

# Scenes from an orgy: the effervescence of sex in porn

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## Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.

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## Scenes from an orgy: the effervescence of sex in porn\*

María Elvira Díaz-Benítez \*\*

An orgy is a sexual activity that is undertaken by a group. This article discusses this practice based on an ethnographic account of the production of Brazilian pornography—specifically the sort of pornography labeled as “hetero” in contemporary Brazilian distribution catalogues. The research which serves as the basis for my analysis was undertaken for my doctoral thesis, on the circuits of production of porn films in São Paulo.<sup>1</sup>

Today’s orgies are part of a larger set of sexual practices that violate normative ideals of intimacy, conjugal ethics and mandatory couple-based sex. In metropolitan areas, individuals and groups engage in varied types of orgiastic encounters in sex clubs, swingers’ clubs, saunas, fetish parties, dark rooms, cinemas, dance clubs and private parties. All of these venues serve as a backdrop for orgies and these, in turn, are vary greatly according to the sexual orientation, practices, and gender performances of their participants.

Precisely because orgies are set outside the legitimizing matrix of sexual norms, they are organized in a way that prioritizes anonymity, taking place in the dark or half-lit, and generally in places only known to the participants. Typically, even on the rare occasions in which they take place “in public”—such as in a porn theater—, not everyone present risks getting involved. Pornography takes advantage of and represents these conventions but, due to the nature of porn itself, it must necessarily change them. Porn is, of course, a market largely based upon the milimetric exhibition of bodies and practices, arranged to produce sensorial delight, particularly through vision. Porn orgies are thus paradoxically exposed to the light, sold in corner newspaper stands, or passed across the counter at any video rental store in the nation (just like other sorts of porn),<sup>2</sup> transforming it into a public act.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator’s Note: Pornography is often sold at newsstands in Brazil.

The orgies produced for Brazilian pornography are generally inspired in the various themes and contexts mentioned above. However, when we turn to hetero films specifically, we find that the most recent almost always revolve around the theme of Carnival and, for that reason, are generally released to the market in February. These films highlight portrayals of sexuality that both defy and play with typical sociological understandings of orgies as events that shake the social order. They are set in a time and place (Carnival) that is notorious for their inversion of values and for creating a momentary relaxation of social coercion with the function of regenerating the social body (c.f. Maffesoli, 1993).

During my research, I accompanied six orgies, all connected to Carnival festivities. One of these was organized by a well-known *carioca*<sup>3</sup> porn producer in November, 2006. The other five were organized by different *paulistana*<sup>4</sup> companies in November 2007. I also accompanied and participated in the pre-production of three of those orgies.

In this article I analyze the porn orgy as an event in and of itself: if we start from the principle that porn reveals a form of knowledge regarding sex, then what do porn orgies seek to reveal? What is the discourse about sexual practices that pornography highlights through the orgy? What do bodies engaging in collective sex tell us? To this end, I will present an ethnographic description of the orgy, paying attention to the practices which take place during this event, in an attempt to better understand what porn orgies have to say about sexuality, transgression and gender. The fact that these orgies are set during Carnival also leads me to ask what symbolic connections are forged between that celebration and sexuality, a topic to which I will return briefly in my conclusions. Why does porn, when it deals with heterosexual arrangements, emphasize this mass event in order to represent collective eroticism?

Two points must be highlighted regarding the “heterosexual” nature of these orgies. First of all, these representations generally include sexual practices between women, even though the films themselves are marketed (and in fact thought of) as hetero. Secondly, there are also Carnival-related gay porn films. During my research, however, I discovered that the Brazilian production of Carnival-themed gay porn has dropped to the point of almost disappearing completely. Gay orgies continue to be filmed, but Carnival is no longer a privileged script. I will briefly address this issue in my conclusions, and pose questions for the future study of orgies in the porn industry.

For now, however, we must turn to some sociological analyses of orgies that are useful to situating my ethnography, and which will also underline our further consideration of why orgies are so associated with Carnival in Brazilian pornography.

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<sup>3</sup> Translator's Note: *Carioca* refers to people, things and phenomena associated with Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>4</sup> Translator's Note: *Paulistano/a* refers to people, things and phenomena associated with the city of São Paulo.

## “Conformist” orgies and “Rebel” orgies: different statements regarding sexuality

In his scholarly review of orgies in the history of the West, English historian Burgo Partridge (2002) classifies orgies in two types: *conformist* and *rebel*. In the first two chapters of his treatise dedicated to the conformist variant (Greek and Roman), Partridge explains the ideological differences regarding sexuality and society present in both sorts of orgies. Later, the author looks at orgies and other sorts of rebellious sexual practices from the Middle Ages on, visiting the Renaissance, the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Victorian, era and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Conformist orgies are those which are part of the social itinerary and occur during recognized and accepted moments. Ritual in nature, they do not transgress the boundaries of socially acceptable sexuality, but are integrated into normative sexual practices. According to Partridge, many different celebrations in Ancient Greece were orgiastic in nature: Dionysian, Lenean, Elaphebolian and Aphroditic festivities in particular. These had banquets subsidized by the State in which the exaltation of pleasure pushed participants to achieve a state of *teleolepsia*, or communion with the divine. Ceremonies involving alcohol, dance and sex were understood as a form of religious veneration. Orgies were thus “religiously ennobling” experiences (Partridge, 2002). At the same time, these events praised hedonism as an ethical doctrine and a fundamental objective of life itself, its goal being the liberation of sexual tension. Many of these festivals had a distinctly national character and, as they approached, society would begin to prepare for them, with (for example) periods of abstinence. Partridge also explores Roman bacchanals, in which sex between young men and women was the center of attraction. He delves into the excesses of the licentious behaviors of several Roman emperors, highlighting Caligula.

There is a connection between the conformist orgies analyzed by Partridge and the social function of the orgy, as analyzed by French sociologist Michel Maffesoli in *The Shadow of Dionysus* (1993). According to this author, the orgy transgresses social order, but this transgression is socially accepted. In this fashion, the orgy is part of a larger group of “order disturbing” phenomena present in many different societies—the Buffoon Ritual of certain central American indigenous groups, for example, or the Zuñi’s Sacred Clown. It is thus an “anthropological structure” (Maffesoli, 1993:151). The Dionysian and orgiastic festival thus represent “the redemption of existence” and propitiate the “restoration of a societies’ peculiar virtues” (Maffesoli, 1993:97). This is its social function.

Thus, the effervescence implicit in the orgy is “legitimate and necessary” (Maffesoli, 1993:97). An orgy is understood in the purely Durkheimian sense as an occasional antidote that contributes to social cohesion and congregation, AND that reaffirms (as explored in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) feelings that a community already

has about itself. The orgy is ritualized and is thus connected to the symbolic position collective sex occupies in the social structure. As a ritual, the orgy has its space in time: *initiation rituals*. Maffesoli (Maffesoli, 1993:106) cites the practice of tantric sex, *Cakra* (the wheel), whose function is “to recapture all the erotic fluids lost to cosmic cycles.” Mircea Eliade (1959) describes several orgiastic rituals associated with situations of birth and funeral symbolism, some of which transgress society’s habitual norms, ritualizing violence and conflict as a means of re-establishing balance. As a rhythm in time, orgies are also rites of passage of seasonal change: here we can cite the Eskimo winter festivals described by Marcel Mauss (1974), the Chinese Taoist rites that allude to erotic initiations and the circulation of sex in consonance with spiritual integration and the cyclic process (Maffesoli, 1993:165) among others.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the orgy functions as social catharsis. It “counterbalances a particular imposition and thus restores a global equilibrium” (Maffesoli, 1993:99). This explanation of the orgy’s cathartic function is echoed in Partridge’s definition:

An orgy is an organized explosion of energy, an expulsion of accumulated hysteria caused by abstinence or repression. As such, it tends to be hysterical or cathartic in nature [...] serving, ultimately, to not only relieve the tensions caused by abstinence, whether this be necessary or unnecessary, but also, in contrast, to awaken the appetite for the massive moderation that is an inevitable part of quotidian life. For this reason, it has been used by the different groups of Ancient Greece and even, much against their will, by the medieval Christian Church. (Partridge, 2002 [2004:9-10])<sup>6</sup>

Partridge’s notion of *catharsis* transcends *conformist* orgies. The *rebel* orgies whose history Partridge analyzes had a cathartic character in that they resisted repression. From collective rituals which used orgies as an escape valve for the instincts, as in the Greeks case, orgies went on to practiced by individuals and sectors of society running against established values. Partridge analyzes the differences in the social panoramas of orgies in several key cases: medieval heresy (always remembering that those accused of heresy had supposedly taken part in sexually licentious behavior, witchcraft and bestiality); the dissolute men and women who violated the mores of English Puritanism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and who transformed 18<sup>th</sup> century London into a city of brothels and prostitution. The eccentricities of some of men and women were understood as perversions by the surrounding society. Among them, Casanova and the Marquis de Sade were seen as celebrities. According to Partridge, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw the rise of such rebellious figures as Rasputin and Aleister Crowley.

Many representations and readings of orgies can also be found in literary and

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<sup>5</sup> Maffesoli cites H. Máspero. 1937. Les procedes pour 'nourrir' le 'spirit vital' dans la religion taoiste ancienne. Journal Asiatique, V, CCXXIX, fasc. Apr.-Jun.-Sept. p. 404 passim, as his source.

<sup>6</sup> Revision note: This quotation was translated back to English from the Portuguese version: PARTRIDGE, B. 2004. Uma história das orgias. São Paulo: Planeta do Brasil.

cinematographic works from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>7</sup> In these, one can find the ritualistic nature of orgies linked to their function as social catharsis, either as rebellion or dissidence against “legitimate” sexual values, or as a simple search for pleasure. Pornographic cinema has also highlighted orgies. They were the “happy ending” of many films shot in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

I argue that orgies represented in pornographic films can be thought of as rebellious orgies if we take into consideration that in many corners of society porn is seen as the “dirty” side of eroticism, “the imprisonment of the erotic within mass culture” (Kovel 1991, p. 165), the literature of sexual deviance, or literature enjoyed by the mentally ill and the sexually dysfunctional (Clowes, 1993). In this sense, both orgies (rebellious and dissident) and pornography symbolize, are grounded on, transgression. However, in affirming this, we must not lose track of two aspects: porn orgies are produced and offered as merchandise as part of a continuum. Their meanings must thus be understood within a different political economy of sexuality. On the other hand, porn discourse regarding orgies stretches beyond their cathartic function, even when they play with the context of Carnival—a moment of social catharsis, according to Maffesoli (1993).

I believe that the driving force behind contemporary urban orgies (swinger’s parties, dark rooms, sex clubs, etc.) is sensorial pleasure in and of itself; and pornographic representations that can be understood within that framework. It can be said that every pleasurable encounter is in and of itself cathartic. Catharsis, however, is not the main motive behind contemporary orgies. They are, rather, part of larger landscape of hedonism and do not necessarily respond to abstinence or repression, as Partridge would have it.

## Porn, orgies and Carnival

Let us think of the orgy as a dance in which bodies simultaneously engage in sex in the midst of a frenetic and effervescent choreography. Each one of the acts executed and the bodies that participate in the orgy bring forth discursive practices that are key to the interpretation of what pornography seeks to claim regarding sexuality. Porn is deliberately trying to *generate an effect*. It seeks to sexually excite those who watch it and orgies, by their very nature, permit porn to link together several different representations of sexual practices and to exacerbate these. Within the mainstream porn productions that I accompanied during my research (more specifically, that modality of “hard core”,

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley; *Terra Nostra* by Carlos Fuentes; *El Fiord* by Oswaldo Lamborghini; *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* by Patrick Suskind; *The 120 Days of Sodom* and *Filosophie du Boudoir* by the Marquis de Sade. Films include: *The Idiots* by Lars Von Trier; *Short Bus* by John Cameron; and *La mirada del otro* by Vicente Aranda.

<sup>8</sup> Orgies found their high point in 1979 with *Caligula*, by Tinto Brass, which rocked the seventh art and has since become a cult film.

involving explicit sexual intercourse, privileging heterosexual and lesbian combinations), orgies represent the most effervescent moment of pornographic sex. For this reason, instead of simply describing the details of these orgies, I will concentrate on the performative mechanisms through which pornography functions as device.

When setting up the practices that will take place during an orgy, porn film directors define which couples and triples should obligatorily have sex at some stage of the performance. These groupings are generally made up of girls and *studs* that have had success in the porn market and whose sexual interactions are expected to boost the film, increasing sales potential. Among these groupings, the directors will set up inter-racial couples, particularly blonde women and black men. The ways in which bodies are arranged and exposed in this inter-racial category invite for many readings. Let us just say that this pairing is constructed as “exotic,” deploying a sexual fetish that is recurrent in our society. Additionally, the inter-racial encounter talks to the “spirit” of the Carnival setting: a moment of relaxation or inversion of social norms where differences can meet. The porn orgy avails itself of this imagery and highlights it.

Drinking is permitted during the orgies, a point that stands in contradiction to the normal routines of porn movie production. Alcohol consumption is allowed at orgy shoots because it is presumed that it will help ease actors into the setting and make their bodies loosen up, increase their libidos and create a mood in which sex will happen naturally. Better yet, alcohol is expected to enable the sex to take on sublime characteristics and become fervent enough for us, the viewers, to experience sexual desire in body and soul. Alcohol consumption supposedly enables true sexual arousal, allowing actors to go beyond their capacity for theatrical interpretation which generally governs collective performance during porn shoots. Alcohol, in this context, is the great companion of Eros: flattening territory so that acts can take place. In the same way that alcoholic beverages are used in many societies in ceremonial rites to mark moments of corporate existence or playful integration, in orgies, alcohol becomes one of the leading enablers of sociability: “drunkenness is, at the same time both a cosmic initiation (loss of self) and an erotic initiation (a collective aggregation)” (Maffesoli, 1993:120).

Several actors and actresses have confirmed that the effects of alcohol (beer and whiskey, usually consumed in combination with the caffeine-boost Red Bull,) are key to make an orgy a truly effervescent event. Their effect—according to Maffesoli—is the “amplification of the individual into the collective body”. Alcohol thus has an aggregating function: “its flux, its liquid and subtle aspect, is at the same time that which links,” as is the case in a feast (Maffesoli, 1993:125).

Besides elevating sex and improving the performances of the actors, alcohol is itself an actor in the orgies. It must appear in the scene, complementing it in the same way as samba music and costumes. The pornographic device could not effectively postulate Carnival—as the social site, par excellence, for collective sex—without it.

The more experienced cast members consider orgies events which break with the everyday routines of porn production. For this reason, there is a certain degree of expectation regarding the event. Everyone knows when the shoot is expected to take place and rumors run rampant in porn actors' networks regarding to locations and the pay for participating. Many agree to participate in the shoot, even when the pay is low (some producers pay around R\$300 (US\$150) to women, R\$200 (US\$100) to men, and up to R\$50 for walk-on roles). As is the case with the population in general, orgies incite the sexual imagination of porn actors. Some professionals would in fact participate for less money or even for free, as to them orgies are something of a fetish and something which is located outside their normal sexual itineraries. In contemporary urban societies, orgies are to some degree an extraordinary event, practiced with fruition by but few collectives. They are in fact quite infrequent, even in pornographic representations.

The character of the orgy as a feast brings up several particular issues. In regular pornographic productions, where sex is practiced by couples exclusively, disciplinary ideals of intimacy (as generated in the West by various devices) are quite apparent. In setting a sex scene in public and putting it up for sale, orgies exceeded the normal pornographic transgression, becoming contained statements regarding of extraordinary promiscuity. Such statements stand in frank opposition to discourses regarding sacrosanct conjugal ethics. Such transgression is accentuated by the fact that in several of porn productions that I accompanied group sex practiced is practiced without condoms.

Orgies on the one hand break with certain daily routines of porn production while simultaneously, on the other hand, others are highlighted. Anal sex stands out as one to the latter category. This practice, also known as *backdoor* in the world porn market, has been a porn attraction since the 1970s, becoming one of the most important branches of industry in the 1990s, especially in the U.S. (Leite, 2006:226). Today anal sex is no longer a simple modal form of pornography. It overlaps and intersects with porn mainstream to the point of being considered mainstream in its own right, as part of the usual repertoire of key sexual (dis)positions. In the network of producers that I researched, performing anal sex is now considered a "must" for women who want a career in porn or even want to temporarily become part of this universe. 'Saying no to anal' can close the doors of the industry to a person, or restrict them to an extremely ephemeral role.

According to Jorge Leite (2006), anal sex is perhaps the quintessentially damned sexual delight. It offends and transgresses because of its practitioners have been historically delegitimized by almost all fields of human knowledge: from religion to psychoanalysis, witchcraft to medicine. Although officially interdicted, anal sex "is the most widespread 'unconventional' practice in current porn productions, as the practice that opened the doors to the spectacularization of unconventional themes within mainstream

pornography” (Leite, 2006:226). The anus, historically excluded as a locus of pleasure, is clearly and directly vindicated by pornography, which overrates anal enjoyment. In porn, the anus is celebrated as an orifice that receives the penis, a member which, in turn, gives the anus porn value.<sup>9</sup>

In Brazilian porn, anal sex takes on other connotations. For one thing, it obeys a certain representation of nationhood, a sexual imagery centered upon a gendered part of the body: the female bottom. Many authors have commented the Brazilian esthetic ideal of prominent, rounded rear-ends directly (Kulick, 1998; Parker, 1991). Brazilian film-maker Arnaldo Jabor considers the female bottom to be the national symbol (Jabor, 1993, p. 12 apud Kulick, 2008, p. 90) He points out that its celebration annually achieves notable heights during Carnival. Brazilian pornography makes use of several concepts and stereotypes regarding Brazilian bodies and sexualities, combining eroticism and exoticism with racialized and nationalized imagery. If asses occupy a privileged space in porn in general, in Carnival-themed films, they emphatically become part of discourses which highlight “Brazilianess,” projected as a typical characteristic of the nation, as something which makes Brazil stand out. These stereotypes are over-utilized by both Brazilian and foreign porn producers, with the latter group periodically installing themselves for short periods in São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro in order to use local talent to shoot features later commercialized on the international market.

Pornography also treats the carioca Carnival in a very specific way. In an interview for *Ele Ela* magazine, John Stagliano was asked,<sup>10</sup> “Is it true that in your creation of Buttman you were inspired by camera shots taken at Rio Carnival Balls”? He responded:

Hmmm... Yes, to a certain degree. I spent the 1988 Carnival in Rio and, in '89, I made the first Buttman. I wouldn't say that I was inspired, but I was certainly affected by all that. I thought it was really sexy to have the camera focus on women's asses, with them looking at the camera. I'd never seen someone spend so much time filming ass! This was a new thing for me and it did affect me.

Carnival orgies spend a lot of time focusing on the numerous and exuberant female asses on display on the set. The cameramen lie on the ground and shoot them from below. Directors emphasize the need for actresses who know how to samba, or at least shake their thighs well. The cameras close in on the actresses' bottoms while they dance or during penetration. But bottoms are not the only thing which is emphasized, however, for pornography is characterized by the detailed exhibition of plasticity of the human body and—in this case—the stretch capacity of the anal orifice. In order to better display this, actors interrupt penetration and expose the anus to the camera lens while

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<sup>9</sup> This state of affairs is altered by *fist fucking*, or fist penetration, a sexual practice and cinema genre in which neither penetration by the penis nor ejaculation take place, therefore transgressing pornographic conventions (See Sáez, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> John Stagliano owns of Buttman, one of the main US porn producers and the founder (together with Stanley Miranda) of Buttman Brasil. *Ele Ela* magazine, year 39, edition 438, jul. 2008.

they lick it or introduce their fingers in it. In this exhibition of the anus, one of the signs relevant to the discourses of sex elaborated in porn is its *moisture*, used as a metaphor for effervescence or as evidence of sexual arousal. The actors attempt to show a dilated, lubricated anus. To this end, they often use saliva as a lubricant. They energetically spit into the orifice to simultaneously demonstrate realism and exaggeration.<sup>11</sup>

The exhibition of the dilated anal orifice is common throughout current commercial pornography, also in films in which women engage in sexual relations with dogs or horses. Looking at films of another genre, catalogued as *bizarre* in the porn market, I agree with Leite's (2006:235) argument that in those the exposition of anal dilation is related to a "freak show" esthetic of "the largest mouth in the world" sort. In such exhibitions, the grotesque is an integral part of the esthetic, showing off the orifice's flexibility as well as its capacity to take in numerous objects: a mouth that can hold three billiard balls; an anus that can hold three dildos or two eggplants, etc.

If the goal of grotesque esthetic is to shock (and seduce), as Leite affirms, in more conventional porn films the exhibition of the anus seeks to excite the spectator by investing on realism and exaggeration, as mentioned above. In porn's search for realism, *pain* is sometimes as effective as pleasure when specifically representing female sexualities or the sexualities of those who are penetrated during copulation. The expressions on women's faces during anal sex semiotically combine pleasure and pain, demonstrating a pain which causes pleasure and a pleasure which is rooted in pain,<sup>12</sup> with pleasure dominating the equation.

In orgies, however, sexual practices take on a "playful" tone, as if to indicate that, aside from participating in an effervescent collective sexual act in which "[almost] anything goes", one is also partaking of the spirit of Carnival, a context in which laughter and sexual playfulness are part of socialization. In keeping with the theme of Carnival as a window for displaying bodies for and during sex, these orgies also generally include an actress or drag queen who plays the role of show hostess. This person moves through the orgy, watching closely the sexual acts on display and asking the performers what they are feeling at that precise moment, directing the camera to close in on details of the sexual interaction and describing these in grandiloquent terms. The organizers of Carnival orgies thus expect the actresses and actors to play with the camera and the hostess, even during sex and notwithstanding the complexity of the sexual act they are engaged in. In one of the orgies I witnessed, an actress grabbed the microphone from the hostess' hand and, in one swift movement, stuffed it into her anus. As soon as she took it out, the camera zoomed in to better catch that orifice's dilatation. The actress then completed her performance shaking to samba and loudly guffawing.

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<sup>11</sup> Sex without condoms is also taken to emphasize the "realism" which producers want to impress upon spectators.

<sup>12</sup> Pain is understood as a mechanism to achieve pleasure in productions classified as "sadomasochistic," where this is taken to its ultimate consequences. Pain itself is also a component of productions which include sexual practices such as coercion and rape.

Mainstream porn does not disobey sex and gender roles. To the contrary: it ratifies them. When dealing with men, the focus is on their virile bodies, activating male heteronormativity. Masculinity is symbolic capital in this esthetic and, for this reason, actors are acutely aware of the way their bodies are shot in any given scene. At them, their sexual performance must demonstrate extreme vigor. In the orgies, the discourse of virility is accentuated: the films try to leave no doubt that only true studs are able to penetrate and sexually satisfy several women, one after another. There is also a tacit prohibition with regards to things that could situate men in the feminine role. Many actors claim that under no circumstances—not even during Carnival—would they let the actresses “finger” them (i.e. use fingers to penetrate their anus). Other actors mention how difficult it is to them to take part in a dual penetration of a woman, given the physical proximity of another actor’s penis. Finally, still other actors remark that they won’t give oral sex to actresses’ whose clitorises are too big, “like a dwarf penis.”<sup>13</sup>

There are also several uncommon practices which might be construed as ambiguous in the porn universe. For example, in one of the orgies I observed, an actor who was well-known on the porn circuit for his exceptionally large penis, doubled over and, in the spirit of “anything goes,” performed oral sex on himself. Masturbation is also a highly valued practice in pornography. If, according to Foucault (1979) the *masturbating child* was cast as a perverse character during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the practice itself (although quite common and quotidian) is either indulged in private or (rarely) for medical or therapeutic purposes, in porn it is engaged in publicly. It is also one of the most commonly recurring acts and thus, in a sense, is one of porn’s most truthful representations of sexual activity. Masturbation takes place in every film, either in opening sequences when the women dance sensually; when performers change from one sexual position to another; or at the moment of ejaculation, when the meaning of the practice is capitalized. However, masturbation has its limits. The hand can touch that which the mouth cannot. It is understood that only the mouth of a woman or of a feminized being can suck a penis. A stud cannot, even if it is his own penis, since engaging in a feminizing act is deemed “weird” and “queer.” The man who engaged in self-fellatio was labeled “nuts” by several other members of the cast.

In short, mainstream porn films create discourses of excess: excess of enjoyment and effervescence; excessive sex, “without tenderness,” dislocated from, and transgressing, the devices of romantic love. There are also excesses in the practices and uses of the body, in the limits of its physical elasticity. As Sáez would have it (2003): “pornography is a genre that produces gender.” I would add that porn produces a “hypergender:” *excessive masculinities* and their counterpart, *excessive femininities*. In arguing this

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<sup>13</sup> For this reason the two *travestis* that participated in this orgy performed exclusively as hostesses. In the Carnival orgy shot by the same producer in 2006, a *travesti* performed as actress. This, however, was an exception to the rule and it was authorized due to her status as a celebrity (a media personality who later became involved in porn). In the scene in question she only performed a sexually passive role.

I move away from the viewpoint of radical feminism that has applied to porn a too simplistic understanding of power. For those authors, the feminine body which is sold in porn is basically an object configured by a dominant male desire which inserts itself into the feminine body, turned into an object of enjoyment and, alienated sexually by the same token.<sup>14</sup>

In analyzing female bodies and performances in orgy films, I have asked myself, “Are the men and women involved in these films situated at opposite poles of a dominator/dominated spectrum?” I believe that porn constructs both genders and bodies, male and female, according to the same logic of excess. When it involves a woman, however, excess is transgressive, even when it is heteronormative.

Just like male actors present themselves as hypervirile and macho, actresses adopt the role of super females. Their bodies are exuberant and their clothes and make-up reinforce accepted ideals of femininity. At the same time, during sex, the women violate the attitudes traditionally attributed to women: docility, gentleness, delicacy and vulnerability. Although restricted to a female role (that of the sexually passive, penetrated), they practice an irreverent form of sex that highlights their agency, clearly saying what they want and how they want it. Using performative expressions such as “do it,” “give it to me,” “stronger,” “harder,” they make explicit their forms of pleasure and challenge the innocence generally attributed to women’s sexuality by society. If men’s excessive masculinity is made explicit in their strength and in their ability to maintain erections for long periods, to vigorously and even violently penetrate, among other feats, excess for women consists in withstanding vigorous or violent penetration for long periods and in other complex practices. In heterosexual porn, women always face greater challenges when it comes to engaging in sexual practices.

In this style of pornography, then, the body and sex can be interpreted as sites for shifting meanings of “woman,” wherein excessive acts which contradict the normal model of female sexuality symbolically masculinizes women.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (cf. Mackinnon 1987, 1993; Mackinnon & Dworkin, 1998), leaders of U.S. radical feminism, claim that pornography causes violence to women, crimes of misogyny, sexual discrimination and the propagation of hierarchical gender inequalities. According to these authors, the submission of women performed in porn by subjecting women to acts of humiliation, beatings, making women beg, or making them kneel while performing oral sex, sex with animals, or in any type of scene in which the feminine body is exhibited being violated.

<sup>15</sup> Carol Vance’s edited collection *Pleasure and danger* (1984) opened up a complex set of gazes and postures within feminism, cultural critique and within studies of pornography itself. This new perspective denies that the model of domination and coercion is the only possible way to look at sexuality. It also questions the view that gender must be looked at through the lens of sexuality and domination, criticizing the restrictions on women’s sexual behavior proposed by certain radical feminist propositions. In this new perspective, body, pornography and sex are spaces for the political re-signification of women and sexual minorities. Pleasure becomes something we must reflect upon, along with the alternative methods and sexual choices involved in achieving it (c.f. Gregori: 2004). This approach has informed a large portion of today’s feminist understandings, and those of Queer Theory. At the same time, it has blazed a trail over the past decades for studies of sadomasochistic and fetish porn, as well as transgender and gay/lesbian studies. Among the most relevant, see Gayle Rubin (2001) and Pat Califia (1994). It also has contributed to so-called “post-pornography.” However, one must admit that, regarding women and feminine pleasure, most engagements among new directions in porn/sex/gender studies have privileged lesbian relationships and the emerging lesbian porn—also seen as rather politically correct. In this article I engage this new intellectual direction to think about the re-signification of women’s bodies within mainstream porn.

Let us return to the practices themselves, however. In porn films that focus on sexual intercourse between two people, one sees a certain scheme repeated with regards to sex which sets up a series of sexual positions in a given sequence. This style—which I label *choreographic*—can be summed up as follows: 1. rapid and ardent mouth-to-mouth kisses; 2. rapid kisses on the woman's breasts (speed is key here as porn esthetics concentrates on genitals and penetration, without wasting time on preliminaries); 3. the woman performs oral sex on the man (generally the woman begins the oral sex round); 4. the man performs oral sex on the woman; 5. two or three positions involving vaginal penetration are performed in sequence; 6. two or three positions involving anal penetration are performed in sequence (in all positions the woman's face and body must always be visible); 7. finally, the male ejaculates.

Orgies violate this carefully choreographed scheme. The number of people who participate in the scene and the character of the film allow for other sorts of dispositions. Given that the orgies are set during Carnival, they generally begin with dancing and drumming, with Carnival band dancers and drum sections in evidence. Samba music and moving bodies—particularly those of the actresses, become the main focus of the opening scenes. After a good dose of samba (which the carioca producer often substitutes with Brazilian funk, or even the hymn of a local soccer club), the sex sequences begin. The director attempts to conduct the scene, explaining what needs to be done, but the cast (either through experience or effervescence) generally conducts itself. Sex always begins with vaginal penetration and, although some male-female pairs get established as more or less “stable” couples, participants generally switch partners after a few minutes of coitus.

In this exchange, some female-female couples join. It is well known that, in porn, sex between two or more women (classified as *lesbo* or *lesbian*) is quite frequent and common, and makes up one of the larger porn markets. Lesbian scenes are standard in mainstream porn and, although some films are entirely dedicated to this theme, there are no producers currently specializing in these films in Brazil (although there are several gay film producers). Sex between women is thus part of the hetero porn scene and it follows a given logic: that of “stimulating a certain masculine voyeur desire” (Gregori, 2004:244). In the orgies, as is the case in many other types of porn films, men frequently show up during the lesbian sex scenes to penetrate one or both women. This seems to “remove” the women from an “incomplete” seduction by forming a “*ménage à trois*” scenes which may also form with two men and a woman. Threesome performances are in fact very common, although there is no sexual contact between the men involved—a practice reserved for *bisexual* porn.

When trios are formed by two men and one woman, oral sex is practiced in conjunction with penetration. Alternatively, dual penetration (or “DP”) takes place, where the woman is simultaneously anally and vaginally penetrated. Other practices also take place occasionally, such as dual vaginal and dual anal penetration, although these rarely

occur in Carnival orgies. The number of participants in any given situation depends upon the amount of “disorder” and chance involved at each event. Trios can suddenly turn into quartets or quintets. In such group sex arrangements, one always finds a larger number of men and generally only one or two women: what is known as a “gang bang.”

Summing up, then, porn highlights a number of sexual taboos and erotic fantasies. In orgies, many of these are simultaneously exhibited, becoming paroxysmal moments of sublime pleasure.

## The consummation of the orgy

Nothing in conventional porn ends without ejaculation. The penis constitutes one of the main narrative threads. In this esthetics men’s bodies become fragmented and ultimately are codified in their reproductive organ. However, the symbolic capital of the penis is enormous. Emphasis is placed upon its size, the amount of time it spends erect and, especially, upon its ejaculation capacity. Masculine ejaculation is the *sine qua non* for the representation of pleasure in porn. All the films highlight the moment in which semen shoots over women’s mouths, faces, buttocks or breasts. Feminine ejaculation, by contrast, is invisible, and other arrangements must be made in order to represent female joy: groans and words become important signifiers.

This symbolic framework is maintained in the orgies. After four hours, as interactions are reaching their peak and sufficient material has been filmed, the cast begins to consummate their sexual activities. The ejaculations start slowly, at first. Every single one, without exception, must be filmed. Since the number of performers is always higher than the number of cameras, this stage requires slowing down the action. Following the law of excess that characterizes this sort of porn, male extras are called in to participate in the final scene together with the actors. Some people thus continue to have sex while others are wrapping up the film’s final phase. Actors and actresses know by heart what needs to be done. They know the bodily postures and gestures that permit complete detailed coverage of the ejaculation, achieve porn’s performative goals. Regardless, the director interferes to coordinate the arrangements.

Some women get down on their knees while three or four studs ejaculate in turn upon their breasts. To maintain the obligatory heteronormativity and masculinization of this event, the male actors take care not to accidentally spray sperm upon each other. In the room corners, several actors shoot their sperm into the mouth and over the face of an actress with whom they have had sex. At the same time, other actors await their moment of consummation, masturbating or penetrating their partner. Ejaculation over buttocks is quite common in orgies, once again emphasizing the general glorification of the ass in porn, and in Carnival-themed porn in particular.

Ejaculation, while lasting only instants, indicates the successful encounter of bodies, desires, sex, and pleasures. These few effervescent seconds are thus converted into spectacle through the lens of porn.

## Orgies and Carnival: final considerations

Why do hetero porn films so value Carnival as a theme? These final remarks seek to interpret the relationship between orgies and the “disorder” of sex and Carnival, to generate interrogations further relevant to other kinds of porn orgies as well.

To popular wisdom, Carnival is a period of permissiveness and, in particular, of corporeal permissiveness, involving gender and sexuality. During this period, it is common for strangers to kiss in the mouth (in a country where that sort of kiss would otherwise mark an erotically charged liaison) and couples are allowed to display their sexual intimacy in public to degree much higher than it would be advisable otherwise. During Carnival men can cross-dress without that being considered a social transgression. *Carnivalization* opens social reality to other possibilities. The literature portrays Carnival as a liminal stage in which “everything is turned upside down” (Maffesoli, 1993:110). According to Bakhtin (1984), Carnival inverts binary oppositions. In referring to the Middle Ages, he claims:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, of change, of renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed (Bakhtin, 1984:10).

These views echo those by Roberto DaMatta (1979) and by Victor Turner. In his *Ritual Process* (1989), Turner speaks of rituals which *invert status*, emphasizing those behaviors in life that are normally illicit, extravagant, or repressed become temporarily permitted during Carnival. DaMatta (1979:132) explains that Carnival calls into being a “transformation of the everyday hierarchy into the magic equality of a fleeting moment.” As Bakhtin puts it (1984), Carnival’s main principle is that laughter. It is a space for misunderstanding, for *playfulness*; a diversion or a “situation dominated by the liberty that is the result of the temporary suspension of the rules of a repressive hierarchy” (DaMatta, 1979:38).

Configured as a public event for fleeting misunderstandings inserted into our social itinerary, carnival is the ideal context for the representation of a hetero orgy. Mainstream Brazilian porn values the social imagination that surrounds Carnival and uses it to narrate the most effervescent sexual moment in pornography (the orgy). From this perspective, Carnival can also be thought of as a mainstream event that ritualizes sexual practices which escape the

everyday. In other words, the transgression implicit in those practices in the context of Carnival becomes a temporary inversion.

The hetero sex that is established as the “correct” matrix for sexuality finds a moment of public frenzy that is accepted and even admired: Carnival is enjoyed by millions of people every year as a period of excess before we supposedly enter into the spiritual peace of Easter. Other kinds of contexts for orgies that bring together people of opposite biological sexes (such as the aforementioned swingers’ bars or private parties) are currently less utilized by the pornographic industry. On the one hand, thinking in practical terms, orgies often cost more money to set up than producers can afford. On the other, this only seems to highlight the fact that Carnival is a dominant space for heterosexuals to enter into otherwise prohibited sexual games. Different from the Carnival that takes place in public in the presence of all sorts of people, swingers parties and sex clubs are restricted to the shadows and to private or semi-clandestine spaces attended by people who engage in practices or profess desires that are dissident from the mainstream.<sup>16</sup>

This leads me to ask yet another question, whose answers can only be truly explored with further research: why have orgies set during Carnival become less common in Brazilian gay porn? While more producers have begun filming hetero Carnival orgies, gay orgies of this type have largely disappeared from the Brazilian market. During my research, I was told that the consumers were rejecting the genre, but the directors didn’t know why. It was suggested that the rejection was maybe due to the kind of set-up used in those films, but I’d also say it has to do with the way that bodies are exposed in them.<sup>17</sup> I also believe that the current lack of production of these films may be due to the fact that gay consumers recognize other sorts of scenarios as acceptable for orgies, aside from Carnival. Pornography uses real situations in order to give an air of authenticity to its representations. Thus spaces such as saunas, pools, farms, dark rooms, motel rooms or even the living room of an apartment may appear to be a more adequate setting for orgies, given current conventions in homoerotic experiences. Carnival may thus not represent a mainstream theme for orgies in gay social circuits.

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<sup>16</sup> Norms exist, however, in every apparently “abnormal” scene. Swing, for example, has become established by transgressing the ideal of intimacy and employing a different fidelity logic than the one that regulates regular couples. It is a sort of “controlled infidelity” which is consensual and open, one might say. At the same time, the exchange of couples is in reality an exchange of women. Eroticism between two men is a transgression of the norms of the swingers’ scene. It only happens on occasion and with a great degree of discretion—at least as far as I was able to observe during my ethnographic visits to the São Paulo swingers clubs where porn actors and actresses worked.

<sup>17</sup> In my doctoral thesis (2010) I explain that gay films contain “another gaze”: another mechanism of focusing on and exhibiting bodies and sex acts, which are different from those presented in conventional hetero porn films. During my research I saw that this language was not always held on to in gay Carnival orgies and my hypothesis is that this is one of the reasons why these films have been poorly received. Also, some porn directors and producers claim that the public for gay films is more demanding with regard to product quality in terms of general esthetics and performance. Because porn orgies are expensive and hard to organize, producers are taking a big risk if it turns out that they do not meet their viewers’ expectations. Some foreign producers have invested in orgies with Brazilian actors. One of the most well known is the series called *Suruba*, by AMG Brasil, an affiliate of the American *Athletic Model Guide*. In these cases, the videography and technical quality have been much improved and maximal performances were demanded from the actors, perhaps due to the demands of a foreign gaze which sees in Brazilian bodies an admixture of sex, race and eroticism. This view of Brazilians “exoticism” and “flavor” appears in several of these presentations through symbols such as music, tropical fruits and natural backdrops. I thank Osmundo Pinho for suggesting this to me.

Finally, I believe that we can use orgies—the object of this particular ethnography—to guide some readings of Carnival in the same way that Carnival can be used as a lens through which to view the hetero porn orgy. Beginning with the gender positions that are established in the orgy (especially the male and masculinized positions), one can relativize the “inversion of values” that Carnival supposedly represents. In looking at the orgy, we can see that even though it is apparently “free from rules” with regards to sexual practice, it maintains explicit gender norms. On the one hand, this has to do with the methods of porn production itself, which seek to avoid mixing styles or conducting “ambiguous gender arrangements,” so to attend to the various porn consuming audiences who should, according to the logic of the market, remain separate. In other words, according to the porn producers, a hetero film should not involve itself in “gay games” in the same way that a gay film does not include women. Such boundaries are crossed in *bisexual* films—a porn genre hardly produced or consumed in Brazil.

I also believe that existing norms of hetero orgy porn can be interpreted through Carnival itself. Probably not “everything gets turned upside down” during Carnival. Many men dress as women and are permitted to “play” with gender, wear red lipstick, wear miniskirts, high heels and slap their male friends’ butts precisely because the game can be seen as a way of ratifying their masculinity. Rules are maintained in this universe of values and the fact that people may engage in some dissident sexual experiences during the festival does not mean that heteros turn gay during Carnival, that gays turn hetero, that buffoons become kings, and the rich poor. Certain inversions never take place, even temporarily.

As Don Kulick has pointed out (1998), *travestis* in Salvador avoid going out the streets during Carnival because they believe that exposing themselves to the crowds increases the risks that they will be subjected to violence and aggression. Kulick’s ethnography shows that this in fact does occur. Like Carnival, pornography maintains and recreates rules for a situation that is considered to have none. Although orgies stage dissident sexual practices such as dual and triple penetrations and group sex with no condoms, it prohibits sexual acts—and even erotic playfulness—between men. Pornography in general offers plenty to think about how sexual transgressions or dissidence can simultaneously co-exist with obedience to, and the repetition of norms.

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