

The Strategic Eversion of Pornography: Ninja Thyberg's *Pleasure*

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Abstract

The paper explores the aesthetics of Ninja Thyberg's *Pleasure* from 2021 in which a 19-year-old woman, Bella Cherry, follows her ambition to become a porn star. The paper explores Thyberg's eversion of three pornographic narrative techniques, the inversion of what Laura Mulvey has defined as the male gaze, the repurposing of the serial production techniques porn utilizes, and the use of flat characters, which enable her feature film to give a nuanced reflection of the porn industry and the capitalistic structures that constitute it. Further, the movie invites a larger discussion of racism and class in the porn industry through its juxtaposition of characters.

Keywords

pornography, porn industry, film, narrative techniques, male gaze, race, class

Introduction

In the past two years, four movies dealing with the subject matter of pornography and pornographic sex work in innovative ways have played in cinemas, beginning with the romantic movie *Paris, 13th District* (Fr. *Les Olympiades* 2021; dir. Jacques Audiard), the satiric comedy and character piece *Red Rocket* (2021, dir. Sean Baker), the horror movie *X* (2022, dir. Ti West), and Ninja Thyberg's *Pleasure* (2021). *Pleasure* stands out from all of these movies, not only because its protagonist Bella Cherry (Sofia Kappel) is a young woman whose main ambition is to become a porn star in the United States, but also because the cast mainly consists of prominent performers of the U.S. porn industry as well as two directors, Aiden Starr and Axel Braun, and an agent, Mark Spiegler, playing themselves. In fact, Sofia Kappel, who plays Bella Cherry, Jason Talor, who plays Bella's agent, Eva Melander, who voices Bella's mother, and Reza Azar are the only acting cast identifiable in the foreground of the movie who are not affiliated with the U.S. porn industry. At the same time, there is no overt difference between the performance of mainstream actors and the actors from the porn industry. In this sense, the movie also breaks with the stereotype that porn performers are incapable of acting, showing the many talents of pornographic actors instead of reducing them to their line of work and emphasizing the moral-social prejudices attached thereto. The cast of the movie, then, lends weight to the film's story by giving porn performers a voice or, at least, including them as collaborators who, under the director's vision, render an elaborate and ambivalent portrait of pornography. This ambivalence is intentional on Thyberg's side, who conducted research for this movie for over four years, acquainting herself with people working in the LA pornographic industry in order to move beyond stereotypes in her characterization of sex workers,¹ demonstrating exceptional commitment to the topic and the people her movie depicts.

This paper argues that Thyberg's *Pleasure* strategically inverts three narrative characteristics of mainstream pornography, the use of the *male gaze*, the seriality of sex acts, and the employment of flat characters, thereby revealing the underlying capitalistic structures of pornography by turning the gaze of the viewer from the product of pornography toward its

1 Thyberg: "But I felt that to do this really properly and to do what I said I wanted to do, like to show the real people behind the porn stereotypes, I felt like I needed to go and see for myself and like to get to know this world for real. So from 2014 until 2018, during four years, I traveled back and forth between Stockholm and LA and like was digging myself into this core center of the industry and step by step getting to know people and getting to know the community and in the end somehow became like a part of that community. So everything in the film is based on the people that I've seen and what I witnessed during my research" (Alblas, 0:02:00-0:02:53).

production. In consequence these inversions can be seen as a major eversion of the pornographic genre, a turning inside-out of the pornographic image that reveals the social structures, production ensembles, and desires that underlie it.

Inverting the male gaze prominent within mainstream, heterosexual pornography, for instance, *Pleasure* allows the audience a view on pornographic sets from the perspective of female performers. The term “male gaze,” as coined by Laura Mulvey (1989), refers to the way in which women are framed and filmed in Hollywood movies of the Golden Age such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1959):

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (19 [emphasis in original])

Mulvey's concept also concentrates on a frame through which women are objectified, using psychoanalysis “as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconsciousness of patriarchal society has structured film form” (14). Much like psychoanalysis in its traditional form, her theory is, hence, heteronormative by default and defined by the terms of lack, castration anxiety, and phallic symbolism, a regime of reading that remains restrictive. As J Halberstam notes, “Mulvey was not creating the gendered dynamics of looking, she was simply describing the remarkably restricted ways in which spectators can access pleasure” (85, [emphasis in original]). Insofar as the male gaze works with a male-female binary model of gender, Mulvey's concept is also cis-normative by default, that is to say, it cannot conceive of non-binary and genderqueer ways of reading movies (Halberstam 83 ff.). Mulvey's male gaze has also been criticized for excluding the subject matter of race by bell hooks, who stated that “black female spectators” defined their identities in opposition to the representations produced by white men (hooks 189 ff.). The common thread of criticism that Mulvey's theory has met since its publication, then, is that she does not acknowledge the diversity of a cinema audience and its power to dissent from the frame of the movie and the intent behind that framing. Mulvey also does not take into account figures such as the femme fatale of the 1930s and 40s, a figure which is both demonstrative of the looked-at-ness of women in cinema but also constitutes a figure actively pursuing her own desires underneath a sometimes very thin veil of passivity. There are, in other words, other models of looked-at-ness in American cinema which can be defiant to the objectifying male gaze and framing of the camera. This dynamic of looked-at-ness and self-defined personhood can be seen in Thyberg's movie. Her protagonist is no femme fatale, but like the femme fatale she

is a person who uses the gaze directed at her to her own advantage by marketing herself on the object of desire that this gaze creates.

Regarding Mulvey's depiction of a specifically patriarchal regime of camera work, Linda Williams also questions the concept of the male gaze for how it depicts sadism as the main motif that institutionalizes it: "Just how much does this thesis that sadism lies at the root of all patriarchy, pornography, and dominant narrative cinema, explain the texts we are considering?" (Williams 204). By inverting the male gaze and turning the camera on the men that produce pornographic movies, Thyberg dismantles the male gaze in her practice of filming, providing us with an alternative answer to what the constituent of the male gaze is. As I would argue, capitalism takes the place of sadism in the movie not as an organized system of control, but as a system structured by desire. Capitalism, in this iteration, is composed of independent individuals trying to reinvent themselves as a brand that might be hired by more prestigious corporations, providing their careers a certain longevity. But capitalism, in Thyberg's movie, is also a social concept, which perpetuates itself by offering empowerment and, in the example of porn, the concept of pleasure that it produces.

Instead of pursuing the stereotype of women being coerced to work in porn, Thyberg's movie depicts women who, by their own free will, pursue a career as performers. The difficulty of dealing with this subject matter is, as porn performer Dylan Ryan notes in an autobiographical article, that there are both places of objectification in the porn industry and places where performers do feel empowered (127). Performers may also feel pleasure in what they are hired to do (Blac 51). Accounts like performer and director Casey Calvert's autobiographical article 'Shark's Teeth' (2015) and Maitland Ward's *Rated X* (2022) also defy stereotypes of sex workers, presenting narratives of women who actively chose sex work by their own volition and interest, though other options were open to them. Further, Jenna Jameson and Sasha Grey can be seen as contrasting examples of women who reinvented themselves in and beyond the pornographic industry, the former describing herself as a businesswoman, the latter defining herself as an artist (McKee and Sullivan 172ff.). There is, indeed, a variety of reasons why individuals choose to work in porn, a fact that points beyond the simplistic stereotype of the coerced and/or sexually abused female sex worker whose agency is informed by trauma. By omitting most of the personal background of her main protagonist, Thyberg leaves her protagonist's motivation open to interpretation, thereby evading some of the traps of Freudian psychology in which individuals are commonly defined by lack and not by their own desires. The inversion of the male gaze in *Pleasure* thus concludes the eversion of the psychoanalytic ground of characterization,

as its main protagonist is enacted as a flat character rather than featured through the lens of depth psychology.

Flat characterization, which is fairly common in pornography, functions as a superconductor mediating the affects the main protagonist experiences in the various situations she is confronted with to the audience. Neither past childhood trauma nor oedipal complexes are characteristic of the main protagonists. Similar to pornography, the lived experience on screen, hence, becomes a resonant surface creating affects that inform the viewer, but to the effect of creating a portrait of Bella Cherry and the porn industry rather than sexual pleasure. In depicting the protagonist's everyday life, her day-to-day work, the viewer is shown a diversity of pornographic sets and genres in porn. Bella's journey, hence, opens up multiple perspectives on the porn industry. This is key to the narrative that Thyberg's movie produces, as pornography can be compared to mainstream television series and movies, but also differs from those productions: "Pornography is one of the most highly classified genres, where every slight difference in race, ethnicity, age, body size, etc., is exaggerated and sold as a fetish" (McKee and Sullivan 28). Fetishes constituting genres in consequence become serialized products, which, in *Pleasure*, are deconstructed by turning the gaze of the camera back onto the conditions under which they are produced. The male gaze that frames mainstream pornography and the flat narratives and characterization that it depicts are turned inside-out into an aesthetic that reframes the viewers perspective on pornography.

Ultimately, Thyberg's movie not only inverts the male gaze and re-engineers the serial character of production in porn and the flatness of its characters, but also creates a juxtaposition of performers with varying social status in the industry. The starting point of this article will be an analysis of Thyberg's inversion of the male gaze in her movie, before showing how she re-engineers the serial production of porn into an episodic narrative. Turning from the serialized product to a series of different production sets (producing said products), her movie utilizes the everyday life of her protagonist as a series of encounters forming and informing the narrative of the movie. The third part will focus on Bella Cherry/Linnea as a flat character subverting social and pornographic stereotypes and a narrative 'threading device' compiling visual motifs. In the last part of the paper, Bella's relationships to her friends and colleagues will be analyzed in order to show how Thyberg's movie invites a larger discussion of pornography in terms of racism and classism. Although this article analyzes a feature movie, it utilizes porn studies in order to engage with the subject matter of the film. While porn studies has established itself as its own field of research, I also engage this analysis being fully aware of what Martin Barker references as the "'stickiness' of

sex talk" (7). Although a positive discourse may have formed around porn studies, the prejudice towards studying anything related to sex work remains. If pornography is a form of cultural expression (Kipnis 1999, viii), as this paper contends, then an analysis of *Pleasure* might also provide insight into the culture pornography gives expression to.

Camera Work: Inverting the Male Gaze

The first pornographic set that Bella works on is introduced to the audience with Bella confirming her age, signing her contract papers, and giving her consent to the shoot. She is shown as fairly self-confident when engaging with the film crew, but nervous behind the scenes. The scene that Bella is about to shoot is part of the "amateur" genre and shot in a point-of-view frame, meaning that the camera is shot from the male performer's point of view and engages with her as a first-time performer. The first scene in *Pleasure*, therefore, references the pornography genre of the "first time shoot" or the "first time audition." My interest here is not to engage with the typology of the scene, but rather with what Ninja Thyberg's movie reveals to us by citing this genre in porn. In first instance, the male performer filming the scene from his point of view is not the director of the scene. Where point-of-view scenes create intimacy for the viewer by making the male performer the main cameraman, this does not exclude the existence of an outside director. *Pleasure* also adds additional layers to the pornographic genre in depicting Bella catching stage fright before her first scene and the director (Reza Azar) both comforting and encouraging her: "I kind of need you to be a little shy. [...] We need that innocence, that shyness, that nervousness" (Thyberg 0:07:13). The disposition of the performer, consequently, becomes a part of the viewing experience that renders the scene 'genuine' and lets her stand out in front of the film crew: "Key to creating a successful star persona is authenticity, an ability to persuade the audience that the performances both on and offscreen are indicative of the performer's real life and true sense of self" (McKee and Sullivan 156).

A major part of the authenticity of a pornographic scene is also given by its explicitness, by which it is commodified and fetishized as an expression of female desire: "Female sexual pleasure has been promoted to the status of a fetish in order to provide representations of sexuality that are more 'explicit' for an audience conceived as male" (Ellis 42). Following this logic, the point-of-view frame also demonstrates what Linda Williams calls "maximum visibility" (48 ff.):

Even when a woman is shown to be deriving pleasure from masturbation, her body is always arranged in 'display' poses maximizing access of the look to her genital area, suggesting that the pleasure depicted is a narcissistic mirror for the viewer. (Willemsen 55)

The heterosexual point of view in pornography therefore literalizes Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' as

[t]he man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. (Mulvey 20)

The point-of-view style in which amateur clips are often shot also creates a visual hierarchy in which the interviewee is relegated to a space below the belt line, beginning with the act of fellatio and often ending with the so-called 'money shot,' the frame of the male ejaculation. A choreography of sexual positions familiar to porn audiences is integrated between these two points that lends the scene a narrative arc. Women, at least in this type of scene, are relegated to the lower stratum of the male body and viewed from above. With the exception of the penis, the body of the man remains fairly invisible, rendering the fellatio an almost disembodied spectacle, a metonymy of pleasure. Thyberg turns the logic of this perception around, showing how the director orders Bella's scene partner, Brian (John Strong), to prepare himself, showing him slowly masturbating in front of everyone on set. In this instance the male body and his masturbation become the camera's focus and, hence, the object of the audience's attention, while the lights, cables, and cameras, i.e. the film set, become part of a deconstructed erotic scene. In opposition to the point of view of the male performer as subject shown in the close-up that follows, we are presented with a wide shot and the body of the performer as an object. Encapsulating what is left off screen in pornography, Thyberg turns Linda Williams's concept of "on/scenity" within pornography around by incorporating what is otherwise left off screen into the frame of the camera:

On/scenity is the gesture by which a culture brings on to the public scene the very organs, acts, 'bodies and pleasures' that have heretofore been designated on-off-scene, that is, as needing to be kept out of view, locked up in what Walter Kendrick has named the Secret Museum. (Williams 282)

A different kind of obscenity therefore becomes visualized within the pornographic discourse, namely the individuals collectively laboring on set as well as their own non-sexual humanity, an aspect often not taken into account in the discussion of pornography, as if the asexual manner of production itself was obscene, considering the product, and hence a topic to be omitted.

Thyberg makes explicit that the performer holding the camera through which we experience porn is also being directed from the outside, that he is not the one controlling the scene. Bella, during the scene, is advised to always look at the camera, i.e. at the viewer, and not at her scene partner, while she answers some questions he asks her,

deconstructing the amateur scene for the viewer. Viewers watch her answer the questions, one of them about her age, and undress at the same time. The view on her body remains blocked by the body of the male performer filming her, making us aware of the older body engaging with her 19-year-old one. We are shown her male partner's gaze on her and her gaze back at the camera and the gaze of the camera on her, and the camera's frame of her, exposing us to multiple perspectives, providing the viewer with rapid visual input from different angles. As her scene partner asks her to perform fellatio on him and she opens his pants the scene is interrupted as he gives her directions on how to interact with him, before they, with the director, decide to cut and start over again. The viewer hence experiences directions like, "Give me big eyes, too, when you look up at the camera. Big eyes like you're surprised" (Thyberg 0:09:52). The end-cut of such a scene as the porn viewer would consume it is disrupted by the multiple directions and angles of the scene. If the frame of the camera has previously been turned on the male camera man and onto the film set, this cut of camera angles and frames also turns the attention of the viewer toward the fact that the continuous reel of one scene is an assemblage of multiple shots and angles, not one continuous shot but material edited to produce the illusion of continuity. A Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, i.e. alienation of the viewer, becomes part of the plot depicted on screen. The director holding the male performer upright in order to prevent him from stumbling over his own pants also disrupts the impression of steadiness provided by the cuts the male gaze performs on the film reel post-production, showing us the imperfections that factor into the creation of the pornographic image.

Another inversion of the male gaze occurs when we see the beginning of the fellatio scene from Bella's point of view, i.e. from the lower stratum of the male performer's body. As the penis is seldom shown from below in mainstream pornography, the scene estranges the experience a regular porn consumer might be accustomed to, especially since Bella is not looking into the face of her scene partner but at the camera he is holding. The viewer who is accustomed to seeing the female performer's face is now watching his own gaze from the outside, the camera that frames his point of view, while the normally effaced male body once again becomes a visual object. In this sense, Thyberg's direction for the camera creates the inversion of what Linda Williams observed in Guy Muybridges moving pictures, namely: "that the power exerted over bodies *in* technology is rendered pleasurable *through* technology" (39). When the technology of the gaze is exposed to the viewer, the 'pleasure' of the scene finds itself either disrupted or transformed in the eye of the viewer, as does the teleology of pornography: "a) a particular *content* with b) an *intention* to produce c) a

particular kind of *effect*" (McNair 45 [emphasis in original]). In other words, the monetary effect and the labor of creating an ejaculation suddenly come to the foreground, replacing the spectacle of pleasure and climax usually identified with the character of a pornographic scene. Thus, the economic mechanisms replace the sexual mechanisms of the genre. In consequence, viewers are continually confronted with the labor of pornography as they see the scene being shot from Bella's perspective with her gaze on both the camera and her partner.

The labor that goes into the scene forces Bella to blend out what the director says to her, blurring her perceptual experiences. The audience not only watches Brian masturbating but also sees the director pointing at his own mouth to gesture to Bella to swallow the ejaculate. During the money shot, Bella is only seen from behind, unlike in porn where the female performer is usually viewed from the front and from above, deviating from the visual hierarchy that mainstream porn establishes through the money shot, as "[t]he male gaze is constantly reinforced through the ejaculating of a masculine glaze, a glaze that coats the other or the self with a glossy, slippery substance that modifies social relations" (Moore; Weissbein 78). The modification of social relations produced by mainstream pornography, however, is not necessarily one, as Moore and Weissbein claim, of marking and claiming property, but more slippery and ambivalent in character. The money shot can, for instance, mark the inability of the man to hold back, the desire to affirm the performer's personal charisma and attractiveness (e.g. by validating her facial features), but also a general fetish desire that, in porn, is interchangeable with the commodity fetish of the sexual spectacle that the male gaze projects on screen and more accurately onto the female performer and her body.

In *Pleasure*, the interchangeability of commercial and sexual fetishization of the female body is shown onscreen when Bella prioritizes her iPhone over her wipes, preferring to photograph her ejaculate-glazed face in different poses, pointing at her mouth and shoving four digits of her hand down her throat, performing an act of taking pleasure in oral sex and ejaculations, but ultimately posting these photos online in order to gain followers. Her self-sexualization, hence, becomes a self-commodification, creating a double affirmation of her own desirability both through the sexual act and the likes her photos receive online, turning the ejaculate on her face into a kind of décor that may have viral appeal on the internet: "The abject is not merely displayed but rendered as a spectacular display" (Paarsonen 215). In this instance, Bella aims to embody a specific ideal of her porn persona that she tries to project into the world:

Amateur representations are invested with some documentary value, as their authors are assumed merely to record things with the technologies available to them rather than skillfully manufacture or manipulate them. These notions of realness and directness are mapped onto notions of directness that are associated with both pornography as a genre and the internet as a medium. (Paarsonen 80)

Here, Bella has control over how she is seen and wants to present herself, using the lingering image of the scene as a marketing tool by posting the photos of herself online with a hashtag of her name and the hashtag “#proudslut” (Thyberg 0:14:19). She hence does not merely use the scene she gets paid for to generate income but to promote herself online as other sex workers in porn do who “use scenes as marketing tools for other income-generating endeavours in which they have more ownership and control,” placing themselves “in shifting positions as entrepreneurs, independent contractors, employees, contracted and freelance managers, and producers” (Berg 161).

The male gaze is also recreated in a professional photo shoot that Bella has with her colleague Joy (Zelda Morrison). The scene reveals that Bella has never modeled before, as she does not know how to pose for the photographer, who is barely able to direct her. His body, its mass, its hairiness, and its focus, also become part of the on/scenity *Pleasure* displays, once again showing us the embodiment of the male gaze which Bella is collaborating with, the photographer. Never having worked in porn, or as a model, Bella learns her poses from Joy (Zelda Morrison), who befriends her during the photo shoot organized by their agent, Mike (Jason Stoler). While the viewer of *Pleasure* is given a new, deconstructed perspective on pornography, Bella, the protagonist, still has to endure the norms and limitations of the male gaze in order to further her own career. At the same time, this self-commodification gives her financial agency insofar as she can distribute and sell selfies and clips of herself on the internet, media photos that she, with the help of Joy, also produces with her iPhone by sucking on a Banana, servicing both phallic and niche-fetish desires of the open market. In one instance, she gets a response on her Instagram feed by a man who calls her: “JÄVLA HORA” (Thyberg 0:38:18). Bella, reacting to the phrase ‘fucking whore’ as a compliment, circumvents conflict by replying with “Thank you,” underlining the ambiguity she labors with within her profession, as these sexist insults are also utilized in porn as “dirty talk,” compliments for being transgressive, an attribute that might render her more attractive to the consumer. At the same time, this can also be read as her own agency, as the way she actively chooses to see herself; namely, positively, and thus independent of how others might possibly perceive her. As such, Thyberg’s movie not only inverts the pornographic male gaze by setting her camera up in opposition to it, but also shows how female performers work with the male

gaze, instrumentalizing it for their own gains, while simultaneously defining themselves in opposition to it and the viewer of pornography.

Economic Frames: Serial Production

A specific characteristic of *Pleasure* is the usage of the filmic unit of the scene within the movie, which is utilized within pornography as part of a serial production. Pornographic seriality breaks away from the traditional concept of seriality taught in media studies and thereby from an episodic “narrative text” (Hagedorn 27) to the audience by the very unit it shares with those episodic narratives, namely the scene as a singular unit. While scenes are used within pornographic movies and series in an episodic manner to build a narrative, scenes can also function as short clips or movies detached from larger narrative arcs, due to their teleology in which the sexual encounter and its production of pleasure becomes the plot. The scene is therefore also utilized to produce a different kind of seriality that can be broken down into three forms. Firstly, the fetishistic fantasies the scene fulfills, secondly, the brand or studio presenting the scene, and, thirdly, the ‘stars’ or pornographic idols and models presented within the film. Conflated into one, sexual fetishism, commodity fetishism, and idolization become the serial product produced within pornography, as: “Pornography is one of the most highly classified genres, where every slight difference in race, ethnicity, age, body size, etc., is exaggerated and sold as a fetish” (McKee and Sullivan 28). *Pleasure* exemplifies several of these serially produced fetishes by showing a ‘first time amateur’ shoot, a BDSM scene, a rough sex scene, an ‘interracial’ scene, and a ‘double penetration’ scene, while also featuring the porn star Ava (Evelyn Claire) as the newest “Spiegler Girl,” that is to say, a performer turned brand and idol.

Pornographic scenes akin to larger movies can be seen as a choreography and enumeration of sexual acts, featuring an iconography of sexual acts (Williams 126 ff.). This iconography of sexual positions and acts is in itself the serialized product of porn as sold on websites like Pornhub or Youporn:

Video clips that can be downloaded on free websites tend to be less than ten minutes long and have little to no plot or dialogue. If pornography of the 1970s and 1980s offered feature-length films with at least the hint of a coherent story, contemporary online pornography offers lots of action that seems to rely little on actual scripts. (Schaschek 3)

The repetitive sequences of singular pornographic shots that the search for a keyword on such porn websites produces show what makes the clips singular—the performers, their body types, their body languages, the nuances of their interactions with each other—while also lending a specific shallowness and flatness to their characters. With the narrative

of pornographic scenes often being a mere ploy to depict sexual acts, the narrative arc of both movie and scene are mere containers for another movie, another scene contained within: “There is *no* plot, *no* character development, *no* thematic development in the films within the film” (Lehman 94 [emphasis in original]). The scene as a ‘film within the film’ is a minimal unit in porn, which can, first, either be used to construct an overarching narrative with related scenes that are loosely episodic to it, or, secondly, to create a collection of unrelated short movies which share a common erotic motif or fetish by which the product is marketed in a serial manner, or, thirdly, be promoted as its own clip. Bella engages in several of these generic scenes such as the amateur audition, the BDSM scene, and the rough sex scene among others, which provide for an episodic arc of her own becoming-a-star, by using her everyday work routine to display different working environments.

The scene and the clip as filmic units are merely the template of erotic themes to be repeated with as many different performers as possible, ad nauseam, performing an elusive repetition: “Seriality suggests instead that whatever is repeated is never actually ‘the thing itself’ but always already a ‘deceptive’ copy—in the very sense in which Deleuze defined repetition *as* difference” (Schaschek 8 [emphasis in original]). Refreshing the very desire it claims to satiate, the industrial repetition of scenes feeds the desire it produces, while giving us a framework for what Sarah Schaschek defines as seriality within porn:

By seriality, to put it in the simplest way, I mean the striking mode of repetition and variation that can be found on almost every level of pornography and which for me seems constitutive for the functioning of pornography – as a film genre, an industry, and an area of gender studies. (3)

Thyberg utilizes this specific type of repetitiveness to the advantage of *Pleasure's* narrative by assembling her movie along a series of visual motifs. One set of motifs, for instance, is the work that Bella invests in grooming her body, revealing, again, the construction underlying the image she uses to advertise herself. Another set of motifs, which will be analyzed here, are the scenes in which she works on porn sets, which for the first half of the movie follow a similar set of events in which Bella, firstly, enters the set, secondly, prepares for the actual porn shoot, before, thirdly, performing on set. Thyberg replaces what Linda Williams in her analysis of porn has called the “sexual numbers” of pornographic narratives, i.e. sequential sexual acts (126 ff.), with a sequence of everyday interactions that Bella engages with on porn set; a set of interactions, which, in their repetition, highlight the differences between the porn sets Bella works on. Instead of focusing the frame of the camera on the choreography of sexual acts, Thyberg's movie turns the camera toward on-set interactions and labor conditions, i.e. the economic frame

under which pornography is produced. The episodic manner in which Bella's porn shoots are featured then also allows for a comparison of labor relations between porn sets.

Bella's first porn scene acts as a cornerstone for Thyberg's approach, providing viewers with an imagery/vocabulary through which they ultimately become able to articulate the problems the protagonist of the movie experiences. The realm of the serial off-scene is, therein, made on/scene, hence, enriching viewers with the very vocabulary avoided within public discourse on pornography: details of its everyday procedure. Concerning the first porn shoot, a part of this experiential vocabulary consists in Bella holding up a newspaper and her driver's license, before reciting her date of birth and the date of the shoot she is participating in, testifying that she is of legal age, knows what she is filming, and consents to the act she is taking part in. She is asked if she has any "no's, do's, or don'ts" (Thyberg 0:03:34), meaning any acts her scene partner may not perform under any circumstance. When she later interrupts the shoot because she is nervous and afraid about shooting the scene, the director sits next to her at about half a meter distance, giving her space and comforting her:

Right, but if you feel uncomfortable and you feel like you don't want to shoot, nobody is forcing you to shoot. We can always, obviously, have another girl sent here that is not the issue. Making you comfortable is the priority here. [...] So what we call this in the industry is stage fright. Some of the biggest names the biggest girls in the business were exactly where you are today. [...] It's just a normal part of being amateur, is doing something for the first time, as it comes a little bit of nervousness. But I feel like that's all just a part of stage fright, so you just have to overcome it. And push past it. – But no pressure (Thyberg 0:6:22).

The calmness and caution with which the director speaks and the quick addition of "But no pressure," allow for some slight comic relief, because obviously there is the pressure of getting the scene done. Yet the director of this porn shoot shows consideration for his actress and respects her boundaries.

The second scene Bella is shown to perform in is a BDSM scene in which director Aiden Starr plays herself. The scene distinguishes itself from the scene before in the sense that the director, with Bella's consent, fastens the ball gag, asking her if it is too tight or if she wants it to be fastened tighter, amongst other things: "Can we call you names like whore, slut, bitch, whore, things like that. Does it bother you? Do you have not any feelings about it or does it turn you on?" (Thyberg 0:41:41). The director and her assistant overall care about the safety and comfort of Bella, take measure of her zones of comfort, pleasure, discomfort, and fixed boundaries and tell her how to signal if she wants more lube, while also checking if Bella knows her safe words, i.e. the two code words by which she can signal to the crew and her scene partner to stop or slow

down in case any of the performed acts become too much to bear. Porn companies like Kink even document the list they go through with the performer in the role of the submissive, i.e. the one who consents to being dominated and positions him/her/themselves at the receiving end of sadistic acts. As these sadistic acts are meant to be pleasurable instead of harmful these scenes are planned out and result in the directors checking the performer's knowledge of the code that safeguards them, making the viewer aware of the code of consent underlying the scene they are viewing. While this code of conduct does not seem to be documented for viewers in Bella's case, it is shown as underlying the organization of the scene. The scene also features the protagonist spending some time with her scene partner (Small Hands) as the film crew prepares the set, bonding with him over his humor, his kindness toward her, and a computer game he is showing her. As the scene is being shot, her gaze blurs as her scene partner applies a vibrator to her, implying that she might be enjoying this scene in specific.

The third scene is a rough sex scene that might falsely be mistaken to be an equivalent to the previous BDSM scene, which was highly organized. The type of submission Bella has undergone in the earlier scene and then described to Joy and others as pleasurable is revealed here as different from the submission that is demanded of her in this rough scene. Unlike in the previous scenes, the director does not check her paperwork and ID, letting her fill the forms out for herself. Further, she does not get properly acquainted with the two performers she is about to work with; they also do not ask her what she likes and, more importantly, dislikes. The director (Derrick Peirce) is both the camera man and director of photography, and seems to have no other crew assisting him, pointing to a lower-budget production. The ongoing theme of this third scene is the question of consent, as the director asks if she knows that this is going to be a "rough scene" and if she likes rough scenes, checking her sexual preferences with a lack of thoroughness and sincerity. Unlike in the previous scene, this director does not take measure of Bella's zones of comfort, discomfort, and pleasure and does not issue a safe word—nor does he explain the choreography of the scene to her, exposing her to an unpredictable situation that leaves her disoriented. The scene immediately begins with her being smacked, i.e. with violence. The scene, in this sense, might be said to consist of affective tensors instead of a build of tension, an exposure to impulses of unfiltered violence of which she is the object. The verbal abuse she suffers from her fellow performers is not only personalized but targets her on a professional level, rendering her all the more vulnerable: "You must be very proud of yourself. Sucking dick for money? You're gonna be a superstar, baby" (Thyberg 0:50:36). Blurring the personal and the professional, the sentence ridicules both

her porn persona and the person underlying that persona, Linnea, devaluing her both as a person and as a co-worker for the camera, reiterating the social stigma that female porn performers face and treating it as a sexual validation of the viewers' desires.

The director, focused on the camera, is more interested in the footage he is shooting than in his performer's well-being. He ignores the first time she cries out for them to stop and only reacts when she calls out "Stop!" a second time. Without an arranged safe word her exclamation remains ambiguous at first. The male performers remain insensitive to Bella's plea and only stop brutalizing her when the director calls "Cut." As they do not know Bella, they only react to the director's orders and lack the sensitivity to note that they are harming their scene partner. While all the men ask her if she is okay, trying to express some kind of care, a rhetorical question is repeated twice in this scene: "She did say she likes a rough scene, did she?" (Thyberg 0:52:20). Like in the first scene, the men tell her that they are just trying to make her feel comfortable. However, the director immediately implies that they can continue filming from this point on, saying: "If you can let's try not to stop this time. I mean, if you need to, you need to, but let's try not to stop" (Thyberg 0:53:30). During the scene the violence seems to be the primary expression of sexuality and the viewer sees the set from Bella's point of view again, witnessing her black out in between incoherent images, closing up on the aggressive and mocking faces of the men penetrating her, seeing her perspective of the floor she is lying on, before she again calls out for the scene to stop.

The way that the third director reacts to Bella's needs in this scene is contrasted with the way the director of the first set reacted to her need to pause. He tells her to take a break, but immediately sits down next to her, while one of her co-performers strokes her back intimately to calm her down, telling her a few seconds later: "You are a very strong girl" (Thyberg 0:54:03). Nobody gives the female performer any personal space in this third shoot, unlike the first one, while the director continually reassures her: "You don't have to do it. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do" (Thyberg 0:54:10). This director, putting one arm around her, stroking her chin, then asks her a question from which he hopes to receive an affirmative answer, saying: "We started off good, right? Yes?" (Thyberg 0:54:42). His sentences from this point on constantly ask Bella not only for her consent but to explicitly say "Yes." Preying on her insecurity, he is trying to force the female performer to give him a clear and affirmative form of consent to which both of the male performers can bear witness. This underlines his understanding of the law and the need for consent for the scene he is shooting and his need to have evidence by which he can deny having harmed Bella in any way.

After affirming that she wants to continue, Bella suddenly does change her mind, at which the director sarcastically replies: “Yeah, you wanna go? Go.” (Thyberg 0:59:58). Similar to the director of the first porn shoot, the director of the third one is trying to convince Bella to stay on set, yet the similarity of his actions accentuates a difference in attitude as he tries to coerce her into staying.

The scene also accentuates the economic pressures which porn performers face in finishing scenes in order to get paid. Bella finds herself further pressured by the director, who implies that nobody on set will get paid if she does not finish the scene. Economic pressure, in this instance, is used to gaslight her as the director implies that without her finishing the scene it all would have been “for free” (Thyberg 0:56:40), evoking the notion that she is exploiting the people she is working with and is responsible for them not getting paid. Lacking support by others and the necessary experience to deal with this situation, Bella gives in to finishing the scene. Confronting her agent with the violence she just experienced, he asks her why she did not call him, not believing her to have been afraid, and chastising her when she shouts out that the male actors involved in that scene had been raping her for hours: “Stop it. You don’t just throw that word around because you had a bad shoot” (Thyberg 0:58:25). On one hand, her agent might be trying to ward off a scandal reinforcing prejudices against the pornographic industry. On the other hand, his reaction is an absolute denial of Bella’s experience. Upon being asked whether she looked at the site and the content this production company shot, like he told her to, Bella answers with silence. There is an ambiguity between his statement and her reaction, a possibility of her not having checked on the content the company employing her produces and a possibility of her being shocked by her agent utterly refusing to take her seriously. The viewer, unable to discern which side is in the right, can only empathize with Bella on behalf of the experiences they witnessed during the course of the movie, a series of similar plots, distinguished by setting, working environment, and style of interaction. The seriality of visual motifs within the movie is thereby utilized to convey a surface experience, which renders a deeper understanding of the stresses, labor conditions, and experiences on pornographic sets.

Flatness: The Protagonist as Threading-Device

Bella’s trajectory within *Pleasure* can be viewed through several templates, one being the hero’s journey in which the protagonist of the story must overcome obstacles to become who s/he already is, thereby idolizing her. Another template would be the coming-of-age story, which would undercut the seemingly competent behavior Bella displays, because she already is acting as a responsible adult and her inexperience

is not merely due to her age but her being new to the porn industry. In turn, Thyberg, as I would argue, employs a more technical term of narration, as her protagonist can be seen as what Viktor Shklovsky in regard to literary prose calls a *threading device*: “In this mode of composition one finished story motif succeeds another motif and is linked to it by the unity of the protagonist” (68). If Bella’s story is episodic in character, then the series of events she experiences can be translated into cinematic terms as visual motifs that her journey within the movie threads together. Bella functions as a unifying point of different experiences performers can make within the pornographic industry and a linear narrative trajectory. The clothing of her entrance scene at the airport provides continuity within the movie by which the viewer is able to realize that Bella is looking at her career retrospectively as she drives to her final porn shoot. Frequently cutting to her looking into the rear view mirror of her car through the white, oval sunglasses she enters the movie with, *Pleasure* depicts Bella’s own retrospective in a symbolic manner. Her trajectory within the story is what creates the seriality of motifs encountered in the movie, providing its viewers with a more coherent sense of the multiple facets of pornography the film exposes.

Despite her emotional struggles, Bella remains a fairly flat character, similar to those of comedy. As Susan Sontag notes: “The personages in pornography like those of comedy, are seen only from the outside, behavioristically” (54). Bella never reveals much of herself or her motivations and is portrayed as a very single-minded person who, immediately after shooting her first scene, asks what she has to do to become the next big porn star. Goal-oriented and ambitious, she shows herself disinterested in anything but her job. When Joy, later in the movie, takes her on a hike, she confronts Bella with her lacking enthusiasm: “Don’t you want to see anything else in LA besides a fucking porn set?” (Thyberg 0:40:26). Bella’s laconic answer to this inquiry is: “No” (Thyberg 0:40:26). Bella’s flat response and singlemindedness is comedic in this instance because it reveals her ambition of pursuing a career within pornography as the desire inherent to all her desires. Her character, hence, appears flat because like comedic and pornographic personages it is behavioristic in its actions. In consequence, the threading line of her experiences is determined by her ambitions, demonstrating to the viewer what a careerist attitude toward porn might look like with irony.

Bella also appears as a flat character in the movie because she deflects from her past. When asked by her colleague Bear (Chris Cock) what brought her to LA, she answers semi-seriously: “My Dad raped me when I was young, so I feel like I [...]” (Thyberg 0:14:30). The answer is a cliché often associated with sex workers, which Bella, in this instance, makes fun of in order to avoid giving an actual answer. After singing to

Joy and her colleague Ashley (Dana DeArmond) at dinner, later in the movie, Bella is also asked why she is working in porn, given her other talents.² With Joy and Ashley in the foreground of the camera, the frame also shows Bella's head bowing up and down over the neck of her beer bottle, as if performing fellatio, which the facial expression and laughter of her friends mark as a joke (Thyberg 0:48:05). Once Bella rises from porn performer to porn star, she is shown to be without friends and colleagues who interact with her and react to her. During the after party of the AVN Adult Entertainment Expo she puts her legs behind her head, parodying a pornographic pose at which point she becomes a parody of herself; her parody has become the truth (Thyberg 1:28:58), because she is alone and without friends who understand the joke. At the same time, her deflections point away from the usual stereotypes of abuse and trauma that sex workers are frequently stigmatized by, showing the viewer a different motivation behind her choices: she wants to have a career.

According to Mireille Miller-Young, the reasons female performers name for entering pornography commonly underlie a strict hierarchy, with money providing the primary motivation, followed by sex, and finally fame (2014, 186). Miller Young concludes: "To assume that porn workers do porn simply for the sex, as opposed to the money, is similar to believing that supermarket workers choose employment in food retail because they like food" (184). Bella enjoys sex; yet, her own discouragement after having been brutalized during her rough sex scene forces her to reconsider her own ambitions. Calling up her mother, she asks her for guidance and in this moment is not spoken to as "Bella Cherry," but by her birth name, "Linnea." Disconnection, here, reinforces identification in the sense that Linnea's mother, believing her daughter to be working in an internship in the USA, gives her a motivational speech about female empowerment, telling her not to get discouraged as there will always be people that will be against her and in her way (Thyberg 0:59:44). As her advice is given woman to woman and without knowledge about her daughter's work as a porn performer, the mother's speech about female empowerment reinforces the idea that a capitalist ambition underlies Bella's primary motivation. The flatness of Bella's character can also be

² Strawberry (Suzanna Son) is also portrayed as musically talented in the comedy *Red Rocket* (Sean Baker 2021), which also shows a lack of knowledge and/or interest concerning the hardships in the present-day music industry, in which musicians can seldom sustain their lives on the basis of their music. Former performer Sasha Grey (Marina Hantzis) and performers such as Carter Cruise and Skin Diamond (Raylin Joy) are also known as musicians and/or DJs, with part of their fan base stemming from their careers in porn. As already stated in (Berg 161), porn scenes are used as marketing products by performers, which open up options for other flows of revenue, but can also be, to some degree, used to further other career interests.

taken as an attribute of her own careerist ambitions, which she entertains in pursuing to become a 'Spiegler Girl' like Ava, who becomes the role model and ideal on her path toward fame. Her last porn shoot in the movie is with Ava, who represents Bella's final destination and stands at the center of her quest to become a porn star.

The flat characterization of protagonists, which often produce reductive renderings of sexuality in porn, are utilized in *Pleasure* in a fashion that is revelatory to the audience, because it enables the analysis of career ambitions. Instead of analyzing from a perspective of moral prejudice, *Pleasure* analyzes pornography from the pretense that it is a business like any other and what that statement in consequence means to those trying to make a name for themselves within the industry. As a flat character, Bella becomes a resonant surface of the experiences she makes, but also an illustration of what careerist behavior might entail. In consequence, her own idea of feminist empowerment, which depends on career advancement and financial independence, becomes her reason to dismiss the sexism and violence directed at her co-workers during her shoots. As such, the flatness of Bella's character allows the viewer to experience her flaws and the problems of the industry she is engaged in with less bias than might be the case if the viewer was deeply invested and moved by her character, while still creating a deeper emotional response within the viewer precisely because her character seems detached.

Juxtapositions/Intersections

If one views Bella as a threading device, then the narrative thread being cast by her is one that follows a trajectory through circuits within pornography and U.S. society in which sex, race, class, and gender intersect. Over the course of the movie Bella makes three human connections, one of them with Bear, who drives her home after her first shoot and introduces her to Aiden Star at a party. He is the first one to see potential in Bella, but also to explain to her the difference between him and a star, the difference between his job as a performer and the idolization that a star receives: "No, I wouldn't say star. I'm more of a fetish. Ah, I'm a type" (Thyberg 0:15:31). Bear then goes on to clarify that he, as a black person, is often booked for interracial scenes, a category he clarifies to be racist: "Inter-rac-ial. The most extreme act you can do in porn, in the industry, the most extreme. I mean this already beyond double anal, triple anal, d.p. Interracial" (Thyberg 0:16:02). Despite his aversion against the scenes he performs in and his desire to pursue other career options, Bella requests him for her first double penetration scene (d.p.). This scene is shot for what is alluded to as the real-life studio Blacked, a studio whose trademark are interracial scenes, turning high-

class productions in upper-class settings and the sexual fetish for Black men their brand. *Blacked*, therefore, is exemplary of how branding and sexual fetishism are conflated and how racial stereotypes become commodified in the pornographic industry. Having quit her agent, Bella offers to perform a scene for free for the company, who, as they tell her, would only book her if she had an agent (Thyberg 1:05:30). Using the 'extremity' of the scene, which features double penetration and interracial sex as a means to promote herself to Mark Spiegler, Bella relies on Bear as a friend to guide her through the physical pain and difficulty of the scene. On the one hand, she relies on his friendship and values him for his support, on the other hand, she does so in an egoistic and abusive fashion in order to promote her own career.

The scene with Bear also shows the pain that male performers go through for the sake of their career when Bella catches Bear as he is about to inject chemicals into his penis before shooting in order to maintain an erection. The chemicals might be Caverject, a chemical used to 'heal' erectile dysfunction but also causing it when used frequently and without medical supervision. The scene shows that male performers' erections must be 'functional' without regard to their emotional and physical state while also countering the racial stereotypes of hypersexuality black men have to deal with in the pornographic industry and society as a whole. The scene also speaks to the fact that pornographic work, contrary to what is shown on screen, can exhaust the male libido, that exhaustion being not only stigmatized but problematic, because pornography heavily relies on male ejaculation, the money shot, for the ending of a scene. The camera angle in this scene shows viewers the white director and cameraman instructing the scene, exposing the 'interracial' scene as a white fantasy. Watching the pained expression on Bella's face as she is penetrated by both performers, her face fades out in the shot. While she focuses her gaze on the sky in order to endure the pain she suffers, Bear calls her "[a] dirty white bitch" (Thyberg 1:09:18). Though the slur, in pornographic terms, 'validates' her performance, it also can be seen as release of tension on Bear's behalf, because he knows that she is promoting her own career at his expense. If Bella has made a human connection in the industry with Bear, the industry's sexism and racism undercut this connection as much as her own ambition.

The second, equally complex human connection Bella makes is the one with Joy, another friend, who has been working as a performer in Los Angeles for two months. Joy is from Florida and has a Southern accent, or, as a casting agent (John Holmes) puts it when he meets her: "Ah, Southern slut. We like them here" (Thyberg 0:19:20). While Bella is typecast as a "Swedish virgin" by the same agent, Joy is stereotyped as white trash, i.e. as a type of performer marked by a very specific

intersection of class and race that is commonly seen as a source of both personal and interpersonal conflicts:

If you *are* white trash, then you must engage in the never-ending labor of distinguishing yourself, of codifying your behavior so as to clearly signify a difference from blackness that will, in spite of everything, express some minuscule, if pathetic, measure of your culture's superiority, at least to those above you who use the epithet *white trash* to emphasize just how beyond the pale you are. This is hard going because the difference between the everyday lives of poor blacks and poor whites in the rural South are few and ephemeral. I am not denying the difference of race—and how that difference is lived—but trying to point to the crushing weight, on all those lives, of enduring poverty and the daily humiliations that come with it (Penley 100, [emphasis in original]).

Joy, who never lays off her accent, shows integrity throughout the movie and replies to the casting agent's type cast by using the Southern stereotype as an advertisement: "I do everything. Anal, d.p.s, gangbangs, blowbangs. I'm a whore" (Thyberg 0:19:27). At this point in the movie, Joy already does all kinds of scenes, while Bella is still holding out on doing an anal scene or anything more 'extreme' for later in her career, strategically planning ahead. At the same time, class- and race-based identifications and classist as well as racist stereotypes factor into the self-marketing for some sex workers. Sexual fetish and commodity fetish become interchangeable, as Bear's self-description as a fetish quoted earlier suggests. So, too, does former porn performer Asa Akira's autobiography: "Spiegler was thinking of taking on a new Asian girl. As it stood, Laila and I were the only Asian girls on his roster. We wanted to keep it that way" (8). Joy, on the one hand, plays into the stereotype projected onto her, while, on the other hand, marketing herself through the label given to her by society and reiterated by the porn industry as a fetish, which is both one of gender, racial, and sexual prejudices. Her friendship with Bella, who markets herself in the same way, creates a stark contrast by which those stereotypes come more to the forefront to the viewer.

Simultaneously, *Pleasure* shows that Joy is anything but the stereotype she is cast in, as she is the one who befriends Bella and helps her with her poses at the photo shoot as well as with producing her own video. Joy does not try to get ahead by putting down others, as the stereotype of white trash suggests; instead, she is shown as a woman who believes that women in her line of work should have a better position, be accepted and adored, even when old and overweight, like men in the industry already are. Unlike Bella, she does not conform to the restrictions her job puts on her. During a promotional party that she and Bella attend,

she shows her anger when her porn idol, the male porn star Caesar Rex (Lucy Hart)³, insults her:

“Ceasar Rex: So just go back to the fucking trailer park where tramps like you belong.

Joy: Did you just call me fucking trailer trash?

Caesar Rex: Yes, right. I called you trailer trash” (Thyberg 0:35:31).

Instead of accepting the insult, Joy pushes Rex into the pool and is escorted off the premises where she continues ranting. The two meet again when Rex becomes a replacement at a shoot Bella got Joy to costar in. Though the encounter is polite at first, Bella soon catches Rex slamming Joy’s body against the kitchen refrigerator. Bella encourages Joy to proceed with the scene by reiterating the hollow ideology of self-empowerment through success that both her mother and her former abusers used, embodying the very violence she suffered from shooting her first rough sex scene.

As a consequence of the performers’ interaction and the tension that exists between them, the following sex scene becomes ambiguous: it is an act of actual discrimination rather than erotic play, as Rex, with both women on a leash, chooses Bella to kiss and Joy to lick his shoe, painfully pinching her and whispering: “Trailer Trash” (Thyberg 1:21:46). Joy, in this instance, stands up for herself and interrupts the scene. Explaining what happened in the kitchen, she calls on Bella as a witness. The director (Axel Braun), who actually wants to know the truth, asks Bella about what she saw, which is when Bella denies having seen anything, betraying the friend she is meant to help. In this instance Joy is everything but simple, uneducated, or temperamental. Her claims are grounded in reality and she, unlike Bella, has the courage to stand up for herself, even if it means losing the opportunity of shooting with a well-known director and studio and, hence, promoting herself on a larger level and receiving a bigger pay. Joy empowers herself by resisting the violence on set and in the industry at large. For Bella, the scene demonstrates how she slowly allows herself to be engulfed by an ideology of empowerment that provides her with the will to succeed in her career but otherwise leaves her utterly powerless and unable to deal with the instances of discrimination and violence she encounters.

Ava is the third and final connection Bella makes in the industry, exemplifying the difference between a porn performer who fulfills a job requirement and a porn star who is hired by larger studios for both her image and her reputation. Ava is a known as the new Spiegler girl, meaning that her agent is Mark Spiegler. Spiegler picks women as his

3 Shown in the credits as Lance Hart, as she, at that point, had not transitioned yet.

clients who, in his own words, are “relatively bright,” “perverts,” who “like what they are doing,” and punctual (Randall 0:23:15), a trinity of attributes that functions as a marketing tool. Performers of his agency are called Spiegler Girls and aggressively marketed as such to the point where, as one Spiegler Girl describes it, “[i]t’s hard to talk about the Spiegler Girls without sounding like a cult” (Akira 137). Being a Spiegler girl means being successful in the industry because, due to the reliability of the performers and the sexual acts they are willing to perform, Spiegler himself, as an agent, has become a brand. Yet, one should also mention that not every woman gives a purely positive account of Spiegler as an agent (Young 133 ff.). While Evelyn Claire, who plays Ava, plays what she is in real life in one sense (a Spiegler girl), she is also playing somebody who is cold, apathetic, and ridicules Bella when they meet at Bella’s first photo shooting. Her fame becomes a point of jealousy for Bella, who, later in the movie, sabotages Ava’s photo shoot, kissing her in front of cameras in order to get more attention for herself at the AVN Expo (Thyberg 1:28:00). As such, Ava is Bella’s ideal in the sense that Bella sees her as the embodiment of her own goals, while Ava views Bella with a mixture of bemusement, negligence, and, finally, annoyance.

Ava and Bella’s relationship is never that of equals, even when Bella becomes a Spiegler girl herself and is, finally, contracted to shoot a scene with Ava. When Ava is instructed to perform oral sex on Bella she refuses, claiming that Bella’s genitals are unkept with a probable fungal infection (Thyberg 1:30:39). There is an ambiguity underlying the scene as Bella, in her first porn shoot in the movie, is shown not to know what a douche is, while the movie, on the other hand, constantly and repeatedly shows how Bella grooms her body, shaving, showering, brushing her teeth and tongue etc. In consequence, Ava might also be said to be lying about Bella’s yeast infection in order to disrupt the shoot they were contracted for. Given the disdain Ava has for Bella, both interpretations remain probable to the viewer, while the director of the scene (Mick Blue) sides with Ava in this instance as Bella remains silent. Turning the character of the scene around, he gives Bella a strap-on and what may be referred to as the male position, which results in Bella repeating all the things said and done to her by men that harmed her: she chokes Ava with the dildo, slaps her, and pulls her hair, while throwing the very slurs at Ava that were directed at her throughout the movie. While she acts out her own aggression, she blacks out more and more often, until the scene is finished and she is conscious of her surrounding again. In this moment, Bella’s ‘unconscious’ active reproduction of the porn industry’s misogyny comes to a literal and dramatic climax, demonstrating what she has become. At the same time, her rivalry with Ava stands in contrast to the

friendship she shared with Joy, who defended her in front of Ava and even helped her create her own content.

Sitting in the VIP-section with Mark Spiegler and Ava at a party later that night, Bella gazes across to Joy who looks at her, seemingly vulnerable, emotionally hurt. Bella looks away, as if she were apathetic, while Joy still looks at her. The gaze here remarks on the difference of class relations, the difference between performer and star, and the damage done to what at least initially seemed to be an actual friendship, to which Ava's aversion to Bella is the opposite. Sitting in a limousine with Ava after the party, Bella apologizes to her for what happened during their shoot, with Ava replying that she does not know what Bella means. Bella instructs the driver to stop and, in a seemingly symbolic gesture, gets out of the limousine, which represents class status, stardom, and wealth. The scene underlines that all of Bella's relationships are undercut by hierarchies of class that underlie the pornographic industry, the difference between performers and stars, people reduced to perform as 'fetishes' like Bear and performers that are idolized like Ava. Class, in this sense, could also be seen as a basic template which can be molded into racist, (hetero)sexist forms and gender stereotypes along the more or less horizontal axis of society, while also creating differences on its vertical axis between the idolized star and the fetishized performer as represented by Bear and Joy in contrast to Ava.

Conclusion

If works of fiction imitate the ideology by which their social reality is structured, as demonstrated by Eric Auerbach (2015 [1946]), then so does genre, especially pornography as a genre of that which is taboo in society. Maybe that is the reason that pornography, as already remarked by Peter Gorsen, despite being that fiction which speaks more openly about sexuality than others, remains, to some degree, the other side of sexual repression as it merely documents what, in his words, must remain unfulfilled (90 ff.). But pornography as a filmic 'genre' is also subdivided into generic themes, which, as is well known, imitate stereotypes of sexuality, race, and gender so the individual performers, in order to progress in their careers, are forced to market themselves along these lines. Performers of color and their innovative resistances against these stereotypes have been documented in greater depth by scholars Mireille Miller-Young in *A Taste for Brown Sugar* (2014) and Ariane Cruz in *The Color of Kink* (2016) than by Ninja Thyberg in her movie *Pleasure*. And yet, her movie deconstructs the role of white women in porn while simultaneously providing an introduction to the pornographic industry that sheds light on the intersections of race, class, and gender. Inverting and turning the pornographic gaze back onto the pornographic set, Thyberg

not only deconstructs Mulvey's presumptions of the male gaze but deconstructs the various elements that constitute the male heterosexual frame of mainstream porn, narrating the underlying socio-economic structures of the porn industry within her feature film.

Turning around the underlying aesthetics of pornography, i.e. the male gaze, fetish-seriality, flat characterization, and social juxtapositions, Thyberg has created a feature film that uncovers vital socio-economic structures of the pornographic industry. Exposing porn's capitalist underpinnings, *Pleasure* also reveals to us the impersonal mechanizations underlying its production, exposing what Robert L. Mazzola calls the "pornographical shell" in which the unpleasurable and pleasurable, the sexual and non-sexual are interwoven with each other, sabotaging the simulacra of sexual imagery (30). *Pleasure*, hence, inverts the pornographic scene to show us the modes in which pornography is produced and labored, rendering a picture of her protagonist Bella who, lacking life experience, grows into her role as a performer until she finally confesses to Ava that they should talk about the violence she exposed her to. What remains significant about this moment is the ignorance and indifference Ava displays, staying in tune with the wealth and social status that she has acquired, an apathy and abundance that is the symptom of its very opposite, exhaustion:

Exhaustion is something entirely different: one combines the set of variables of a situation, on the condition that one renounce any order of preference, any organization in relation to a goal, any signification. The goal is no longer to go out or stay in, and one no longer makes use of the days and nights. One no longer realizes, even though one accomplishes something. [...] The disjunctions subsist, and the distinction between terms may become ever more crude, but the disjointed terms are affirmed in their nondecomposable distance, since they are used for nothing except to create further permutations (Deleuze 153).

Exhaustion with its never-ending variations is the aesthetic structure of porn, embodied by a constant variation of fetishes and idolizations, sexual fetishism, and commodity fetishism turned social structure. Ava, completely flexible in her mode of existence, is the perfect embodiment of pornography, the perfect self-commodification of her own body, and the most perfect capitalist machine, and, therein, completely sublime. Her glamour is a display of cynical reason, because she is well aware of what she is doing, but nonetheless pursuing it to no other end at all than the pursuit itself. This indifference, on her side, is the very display of exhaustion by which capitalism operates, a mode of production that is continuously Bataillian in the sense that thresholds of profanity are constantly crossed to create a mode of sacrifice or pleasure from which the star/idol as sacred figure of lust emerges.

In conclusion, the ideology of female empowerment that Bella performs is revealed as a form of automutilation, a sacrificial machine,

while the self-empowerment that Joy displays might make her career path difficult and leave her marginalized but in tune with herself, whereas Ava remains a generic persona, a shell without personhood. As demonstrated in her shooting with Bella, she shows herself to be on top of any situation, because she, to borrow a term from BDSM, literally dominates from the bottom as her provocation of Bella's anger suggests. Thyberg's inversion of pornographic seriality, flat characterizations, and the male gaze, hence, reveals to us the power structures that construct the sacred 'pleasure' that pornography, in its profanity, promises, while also revealing to us the indeterminate zones of discrimination and ambiguous labor conditions that sex workers struggle with in this line of work. What remains remarkable about Thyberg's movie, though, is that Bella pushes her own boundaries time and time again throughout the movie, only to find that the final threshold she is unable to cross in the end is the boundary that separates her from Joy, the threshold that has become the demarcation of her new habitat, the microcosm of the VIP area. Only when she speaks to Ava in the limousine does she cross a boundary of more significant meaning, transgressing the threshold of silence and the taboo of regret, consequently putting her whole *raison d'être* on the line by exiting the limousine. *Pleasure* not only inverts the male gaze; by making the structure of pornography its own and inverting its mode of storytelling, it exposes the infrastructure underlying pornographic vision. Finally, it also depicts a story of female friendship which is neither queer nor straight, neither sexual nor asexual, but a statement upon itself and a social diagram depicting a politics that escapes the heterosexual framework established by the camera, hinting at the possibility of what else might be possible if we actually stood up for our allies.

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