



Visual Pleasure and Gonzo Cinema: Mason and the Problem of the Female Gaze in 'the hardest of hardcore'.

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Abstract:	This article focuses on the work of enigmatic female gonzo director Mason, and examines her filmic negotiations of genre convention within the mainstream American gonzo industry. Close analyses of her films reveal a rich, textured set of filmic strategies which complicate conceptions of what mainstream gonzo pornography looks like and how it functions. This article presents an overview of her career to date, examine the articulation of her relationship with her female performers, and discusses her authorial tropes. It asks how her films differ from those we might have come to expect from male directors, and I question how we might account for her female gaze (as both producer and consumer) upon extremely hardcore scenes. In particular, I seek to demonstrate that as Mason navigates, negotiates and negates a variety of gonzo conventions, her work is best understood as a series of responses to the norms of her chosen genre.

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Visual Pleasure and Gonzo Cinema: Mason's challenge to convention in 'the hardest of hardcore'.

'Do you like to watch yourself?'

'In scene after scene from popular gonzo flicks, gagged women who close their eyes are quickly reprimanded and told to open them: ... "open your fucking eyes," Examples of directives like these can be found in [such films as] *Mason's Dirty Trixxx 2* ... In each case, the director's reprimand demonstrates that **his** pleasure is contingent on her presence and recognizability as *subject*' [bolding mine] (Purcell 2012, 145)

The final scene in *Dirty Trixxx 2* opens in close-up on Alexandra Quinn's face (Mason 2002a). She is already naked, face down and alone on a rug placed on the bare floor of a vast industrial space, her ankles attached by restraints to a collar around her neck. A voice enters the scene from behind the camera, its owner unseen. It belongs to the director, Mason. 'Do you like to watch yourself?', the voice asks. 'Do you like watching yourself get degraded?' 'I love to be degraded', Quinn responds breathily, already in a state of taut ecstasy. The camera moves to show the source of Quinn's reverie: she is watching a huge projection of a previous scene she had performed in (*Lady Fellatio 2* (Mason 2002b)). As the camera's gaze returns from the projection to the present Quinn, her speech reduced to barely audible, mumbled exhortations, she is masturbating. Mason moves the camera between the present scene and the projected one, and Quinn calls out to the screen, watching and reimagining that moment, encouraging the projection of her former co-star: 'Fucking come on me. I want my whole mouth filled with come'. 'You're so filthy', says Mason, her voice trembling.

Her voice. Mason is a woman.

As a female director working at the forefront of hardcore gonzo pornography Mason is unusual (though of course not unique). She is not a queer or alternative or even self-avowedly feminist pornographer and her work, as opposed to the work of many contemporary female porn directors, is not at first glance produced to run against the grains of conventional American West Coast pornography in its diegetic and extra-diegetic choices. Her work is *resolutely* mainstream if we think about that term as referring both not only to some generic sense of style but also to the means of production, distribution and consumption (Stoya 2014): it is solidly market-driven, and commercially and critically successful. And despite what I will argue are the potentials of her work as she balances her subversive visual strategies with broad appeal, she is hardly part of discussions about the state of the mainstream porn industry by activists or radical alternative pornographers – in fact, it is not even just anti-pornography writers who have failed to notice that Mason is indeed a woman.¹ Despite frequent moments of friction with studios and other [male] directors, she has worked and continues to work at the heart of the porn valley studio system for established major companies such as Elegant Angel, Platinum X and Mile High. Over the course of her career, she has won awards at all the major industry ceremonies, including becoming the first female winner of the Director of the Year category at the industry-orchestrated AVN Awards (the so-called 'Oscars of Porn') in 2015. She sits, albeit uncomfortably on occasion, near the centre of the industry.

Nevertheless, close analyses of her films reveal a rich and textured set of filmic strategies which work counter to genre expectations, and complicate conceptions of what mainstream gonzo pornography looks like and how it functions. In this article, I present an overview of her career to date, examine the articulation of her relationship with her female performers, and discuss her authorial tropes in some detail. I ask how her films differ from those we might have come to expect from male directors, and I question how we might account for her female gaze (as both producer and consumer) upon extremely hardcore scenes. In particular, I seek to demonstrate that as Mason navigates, negotiates and negates a variety of gonzo conventions, her work is best understood as a series of responses to the norms of her chosen genre. Rey Chow has argued (after Linda Williams) that pornography is a 'generically coded representational system, artificial rather than natural and therefore subject to change (Chow 2001, 54)'. In revealing that

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pornography's systems are indeed mutable, the ultimate result of Mason's experiments, I will argue, is to create a changed pornography which remains sufficiently close to mainstream expectations that it sells and wins awards, but which strays from conventions in ways which are complex, layered, and radically productive in their gender politics.

'Creating Art rather than Porno'

Mason (who also occasionally shoots films under the anagrammatic pseudonym Sam No) has been directing pornography since 2002, having begun her career as a camera operator for pioneering gonzo director Rodney Moore around 1999 before progressing to a directorial debut, *Lady Fellatio in the Doghouse* (Mason 2002c) under the tutelage and support of Patrick Collins, owner of major Californian porn studio Elegant Angel. After graduating college with a political science degree, Mason had initially set on pursuing a career in law. At college, though, a course on feminism had caused her to begin to question her own 'love-hate relationship' with pornography; an interest sparked by furtive childhood perusals of *Oui* and *Hustler* magazines but complicated by what she later describes as a 'habituated ideological orthodoxy' that porn was 'wrong and harmful to women'.

'I started to consider', she recounts in a rare but candid essay, 'that the issues I had with pornography were simply reflections of the way society treats women more generally. I started to feel that all of the guilt I felt when viewing porn was predicated on my own discomfort with being a sexual woman. Why did I feel so much shame after watching others have sex?' (Milne 2005, 125). The way she thought to answer this question, and to investigate its roots within her and within society more broadly, 'was to get personally involved in the adult entertainment industry'. Her conversion was swift: 'Today' she wrote in 2004, 'I see porn as a much needed medium of sexual expression. I have learned to embrace my sexuality through watching women who are truly comfortable with their own sexuality' (Mason 2004a).

By her account, this shame is driven by stigma around female sexuality and its representation in pornography and the wider media landscape, itself generated by a general, patriarchal social anxiety about sexually self-confident women. In her column for industry trade publication *AVN Insider*, amongst discussions of consent, agency, authenticity and autonomy, Mason returns frequently to this guiding ideology: that polite society (and even, in many cases, the porn industry itself), expects women to behave and express their sexuality in one particular way – demure, invisible. By contrast, she wants to show, as she puts it, 'that sex is inherently *disordered*' (Mason 2003d). '[My performers'] scenes are not symptomatic of victimization: weak, fragile, empty vessels to be viciously used and abused at the hands of violent male misogyny', she writes. 'But to the contrary, they are emblematic of empowerment, self-awareness, authentic femininity. ... these are women in control of their sexual destiny, enthusiastically pursuing their own desires, shamelessly celebrating hardcore fucking, irrespective of the oppressive social stigmas or narrow perspectives of womanhood that generally apply.' (Mason 2003b).

This account of female sexual shame in contemporary Western discourse maps closely to Carol Vance's concerns – 'Women are vulnerable to being shamed about sex, and the anti-pornography ideology makes new forms of shaming possible' (Vance 1984, 7) – and her important and influential account of 'pleasure and danger', where desire and risk weigh heavily against each other. In fact, Mason's work seems to probe visually those questions Vance herself asked sociologically, and produces a resounding response to the social anxieties about female sexual desire in the contemporary West which Vance identifies:

If sexual desire is coded as male, women begin to wonder if they are really ever sexual. Do we distrust our passion, thinking it perhaps not our own, but the construction of patriarchal culture? Can women be sexual actors? Can we act on our own behalf? Or are we purely victims, whose efforts must be directed at resisting male depredations in a patriarchal culture? ... Does exceeding the bounds of femininity - passivity, helplessness, and victimization - make us deeply uncomfortable? (Vance 1984, 6-7)

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3 In her search for answers, pornographic filmmaking quickly became a tool through which Mason sought to
4 communicate her own complex relationship with both her own sexual identity, and the representation and
5 mediation of sexual identities in general and the sexual identities of women in particular. Mason's genre of
6 choice is 'gonzo', per Clarissa Smith 'a marketing term promising a ring-side view of the sexual action ...
7 close up filming, a rough and ready hand-held style and little evidence of formal plotting ... rough sex with
8 no pretence of romance, little gentleness and lengthy scenes' (Smith 2011, 95-96). Milne describes Mason's
9 work as 'the hardest of hardcore': intense gonzo, usually gangbangs, blowbangs, and hard anal scenes;
10 Mason herself frames them as 'sickened, twisted, perverted' (Mason 2003b), and 'intense ... aggressive ...
11 hard, passionate, psychological and very, very rough'. (Milne 2005, 131; see also Mason 2003c). And yet, to
12 both celebrants and detractors, standard gonzo tropes become, in Mason's hands, something qualitatively
13 different from that of her contemporaries: remarking on her stylistic particularities, gonzo director Chico
14 Wang tells industry gossip writer Luke Ford that 'For the record, I have nothing against Mason. I think she's
15 a retarded director who thinks she's creating art rather than porno' (Ford n.d). This clearly is not intended as
16 a compliment. (See also Mason 2004d).

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19 Wang's critique can best be understood as a comment on the ways in which Mason's work seeks to resist
20 the narrow bounds of gonzo convention. Close examination of her oeuvre reveals determinable stylistic,
21 aesthetic and visually political commonalities and threads which run throughout her body of work and
22 which mark it out as distinctive, including directorial interventions before, during and after scenes; frequent
23 plays with conceptions of the gaze, including the presence of screens; and an avowed diegetic and extra-
24 diegetic concern for 'authenticity' during scenes of rough sex, and the expressed aim to communicate her
25 female actors' genuine sexual desire through the dismantling of boundaries and limits. I will deal with each
26 of these in turn.

30 'I am just a voice you hear'

31
32 Firstly, it is illustrative to discuss Mason's interventions into the scenes she directs. Her early experiments in
33 filmmaking, using a camera she bought herself to shoot a close friend performing with sex workers, seem to
34 have allowed her to develop the conversational warmth and rapport with her subjects which have remained
35 the hallmark of her filmmaking ever since. 'If you look back at those [first] tapes', she explains, 'there's a
36 real intimacy to the interviews and the exchanges with me behind the camera. I was fascinated by who
37 these women were as sexual beings. And through my interactions with them, I learned a lot about their
38 history, and in turn about myself' (Milne 2005, 127). If there is a directorial trademark in a Mason film, it is
39 this interaction: female director to female performer, before, during and after the scene. It seems
40 impossible that Natalie Purcell could have actually watched *Dirty Trixxx 2* and not realised that Mason was
41 indeed a woman; across the span of her career, her voice is often the first to be heard as scenes open.

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44 These conversations, unlike the kind of consent-establishing bookends or 'exit interviews' used by fetish
45 producers like kink.com, where performers are interviewed before a scene to clearly and often legalistically
46 establish their desires and limits, and afterwards to assert on film that these limits were respected (a
47 practice which is widely considered by industry observers as serving the interests of litigation-wary studios
48 more than performers (Urbana 2015)), Mason's directorial voice, particularly in her later work, is
49 conversational, friendly and warm, often punctuated by giggles and what at least appears to be a frank and
50 convivial familiarity. There are no discussions of boundaries, only of desires, hopes, and even anxieties.

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53 For a viewer of her films, Mason exists almost exclusively as a disembodied voice. We rarely see her body
54 and never her face. (Ford 2003). Kaja Silverman argues that the female voices in conventional pornography
55 are reduced to 'a generator of gender-differentiated and erotically charged sounds', 'the acoustic equivalent
56 of an ejaculation, permitting the outpouring or externalization of what would otherwise remain hidden and
57 unknowable'. (Silverman 1988, 69). There are plenty of such vocalisations in Mason's scenes, of course, but
58 they are combined with eloquent moments of discourse and discussion from both performer and director.
59 Women's voices here are prominent as sexual agents, as spectators, as active participants in the production
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1 and consumption of the sexual performances on display. If 'sexual difference is the effect of dominant
2 cinema's *sound* regime as well as its visual regime', as Silverman suggests, then this inversion of dominant
3 modes of sound design must logically produce a different account of difference.
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6 Framing every scene for her *Massive Facials* blowbang series for Elegant Angel, for example (Volumes 1-6,
7 2008-2013), or her more recent *Facialized* movies for HardX (Volumes 1-2, 2014-15) is a light, relaxed chat
8 as she moves her camera over her female star. A paradigmatic example is Ariana Marie's scene for *Facialized*
9 (Mason 2014a), where Marie and Mason discuss the forthcoming action not in terms of limits but in terms
10 of experience, hopes, pleasures, and enjoyment. In particular, and unusually for a scene which will not
11 feature any penetrative sex, they talk matter-of-factly about *Marie's* desires, both in terms of her personal
12 psychological turn-ons as a sexually submissive woman, but also because Mason is avowedly, openly keen
13 to ensure her female stars actively enjoy these kinds of scenes. (See also Kingstown 2015).
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16 The standard conclusion of these blowbang scenes, which in the hands of other directors become excessive,
17 frenzied visual manifestations of male pleasure (Williams 1989, 100–103) is subverted by two key
18 interventions. The first is in a reworking of one of the most persistent of pornographic conventions. The
19 usual end of a porn scene is a come-shot, and it has become such a trope that several alternative or queer
20 pornographers have sought to avoid it, given its centralising logic of the primacy of male pleasure.
21 (Taormino 2012). In mainstream pornography the 'money shot' or image of the male ejaculation is 'the
22 genre's frequent insistence that this visual confession of a solitary male 'truth' coincides with the orgasmic
23 bliss of the female' (1989, 101), and it is a standard anti-porn feminist critique that the visual economy of
24 pornography is explicitly threatened by female or even mutual desire (See, for example Wolf 1991, 138).
25 Counter to this standard move, Mason decouples male and female climax, and the logic that one must
26 inevitably flow from the other, by arming her female performers with high-powered Hitachi vibrators and
27 encouraging them to climax by their own hands. The scenes all finish when the female performer has come,
28 never before. In so doing, Mason ensures that they (and not their male co-stars) are in control of their own
29 orgasms. Indeed, unlike the conventional connection where the male ejaculation is both sufficient for and
30 co-extensive with the female orgasm, in these scenes the opposite is true – even six come-shots can't
31 provoke climax, and the scene is not over until the *female* performer has reached not only orgasm, but fits
32 of gasping, exhausted laughter. Moreover, as Williams also eloquently describes, despite female performers'
33 frequent exhortations 'to feel the hot substance spurt on some specific part of her body', usually 'the
34 spectacle is not really for her eyes', but instead for the male co-stars, the male director and male viewers.
35 Here, though, we have a *female* director acting as (as Mason claims) 'One part cheerleader, one part coach,
36 one part conductor' (Miller 2013), supporting and directing the action, consuming the spectacle at least in
37 part for her own pleasure.
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40 This is accentuated by her second intervention: as Marie collapses into orgasm and then a broad smile,
41 Mason's voice once again punctuates the scene. 'Oh, my gosh. That was so hot. You've got to see it', the
42 director laughs, and the two converse, giggling, more like friends than in the humiliating tones Purcell
43 describes for the genre. In Purcell's formulation, gonzo directors insist on eager, open-eyed engagement to
44 appease their desire to humiliate, where the more aware of her degradation a performer is, the more
45 exciting the director and his audience find the scene. A focus on subjecthood, by Purcell's understanding, is
46 a route to more profound dehumanisation. The more humiliated a performer feels, the better the
47 experience for the viewer. In Mason's case, by contrast, the female director's pleasure is indeed contingent
48 on her performer's presence and 'recognizability as *subject*', but this recognisability is framed as a genuine
49 and careful interaction, an acknowledgement that subjecthood is actually possible without coercion, that
50 this type of sexual activity is actually, possibly pleasurable, and that her performer's embodied subjectivity
51 is crucial as part of her political and pornographic strategies. This is a fundamentally oppositional
52 understanding of the same process: whereas Purcell presumes the more mentally present and fully
53 subjective a female gonzo performer is, the more she will dislike the experience, Mason seems to insist on
54 the opposite. Mason wants and needs her female performers to be fully active subjects both artistically,
55 and pornographically.
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2 The echo of a female voice as director, orchestrator and consumer of the scene begins to challenge the
3 'phallic economy of pleasure', as Williams seeks, by neutralising Purcell's critique – that this process of
4 subjectification is designed to appease a male viewer. In several other scenes, Mason takes this
5 recognisability as subject further by showing her female star themselves covered in semen and shaking
6 post-orgasmically in the camera's own screen, explicitly including them in a circuit of desire and allowing,
7 through small, natural and honest moments of recognition and often through grins, laughs and
8 conversation, a recognisable sense of genuine pleasure, engagement, and sexual fulfilment. It is not just the
9 director's pleasure upon which subjecthood is contingent; it is, of course, also contingent on the
10 performer's own.
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12 13 14 **'Look right at me'** 15

16 Secondly, I want to highlight the particular strategies Mason uses to assert her authorial gaze, and to affirm
17 it as specifically female. Mason's conversations with her performers, and her interventions into her scenes,
18 are not always as bookends, framing a narrative of excited expectation and sated fulfilment for her
19 performers. In other scenes, particularly early in her career, she often deliberately allows her body to break
20 into frame to actively participate, and not simply to watch. 'Shooting scenes that were formulated for my
21 own sexual fantasies', she describes, 'felt like I was part of the scene'. (Milne 2005, 130)
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23 Mason reveals here who is 'engaged in representation' (Chow 2001, 41). By absolutely confirming that this
24 is indeed a female director, each of these cases disrupts a presumed male viewer's experience of the action.
25 As Lucy Neville has pointed out, the popular notion of how pornographic convention operates seems
26 grounded in roughly the terms set out by Laura Mulvey in her famous account *Visual Pleasure and Narrative*
27 *Cinema* (Mulvey 1989a), broadly presuming a male subject and female object of the cinematic gaze.
28 Neville's research with women who watch pornographic films reveals that even if they do not frame their
29 understanding of the visual conventions of porn in the scholarly psychoanalytic terms of Mulvey's
30 argument, they do describe their intuitive sense that 'that most straight porn asked them to look at women
31 as a man would' (Neville 2015, 200).² In Mason's films, though, rather than presenting any simplistic sense
32 of narcissistic scopophilia, 'woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men' (as Mulvey has it),
33 her face is invisible to the camera, and she never becomes its object. Her voice from behind the lens
34 consistently affirms its gaze as *hers*. Pornography is conventionally comfortable with the point-of-view shot,
35 allowing male spectators to fantastically insert themselves into the action, and yet in Mason's films, this
36 identification is disrupted.
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39 In the first *Dirty Trixxx* film (Mason 2002d), she forces Olivia Saint to lick come from her patent leather boots
40 as Saint kneels in front of the camera. In *Lady Fellatio 2* (Mason 2002b), during the scene Alexandra Quinn is
41 forced to watch during *Dirty Trixxx 2*, as Gino Greco prepares to come on Quinn's face, Mason's voice
42 frantically directs the action unfolding. 'Look right at me', Mason snaps, as Quinn joyfully and exuberantly
43 stares down the camera lens: 'I fucking love sucking cock'. Whilst Quinn is naked, sprawled on an oil-stained
44 concrete floor, Mason reaches first her perfectly manicured hand and then her sneaker-clad foot enter the
45 frame, to choke and hold her down as she writhes and begs. When this scene from *Lady Fellatio 2* reappears
46 as a projected image inside the pro-filmic space of *Dirty Trixxx 2*, both the director and performer consume
47 and then mimic their own images on screen, their present action catalysed as they are fantastically re-
48 inserted into that prior moment and its pleasures and possibilities. In many respects, this type of move
49 starts to fulfil Claire Johnston's hope for a counter-cinema, embodying, presenting, representing and
50 encoding the working through of desire (Johnston 2000): the moment becomes one in which Mason
51 interrogates her own complex relationships and histories with sexual images, and their impact on her own
52 prior and immediate sexuality. As Williams has written, 'Much has been written about the way we lose
53 ourselves or identify with those glorious, magnified human bodies in movement on the 'silver' screen; much
54 less has been written about the ways we re-encounter our own bodies, and our own sensuality, in the
55 process' (Williams 2008). In the *mise-en-abyme*, Mason and Quinn stage a literal re-encountering of their
56 bodies, and reinforce the active possibilities of both production and consumption of pornographic images
57 by women.
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'Are you OK with this Alexandra?'

Thirdly, I want to give an account of moments in Mason's filmmaking where the limits of the relationship between director and performer in the contexts of a commercial porn shoot are revealed, and what the revelation of these limits might demonstrate about mainstream pornography's ability to adequately express moments of apparently authentic sexual desire.

Sanna Härmä and Joakim Stolpe read an interaction Mason has with Katerina Kraven on the set of *Riot Sluts* (Mason 2004b), released as a 'behind the scenes' moment, as erotic; 'a record of a moment of shared affection between two co-workers'. (Härmä and Stolpe 2010, 120). The performer and director taste each other's fingers, sharing their mutual enjoyment at the scene just completed. There are plenty of such moments sprinkled throughout her films; moments in which Mason's interactions with her performers seek to communicate both implicitly and explicitly the presence of an authentic moment of genuine sexual pleasure, and Mason's consumption of those moments as a viewer in a way that accords with her own particular sexuality.

One exception stands out. Quinn's scene from *Dirty Trixxx 2* includes a dramatic break with pornographic convention. About five minutes into the scene, as Ferrara has begun to push his penis into Quinn's throat, Mason momentarily allows the camera's gaze to drop, revealing her own legs and feet. 'Are you OK with this Alexandra?'. Mason sounds concerned, worried. 'Are you OK? Tell me?'. Quinn nods her agreement and Mason returns the camera's focus to the action, holding a tight shot on Quinn's crotch as she masturbates. The scene from *Lady Fellatio 2* continues to play in the background. In her essay for Milne, she describes at some length that this is awkward, jarring section of the scene is a moment of unscripted, genuine worry which was only included in the final cut at the insistence of the studio. This becomes, she explains, 'the first time I felt like I had sold out'

Tzachi Zamir uses Mason's expressed concern for Quinn during the scene as part of a larger argument about how acting might be understood within the conventions and pragmatic realities of porn, reading this slippage as an explicit acknowledgement that Quinn is performing *Mason's* desires, but that her eager consent as the scene continues demonstrates that Quinn's 'willingness to be orchestrated according to the script animating the director's desires can constitute love-making; a voluntary bodily response to another's secretive and private wishes' (Zamir 2013); that is to say, it is Mason checking with Quinn that she is happy to continue to act out Mason's specific fantasies, and that Quinn's acquiescence should be read as an act of active, giving submission. If we believe her account for Milne, it seems to me, however, that something quite contrary to this is actually occurring: that Quinn has broken through a limit of that which Mason herself finds tolerable to observe and orchestrate. Here she is, even if only for a matter of seconds, not participating in but actively resisting the scene she is shooting. This intervention has a quality unlike the others already discussed. It is a moment in which she loses control as the desire of her performer exceeds her own, and it becomes a key moment of reflection.³

'I've always believed that women don't need to elaborate demonstrations of their autonomy and consent', she asserts.

I remember I saw a 'couples' movie where a woman being fucked aggressively by five guys spontaneously said, "Stop!" and all of the participants, responding like robots, let go of her in unison. It was apparently the director's intention to make it absolutely clear that the woman retained power over the experience she was involved in. I found it so insulting. Why do we find it so hard to believe that a woman has no control over her sexuality? Why is it required to explicitly demonstrate that a woman is sexually powerful over what she chooses to engage in? (Milne 2005, 133)

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2 For a brief moment, Mason lost the courage of her convictions that the director can and should be
3 'authentic'. This jolting from the action almost threatens to undermine the whole scene, as it punctures the
4 mutual exchange and circuit of looks and desires between Mason and Quinn. It also serves to counteract
5 Mason's didactic aims to present sexually aggressive female submission as a possible and authentic mode of
6 sexual behaviour, but I think Mason's discomfort with the presence of this moment in the final film is
7 instructive.
8

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10 Authenticity is a major question of debate amongst porn scholars, and we should of course be wary of any
11 diegetic or extra-diegetic assertions that any particular pornographic scene has adequately either permitted
12 or represented anything that might be called 'authentic' at all (or even, after Chow, that there even exists
13 something that can be deemed an authentic sexuality in the first instance). Ultimately though, the question
14 of authenticity underpins many arguments speaking both against and in favour of pornography or its
15 possibilities, including those here; whether or not we can trust the performers' communication of both
16 pleasure and consent before, during and after the scene, and the director's own account of her interactions
17 with those she works with, must always be a matter of some scepticism (Downing 2014; Maina 2014; Smith
18 2001; Young 2014). Nevertheless, when combined with her reflections upon it, this slippage – this moment
19 at which Mason discovered within her a sense of deeply ingrained caution at such excessive displays of
20 sexual roughness – provides a rather rare example of both a porn performer and a porn director reflecting
21 critically on the obvious moments of friction that must necessarily occur between 'real' sex and sex as it is
22 performed for camera and audience. (Chow makes it clear that a reconfigured theory of pornographic
23 representation would acknowledge just these kinds of moments where the representation's artificiality is
24 productively revealed (Chow 2001, 54).
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27 Quinn's brief, enthusiastic response to her director's concern do not only signal her consent. She barely
28 misses a beat; she is fully, deeply present in the moment, orchestrated perhaps, but in a way which
29 transcends simple acceptance and compliance. She pushes back against Mason's concerns by throwing
30 herself even harder into her co-star, as if to communicate her full and enthusiastic participation. For Mason,
31 this seems to have become an epiphany of sorts, and she would return in her writing and in behind-the-
32 scenes features on her DVDs frequently to her own doubts and the criticisms of reviewers, audiences and
33 colleagues that her work was too hard, too rough, and too degrading.
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36 In one of her *AVN Insider* columns, Mason describes a conversation which was released as a featurette for
37 *Sexual Disorder* (Mason 2003a).

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39 Do porn consumers not realize that this industry is brimming with strong, aggressive
40 young women, who are instructed on the vast majority of sets to hold back from
41 expressing themselves, to not instigate rougher acts, to not display anything on video
42 that might be construed as degrading to women? Recently, while shooting behind the
43 scenes' footage two actresses revealed to me that many directors actively inhibit their
44 performers from sexual expression. (Mason 2003d)
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46
47 Contra to the standard narrative, which has it that violent pornography is the infliction of dangerous desires
48 upon female performers by a male, patriarchal pornography industry, after *Dirty Trixxx 2* the rhetoric of
49 Mason's filmmaking is that it is constrained and curtailed female sexuality that is the problem in most
50 pornographic movies and their conventions, not its excessive, messy iterations (Lorelei Lee makes a similar
51 argument about her own experiences (Lee 2012)). This aligns also closely with Chow's hope for a different
52 kind of theorisation of pornographic representation: one which acknowledges that 'generically codified
53 representational systems' are at play, and that reconfiguring representational strategies reveals that the
54 conventional ways of doing things are just that: conventions, not truths (Chow 2001, 54)). Coming from a
55 male director, that might seem trite or defensive, but coming from a female director and informed by
56 interviews with performers themselves, such criticisms become harder to dismiss.
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'You can see yourself in it if you really want to'

Mason's work, I want to conclude, strives to make visible the kind of 'democratic morality' Gayle Rubin implores for sexual relationships and their social framing, one which 'should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide' (Rubin 1984, 283). In making her gender visible not by performing *for* the camera but through strategies which reveal and affirm a female gaze, and by focussing on mutual pleasures and considerations outside of a heterogeneous, normative account of how sexual desire might function, Mason creates pornography within the mainstream industry which resists and even inverts some of its most worrying excesses. In the process, this breaking of conventions reveals the standard way of doing things as, precisely, signifiers of a deliberate artificiality' (Chow 2001, 54).

Mason's representational politics are not necessarily widespread in the porn industry and many of her fellow directors clearly do not share her concerns and aspirations, as she herself acknowledges (Mason 2004c). The industry itself has been resistant to the kind of innovations Mason advocates, not least because, at least in part, the industry's wider rhetorical defence against accusations of gendered violence has often been to bow to their opponents' conception of acceptable and bounded (female) sexuality, and to soften their product accordingly. Rather than seeking ethically coherent visual modes which acknowledge a breadth of sexual expression, in the face of criticism the impulse of major studios seems occasionally to push in the other direction, tacitly endorsing the idea, for example (as exit interviews often do), that porn performers are necessarily coerced victims. 'Even now, after all the changes I've witnessed in the industry, and the ever-growing self-confidence of females who work in it', Mason says, 'there remains a pervasive notion of women as frail, weak, mindless individuals who need to be protected from themselves. While being a woman has never hindered my career opportunities or advancement in the industry, standing up for an image of womanhood that contradicts societal prescriptions of femininity is still something that even in the world of pornography is a constant struggle'. (Milne 2005)

Mason's films are, fundamentally, images of womanhood: her own, and that of her performers, and, as these images feed off of each other in endless circuits, of female viewers of sexual scenes. The opening scene of the film that scored Mason her Director of the Year statuette at the 2015 AVNs, *Allie* (Mason 2014b), begins, as ever, with a conversation. Allie Haze, the film's star, is preparing for her first on-camera anal sex. As she laughs and jokes with the director, Mason asks her to bend over to reveal a butt-plug. The plug, which Mason had apparently selected specifically, features a mirrored end surrounded by diamonds (Kingstown 2014). As Haze bends over, Mason lowers the hand-held camera to hold the plug centrally in the frame. As she does so, there is a brief reflection of the camera in the plug itself, its mirrored surface offering the briefest kaleidoscopic glimpse of the woman holding the camera. Another circuit of gazes and desires. 'It's pretty!', squeals Mason with delight. Allie responds, laughing: 'You can see yourself in it if you really want to'.

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54 ¹ Mason chose the name for its ambiguity (Milne 2005, 129), and with some clear success: when I
55 commented on Mason's absence from the online 'Periodic Table of Feminist Porn', which seeks to catalogue
56 key catalysts in feminist pornographic filmmaking, its compiler Ms Naughty replied to me that 'I don't know
57 him, have never seen his work because I don't tend to watch mainstream porn if I can help it.' (Naughty
58 2015a; 2015b).

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² Mulvey is often still used to either provide a shorthand account of the filmic conventions of porn in general, or (where counter-examples are offered) as a synecdoche of anti-pornography writing from a film theory perspective (See, for example, Henning 2004, 172; Bauer 2015, 158; Schaschek 2014, 134; Ellis 2006, 37; Bronstein 2011, 143, Paasonen 2011, 174; Kaite 1995, 67; Zagala 2002, 30; Dymock 2016. It also remains a tool of critique in anti-pornography writing, as in Adams 1996, 154).

³ This also seems a moment which she mis-remembers: in her essay, Mason imagines this moment as having occurred much later in the scene than it actually does, after a series of commands from Ferrara for Quinn to crawl and bark like a dog. In the scene as it plays out in the final cut, at least, the concern prefigures this more extreme act.

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