



Sex/work

Ricky Varghese

To cite this article: Ricky Varghese (2016) Sex/work, Porn Studies, 3:2, 191-194, DOI: [10.1080/23268743.2016.1184482](https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1184482)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1184482>



Published online: 27 Jul 2016.



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FORUM

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Trained as a psychoanalytic therapist, the question of how the presumed linear temporality of a narrative structure might be or become unsettled has been of significant interest to me. As such, the impetus for this brief thought-piece has been to think psychoanalytically about the question of sex, work (in the sense of the means of production), and the specific temporality of that work within narrative pornographic film. My interest in conducting this analysis is to think about how sex and work occur both simultaneously and distinct from one another, similar to the ways in which the linear time of the scene itself is conceived as it is being shot. I do this by analyzing a scene from the queer male pornographic film *Hot Raw Bears* (Moretti 2013), wherein I explore how the linear time of the scene becomes ruptured, broken apart as such, to produce a new relationship between sex and work, as both these gestures become enacted for the camera. I want to put forward a provocative notion that the delineation between sex and work in a pornographic scene both produces and reproduces a temporal and psychological rupture that can be best described as trauma. In making such an argument, perhaps we can move towards a psychoanalytic understanding of why there is still so much shame and stigma associated with the relationship of sex and work.

Before I go any further, it is essential to state that I use the term ‘trauma’ here in the strictest technical sense of the term, specifically as it pertains to psychoanalytic theory. In that sense, trauma is first and foremost a subject’s relationship to the break in their experience of linear time, an experience that they might arrive at belatedly. Trauma then, in direct contradistinction to its everyday or colloquial usage, here is given neither a positive nor a negative value. It is important to keep this technical understanding in mind when thinking about it as purely a relationship to such a rupture in the linear time of a scene, as in the case that I describe and analyze here. My use of the term ‘trauma’ should not be taken to mean that either pornographic performance or sex work is ‘traumatic’ in any negative sense. Furthermore, I want to add that I am in no way presenting a hierarchy of sex work in which performance-based sex work is somehow more skilled and/or legitimate than direct commercial service providers.

Before I think through the scene from *Hot Raw Bears*, I want to set the stage for this analysis with some questions. These queries, I feel, become central to the discussion here. One such question that I want to consider is what it might mean to think of labour as a belaboured gesture, in and of itself, that signals both the making and unmaking of a pornographic scene. Further to this, what does it mean to inscribe a sense of recognition on – or, to afford a sense of recognition to – the pornographic performer, whom I will refer to here as actor/worker for my purposes, as both subject and object within the scene?

With these questions, I am initiating a discussion that shifts between the space of pornographic production as a site in which work takes place, and the site where the worker experiences themselves – perhaps belatedly – as a worker. It is in the space of pornographic production that an actor/worker works at a craft, a task, an at-times repetitive, and even perhaps predictable, sequence of erotic practices that altogether come to be rendered as, and under the category of, ‘work’. At its core, then, I am striving to carefully think about the actor/worker’s relationship to the time of their work within a pornographic scene and how

this time is experienced belatedly or perhaps latently. I am investigating the very time in which they become recognized not only as a performer of/for erotic gratification, but also as a worker set squarely in relation to the demands of late capitalism and its impulses that allegedly bounce back and forth between two ends, supply and demand.

I want to tarry a little while longer on my insistence on referring to the pornographic performer as 'actor/worker', at least for my present exploratory intentions. This category of actor/worker appears to both adequately encapsulate the task of acting while also recognizing this same performer as a worker carrying out a task for which he might be offered some amount of remuneration or compensation. In a way, the pornographic actor/worker belabours the gesture of being simultaneously an actor and a worker precisely because they use their body to both form and inform their craft. It becomes a productive, generative body in the throes of ecstatic physical labour. The actor/worker also attempts to convincingly (or not so convincingly, as the case may be) act out erotic fantasy as an instance of performance for both self and other gratification. The other, here, includes the actors that may be in any such scene and also those on the other side of the screen, the pornographic viewer and consumer. In a way, the gesture of belabouring played at by the actor/worker argues for and elaborates on both the performative stance imbued within the task of acting out fantasy and the function of being a worker, at work, in the scene captured by the camera. Also to consider is the belatedness one might experience, with regards to recognizing oneself – or the viewer/consumer recognizing the performer on screen – as both an actor and a worker within such a complex space in which erotics, sexuality, acting/working, viewership/consumption, and performance meet.

Belatedness is attuned to a sense of the afterwardness; that which occurs in the aftermath of an experience. As such, it is a temporal category that marks what exceeds time itself because it signals the coming of an experience in time. The recognition of experience arrives in the subject's consciousness after the fact of the experience itself. Psychoanalytic theorist Teresa de Lauretis succinctly expands on Sigmund Freud's conception of belatedness as 'a mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution of sexual or traumatic meaning to earlier events – *Nachträglichkeit*, translated as deferred action, retroaction, *après-coup*, afterwardness' (de Lauretis 2008, 118). Retroactive, retrograde, and seemingly reactionary belatedness arrives in the subject like a footnote inscribed within and attributed to their subjectivity. It arrives outside the normative restrictions imposed by and implied within a linear conception of time or the normative sequence of events that allow a scene to play itself out on screen.

Belatedness as an experience of self and other recognition arrives in the subject at a time out of step with the subject themselves, a temporality out of bounds, outside the prescribed boundedness of a linear narrative arc that presumes a beginning, a middle, and an end. It comes to both the actor/worker and the viewer/consumer as traumatic, wherein the experience of time is ruptured. Rebecca Comay describes this experience of trauma as ruptured time:

Trauma [as marking] a caesura in which the linear order of time is thrown out of sequence. We compound this temporal disorientation every time we try to quarantine trauma by displacing it to a buried past or a distant future. (2011, 25)

I want to now test this understanding of trauma as a temporal rupture for and of both the actor/worker and viewer/consumer by exploring a specific pornographic scene in which the narrative is deliberately ruptured as part of its narrative logic.

Produced in 2013 under the directorial and camera hand of veteran gay porn star Nick Moretti and under the studio banner of Bareback RT (the 'RT' here standing for 'Real Time'), *Hot Raw Bears* appears to effectively wed together two sub-genres of queer male pornography. At once, it appeals to both those viewer/consumers who have a distinctive penchant for the

hirsute masculinity of that very specific figure of queer male identity, the 'bear', and also to those who seek erotic pleasure in viewing bareback sex, or, in other words, penetrative sex without the use of condoms. In keeping with the generic conventions of pornographic films, the narrative sequences are broken up by four scenes of explicit performative sex. The second scene in particular interests me most. It opens with three bearish performers – namely Aiden, Rico Vega, and Bamm-Bamm – playing on a hotel bed. The performers get right into the action, touching, caressing, licking, sucking, fingering, and blowing one another with great resolve, ease, and comfort. It becomes fairly obvious early on in the scene that Rico Vega, the Latino bear, will serve as the willing and eager bottom to tops being played by Aiden and Bamm-Bamm. The sequence of events seems to repeat what often appears in most standard queer male porn films – Vega, being the enthusiastic bottom, services both Aiden's and Bamm-Bamm's cocks, and has his ass readily rimmed and eaten by both of them in preparation for it to be penetrated by them, each taking their turn fucking him bareback.

The scene progresses with both Aiden and Bamm-Bamm taking turns fucking Vega until, at one point nearly halfway through, something happens to break the expected linear sequence of events. Aiden is taking his turn penetrating Vega, who now is lying on his back on the bed. Vega's head slightly falls off the side of the bed enabling him to reach his head over to Bamm-Bamm who appears to be standing by the bed. This allows Vega to fellate Bamm-Bamm while Aiden fucks the former. Suddenly, the director, Moretti, who is also the cameraman, states: 'Hey, I need a turn at that ...' – clearly indicating his desire to get in on the action by fucking Vega himself. Aiden, after pulling himself out of Vega's ass, responds to Moretti: 'Yeah, go ahead ... want me to hold the camera?' Moretti replies 'Yeah, you want it?' Aiden responds as he grabs the camera 'Sure ...' A pause is evident in Aiden's utterance of this 'sure', after which he continues: '... my fee just went up, by the way ...'. What ensues next is what appears to be uncontrollable laughter amongst all four performers both within and outside the camera's frame. Aiden explains his remark by saying '... now I'm a cameraman ...', which results in further laughter. As he and Moretti change places, Aiden concludes his comments by stating '... this is America, man! Entrepreneur ...!' – indicating, albeit comically, a tie-in linking nationhood to late capitalism and entrepreneurship to the logic of compensation. The laughter subsides, by which time Moretti takes his position and proceeds to penetrate Vega while Aiden continues to record the scene. Clearly turned on and appearing to be in need of a quick release, Moretti fucks Vega and cums inside him, after which he takes his position back behind the camera while Aiden returns to the bed to continue playing with Vega and Bamm-Bamm, until all three of them climax and the scene draws to an end.

The initial switch of roles between Moretti and Aiden lasts no more than 20 seconds and yet its significance cannot be overlooked. An actor turns into the cameraman, while the cameraman briefly becomes, and takes on the role of, an actor. This role reversal is emphasized by the dialogue that takes place between the two performers and the laughter that punctuates the scene – an uncomfortable, but uncontrollable, laughter indicative of a rupture in the linear time of the scene. What is revealed or rather unveiled by the laughter and what incites it – the statement '... my fee just went up, by the way ... now I'm a cameraman ... this is America, man! Entrepreneur ...!' – is an excess to the very staging and performing that occurs on the bed between the performers for the camera. In a way, it showcases this excess as a kind of extruding yet necessary remnant that both resists being contained by, and cannot be held within, the flow of the scene itself. It breaks the scene to reveal that what is being enacted on screen, while it is sexual, erotic, fantastical and performative, is also a scene of work in which the reminder (and remainder) of the transaction becomes the very inscription of that excess. This excess is traumatic, in the technical sense of the term as

described by Comay, precisely because it annuls the straightforward time of what is being captured on film – it traumatizes the temporality of the scene – and reveals that work exists as the signifying material overflow of the scene itself. The laughter that becomes produced at Aiden's statements within the scene marks the belated recognition of what the scene is 'really' about – it reveals itself to be both a space in which acting occurs in the form of erotic performance while simultaneously becoming a workplace or space in which compensated labour is always already *a priori* understood as the purpose that makes the scene possible. Laughter, like the statements that inspired them, becomes the traumatic slash or the belated solidus in the literal temporality of the scene that separates sex (erotic performance as acting) from work (hierarchically placed labour done for financial compensation as much as, if not more than, erotic compensation). Laughter acts as the retronym that creates the distinction between sex and work while, at the same time, necessarily allowing the two to be, in a way, rendered as mutually exclusive here, wherein the occurrence of one precludes the occurrence of the other. Here, one, it would seem, cannot necessarily exist without the other.

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Ricky Varghese
Clinical Counselor, Toronto, Canada