; original emphases; citing Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968, 248)

Importantly, Keegan’s examples of trans media objects are not limited to what are commonly understood to be media representing trans people, but are, instead, media objects which ‘cultivate trans consciousness by offering an aesthetic space in which the subject may feel a way forward through the closed phenomenological horizon of binary gender’ (2016, 27). Keegan’s description of the encounters between one’s own gendered perception and media objects’ presentations of ‘flesh in the world’ highlights a potential here for an unlearning of gender binarism that affects our own phenomenological experience of gender. Keegan foregrounds how these can be ‘moments of phenomenological encounter that sustain transgender poesis: an extension of transgender becoming’ (30). It is through such encounters that a *creative* force is made manifest, the bringing into existence suggested by Keegan’s use of ‘poesis’, that offers a trans-affirmative example of phenomenological media theory’s central proposition: that experiences with media involve mutual sensory exchanges between spectator and media object.¹⁰

Another consideration of the opening up of potentials for trans becoming or poesis through spectatorship comes from Andrea Long Chu. Chu is a controversial figure within the field of trans studies: her work bristles against affirmative accounts of transness, it tends towards the polemical, and her sincerity is often difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, her account (Chu 2019) of the significance of her encounters with ‘sissy’ or ‘forced feminization’ pornography in her transition are insightful to revisit. The erotic fantasy provided by sissy porn involves its ‘turning’ a male viewer into a woman, a process it aestheticizes through streams of direct address to the spectator and the semiotics of hypnotism.¹¹ Following her provocation, ‘sissy porn did make me trans’, Chu peddles back somewhat, saying, in a more earnest tone: ‘at very least it served as a neat allegory for my desire to be female’ (2019, 79). This more critical point recalls Chu’s earlier postulation that ‘transition expresses not the truth of an identity but the force of a desire ... transness [is] a matter not of who one *is*, but of what one *wants*’ (2018; original emphases).

What I find valuable here is Chu's foregrounding of the position of *desire* in relation to how we understand our gendered selves. However, I want to entertain the possibility that our gendered identifications might be *both* a question of what one wants *and* of who one is. What Chu sees in sissy porn as an allegorization of her desire to be female speaks to this subgenre's heightened reflection on the role of desire and identification in all our media encounters. While sissy porn may constitute a small subsection of the pornography most spectators encounter, it hyperbolizes a quality inherent in all pornographic media: its amplification of our awareness – phenomenological, epistemological, desirous, fantastical – that our sexualities and our genders might be otherwise.

Becoming bi, becoming trans

In conservative, far-right, and conspiracy-theory-oriented communities, the idea that pornography might make you queer or trans is a recurrent concern. Consider NoFap, a mainly online community network replete with far-right and anti-feminist rhetoric (Burnett 2022) that promotes abstention from masturbation and watching pornography, which are often framed through the lens of addiction. In a guide produced by the group, they write: 'A porn addict might ... develop fetishes or sexual obsessions that previously would have left them cold ... Particularly upsetting for some users is an escalation into porn that they feel does not reflect their sexual orientation' (NoFap 2016, 10). Here, we find a more measured worded articulation of a grievance more commonly articulated among NoFap followers as a kind of rock bottom: that their pornography consumption led them to erotic interests, desires, or even sexual orientations that they feel are at odds with who they are or would like to be. Similar fears are at the root of American conservative writer Rod Dreher's discovery of sissy porn, at which he laments: 'imagine a confused 12-year-old boy – perhaps one experiencing same-sex desires – finding sissy porn on his smartphone, and giving himself over to it. It's only a few clicks away' (2018, under 'UPDATE.3').¹² What these anxious, paranoid articulations of pornographic spectatorship share is a fear that pornography has the potential to turn straight men queer, to turn cis men trans. In a sense, I have been arguing something similar, although I do not simply believe that porn can turn one queer or trans as they describe. The behaviourist assumptions that ground their arguments presume direct effects from media objects to media consumers that do not hold up to scrutiny. My point is, less sensationally, that pornographic spectatorship can foster curiosities to desire and identify expansively through its proffering of multiple positions of sexual possibility. A second – maybe obvious, yet significant – difference between my account and those of NoFap and Dreher is that I do not believe there is anything wrong with becoming queer or becoming trans, and neither do I subscribe to the idea that sexualities and genders are or should be immutable. In accounts of pornographic spectatorship like those of NoFap and Dreher, sexuality and gender being made mutable must be symptomized as the effect of *artificialized*, *exogenous* objects (pornographic texts). These are then contrasted with a *naturalized* conception of the human, body, or psyche as domains where gender and sexuality's purportedly *endogenous* binarism can remain untroubled. The paranoia that pulses through these reactionary myths is rooted, I suggest, in two fears: first, that our sexualities and genders are not as dualistic nor as fixed as these thinkers would hope; and, second, that desire and identity are not endogenous expressions of true being positioned

against manipulation from dangerous exogenous objects. Instead, they are fostered in the fecund space between perceptions and worlds, subjects and fantasies, what we have been and what we might become.

While direct lines of causation cannot be presumed between our spectatorship of pornographic media and our desires and identities outside fantasy, to silo these spaces as unable to affect one another would be equally erroneous. Cowie reminds us that ‘the importance of relating fantasy to auto-eroticism is to show that desire ... comes to exist as sexual through its articulation in fantasy’ (1984, 79). Whether these fantasies are intrapsychic or textual, their role in the construction of our desires remains paramount. We can, therefore, entertain the possibility that our experiences with pornography as textual forms of fantasy carry with them the capacity to affect our sexualities and genders in transformational ways. In his discussion of the significance of our experiences with pornographic media, Donald E. Hall writes:

we should never define ‘sexuality’ ... as solely that which involves genital or bodily contact ... My sexual hermeneutic response as I encounter images, narratives, or data on the screen is an active response ... My desires shift and accommodate (or do not) what I encounter; my horizon alters inevitably. (2009, 124–125)

Hall, importantly, does not presume one-to-one effects between the pornography we view and our desires, sexualities, and identifications; instead, he frames these as interplays between spectator and text wherein desires, sexualities, and identifications are negotiated. Recognition of these interplays attends to how, as Paasonen (exquisitely) puts it, ‘experiences of watching porn shape and influence one’s contingent somatic reservoirs’ (2011, 203). The forms this shaping and influence may take are not unidirectional, nor are they predictable, but they are processes that, nevertheless, continue to animate processes of pornographic spectatorship.

Pornographic fantasy’s accommodation of multiple sites of desire and multiple sites of identification carries with it the potential to think our sexualities and genders anew in ways that embrace non-singularity. This is, importantly, a move beyond hegemonic identity formation – cisness and monosexuality – and towards counterhegemonic forms of identity formations. Cisgender identity formation is predicated on a *stability* of gendered identification, an *alignment* between social forms of gender and the physiological forms it gives meaning as ‘sex’. Monosexual identity formation is predicated on the *telos* of singular, fixed object-choice as the outcome of either sexual maturation or the movement from closetedness to outness. The hegemonic statuses of cisness and of monosexuality are not just incidental: they have been maintained violently, as scholars of transgender and bisexual history have shown, as technologies of colonization, white supremacy, and Western global dominance, enacted through state apparatuses like medicine and law.¹³ It is thus paramount that we do not consider all forms of sexual or gendered identity formation alike: some are socially sanctioned, and others are deemed socially impossible, as in the attestations of bisexuality or transness’s ‘non-existence’. What we find in pornographic spectatorship, however, is an opening into the domain of the possible that runs counter to hegemonic notions of proper or legitimate sexuality and gender. As Judith Butler writes in their discussion of pornography: ‘fantasy enacts a splitting or fragmentation or, perhaps better put, a multiplication or proliferation of identifications that puts the very locatability of identity into question’ (1990, 110). The multiplication of identifications

inherent in pornographic spectatorship thus constitute markedly different phenomena to dominant identity formations, but I want to suggest that certain kinds of identity formation are still rendered possible here. The suggestion that some of our sexual and gendered identities might be informed by our experiences with pornographic material should not be so controversial. Indeed, many of us can attest affirmatively to its already having taken place.

Conclusion

In an interview for the British docuseries *Pornography: A Secret History of Civilisation*, Linda Williams reflects on, first, women's and, then, her own pornographic viewing habits. She begins: 'As a woman, if you want to get turned on by pornography, to this day, what you watch is gay porn' (quoted in Rodley 1999). Williams then pauses, perhaps deliberating over whether this claim can really be extended to women in general, or whether to, instead, share a more personal account. She chooses the latter, divulging: 'It's what I watch' (original emphasis). She beams a broad smile. Like *The Kids Are All Right's* Jules and Nic, Williams is familiar with the 'counterintuitive' thrills to be found in pornographic spectatorship involving sexual tableaux in which she is not 'represented' through women figures, but in which she can find spectatorial pleasure. The spectatorial interests of Jules and Nic, like Williams's, cannot be considered straightforwardly as indices of a sexual self. In the course of *The Kids Are All Right*, Jules begins an affair with a man (Mark Ruffalo), suggesting something shared between her pornographic interest in viewing men and a desirous interest in having sex with men, something we might call a capacity for bisexual desiring. With Nic, however, her spectatorial pleasure remains separate from the sex she pursues: there is no suggestion that she is anything but a lesbian. Nic's separation of pornographic fantasy from social practice or identity is, indeed, more commonplace. Among pornographic spectators, as among people more broadly, there is a far greater proportion who think of themselves as cisgender or monosexual than think of themselves as transgender or bisexual. This reality, of course, involves a complex web of social, cultural, and political contingencies determining how we make sense of different aspects of our selves, delimiting, and often curtailing, possibilities of transgender and bisexual identification. Yet, despite the persistence of cisness and monosexuality in how many understand themselves, what endures are spaces of pornographic fantasy that grant spectators the possibility of desires and identifications that exceed ascendent binaries of social-sexual organization. While the relations between these fantasies and our understandings of our sexual selves are not predeterminable, I want to proffer pornographic spectatorship as an experience teeming with invitations to transgender and bisexual being, invitations that, for some of us, are embraced as *constitutive* of our sexual selves more broadly.

This article has analyzed the processes of desire and identification inherent to pornographic spectatorship in order to illuminate the rich potential it holds for unlearning rules of sexual and gendered binarism and immutability. The utility of certain psychoanalytic approaches herein involve their recognition, in Jacqueline Rose's words, of how 'the relationship between viewer and scene is always one of fracture, partial identification' ([1986] 2005, 227). Key parallels can be forged between this relationship and the 'insistent partiality' with which Clare Hemmings (2000, 43) characterizes bisexuality's epistemological utility, or what Sandy Stone identifies in the transsexual text as 'the potential to ...

fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries' ([1987] 2023, 25). To experience the possibility of desire's non-singularity and gendered identification's unfixity is to encounter the transformational possibilities of bisexuality and transness, to glimpse that which lies beyond cissexism and monosexism's stronghold over delineations of the possible, to witness these systems' destabilization.

There are certain aspects of pornographic spectatorship that I have not explored in this account, but whose import could guide further research into this phenomenon. Work on the importance of modality in pornographic spectatorship stresses the differences between viewing pornography in different ways (for instance, in a sex cinema, on a VHS, on the internet). With modality in mind, we might consider the differences between cinematic and televisual apparatuses, or the import of the affective dimensions of browsing, scrolling, and clicking (see Paasonen 2011), vis-à-vis our identifications and desires. We might also complicate our analysis with attention to the differences among viewing subjects, insofar as our encounters with pornographic media involve negotiations between ourselves and the texts. We might consider how our gendered, raced, dis/abled, and other embodied subjectivities affect our potential to desire and identify in pornographic spectatorship. To do so would not involve an ontologization of certain forms of spectatorship circumscribed by identity but, instead, a consideration of how social and cultural experiences of identity interact with fantastical desires and identifications, the possibilities they delimit.

Additionally, more attention might be given to the textual and representational aspects of different pornographic texts. An enduring problem remains in the fact that many of the ways identification and desire relate to pornographic media depend upon bodies made intelligible by pre-existent systems of sexuality, sex, and gender. This problem is not necessarily displaced by the potentialities I have been outlining. However, I contend that movement *between* normatively intelligible objects can initiate a process of displacing their *meanings*, precipitating their being made *unintelligible* within prior discursive frameworks. This capacity, for certain kinds of pornographic representation to displace regimes of meaning, has been articulated by others. For example, Linda Williams highlights how male–male–female bisexual pornography 'makes a point of articulating a female gaze at male couples ... confounding [the] heterosexual presumptions of the workings of desire' (1993, 57). Similar interactions between textual and spectatorial possibility are forged in Steinbock's (2014) discussion of *Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papi and Wil* (Diamond 2007) as an example of pornography which, in its visualization of trans sexualities, proffers the question 'What if, rather than substance and appearance, the subject was a matter of *process*?' (Steinbock 2014, 750; original emphasis). Inherent in both these examples is the suggestion that particular types of pornography – depicting bisexual desires and trans performers in these instances – can displace culturally ascendent myths, whether challenging dominant conceptions of female desire, sexual linearity, gendered essence, or sexed morphology. To these examples, we might add pornographic films that render the body's sexual *unintelligibility*: films like *Fruitcake* (Bergsmark and Kaaman, dirs. 2009) or *Instinct* (Bergsmark et al., dirs. 2019), whereby shots of bodies in close-up – a succession of anuses, horripilated flesh that might equally be labium majus, scrotum, or neither – effect pornographic encounters with bodies that render normative sex assignment impossible. In these instances, both monosexual and cissexist sexual economies are rendered hermeneutically ineffective.

The interactions between the textual and the perceptive in pornographic spectatorship – and the relation of both to meaning – constitute fertile ground for future scholarship.

What should remain paramount in considerations of pornographic spectatorship is a refusal to conceptualize it as an encounter either predicated on difference – where the alterity between sexual subject and pornographic object is impossible to bridge – or predicated on direct ‘effects’ – where the media object is presumed to manipulate the sexual subject. Instead, we should take heed of the contributions of psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches to media that stress the exchanges and negotiations between subject and media text as constitutive of our sexual selves. In pornographic fantasy, the purview of what we might be is expanded in ways that contest notions of oppositional difference and explore the insistent possibility that our sexualities and genders may be otherwise. For some of us, these potentialities effect a recognition of more of what we are as we negotiate, through pornographic spectatorship, our continual sexual and gendered becomings.

Notes

1. For Jacques Lacan, as for his adherents, identification is integral to the ego’s formation in the Imaginary. As he writes: ‘The imaginary structuration of the ego forms around the specular image of the body itself, of the image of the other’ (Lacan [1955] 1991, 95).
2. Indeed, Linda Williams ([1989] 1999) suggests this utility in her account of women spectators’ experiences of identification when watching sadomasochistic pornography. Drawing upon the psychoanalytic work of Parveen Adams (1988), Williams describes the process of sexual identification as involving ‘an oscillation between male and female subject positions held simultaneously, in a play of bisexuality, at the level of both object choice and identification’ ([1989] 1999, 215). Whereas Williams finds this psychoanalytic account useful for challenging myths around female pornographic spectatorship as only involving identification with ‘pain, humiliation, and suffering’ (214), I am suggesting that an understanding of object choices and gendered identifications as oscillatory is useful for theorizing pornographic spectatorship more broadly.
3. Ironically, the sexual configurations for which these desirous potentials are least amenable might be found in pornographic films depicting sex between cisgender men and those depicting sex between cisgender women. However, as I demonstrated with my example of watching a jerkoff video, the interaction between these images and the spectator’s intrapsychic fantasies, or the spectator’s own sense of subjectivity, can introduce new gendered formations into the mix, even if they are not represented visually.
4. Such a potential is proposed by Eliza Steinbock in their analysis of *Out of the Woods* (De Genevieve 2002), which situates the film within a corpus of trans pornography that ‘potentially depicts as well as generates a groping subject defying the permissible range of touch to engender trans erotics’ (Steinbock 2016, 75; emphases added). Steinbock establishes a relation between depictions of being-otherwise and a spectator’s exposure to their own potential to be otherwise.
5. Freud’s theories of bisexuality were developed in dialogue with Wilhelm Fliess (see Freud and Fliess [1887–1904] 1985).
6. San Filippo (2013, 18) terms these approaches ones of ‘bi-spectatorship’.
7. For Freud, psychoneurotics are those whose symptoms constitute ‘manifestations of disturbances in the *psychical* operation of the sexual function’; Freud contrasts psychoneurosis with actual neurosis, whose symptoms are ‘the direct *somatic* consequences of sexual disturbances’ ([1916–1917] 1963, 388; original emphases).
8. Freud’s ideas can be expanded further through an understanding of neurosis not as a pathology necessitating cure, but as the effect of recurrent conflicts between the subject and their

society. Todd McGowan, for instance, draws upon Freud in his description of neurosis as ‘nothing other than the price the subject pays for its submission to the demands made by the social order. The neurotic symptom emerges out of the subject’s refusal to submit completely’ (2016, 61). Neurosis thus describes a discomfort with the social order’s rules that might function in a way that is enabling of the bisexual and transgender potentialities I trace in pornographic spectatorship.

9. These ideas chime with the spectatorial dynamic that Lucy Neville describes (in relation to women consuming pornography depicting sex between men) as a ‘genderfucked gaze’ whereby ‘the imagined “self” has the freedom to mutate into alternative manifestations ... a shifting gaze’ (2018, 67).
10. I am thinking in particular of the film phenomenology of Sobchack (1992, 2004) and Barker (2009), wherein media objects are equally media *subjects*.
11. This pornographic subgenre has its precursors in the forced feminization zines published between the 1950s and 1970s, but it was developed in online pornography, Chu (2019) writes, principally on the microblogging website Tumblr from around 2013 onwards. For those who are interested in exploring the earlier examples further, the University of Toronto’s Sexual Representation Collection has a collection entitled ‘1950s–70s Transvestite/Forced Feminization Zines’.
12. Dreher is responding here to an earlier version of Chu’s writing on sissy porn.
13. For articulations of these ongoing histories vis-à-vis transness, see Aizura et al. (2014), Snorton (2017), and Preciado ([2000] 2018); and vis-à-vis bisexuality, see Storr (1997), Hemmings (2009), and Peyghambarzadeh (2020).

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