

# **Fragments of Fear and Power: On the Pornographic Construction of Masculinity**

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## **Abstract:**

The degrading "objectification" of women in pornography has been widely debated. By implication, men in pornography are often perceived as overbearing "subjects". In this paper, I want to argue however that pornography reduces men visually and symbolically to fragments of a preliminary subjectivity. A brief discussion of pornographic cinematography identifies visual strategies of fragmentation. I then discuss symbolical strategies as revealed in Drucilla Cornell's Lacanian approach to pornography. Cornell's suggestion of infantility in the men of porn is invaluable to my hypothesis: pornography does not represent adult masculinity and sexual power conveyed by men but an infantile fantasy of masculinity and sexual power conveyed by fragments of men. In conclusion, I want to add that in times of ubiquitous online pornography, masculinity is at a loss for alternative models of sexual behavior. The last chapter of this paper explicitly moves from academic to creative questions and offers suggestions from an artist's point of view on how such alternatives could be effected.

**Editorial Note:** In 2006, I wrote a seminar paper on men in American internet pornography. The article at hand is a revised version of that paper that I translated from the original German and abbreviated considerably for this publication. For legal reasons, I left out a chapter closely analyzing specific pornographic visuals. I would be happy to provide the original paper to interested fellow researchers.

## **Introduction**

1 In my research on the public and academic debate of pornography, I found much criticism on the pornographic visualization of women but very little on the visualization of men. The focus of this paper is explicitly narrowed to the pornographic construction of men and masculinity.

2 I will briefly discuss the influence of pornography as a socio-cultural means of masculine identification. The ensuing questions are, how is male identity constructed visually in pornography and to what ends are the specific strategies of narrative construction employed?

3 The technical side of construction will be discussed in a brief excursion into film theory, offering the suggestion that pornographic visibility reduces men - as much as women - to specific fragments that do not add up to identifiable bodies. The question of possible motives for this reductionism will be addressed by discussing a Lacanian reading of pornography.

4 This reading, particularly Drucilla Cornell's "Pornography's Temptation", claims that an infantile fear of the phallic mother is at the core of the pornographic construction of masculinity. I will argue that the Lacanian approach is problematic because it seems to apply the same foundations to masculinity that is pornographically reduced as to masculinity outside pornography.

5 Overall, pornography is ascribed an enormous role in the process of male identification. Since I am not an academic, I will close this paper by giving an artist's point of view: what can be done to overcome pornographic simplifications? What alternatives might be created? How can pornography be beat at its own game?

### **The Social Weight of Porn**

6 One particular claim is often found in the context of pornography criticism: the ongoing reproduction of patriarchic structures in pornography is an influence - especially on the young - that must be avoided and should even be legally banned from the public.

7 The matter of public influence will not be addressed empirically in this paper. I have not found a single large-scale empirical study that would help ascertain answers to questions such as: do male audiences really assure themselves of their masculinity by means of a pornographic representation of male supremacy? Are male audiences content with such representations? Do female audiences really "learn" from pornography to be submissive? These issues remain dramatically, yet opaquely virulent in the debate on pornography. It is highly desirable that empirical studies be undertaken in order to define pornography's influence on society, particularly young audiences, male and female alike.

8I n lack of such empirical data, I want to discuss some theoretical considerations on the influence of pornography. For example, social constructivist Michael Kimmel takes the view that pornography has enormous educational relevance: "Pornography ... instructs young men about the relationship between their sexuality and their masculinity. ... [It] is an important part of the male sexual script, which, in turn, is a vital confirmation of masculinity" (12).

9 The term "script" echoes both a sociological and a cinematic meaning. On the one hand, a social script is the sum of socially and culturally available elements from which real-life, everyday masculinity is acquired. On the other hand, a narrative script is the foundation of any cinematic product, simplistic thought it may be in the case of pornography.

10 According to Kimmel, both scripts amalgamate over the course of socialization so that pornography becomes an institution of cultural and social influence at a level with sex

education as offered by schools and parents, and even with young men's own sexual experiences.

11 In a somewhat Butlerian line of thought, Kimmel's argument implies that the symbolism of pornography, among other sexual scripts, is inseparably linked with the physical experience of sex. This socio-performative view seems to make out pornography to be a social “agens” acting upon a socio-physical “patients”.

12 However, Kimmel's view on pornography as a powerful influence in sexual education does not exclude the possibility of change. Scripts can be analyzed and reevaluated. Dependent on patriarchic structures that are, in turn, culturally inherited, the influence of pornography as one of the sexual scripts is amenable to cultural influence.

13 Kimmel's view is certainly more differentiated than Catharine MacKinnon's. MacKinnon describes male pornography audiences to be no more than “slaves” to the genre:

Sooner or later ... the consumers want to live out the pornography further in three dimensions. ... It makes them want to. When they feel they can, when they feel they can get away with it; when they believe they can get away with it, they do. ... [T]hey may use whatever power they have to keep the world a pornographic place. (MacKinnon in Cornell, 123, *emphases in orig.*)

14 Cornell comments that this view "represents an exact, if gender-inverted, reinscription of Freudian insight that anatomy is destiny" (125) and goes on to argue that MacKinnon simply equates masculinity with its pornographic representation: "MacKinnon's view of men and masculine sexuality precisely mirrors the pornographic world which she critiques. ... The fantasy of the dick controlling the man is inseparable from the sexuality of the pornographic world" (125)

15 MacKinnon's essentialist claims of causality make for a dead end in the debate on pornography. Kimmel's term “script”, however, allows for a multitude of layers to be analyzed in the pornographic making of masculinity. As this clash of views on pornographic masculinity shows, it cannot be emphasized enough that the depiction of men in pornography is not a mimesis of “real masculinity” but a cultural fiction. In the following, I want to offer a brief excursion into film theory to analyze how this fiction is visually conveyed.

### **Visual Fragmentation and (Re-)Assembly**

16 For technical reasons, all visual media must make choices concerning perspectives on and details of their depictions. I want to argue that the technical choices made specifically in pornography - angles, details, editing - and the underlying symbolism go hand in hand in the pornographic “construction” of men.

17 German film critics Hißnauer and Klein summarize the principle of cinematic construction in general: "Cinematic language makes use of [...] visibility beyond a simple task of representation and navigates the audience's gaze" (33).<sup>1</sup> How is this "navigation" achieved? Roughly speaking, there are two stages in cinematic production that determine the finished product: the division of scenes into single shots and the montage of these shots into a new cinematic "whole".

18 In non-pornographic film-making, an abundance of details and angles is recorded to allow for the montage to provide a certain completeness of the film's bodies. As virtual as this completeness may be though even in the most "conventional" films: in pornography, it seems, such completeness is never even aspired to.

19 Pornography typically uses close-ups of the genitalia and other particular areas of the body. I have no empirical data at hand for a proper statistical ranking,<sup>2</sup> but from my observations, the choices made in pornography are few: faces, mouths and eyes seem to be some of the other typically emphasized areas. The division of scenes – and bodies – typically found in pornography can therefore be described as a visual fragmentation.

20 A montage, or (re-)assembly of bodies from these fragments must fail. I want to go as far as to say: there are no bodies in pornography. Pornography goes on to show nothing but fragments and thus deprives its protagonists of being "whole" bodies as well as "whole" subjects. The men of porn, therefore, seem not to be granted identification.

21 On a symbolic level, with reference to Jacques Lacan, Hißnauer and Klein tie the technical process of cinematic body-making to the infantile process of self-identification: "[T]he montage merges the fragmentary body images into a new entirety. The image becomes the imago" (34). Jacques Lacan himself calls the mirror stage "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image - whose predestination [...] is sufficiently indicated by the [...] ancient term imago" (2). "To assume" means to "take on" an image. Lacan seems to imply that a conscious decision underlies the infantile process of self-identification.

22 According to Hißnauer and Klein's argument, a conscious decision is the foundation also for the identification of bodies, or "whole-body-making," in film. This decision lies with the filmmakers. The assembly of bodies from images of body fragments is an endeavor consciously planned and carried out on the set and in the editing room.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Hißnauer and Klein: my translation.

<sup>2</sup> Also, the visual examples I used in my 2006 version of this paper have been excluded for legal reasons from the version at hand. Examples are however abundantly available online.

23 Yet, the editing process can only merge what the footage offers. The infantile subject in Lacan's argument is always already fragmentary and unifies herself - successfully or not<sup>3</sup> - through the assumption of her own reflection in the mirror. A film, on the other hand, must produce its own fragments first and then address the issue of assembly. That is to say, the fragments always already contain the pre-formulated motives that motivated their production in the first place. I will discuss below, with regard to Cornell's Lacanian reading of porn, what some of these motives might be.

24 Pornographers and critics alike must realize: the depiction of men in pornography is not a representation but a construction, a fiction effected by certain narrative strategies. The beginning of this event is always marked, for each production, by the same conscious process of decision-making: what fragments are to be produced to serve as a selection for later assembly?

25 The technical aspects of film-making in pornography tell us one very important thing about the symbolism that goes with it: on a symbolic level, the men of porn, with their bodies cinematically incomplete, are no more than roughly sketched, pre-imago patchworks. How, then, can they be taken for men, i.e. representations - or constructions - of adult masculinity when they seem to be, in a Lacanian sense, infantile? With such little cinematic cohesion - when, visually, they are on the verge of dissolution - what is it that still holds them together on a symbolic level? Pornography criticism seems to find an abundance of power in the men of porn. But, in Lacan's word, how can they possess the "phallus" when they are literally premature? Or do they, in fact, not possess the phallus after all? I want to take a closer look at what the Lacanian concept of the phallus is - and whether or not it can be made out in the men of porn.

### **Phallocentrism: From Infancy to Pornography**

26 In "Pornography's Temptation," Drucilla Cornell finds both femininity and masculinity to be drastically reduced in pornography. Arousal is achieved, she argues, through "the graphic description of woman's body as dismembered by her being reduced to her sex and stripped completely of her personhood" (106). On masculinity, she remarks:

In pornography, the prick is always presented ... as having the positive 'attributes' of the one who can fuck and come. But this depends on an anatomical reductionism in which a man's sexual difference has had extracted from it all evidence that he is a self, and leaves behind only a single aspect of his life - a being whose sexuality completely takes him over. (125)

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<sup>3</sup> I am skipping at this point the Lacan's more complex argument concerning the limitations of self-identification in the mirror stage, namely the concept of "méconnaissance".

27 Women and men alike are thus pornographically reduced to their anatomy, and anatomical fragments at that, as I have discussed above. The difference, however, according to Cornell, lies in the attribution of different meanings to the genitalia. With reference to Lacan, Cornell shows that in pornography, the penis is identified with the (Lacanian concept of the) phallus, whereas female genitalia are made to be threatening. Central to Cornell's discussion is "Lacan's insight that at the very basis of Western culture lies the repressed, abjected figure of the ultimate object of desire, the phallic Mother" (126). In Lacanian theory, this imaginary character is the substrate of an infantile myth. The infant's life depends on the mother, and the male child emancipates himself for the first time in the oedipal phase, overcoming that threatening power only in desiring to obtain it, to become one with it.

28 However, the boy realizes the sheer physical difference between him and the mother. The first sense of completeness in self-identification - the result of mirror stage - is threatened. A re-identification with the mother becomes impossible to imagine: the mother's lack of a penis is rationalized as an incompleteness, a lack, a castration, and to become one with her would mean to be castrated also. The young boy can now define himself exclusively by the difference.

29 He is drawn to an alternative identification model "to seek the fulfillment of desire that can no longer be guaranteed by the fantasy of the phallic Mother who is only 'there for the infant'" (128, *inv. comma in orig.*). This model is found in the "symbolic father", a figure that, according to Lacan, can stand in for anything the mother desires. What she wants - what she lacks - is in a position to dominate her. Thus, the boy's identification with the symbolic father, his "drive to enter into the symbolic realm" (128) is not a redemption of his desire for the phallic mother but is an identity that offers him domination over that which he desires.

30 This position of dominance is what Lacan - ambiguously - calls the "phallus". Elizabeth Grosz defines the phallus thus: "The phallus seems to function as the signifier of the presence and absence of access to power and self-definition" (Grosz 141). As a "signifier", the phallus is of course more than a mere "sign" of power, as a detective's badge would be. Doerte Bischoff argues that "what makes the phallus more than a sign and therefore a skandalon, is the fact that it has been claimed to create all-encompassing power" (Bischoff 294).<sup>4</sup> It is by the grace of the phallus that one is capable of entitling oneself to power over others who lack the phallus and the capability of self-empowerment that comes with it. These others are therefore driven by desire for the phallus or, vicariously, one that possesses it.

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<sup>4</sup> All quotes from Bischoff: my translation.

31 Bischoff goes on to emphasize that the phallus itself is as much a cultural construct as is its patriarchal implementation. Inasmuch as it offers a metaphorical alliance between masculinity and power, Bischoff argues, "the phallus is to feminist criticism a symbol of patriarchal cultural tradition" (294). In other words, the phallus itself is a symbol among symbols and does not transcend symbolic systems inherent in a culture evolved through tradition.

32 In patriarchy, the phallus is ascribed to the symbolic and the actual father, not least due to the father's sheer ability "of stamping [the mother] with his name" (Cornell 129). By accepting the father's name, the mother officially declares her lack – and his ownership – of the "phallus".<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the identification of the penis and the phallus in patriarchy takes place in the boy's realization of (1) the physical difference between him and his mother and (2) the fact that the equally penis-bearing father has official and physical dominion over the mother: "The biological penis takes on the significance [of the phallic signifier] only through its identification with the Big Other that secures identity through the power to control the Mother/Other" (129).

33 According to Cornell, pornography makes use of these unconscious processes to visualize a masculinity that coheres with the dominant, powerful father. From Cornell's psychoanalytical point of view, this is the very core of pornography: The fantasy of identification with the ideal "omni-potent" man "protects the man from ever having to face the other possibility of unconscious dis-identification between the phallus and the penis" (129). Still, the fear "that he too is lack, i.e., that the penis is never the phallus and cannot be because the phallus does not exist except as fantasy" (129) is ever present in the unceasing desire for the mother who is still perceived as potentially phallic. Otherwise, it would not be necessary that a man "turns to pornography that ... positions him as the one imagined to be the all-powerful Father, the one with the erect prick" (129). For Cornell, this is exactly what male pornography audiences do, securing pornography's substantial role in the preservation of patriarchy.

34 To this Lacanian interpretation, pornography is a means of coping with infantile trauma in adulthood: "The pornographic scene has to be repeated because the phallic Mother ... will always return on the level of the unconscious" (130) - in the guise of every woman encountered. Therefore, the pornographic scenario becomes the only - albeit unreflected and infantile - escape: an "escape into power," as Andrea Dworkin calls it (Dworkin 64). Cornell

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<sup>5</sup> At most, marriage grants her a nominal pseudo-participation in his "phallus", e.g. in German-speaking countries where it was common until the middle of the 20th century that women would be addressed according to their husbands' credentials ("Frau Doktor").

summarizes that pornography "mimics the male child's ascendance into the adult masculine symbolic in which he too becomes a man, proud of his prick, with its power to control women" (Cornell 131).

35 I want to argue however that pornography does not offer a straightforward reassurance of pride and power. In fact, pornography weakens the confidence of male audiences and questions their masculinity by presenting a sexual act that is too specifically constructed to be experienced in everyday life: infantile fear confronted with particular physical features (size matters!), improbable stamina and, of course, the most subordinate and "easy-to-be-convinced" sexual partners. This strategy is peculiar. Why would pornography confront paying customers with a male sexuality thus unattainable? It is of course common in capitalist businesses to offer products that will soon outdate and leave customers wanting the updated model. In this sense, lasting reassurance must not be the product of pornography lest the business of pornography become obsolete. Yet, in pornography, updates are not taking place, the product is stagnant. The Lacanian reading suggests that male audiences hold on to this straw to keep patriarchy alive, even at the cost of diversity and potentiality of their own masculinity. I want to add that if there were more and better alternatives to pornography, perhaps male audiences would opt for very different models of masculinity that are not founded on fear and physical fragmentation. I will address this thought further below in the last chapter of this paper.

## **Conclusions**

36 In Cornell's view, the men of porn remain in the possession of the "phallus". The price however is staggering: the men of porn are stuck, powerfully, in an infantile fear of their mothers and therefore, by projection, all women. While Cornell labels the pornographic male "a being whose sexuality completely takes him over" (125), her own argument reveals this male as a being completely taken over by his fear. In pornography, it appears in this reading, fear, sexuality, and power are the same – which amounts to the psychopathology of rapists. And what is more, the desperately fearful fragmentation and reduction of men as found in the Lacanian analysis resembles an inverse castration that hails the infantile fantasy of the penis-phallus but sacrifices all other qualities of men.

37 Cornell's Lacanian reading offers valuable insight into possible motives for the pornographic reductionism that leaves women and men visually fragmented. The sexual power of the fragments identified as "male" exercised violently over the fragments identified as "female" is very real within the narrow-minded narrative framework of pornography.



38 However, the influence of pornography on masculinities outside this framework remains to be discussed. The implications here seem to be that masculinity is always already patriarchal in a Lacanian sense and that pornography - as a reiteration of patriarchy - corresponds to needs always already present in male audiences. Accordingly, Cornell claims a psychoanalytical approach to be the only adequate means of analysis: „I set forth a psychoanalytical account so that we can adequately come to terms with pornography as a cultural phenomenon“ (Cornell 126).

39 Cornell argues against MacKinnon that her "view of men and masculine sexuality precisely mirrors the pornographic world which she critiques" (125). The dynamics of pornography and its Lacanian reading seem no less problematic. On the one hand, the theorems of psychoanalysis of Freudian and Lacanian traditions have long since found their way – albeit in simplified form – into popular culture and thus into the very social and cultural scripts that are substantial to the making of masculinity – according e.g. to Kimmel's argument as discussed above. Pornography, too, is thus informed by simple notions of Freudian and Lacanian gender role templates.

40 Therefore, psychoanalytical theory may in fact be adequate in finding within pornography elements of a psychoanalytical origin. In turn, infantile fear and a desire for an “escape into power” may in fact be the foundation of pornographic masculinity. I want to emphasize however that masculinity outside pornography must not be reduced to pornographic – or psychoanalytic – simplicity. Otherwise, pornography as informed by psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic reading of pornography are at risk of falling most unfortunately into coalescence.

41 Brutality and submission out of fear are of course means to the assertion of a certain kind of power - the fearful power of rapists and tyrants. However, all male exercise of power or sexuality is not founded on infantile irrational fear and desperation because it does not exclusively induce violence and oppression. Many other qualities can also be found in male sexual behavior outside pornography, such as creativity, foresight, tenderness, responsibility, prudence, attentiveness, sensitivity, spontaneity and many more.

42 I want to emphasize at this point that masculinity must be more than a socially and culturally inherited concept. In order for this concept to evolve, it must be informed at least to some degree by the constant reevaluation that is taking place in the very moment of physical and emotional experience. Simply put, masculinity is as much shaped by sensation as by cultural knowledge.

43 A suggestion along these lines is found in Robert W. Connell's introductory reader

"Masculinities." Connell claims that "[m]asculine gender is [...] a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex" (52-53). Such possibilities do include "definite social relations" (54) and are therefore imbedded in, and dependent on, social and cultural traditions.

44 A diversity of male sexualities, then, would have to be a "combination of force and skill" (54) and thus the result of a dynamic gathering of physical and conceptual components: "the performance is symbolic and kinetic, social and bodily, at one and the same time, and these aspects depend on each other." (54)

45 Explicit depictions of male sexuality of such a kind, rich in nuances and subtleties, are hardly to be found in or marginalized by currently established pornography. On the contrary, the poverty of the prevailing narrative construction of masculinity in pornography is abysmal. The problem lies with the lack of alternatives. Pornography has a monopoly; no alternatives are readily available on a mass distribution level. The following appeal is dedicated to a few suggestions for such alternatives.

### **To Beat Porn At Its Own Game: An Afflicted Artist's Appeal**

46 I am no professional academic. As a writer, I have an artistic urge to break from an academic perspective and make suggestions on what can be done, concretely, publicly, artistically, outside the range of academic debates. Call the following a utopia. I believe it's our only hope in standing up against the simplifications of pornography.

47 First of all, debates on a legal ban of pornography are in fact futile. Prohibition has never stopped pornographers from producing their material. Also, it lends an air of political protest. Let's not give pornographers the excuse of noble-mindedness. Besides, the legal situation - especially concerning the internet - is complex to say the least. Online distribution is very hard to control, and as teachers and social workers from all over the world report, even active parental control over their minors' use of the internet is extremely limited.

48 Access to pornography has never been as easy: many popular porn websites are free of charge, and the only hint of legal responsibility is a hilarious button that says "Yes, I'm of age". The categories of porn that these websites offer include contents that are only recently available to a wide public, such as bestiality, mass rape, and many more. This makes today's porn a more terrifying influence than ever. I agree: We must somehow protect our minors - and ourselves - from this influence.

49 However, the unpleasant and often publicly avoided fact is that this endeavor has already failed. The influence is at work. Audiences worldwide, including minors, are

consuming porn online at this very moment.

50 We keep discussing the ubiquity of porn and its massive influence on our minors. Meanwhile, we yield the floor to the very agent we so desperately hope might somehow, magically, lose its appeal.

51 I propose that we create something better, something that will outshine porn, something that will deserve the title “sexual education,” something that will give our minors access to an understanding of sexuality so rich that they will put pornography aside as something impoverished and boring, something that - in the long run - will famish the porn industry and hang it out to dry.

52 I propose that we produce alternative explicit visuals, a multitude of diverse and opalescent depictions of sexuality that are rife with qualities so painfully lacking in porn: Diversity. Playfulness. Courage. Sensuality. Boundaries. Confidence. Curiosity. Prudence. Tenderness. Care. And many, many more.

53 We take possession of the channels of distribution that porn makes use of, and we make our alternative products as massively and easily available as porn is now. We publish our material online, using every viral marketing trick in the book. We broadcast it on TV at prime-time. We print it on the cover pages of magazines and on the billboards in our cities and along our highways.

54 We need a change of paradigm – yes, one that is actually worth this overused term. We have to pick up the pieces of the 20th century beginnings of sexual liberation and bring it, finally, thoughtfully, lovingly, to fruition.

55 Pornography will not stand a chance.

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