

The Élan Vital of DIY Porn

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In this essay, I borrow philosopher Henri Bergson's concept élan vital, which is translated as vital force or vital impetus, to describe the generative potential evident in new Do-It-Yourself (DIY) pornographic artifacts and to resist the trend to view porn as dead or deadening. Bergson employed this idea to challenge the mechanistic view of matter held by the biological sciences of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, a view that considered the stuff of life to be reducible to brute or inert matter. Bergson argued, rather, that matter, insofar as it undergoes continuous change, is itself alive and not because of an immaterial, animating principle, but because this liveliness is intrinsic to matter itself. I use Bergson's élan vital to think through the liveliness of gay DIY porn and for its contribution to a visual history of desire, for the ways it changes the relationships between consumers and producers of pornography, and the ways it realizes new ways of stretching the pornographic imagination aesthetically and politically.

It's Alive

I jump between sites.

I watch a racially ambiguous young man with thick, muscular legs standing in front of a nondescript bathtub. He whispers, "I'm so horny right now," rubbing his cock beneath red Diesel boxer briefs. He turns and pulls his underwear down, arching his back to reveal a hairy butt. Turning to the camera again he shows off his modestly equipped, but very hard, dick. After only a few strokes,

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thick cum oozes from the tip of his penis. He pauses, trembles. And then he jerks off quickly: semen arcs towards the camera.

I switch to another tab on my browser and scan the screenshots of the men broadcasting on Cam4, a live pornographic webcam broadcasting site. I click on “Mister Chris.” When the image resolves, two muscular young white men, one with a dark mop of hair and the other in a blue baseball cap are performing for a bossy audience: “chris kiss your hub,” “start the action!” When the camera goes offline, I switch to “26blkmuscle.” He’s been online a while and doesn’t seem to be in a hurry to cum, or maybe he’s waiting on “tips,” donations from the voyeurs watching him.

Impatient, I open another tab. I watch a Creative Commons licensed submission in the 2007 Do-It-Yourself porn festival, CUM2CUT. Created according to a lottery-assigned rubric — “Christian Porn” — the video features a pierced male punk in wedding drag who enters a church, ecstatically announces his desire for Jesus to a tattooed minister, who then pisses on the sub supplicant. The minister sends the young apostle to eat the body of Christ, a bearded dyke suspended on a cross, who appears to suffer very little during an eager session of cunnilingus.

What do these scenes have in common? Each represents a small part of a vast queer pornographic archive that depends on the active engagement of everyday people. Each represents a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach to pornographic self-representation, and marks pornography’s transformation under Web 2.0: user-generated content is produced and flows among and through diverse networks of users who collectively shape meaning and value.

These expanding ecologies of DIY porn are simultaneously explosive and ordinary. That is, DIY porn shows how porn has become an “open” practice not limited to commercial or corporate interests. The widespread and relatively inexpensive availability of a range of image capture technologies (from digital cameras to webcams and cellphones) has democratized porn production, and in turn challenged the images and commercialism of “industrial porn,” the multi-billion dollar interests that shape our shared pornographic imaginations. This is not to say that DIY porn necessarily upends the established pornographic order. In fact much of it, as in the first two examples above, is altogether more banal. Putting aside the preponderance of grainy or boring videos, even those videos that achieve the pornographic effects their authors intended, that is, arousal, do not necessarily break new political or aesthetic ground. Put crudely, very few of the many, many DIY cumshots or a viewer’s accompanying masturbatory success necessarily approaches the explosive promise of Lacanian *jouissance*. Nonetheless, I contend here that gay DIY porn offers important ways for thinking about the liveliness of sexual representations and exchanges in the digital age in which an array of technologies, especially the Internet, have proliferated opportunities for creating and sharing homemade sexually explicit material.

Each of the above scenes therefore evinces what I call “the *élan vital* of DIY porn.” In what follows I appropriate philosopher Henri Bergson’s *élan vital* to express the creative and generative capacities and effects of gay DIY porn (Bergson). I thereby suggest that rather than function as evidence of “pornified” (Paul) cultural values that reflect the deadening of our existing or future interpersonal, broadly social, and self-same intimacies, gay DIY porn represents a generative aliveness, an active contribution to and elaboration of networked bodies and desires. I’m arguing in short, and not a little playfully, that DIY porn is possessed of a vital force.

Élan Vital

It’s unlikely Henri Bergson imagined that his *élan vital* would be invoked to discuss the evolution and aliveness of gay male pornographic images. He used the idea in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution* to comment on the biological sciences of his time, criticizing their reductionist views of life and matter and suggesting that they had not grasped the animating principles of life. Although he is often grouped, disparagingly, with “vitalist” thinkers and philosophies, Bergson’s views were, in fact, distinct. For example, he did not believe, as other vitalists did, in an animating immaterial force, or a transcendent divine will, that operated in addition to material ones. As Michael Vaughan parses Bergson’s views, *élan vital*

signifies a force different in kind to matter conceived mechanistically or deterministically, and this “force” is nothing more than that very same matter conceived intuitively: as active, as creative, as itself vital – the very qualities that a mechanistic materialism effaces when it isolates superposable parts and treats as quantifiable and repeatable what is really continuous qualitative change. *Élan vital* as the organization of matter neither implies nor requires the action of an immaterial agent; it requires the conception of matter *as* agency. (16-17)

Here I sidestep the question of whether Bergson was a vitalist or whether vitalism makes for good science (it doesn’t, although it poses important questions about how to think about aliveness and materiality). Rather, I am inspired by his conception of *élan vital* to think through the liveliness of gay DIY pornography, to the creative initiative as well as the constraining pressures that shape its production and circulation. I am interested in generativity. *Élan vital* therefore serves as another way of framing the “movement of differentiation,” (Vaughan 5; see also Bergson 8) the capacity to move and be moved, and the ways change operates to enliven life.

Élan vital thus helps to frame gay DIY pornography as a vital force affecting and affected by transformations in, most obviously, sexual mores, as well as the politics of representation and the growth of network cultures. It refers to an

aliveness both extant and immanent, to gathered energies that press on collective and individual beliefs and desires, and to other energies not yet distributed or in circulation. It refers as well to an innate capacity for a kind of pornographic self-sovereignty (or in the touchy-feely language of twelve step programs and the New Age movement, “self-actualization”), for the creative transformation of one’s life into porn and/or art without, hopefully, carrying too much of the hierarchical baggage that attends either of those categories, that blurs or makes sticky the lines between high and low, elevated and carnal (Brinkema). Of course, these practices of creative self-making, and the profligate circulation of these performative embodiments that come with the possibilities of Web 2.0, don’t operate outside boundaries or constraints. I discuss these limits, ontological, political, aesthetic, and otherwise, below. But they do emphasize the capacity to choose, act, and create, signaling affective, political, and ontological orientations that commit to freedom as practice and process, as immanently available, even when it comes to porn.

DIY Porn/Gay Porn Histories

In *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics*, curator, artist, and scholar Katrien Jacobs examines the aesthetic and political dimensions of DIY porn. New DIY netporn practices open spaces for the progressive and activist construction of alternative or queer sexual subjectivities and images, and they draw the attention of state interests who survey and censor these new web publics. In Jacobs’s view DIY porn epitomizes the participatory qualities of what Henry Jenkins has dubbed “convergence culture,” in which the lines between producer, consumer, and fan blur. The widespread participation in online sex publics and the proliferation of “micro-porn spaces,”—the wide range of sexual and identitarian niches available online—evokes Paulo Virno’s theories of the “multitude”:

Multitudes create mobility and escape from corporate industries and the exploitation of workers, where they would be seen as dead labor within the exchange economy. Multitudes do not adhere to older definitions of work masses nor critical masses that can overthrow the system. Multitudes are characterized by the transformation of production through the application of technical knowledge and socialized intelligence. (Jacobs 2)

Online DIY porn cultures are “lubricants” for social actors to engage new media and one another (Jacobs 2). Jacobs situates these engagements in a broader politics of sexuality; as she puts it, “[these] generations of porn users have helped define sexual tolerance, sex debates, and revolutions in the face of social backlash” (2).

Gay and queer men’s specific contributions to networked porn are likewise situated within broader social histories, pornographic and otherwise. Given the ways gay men formed intimate networks in the context of state monitoring and

repression, as well as the social backlash Jacobs describes above, one might argue that gay men helped to innovate today's ubiquitous social networking (Meeker). These histories illustrate changing definitions and anxieties about pornography and emergent publics alike. Certainly by the advent of technologies of mass reproduction, namely photography and film, recognizable and self-conscious subcultures of same-sex desiring men already existed in most major urban areas. These prototypically gay men were, like others in late 19th Century, already consumers of sexually explicit images. Some became producers as well, although as Thomas Waugh observes, important figures in the early production of now canonical gay iconography were self-trained artists, early antecedents to DIY production. Many, like Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, produced erotic images under the banner of art, images that entered into pornographic circulation through post cards and mail order catalogs, among other routes.

But by the mid-1980s, most of the pornography produced for and distributed to gay men moved away from the independently produced and often cinematically compelling work epitomized by Wakefield Poole, Jean Daniel Cadinot, and others toward a corporate or industrial porn model.¹ While industrial porn is distinguished by a range of factors—methods of financing, production staff, professional models, distribution networks, etc.—at base it is shaped by an economic bottom line: industrial porn arouses for profit. It represents the corporate production and management of desire, and employs a capitalistic approach to the use-value of the bodies it displays, that is, the labor is cheap, flexible, and disposable.

Anti-porn feminists, including some gay men, point to these elements as evidence of structural injustice built into modern pornographic enterprises (Kendall and Funk). In addition to reproducing sexual and gender inequality, anti-porn perspectives point to the deleterious effects pornography has on our intimate lives—why grapple with the difficulties of our relationships with others when porn provides all of the pleasure with none of the negotiation and compromise (porn never has a headache). In the same vein, other critics and researchers decry the harmful effects pornographic images have on the sexual identity development of youth, pointing out the ways such images celebrate hierarchical difference and promote unrealistic, and unhealthy, images of the body (Bryant; Flood; Twohig, Crosby, and Cox). Still others suggest that porn has taken the place of more tangible and messy intimacies with our sexual partners. These, then, are the dead or deadening effects of pornography.

But the widespread consumption of porn, the creation of new genres, the leaking of porn into popular culture, all make anti-porn arguments more prob-

¹ The Athletic Model Guild (AMG) of the 1950s and 60s represented a prototypical porn assembly line. AMG recruited hundreds of straight and gay models, photographing and filming the young men in a range of suggestive, erotically charged, but not hardcore, scenes.

lematic. How do anti-porn feminists account for amateur self-pornographers turned entrepreneurs of the first web porn boom, many of them tech savvy women? How do they account for the proliferation of digital DIY porn in particular? Is *every* pornographic image produced by a sexually traumatized victim of capitalist exploitation and false consciousness—are DIY pornographers all proletarian dupes? The everyday production of pornographic images across a vast range of social contexts instead suggests porn is an altogether more open and vital than closed and dead force.

Open Porn

The widespread availability and ease of use of digital media technologies have made porn more democratically accessible, or open. The vast array of user-generated content—web groups, cam sex, peer-to-peer (p2p) exchange and piracy, blogs, activist or fan sites, or the crowd-sourced content of XTube and its clones (Jacobs 49)—have particularly empowered marginal sexual identities and embodiments to enter into pornographic production and exchange. Jacobs and Feona Attwood, for example, each point to a range of altsex sites, from the nerdy, goth, and punk chicks of SuicideGirls and Nerve, to the emergence of gay bear subcultures in a range of global contexts as evidence of netporn’s “exuberant” democratic possibilities. Peter Lehman points to a user-generated precursor of XTube, Voyeurweb, which began in 1997, and looks specifically to the ways the site illustrates the changing representation of the penis which have historically fallen into only a handful of categories: “the desirable big dick in porn, the pathetic small penis as the butt of the joke in humor, the medically normative penis measured in inches, and the tasteful aesthetic penis of high art” (111). While many images of penises “replicate rather than challenge” these tropes and discourses, other users’ images and “comments challenge and expand those norms, calling them into question and exposing them for what they are: culturally, historically, and ideologically constructed categories open to change” (Lehman 112). Tatiana Bazzichelli, co-organizer of the CUM2CUT independent porn festival I discuss below, meanwhile imagines an explicitly activist porn of the future that is pro-sex, queer, and collaborative, that contributes to a social-sexual commons.

Opening porn to a range of social actors and representational techniques, digital DIY porn cultures render more sexual realities and possibilities “on/scene” (Williams). Online gay DIY porn is alive in part through the ways it resists the deadening organizing profit motive of industrial porn; rather than arouse for profit, much DIY porn circulates in gift economies.

Alt Sex/Alt Gift Economies

Although a number of early web entrepreneurs leveraged sexual representations into profitable paysites, web groups, p2p exchanges, image posting sites such as Voyeurweb, and Web 2.0 sites like XTube demonstrate the ways DIY porn frequently circulates within alternative economies of exchange. These are gift economies in which people offer themselves as freely given pornographic gifts, and thereby create cycles of interaction and reciprocation. Gift economies are distinct from market economies in a number of ways. Here I emphasize only one: in a market economy relationships between consumer and producer conclude with a transaction. Gift economies, by contrast, produce ongoing cycles of exchange and reciprocation that effect and reinforce bonds between groups. In the case of DIY porn, in exchange for their pornographic gifts, posters receive feedback: from suggestions for future videos, to gratitude, to other more material gifts including clothes, cameras, or money. They also receive pornographic gifts of their own, as they inspire others' participation. Moreover, by sidestepping the economic overhead of commercial porn—DIY amateurs don't have to pay themselves, other models, fluffers, and so on—part of the pleasure-value of these sites arises from their participatory flavor. Those who post videos for example often do so out of a desire to share, to receive the input and feedback of other users. And while some posters are obviously exhibitionists who derive pleasure from others' voyeurism, others self-consciously intervene in established pornographic orders by posting creative or unusual videos (more on these below). The value of pornographic artifacts on Web 2.0 sites like XTube is thereby determined by factors not wholly tied to monetization. Some of these factors are relatively obvious and reflect the quality and originality of the video (was the video clearly filmed? does it afford a pleasurable or interesting view of a body?). The volume of videos a user posts shapes value, too; a high volume of postings creates a fan base that offers steady interaction and feedback. Value is also shaped by whether a user cultivates a particularly evocative sexual identity or makes exciting contributions to a particular genre (hunks, piss, solo, etc.). From aesthetic and political points of view, value is thus produced by one's ability to work with limited materials, to creatively re-work and expand the pornographic imagination, and to seduce a public through gifts more or less freely given.²

² Stephen Maddison and Sharif Mowlabocus usefully point out some limits to notions of sexual or pornographic "freedom." Freedom does not refer to the absence of all constraints, but rather refers to particular relationships to forms of authority. In particular, the need to acquire technological goods and proficiencies, as well as the ongoing unpaid, "immaterial" labor necessary to participate in DIY porn economies, both mark the borders of online sexual freedoms.

Sharing Sex

Bryanterry (Fig. 1) is the pseudonymous screen name of a 22-year-old college student. Over the last four years, he's uploaded, as of this writing, two hundred and thirty five videos to his XTube account. He has more than twelve thousand "friends" and ten thousand subscribers. His videos have been viewed more than ten million times. His uploads follow a relatively consistent format. They feature him alone in a bathroom or dorm room masturbating until ejaculation. Although his early videos featured his face, albeit partially obscured with blindfolds or masks, most of his videos do not. The early videos show a penchant for light bondage, but the preponderance of subsequent uploads fetishize "gear": clothing usually related to sports such as jockstraps, swimsuits, and wrestling singlets. Increasingly, he posts videos in which he masturbates in or with gifts—silk shirts, boxers, moccasins, jockstraps, and more—his fans have already provided or that they plan to purchase after he appears in them. Viewers frequently hear his whispered voice expressing excitement and pleasure: "Oh fuck, I'm so horny," "That feels so good," "Do you like it?" are common refrains. Although the videos adhere to a general formula, the videos nonetheless consistently evoke praise, and he continues to upload them; they are vital.

Bryanterry says he began posting videos after a friend suggested XTube as a place where he could post sexually suggestive images that social networking sites like MySpace did not permit.³ The videos became a means for him to explore and express aspects of his sexual identity he felt awkward about sharing with others. In his own words, "I love having a way to do things I might be embarrassed to do with other people, or play out fantasies that I'm curious about that might seem weird or different to actual potential boyfriends." He also began to take an exhibitionist pleasure in the effects he had on others. His own participation in the sexual gift economy of XTube were "inspired from others and myself." When I asked him if he had some examples, he couldn't think of specific ones. Rather, he emphasized the videos' realness—"I loved how real they were"—and an exciting collectivity—"I liked how there were people like me making really hot videos and getting to turn people on from all over the world." The impetus for creating new videos also comes in turn from the encouragement and interaction his videos generate among his fans.

³ These and the following quotes from Bryanterry are based on email correspondence with him during 2011-2012 and, like the image on the next page, used with his permission.



Figure 1: Bryanterry

Although he recognizes the possibility of leveraging the popularity of his videos for a “pro-amateur” career in which he could generate revenue from his videos or branch out into quasi-commercial markets, Bryanterry continues to offer his videos for free. He says he does this for two reasons. First, going pro-am would, in his view, require him to reveal his identity, and he worries about hurting his friends and family. And second, he believes that by giving his videos away for free, more people are able to enjoy them and that his openness increases his audience’s, and his own, pleasure. He says, “I feel it’s kinda hotter anyway to give them away for free and see how people react. They might pay anyway, but still I think more people enjoy my videos because it’s a great way for them to get off and it’s free and open.” For Bryanterry the fact that his videos are self-produced means that he is in control of his own sexual representation and can interact directly with his fans. This, he feels, contributes to sense of authenticity distinct from the “fake” or “cheesy” offerings of mainstream commercial gay pornography.

Bryanterry thus clearly distinguishes his own videos from the material produced by commercial porn. By remaining anonymous he is afforded relative freedom to explore and express a range of his sexual desires and practices, as well as respond to requests from his fans. In this context his sexual performances have become an important part of his individual sexual self-definition (Attwood 443) although he indicates that he might remove his videos if this anonymity were threatened. However, although Bryanterry's videos are organized by a non-commercial impetus, his contributions do not operate outside all economic concerns. He does, for example, receive gifts, largely in the form of clothing and gear, and also some unsolicited money. He understands these gifts as perks and not as animating ends: he doesn't make videos to make money. Still these donations do impel him to create more videos: "There haven't been that many significant donations, but sometimes people are generous when they buy gear from me like underwear. I have a thing for underwear and gear, as you can probably tell, so I actually like donations and selling gear to get more to show off in videos. It turns me on!"

Importantly, unlike other XTube users or user-generated social networking sites more generally, he doesn't use the sexual persona he has created on XTube as a way to make face-to-face connections. Indeed, he says that he does not meet people from the site, a paradoxically conservative position, given his commitment to documenting fantasies. Although his videos have affective and embodied results, if the comments posted on his profile page are any indication, these intimacies remain for him strictly on screen: "I don't meet up with people from the site, no matter how tempted I am sometimes, because the world is a dangerous place and I'd rather take my chances meeting people through other channels." Thus, although Bryanterry's videos are "real" expressions of his sexual desires, he also understands them as "fantasy and fun." In this way his videos blur the lines between categories of "authentica"—the widespread taste for mediated images of ordinary life and the naked bodies that might inhabit them (Attwood 448; Barcan), and "realcore," the superficially unmediated depiction of "real people with real desires, having real sex in real places" (Attwood 448; Messina).

Mystery Porn

If Bryanterry's videos evoke something of the liveliness of gay DIY web cultures in the ways they depend on feelings of inspiration and participate in economies of gift exchange, then the videos by The Black Spark suggest how gay DIY porn can interrupt the narrative and aesthetic limits of commercial gay porn. Although historical analyses of gay porn reveal the ways the genre has often blurred the lines between art and pornography (Waugh), contemporary commercial porn only rarely evinces reflexive or "aesthetic" impulses. Additionally, the narrative elements, however flimsy, that structured gay pornography as "fea-

tures” have almost entirely disappeared.⁴ Instead, the majority of gay pornographic content follows a predictable script of sexual coupling captured by equally formulaic techniques of visual representation. The choreography of sexual action typically goes something like this: brief dialogue (easily and frequently omitted), kissing (ditto), oral sex, preliminary anal penetration through fingering or rimming, anal sex, and ejaculation.⁵ The filming, framing, and editing that capture these sexual encounters are likewise limited.⁶ Most commercial gay pornography emphasizes the friction of intercourse and makes the money shot its inevitable outcome (Moore and Weissbein). And while fucking and/or ejaculation are likewise the teleology of much DIY porn, the particular ways in which these are expressed vary widely and offer important counterpoints to the representational and narrative ideologies of commercial fare.

The videos of The Black Spark illustrate how these conventions can be resisted. The videos juxtapose disjointed, highly aestheticized sexual scenes set to a range of evocative contemporary music, from American indiepop band Chester French to the British New Wave revivalists La Roux. The semi-serialized videos (sometimes referred to as “chapters”), build on one another while also recycling images, scenes, and superimposed or scrolling text. These elements combine to evoke mysterious narratives of sexual loneliness, addiction, loss, betrayal, and obsession. At the same time, especially through a persistent visual trope—masks and disguises—they suggest a fantasy world of superheroes for whom sex is a weapon or curse. From yet another, complementary, angle, they take an experimental or meta tack, in the manner of David Lynch or the television show *Lost*, to the tropes of conventional pornographic fare, at once celebrating and deconstructing hegemonic masculinity and “dude sex” (Ward).

The first video, titled “Not Over You,” opens with a closely cropped image of one of the performers, face concealed by a white *commedia del arte* mask, showering, a glowstick in his mouth. Juxtaposed over his image is the text: “Who is The Black Spark.” A quick edit cuts to a closely framed shot of the hand of a figure inserting an orange glowstick into his rectum (Fig. 2).

The tightly cropped frame, with saturated, heavily contrasted orange and olive hues, then cuts again, first to more text—“I live alone”—and then to black

⁴ According to TLA, a leading retailer of gay DVDs, none of the top-ten selling videos or 2010 were narrative features (instead, they featured twincest, barebacking, and watersports!). See <http://www.tlavideo.com/gay-top-selling-gay-adult-titles-of-2010/feature-8634-3> and <http://thesword.com/index.php/all-stories/42-depts/4151-incest-bareback-and-watersports-movies-were-top-selling-titles-of-2010.html>

⁵ Specialty or fetish videos, spanking or pissplay to take two examples, vary only in their emphasis of certain acts.

⁶ I do not address sound, although it’s clearly important whether there’s an emphasis in natural sound, the voice, the absence of sound, or, as in The Black Spark’s videos, musical soundtracks.

and white images of a living space crowded with musical equipment. Another edit follows, this time to what appears to be the same masked figure masturbating in a bathtub; here the orange glowstick in the water casts an eerie light on the long white nose of the Pulcinella mask. This image is the first to indicate that these videos are not produced by the figure in the frame because the camera pans from left to right. Superimposed text appears: “Lust is the source/Of my power” while, the song “Not Over You,” by the indie band Chester French plays, underscoring a narrative of loss: “Late night, long flight, sleep till we land/Hotel, dead cell, sun bathes the sand/ [. . .] /I try to do what I gotta do/But I’m not over you.” The plaintive “I’m not over you” accompanies further cuts and juxtapositions of image and text, first to a scene that includes a second figure (now suggesting at least three collaborators), followed by the words “deceived by my own illusion and pride.” Here, cool greens and blues, along with the bright halo created by a string of LED lights in the center of the frame, illuminate a scene of anal sex. Our masked protagonist is being fucked; he lies passively on the bed, turning his head to face the camera. Following a brief pan comes another scene of anal sex, which although it takes place on the same bed (viewers see the same brick wall in the background), the glowsticks and LEDs that created such rich colors are now absent. And for the first time, more than a minute into the video, we see the face of a man being fucked and hear his voice: “fuck me, oh fuck me.” Although the similar background and the continuity of sexual acts suggest this is our protagonist unmasked, we do not know for sure. The mystery deepens.



Figure 2: The Black Spark’s aestheticism.

Subsequent entries in the series likewise mix surreal and aestheticized eroticism, hardcore sex, evocative musical soundtracks, and often-idiosyncratic text (words are misspelled, strangely capitalized, or mashed up) with sometimes random images (like a polarized image of brushing teeth, a scorpion poised to strike, or a kidnapping by a ninja). Masked figures fuck in parks and hallways, and once in a video store with gay porn films visible on the shelves (Fig. 3). Indoor sex scenes are often lit solely with flickering LEDs. Nearly everyone wears a mask of one sort or another—the white *commedia del arte* mask plays an important role, as does what I describe as terrorist-dude drag, in which a baseball cap and bandana obscure the figure’s face. The superhero motif is supported through, in an early video, a quick cut image of Spiderman, as well as through the buff bodies of performers, and the repeated use of the word “power” in the superimposed text, as in, especially, “Chapter 1.5”: “Elsewhere a villain is born/he will take your power/up his ass/down his throat/ now he has stolen mine/i LOST focus/the great power was swallowed” (sic). With as many as three men in some scenes, it also becomes increasingly clear that The Black Spark’s videos are a collective effort.

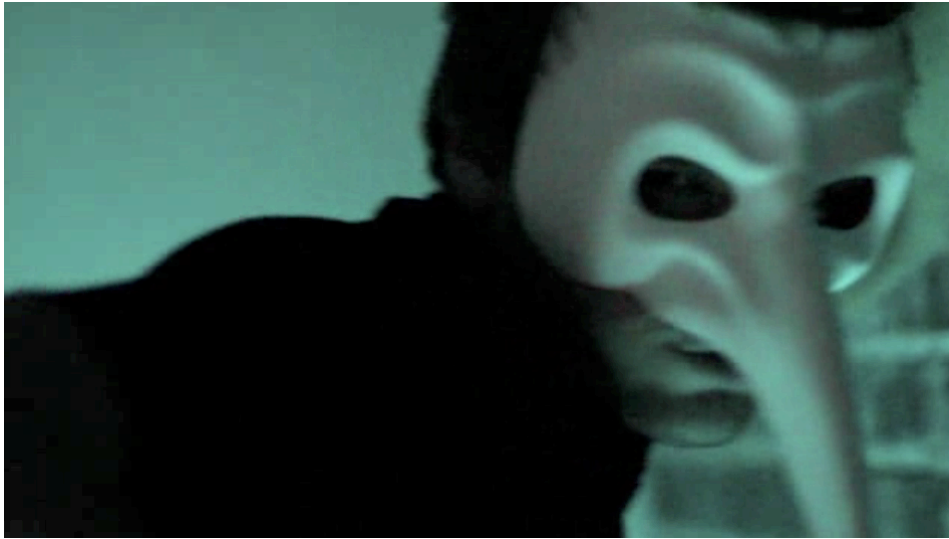


Figure 3: The Black Spark as Pulcinella?

In an interview with *Thesword.com*, a blog associated with the pay-per-view gay porn site, *The Naked Sword*, The Black Spark, who maintained his anonymity, elaborates the vision that animates his hybrid DIY porn contributions. He also reveals a bit about their production, noting that there are a number of different men, or “sparks,” of which he is only one. He and one other (un-

filmed) man shoot the videos. In the interview, he presents the videos as a means to explore his sexual desires, as a counterpoint to the banality of commercial porn, and as a political challenge to cultural expectations about sex and sexual propriety.

However, it appears that his real aspiration is to make art, specifically erotic feature films.

Like Bryanterry, The Black Spark expresses a belief that this virtual medium enabled him to explore his real desires, desires that others wanted to “fence in.” The videos therefore function as a kind of sexual therapy. He contrasts the aestheticism of his own work with the images in mainstream porn, which he complains is “boring.” And like many of his fans, who wonder whether his work should really be categorized as erotic art rather than porn, The Black Spark himself expresses ambivalence on this point—“I worry about it being considered porn everyday.” His desire to blur boundaries goes further. Unlike Bryanterry, for example, he also understands his intervention as political. He wants “to break some barriers.” When the interviewer asks, “Is that your main intention with Black Spark then, to break barriers? To challenge censorship?” The Black Spark responds, “I started doing this for a lot of reasons, but sure, challenging people’s preconceived notions is a big part of it.” Later, he continues, “If I can make people talk about censorship and acceptance, then I’m doing my job.”

But in this heady aspirational mix, the videos, for all their apparently self-conscious interventions, present an altogether more ambivalent portrait. One obvious contradiction arises in his interview. He wants to maintain his privacy while also being a sexual exhibitionist—expressing a desire to challenge assumptions about sexual propriety doesn’t yet mean he’s committed to risking his own. And while the videos’ surreal “artiness” is certainly unusual within the context of either more mainstream or DIY fare, they don’t upend pornographic conventions. The videos, after all, feature a number of well-endowed, physically toned, young white men, whose bodies are so similar as to be almost interchangeable, especially when their faces are absent, masked, or otherwise obscured. They also emphasize sexual acts like facial cum shots, cum-eating, and bareback sex, which, according to video downloads and sales, are among the most valued sexual images of the pornographic moment. In economic terms, these videos may not arouse for profit in a manner identical to the representational logics of commercial porn, but they do employ sexual representations for economic aims, even if those aims are directed toward the production of art (the films, by the way, appear to have fallen through). And how sophisticated are the videos’ formal interventions? On the one hand, I found myself entranced by the use of light and color in the videos—light becomes sensuously material, it penetrates bodies, refracting the ways watching porn operates as a kind of touch in which the affective power of the image works directly on the body. On the other hand, I wondered how many of these effects were intended and how many were acci-

dental. I found myself identifying with one of my informants, himself a recent contributor to online DIY pornographic culture, who put it simply, “Would I watch these videos if there wasn’t any sex in them? The answer is no.” Without the sexual content, The Black Spark’s videos fall within the scope of another genre of DIY participatory culture, fan video music remixes.

Whether or not The Black Spark’s videos actually represent a serious artistic or political alternative, it’s clear from his interview and from the many hundreds of comments by fans that the videos participate in the formation of a pornographic “taste culture” that identifies itself as a sophisticated counterpoint to mainstream or other DIY porn and in which “aesthetics is evoked as a form of ethics” (Attwood 449-450).

Hacking Porn

The indieporn festival CUM2CUT offers a more coherent political philosophy of DIY sexual representations and likewise works toward simultaneously elaborating both pornographic aesthetics and ethics. In the festival porn is framed as a hacktivist practice that brings a punk political sensibility to sedimented narratives and images of sexual bodies and identities. It draws on the tenets of the Free and Open Source Software and “copyleft” movements by suggesting that anyone can become a cultural producer *and* that there is an intrinsic value to freely exchanging cultural artifacts.⁷ The freedom to use, share, and retool existing work is a punk or anarchist orientation that contrasts sharply with corporate or proprietary logics in which a song or software might be temporarily or partially leased by a consumer but never owned or made available for the consumer’s reworking. Emphasizing the ties that bind queer and hacker cultures and sensibilities, especially the shared desires to simultaneously resist and open normative imperatives, the festival invites participants to produce short pornographic films over a four-day period. The films were then made available for download on the festival’s Creative Commons licensed site. As the organizers write on their webpage, “In this context, queer means to express sexuality beyond the boundaries of identity and to cross the limits of fixed genders and stereotypes. At the same time, the idea of being queer is closely connected with the D.I.Y. attitude: CUM2CUT wants to encourage everyone to express themselves using their bodies and media from an independent point of view, thereby creating new experimental queer languages” (Bazzichelli and Novati n.p.). Participants were assigned a pornographic category by lottery. In the 2007 festival held in Berlin, lottery categories included gothic porn, horror porn, and futuristic

⁷ For more on free software and copyleft, see “Philosophy of the GNU Project” (<http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/philosophy.html>) and Creative Commons (<http://creativecommons.org/about>).

porn, among others. Participants also had to adhere to a handful of rules: certain images had to appear in all the films (the “@” symbol and a city map of Berlin), as did the sentence “I used to have such a good imagination” and the sound of an audible slap.

In 2007 winning films included the first prize “Who ever could imagine christianity was so fulfilling?” and, sharing second prize, “Wild bore hunting style II” and “Make my socialism creme filled.” The categories in which the films were produced were, respectively, Christian Porn, College Horror Porn, and Socialist Porn. Interestingly, of the three, only the first features any explicit sexual content. Indeed, by working to queerly hack pornography the festival winners contest what counts as sexual arousal, ostensibly the organizing principle of pornography. In the first film, which I described in brief at the opening of this essay, a young man in a white dress (evocative of Madonna circa “Like a Virgin”) walks down a Berlin street angrily speaking into his phone and expressing his determination to go to church: “I’m finding this church. I’m going there and you can’t stop me!” He holds his Berlin map, on which a note reads “Find Jesus @ Mariannenplatz.” Arriving at the St. Thomas Church, he exclaims in relief, “Hallelujah, I’m going to church.” Inside what is obviously not the real church, a punk rock priest confronts him, “Are you ready to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?” Replying in the affirmative, the priest invites our white-dressed and black bewigged protagonist to kneel before him. The priest then baptizes the supplicant with pee, who ecstatically proclaims, “Oh Jesus! I can feel Jesus within me!” The priest then exhorts, “Now eat the body of Christ!” gesturing toward a bare-breasted but mustachioed woman with arms bound to a makeshift crucifix. The cunnilingus that follows is accompanied by synthesized music that evokes a lo-fi pornographic soundtrack. In its representations of drag, same and cross-gender contact, kinky sex, and religious imagery the video is a playful equal opportunity offender. It subverts pornographic expectations—no beefy bodies, fake tits, or money shots here—and hacks religious language and iconography as queer.

The second-prize winners hack porn more abstractly. In “Wild bore” the filmmakers open with an image of a plug being mated to a socket, an image they recycle several times. Supporting the “college horror porn” theme, much of the film is so dark as to be almost unviewable and is accompanied by ominous, growling ambient noise. Scenes of cars speeding along dark Berlin streets are cut with a murky image of a figure whipping the body of a Trabbi, the famous and often-derided East German automobile, while off-screen voices giggle and whisper in German. The scene continues for a moment and the soundtrack is replaced with the increasingly audible sounds of women moaning with (we assume) sexual pleasure. More visual cuts follow as the now pornographic soundtrack continues; as the moans intensify, another cut follows a shopping cart as it accelerates down a dark street until it crashes into another cart thrust from an

alley. The crash is followed by a brief cut to an explosion that could only have come from a bombastic Hollywood actioner. “Wild bore hunting” concludes with an androgynous figure sitting on a toilet, peeing and then pulling on the nearby roll of toilet paper on which appears some of the material required by the competition: “I used to have such a good imagination” . . . @ . . . and a map of the formerly divided city. Alerted to an abrasive clacking, the figure looks down between his/her legs to find a mechanical toy caterpillar humping a mechanical duck.

In “Make my socialism creme filled,” scenes from “Perversion for Profit,” a well known 1965 American anti-porn film narrated by journalist George Putnam that decries pornography and links obscenity to communist conspiracies, is sped up, slowed down, and intercut with scenes of a perverse baking party in which masked and dragged up revelers use dildos to whip cream that they spread on each other and a socialist cake cum effigy graced by Lenin’s silhouetted head. As with the other festival videos, there’s an abundance of loose and aggressive playfulness with none of the studied sensuality of *The Black Spark’s* videos.

The CUM2CUT winners are choppy, rough, punk, and hardly erotic at all. But the point of hacking porn isn’t necessarily to create new forms of queer eroticism but perhaps to open up representations of sex and gender more broadly. Or, put differently, they evince the eroticism that is virtual to the everyday world, the immanent kink waiting everywhere: in church (perhaps obviously), or in maps, cars, shopping carts, whipped cream (again obviously), and dinner parties. Their interventions go beyond the obvious phallic symbolism of the pipe or socket in “Wild bore” to imagine sex/orgasm as crashing shopping carts or as an orgiastic scene of socialist play and consumption. The sexual body is not normatively enfleshed, then, rather it is made cyborg, rearranging and discovering new ways to make intimate contact or get off.

CUM2CUT co-founder Tatiana Bazzichelli optimistically frames the work produced in the festival, and indie queer porn more generally, as a “porn of the future” that makes pornographic production a part of everyday life (Bazzichelli 4). Describing her vision for a hacktivist porn practice, she evokes the playfully antagonistic interventions of Dada and Fluxus: “In 1972 Wolf Vostell, one of the pioneers of video art, happenings and the Fluxus movement, wrote in a postcard: ‘Duchamp has qualified the object into art. I have qualified life into art’” (Bazzichelli 4). To explore and challenge the intimate and structural pressures that shape gender and sexuality, and to create sex-positive images and cultures, Bazzichelli suggests, “*We should qualify porn into life*” (4, my emphasis). CUM2CUT was therefore an effort to rework porn as an “open concept, as a new way of living the city space, creating a network of people through pornography, and an occasion to disrupt the boundaries and the limits of sexuality” (Bazzichelli 8). From this perspective, CUM2CUT participants contribute to a larger sexual-social commons that cuts across real and virtual worlds.

Porn into Life

What, then, is the *élan vital* of gay DIY porn that I have chased after in this essay? Recall that for Bergson *élan vital* was less a solution to the problem of mechanism versus vitalism than a new way of thinking materialism, of understanding matter as agentive. It wasn't an answer but a placeholder for the innate, ineffable creativity of matter. As he put it, "the 'vital principle' might indeed not explain much, but it is at least a sort of label affixed to our ignorance, so as to remind us of this occasionally, while mechanism invites us to ignore that ignorance" (Bergson, *Creative Evolution* 22; Greco 18). Rather than view life as a predictable progression of the selfish interests of brute matter, Bergson understood evolutionary change as life's agentive response to a range of pressures and constraints:

the living being possesses a capacity for reaction, an activity of its own that allows it to resist brutal, purely physical forces. By this we do not want to say . . . that the soul is truly in a struggle with the forces of inorganic nature, but we maintain that forces do not behave totally the same in the presence of brute matter, and living matter. Up to a certain point, the effect is indeterminate" (Bergson, "Metaphysics" 29).

The vitality of online gay DIY porn doesn't lay in the way it represents better or more evolved porn, but in the way it opens up a creative immanence, the capacity to solicit the participation of publics, laterally or directly resist or elaborate normative pornographic conventions, and to animate and enliven our sexual imaginations and cultures. Gay DIY porn moves bodies and desires and makes good, however unevenly, on the promises participatory culture offers for democratic alternatives to the incorporation of everyday life, and of sex itself as an expanding and vital, even or especially if non-procreative, practice of life. For Bryanterry, *The Black Spark*, and the organizers and participants in CUM2CUT, pornography becomes an expressive practice that is shared and circulated, refracting or contesting the conventions of commercial pornography. Bryanterry and the CUM2CUT winners make their work available for free, soliciting the desire and participation of others. *The Black Spark* seeks to intervene in the formal and aesthetic qualities of contemporary pornography, adding mystery to what is all too often boring and repetitive fare. In all of these cases, the light that emanates from the queer space of the screen, that touches bodies, is, like the ejaculate that arcs in response to some virtual world of desire, a form of matter, literally life-giving.

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