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# Grey, gonzo and the grotesque: the legacy of porn star Sasha Grey

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## Introduction

In contrast to the customary alignment of female porn stars with anonymous disposability and exchangeability, Sasha Grey has had an enduring impact on the porn industry. From her noisy arrival online in 2006, she rapidly became one of the most well-known and wellpaid porn stars of her generation (Brents and Sanders 2010), starring in over 200 films in three years and winning 13 adult film awards. Her fame also expanded into more legitimate aspects of the media: Grey became a familiar persona as she appeared in advert campaigns for PeTA and the Fawcett Society, in music videos for Eminem and The Smashing Pumpkins, and in major feature films and TV series like *Entourage* (Nutter 2010), *Open Windows* (Vigalondo 2014), *Would You Rather?* (Levy 2012) and Steven Soderbergh's *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009). Although it has been over five years since she left the porn industry, Grey's cultural impact remains significant. She is strongly associated with the interpolation of machines in twenty-first-century pornography (Schaschek 2014), with the evolution of porno chic (McNair 2013), and with the lucrative mainstreaming of BDSM, in part through the reputedly eponymous *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise (James 2012). Grey's uniqueness is unanimously asserted, described variously as the 'dirtiest' (Grigoriadis 2009), 'most sexually liberated' (Duca 2014), 'game chang[ing] sexual provocateur' ('Going Deep' 2014) the Western world has seen. Grey similarly described herself as 'a new breed' of porn star (Maher 2010), stating in one interview 'I've challenged the idea, I think, of what a young woman or what a porn star should be' (Tobias 2009). In 2016, five years after announcing her retirement from the porn industry, Grey described her 'legacy' as 'inspir[ing] [young people] to take chances and understand their own worth' (Tavana 2016). This article constitutes the first analysis of Sasha Grey's pornographic career and considers what precisely her legacy is, analyzing in particular the star's deployment of the increasingly dominant pornographic style of gonzo to unexpected, and troubled feminist ends.

## Grey's alternative gonzo

In both her performative choices and parafilmic explanations of her work, Grey demonstrates her vigorous adherence to the major stylistic features of gonzo, which Giovanna Maina summarizes as constituting a '(pseudo) documentary' cinematographic style, 'hyperbolic sexual numbers [and] extreme practices', and designed for 'a male target audience' (2014, 108–110). Grey quickly gained a reputation for sexual extremity, vomiting into her own eyes in films like *Face Fucking Incorporated* (Silvera 2006), being drowned and electrocuted in Kink.com productions like *Waterbondage* (Adams 2012) and *Wired Pussy* (Kink 2013), and posting grainy online 'how to' tutorials on anal enemas and fitting her feet into her mouth. In her infamous appearance on the Tyra Banks show in 2007, the performer coolly lists her only sexual restrictions as 'I won't do [...] children, and I won't do animals' ('Sasha Grey on the Tyra Banks Show' 2009), establishing herself in the mainstream media too as an emblem of pornography's most shocking possibilities. Grey also explicitly aligned herself with gonzo's interest in intense corporeality, describing her desire to 'viscerally connect with my audience' ('Sasha Grey on Modus Operandi' 2011) through depicting the 'raw [...] immediate' and 'animalistic' (T.A.N. 2009; Stern 2011). 'For me', she states, 'there is nothing else but to be intense. Intensity is my alarm call to the nightmare and slow monotony others call "real" life' (Stern 2011). Such intensity is constructed with relative stability in gonzo films as catering to a peculiarly masculine desire that operates often at the female performer's expense. Certain acts, such as blow jobs, anal, orgies and multiple penetration, are represented with ever more immutable heterosexual power disparities: blow jobs eroticize female suffocation with increasing ubiquity; anal scenes regularly include sexual numbers with the man's foot on the woman's head; and scenes with multiple men commonly involve insults and slaps directed towards the female performer. Grey foregrounds her preference for this constructed maleness of desire, what she calls 'an abrasive way of having sex [that] pulverizes the idea of making love'. 'I don't want to make love', she states: 'I want to fuck. I fiend for intense sex [...] [for] sicker ways to get off psychologically and physically' (Stosuy 2006). This enthusiastic preference for roughness, together with her intertwined interests in sexual hyperbole and bodily rawness, saw Grey constitute the consummate gonzo girl.

Yet both the fact and content of Grey's elucidations of her performative objectives aligned her simultaneously with attitudes and motivations more associated with alternative pornographies. With strident eloquence, Grey

frequently explains her perception of porn-making in terms of creativity and considered performativity:

I'm a[n] artist and an explorer [...] I approach adult film as performance art [...] I have a concept, a purpose [...] I want to examine myself and explore the human condition [...] projecting those things to my audience using my body as the tool, as the canvas. (Dirty Hank 2011; 'Sasha Grey on Modus Operandi' 2011)

As the reference to the human condition suggests, Grey is particularly interested in the exploration of physical and psychological limits, which she pursues through a range of subcultural creative modes. Grey founded aTelecine, an 'experimental psychedelic death dub' (Firecloud 2009) band, with song titles like 'March of Death – Thanks Mom', 'Night of the Id' and 'Sky Then Trees Then Birds Then Nothing'. On social media platforms she showcases her interest in societal disintegration and chaotic anti-meaning, tweeting her enthusiasm, for example, for the 1970s Dadaist performance art collective COUM Transmissions and, elsewhere, brandishing Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre with a knowing smile. Her 2011 photographic collection *Neu Sex*, featuring interspersed writing on visual culture and sex work, was designed, Grey explains, as an accompaniment to the commercial porn performances over which she had less aesthetic control. Alongside fashionista shots of Grey looking beautiful in extravagant settings and bisected ball gowns, the book is largely concerned with rejecting the artificial glamour of (pornographic) media culture, showing instead the grotty, broken down reality of (sexual) bodies. In one picture, Grey stands naked on a stained mattress by the side of the road; in another she wipes her bottom in a dirty bathroom, a bloody sanitary towel dangling from her pants. Across these mediums, Grey demonstrates her interest in existential thresholds, her 2013 erotic trilogy *The Juliette Society* similarly filled with references to sadomasochistic French cinema and literature and Freudian psychoanalysis (Grey 2013). This sympathy for what Leo Bersani calls, after Freud, the 'ecstatic suffering', 'the jouissance of exploded limits' produced 'when a human is "pressed" beyond a certain threshold' (Bersani 1987, 217), provides a prominent context to Grey's porn performances. It demonstrates why the raw intensity of gonzo constitutes a particularly apt filmic style for Grey. However, it also simultaneously locates Grey within a more alternative pornographic tradition, where porn-making is conceived as a potentially intelligent and creative process and where pornography constitutes just one creative avenue

within a ‘broader interest in cultural and lifestyle issues’ (Attwood 2010, 2). It is this blending of dominant elements from both alt porn and gonzo which has been fundamental to Grey’s significance. The New York Times describes the performer, for example, as ‘distinguished both by the extremity of what she is willing to do and an unusual degree of intellectual seriousness about doing it’ (Heyman 2011); Rolling Stone states similarly that Grey ‘rose to prominence because of both the intensity of her scenes and the intelligence with which she supported her right to film them’ (Morris 2014). The most recent article written about the performer in 2016 describes her as ‘Hollywood’s first porn star in the Internet era [...] [to] envision porn [and] self-degradation as [fine] postmodern art’ (Tavana 2016). Where the androcentricism associated with gonzo and the ethical and often feminist rationale of much alternative pornography mean these styles are frequently understood as fundamentally opposed, Grey demonstrated important ways in which they could overlap. Indeed, in their exploration of the possibilities of ‘trans-generic hybridisation’ (Zecca 2018, 144) in gonzo, Federico Zecca and Giovanna Maina ask whether there could be ‘an “alternative” gonzo’ (Maina and Zecca 2016, 347). Grey posits one way in which such an alternative gonzo could operate, her defining of her performances as deliberate and aesthetically minded explorations of (sexual) bodily limits rendering many of the dominant features of gonzo into expressions of her particular artistic vision.

Jack the Zipper’s (2006) film *Razordolls* is a good example of this. The film takes place in the dark, narrow corridors of a shabby warehouse, often filmed from above from a CCTV perspective that endows the film with a bleak, grainy criminality. It cuts between scenes of violent double deepthroat, a one-on-one vaginal and anal scene, and double penetration numbers, with Grey at one point passing out as the now infamous James Deen chokes her. In its mood of melancholy aggression and threatening extremity, the film typifies the gonzo style. Yet these features simultaneously cater precisely to Grey’s interest in the performative exploration of sexual violence, and her ‘idea of a good adult film’, as she puts it, ‘as something more akin to a Catherine Breillat film’ (Stern 2011). The film opens with Grey standing between James Deen and Alec Knight who slap her face and tear at her clothes. Grey’s dark chuckles and occasional sly grins to the camera above her head establish her as a central hermeneutic figure in the film, her specific countercultural tastes aligned with the film’s atmosphere and aesthetics from the beginning. The film’s dilapidation and detached hostility supply precisely the rejection of sexual glamour with which Grey is concerned, what she calls in *Neu Sex* ‘an absence



of aesthetics' (Grey 2011, 7). Yet the film is also highly aesthetically self-conscious: entire scenes are shot in slow motion; a disorientating colour inversion takes place at one point so that Grey is rendered in purple and green with glowing white eyes that stare disturbingly; a double blow job scene is overlaid with grinding industrial grunge music reminiscent of Grey's own band. Such cinematographic experimentation emphasizes the intentionality of other scenes in the film that display the aesthetic sparseness common to gonzo. The one-on-one scene is eerily silent, monochromatic and unpolished, for example, Grey fucked by Deen with a sombre brutality, his hand hooked inside Grey's mouth as she stares unspeakingly at the wall. Although this scene exhibits the 'low production values' (Maina 2014, 108) common to gonzo, the aesthetic thoughtfulness of the film overall makes such starkness purposeful and therefore expressive of Grey's interest in the 'exploded limits' of desire and the stripped bare human. Although *Razordolls* is notable for its absence of speech, Grey frequently articulates this subcultural exploration of pleasurable annihilation more explicitly, stating in another film with Deen as she is violently fucked in the ass:

I want you to make me feel worthless, I want to feel like a piece of shit. Straight to the shit hole is all I deserve [...] It's never enough is it, you want to use me up [...] use up my holes. (Blue 2013)

In the context of Grey's foregrounded subcultural sensibilities, such language of sublime destruction functions less as a tedious expression of gonzo machismo, and rather as a thoroughly purposeful exploration of malice and exhaustion. Grey's trademark appearance – a pale, skinny body that can be tossed around by her co-stars like a rag-doll, waist-long black hair often matted in greasy strands about her face and smeared black eye make-up – similarly communicates the pared-down, negated subject. In the final scene of *Razordolls*, Grey is laying on something which cannot be seen in the shadows, so that she appears to float, her thin limbs tapering away into the darkness as Deen angrily fucks her ass and Knight hits his penis against her face. Her ultra-white body is a pulsing, elemental blur and her open mouth a smear of vivid red, in an existential nightmare that evokes perfectly Grey's performative objective to explore sexual dehumanization and to make, as she puts it, 'David-Lynch inspired porn' ('Sasha Grey on Modus Operandi' 2011).

Thus, Grey's foregrounding of her performative objectives and countercultural creativity align her with alternative sensibilities which complicate the gonzo style she typifies. The parameters within which her often

hard and unrelenting performances are understood are necessarily altered: gonzo's cinematographic starkness becomes an expression of Grey's subcultural interests in grungy self-effacement, and its emotional harshness becomes a fitting performative context within which to explore bodily transcendence and the eroticism of defilement. Grey therefore demonstrates the ability of female performers to utilize the malleability of gonzo to express attitudes and aesthetics ostensibly at odds with the androcentricism, and frequently the misogyny, traditionally associated with the style.

### Gonzo subversions

Grey's particular iterations of gonzo have seen her strongly associated with the feminist possibilities of porn performance. Rolling Stone states of the star that 'what's most important about [Grey] is her impact on feminism' (Grigoriadis 2009); popular film theorist Scott Tobias (2009) brands her a 'post-feminist warrior'; and Grey herself states that 'I'd like to think of myself as somebody who has a voice for liberating female sexuality' (Hogarth 2017). These feminist associations derive partly from Grey's obvious exemplification of third-wave and postfeminism's valorization of proud and assertive modes of sexual visibility. Being, in Naomi Wolf's words, 'unapologetically sexual [and] pleasure-loving' (1994, 149) is increasingly correlated with female autonomy and power, providing what Rosalind Gill and Laura Harvey describe as 'feminism's aspirations for female sexual selfdetermination' (2011, 54). Feona Attwood describes too the centrality of visibility to this equivalence of eroticism and authority, stating that 'notions of a strong confident self' have fused 'with body display [and] self-pleasure', so that 'being looked at no longer necessarily signif[i]es powerlessness' (2011, 204). Grey's emphatic sexual visibility locates her firmly within this feminist tradition. More, though, it is Grey's unique deployment of dominant stylistic features of gonzo which renders her an enduringly potent figure of female sexual empowerment in porn.

Gonzo intensifies the pornographic imperative to proffer the incontrovertible veracities of sex, what Linda Williams calls the 'hidden [...] truths' (1989, 45) of the body around which the porn film genre has historically revolved. In its focus on extreme proofs of physicality and its cinematographic style of raw and unpolished sexual interaction, gonzo amplifies pornography's generic need for realness. Its corporeal extremes make use of the way in which, as Helen Hester states, the 'body in a state of intensity' is 'a key generator and guarantor of authenticity' (2014, 131). The violence common to the style

provides a further haptic guarantor of bodily truth, proffering, in Timothy Bewes' words, 'flashes' of 'vitalism and certitude' (1997, 107). Grey aligns herself thoroughly with gonzo's status as the ultimate 'porno vérité' (Maina and Zecca 2016, 338), frequently asserting the verisimilitude of her performances: 'When I'm on an adult set and I'm in a scene, I am myself. I'm not acting' (Hogarth 2017). Her fascination for gross corporeality aligns her with the amplified veracity of gonzo too, although, crucially, Grey embeds this extreme physicality in her authentic sexual identity, tracing her performances back to her early sexual development: 'I had different ideas of what sex was [...] I felt sick to my stomach [about my fantasies] [and thought] I'm not supposed to think this way' (Dirty Hank 2011).

This 'personaliz[ation]' (Attwood 2012, 53) commonly functions in alt porn as part of a politicized promise that the representations of sex on show accurately depict authentic and often un- or misrepresented types of sexuality. By locating the extreme and disgusting within her authentic sexual self, Grey marries this ethical mode of pornographic truth-telling with the veracity of gonzo's grotesqueries. The '[in]tolerable' (Kristeva 1982, 1) bodily fluids and non-normative sexual acts common to gonzo are therefore conceptualized by Grey as necessary expressions of female sexuality that is 'unfeminine' and unglamorous. Like Belladonna before her, Grey enacts what Maina calls a 'revolutionary reappropriation of the forms of grotesque degradation' (2014, 125; original emphasis). Behaviours and bodily expulsions considered revolting are erected by Grey as part of a necessary feminist enterprise to show the ugly multiplicity of a truly 'authentic' female sexuality. More so than Belladonna, however, whose work with the abusive Nacho Vidal and traumatic beginning in porn performance troubles the emancipatory associations of her own explorations of the grotesque, Grey explicitly links her relish of insupportable orifices, fluids and acts to the need to address the representational inadequacies she perceives in pornography and Western culture more broadly:

Women aren't allowed to be proud of their sexuality or their sexual fantasies. We're allowed to prance around in tops that [...] show our nipples and miniskirts that show our butt cheeks, but God forbid we talk about anal sex [...] We live in such a hyper-sexualized world. But it's very superficial [...] Women aren't just sexual on the surface. We're not just there to be a figurine. We should take control; I got into [the industry] to encourage [...] women sexually to not be inhibited [or ashamed] by who they are [...] as sexual beings'; 'I want to show women it is okay to



have sick fantasies and to have non-pedestrian sex. It's okay to fuck like a man. You don't have to be a lady in bed'. (Tobias 2009; Dirty Hank 2011; Foster 2016)

Grey's revelling in gross corporeality is therefore defined as a direct response to a hypersexualization of female sexuality that simultaneously limits and denies, rendering the spit, 'squirt', come, vomit and 'ass milk' (Fuck Slaves, Malone 2006) so fetishized in gonzo into expressions of an authentic female sexuality that require acknowledgement and representation.

Grey's central role in the Elegant Angel film Squirt Gangbang (Nutsack 2007) is a powerful example of this. The film opens with three women rubbing their hands over Grey's face. She looks excited and lets herself be positioned in front of each female performer as they masturbate and ejaculate in her face. Steadily, more women arrive until Grey is surrounded by seven women who lounge and squat on sofas in a circle around her, masturbating with dildos and sporadically squirting into Grey's face, often with such force that her false eyelashes are blasted across her cheeks. Grey savours their come, lapping it from the leather sofas, gargling with it and diving happily into vaginas after they have come, mumbling fervently that she wants more, that she is thirsty, that she wants to be drowned. Grey orchestrates the film's depiction of ejaculate as an 'enjoying substanc[e] [...] of the body' (Edelman 2009, 37). Her delight dismantling the notion that the fluids are offensive or that being inundated with them is an inherently humiliating or nasty act. The women excitedly proclaim to each other '[Grey] likes it!', and the come becomes the basis of a voluptuous erasure of bodily divisions. The women lick themselves as Grey licks them; fluids bestowed on another become one's own again, a game developing at one point where Grey trickles each woman's ejaculate back into their own mouth before they spit it back to her, and receive it again, everyone laughing and cheering 'Give it back! Give it back to me!' Grey seems in a reverie throughout the film, crawling dreamily between the ejaculating women and closing her eyes in luxurious enjoyment when she is at various points held and kissed, the women quietly tracing their fingers across her lips or rubbing the come all over her body. While Grey troubles the notion of these bodily fluids as grotesque at all, she simultaneously emphasizes and seeks out the perverted elements of the act. Calling it 'that dirty fluid', Grey heightens the grossness of these bodily functions and exchanges, squirting the ejaculate out of her nose and licking it back up or laughing with abandon as she wrings her soaking wet hair into another woman's mouth. Grey powerfully displays

the right for women to explore and potentially delight in the titillating charge of the abject. Her celebration of the disgusting rejects the notion that certain acts, such as coming on another person's face, express an inherently male desire and therefore inevitably produce a female victim. Grey's dark laughter as she is drenched in female ejaculate gestures towards the 'uninhibited' desires at work beneath the sanctioned 'surface' of pornified femininity which Grey seeks to display (Tobias 2009). Annie Cruz, another infamously assertive performer who also stars in the film, explicitly draws attention to this contrast between a constructed, sweet femininity and the authentic licentiousness beneath, inciting the women to 'Look at that fucking pretty little face', before coming all over it as Grey grins wickedly. The shouts and whoops of the women as they grow increasingly intoxicated with the licensed freedom of such untethered sexual behaviour demonstrates the liberating effect of such corporeal sprees, a potentially feminist rejection of moral-cultural constraints on acceptable modes of female sexual expression.

Grey uses such transgressions of normative bodily behaviours and borders to exceed too the limits of legitimate sexuality, establishing that grotesqueries need not take place within the heteronormative and androcentric parameters so common to the gonzo style. Maina and Zecca (2016, 341) highlight the way in which gonzo's focus on acts which diverge from strictly heterosexually reproductive types of sexual interaction, such as anal and blow jobs, endows the style with a perversity and kinkiness. Yet where gonzo traditionally undertakes these explorations of 'non-naturalised [...] non-reproductive sex' (Stüttgen 2009, 3) in predictably heteronormative ways, Squirt Gangbang is just one example of Grey's assertion that the enjoyment of the gross and bizarre is a normal and acceptable part of female sexuality that can operate outside – as far as is possible – a heteronormative framework. In the aforementioned Tyra Banks interview, Grey explains to the bewildered supermodel that her porn moniker is a reference to the Kinsey scale and to her perception that sexuality exists on a spectrum rather than within a hetero/homo binary. Grey has similarly explained her decision to work freelance, rather than accept a more lucrative studio contract, as an attempt to avoid performative restrictions, instead seeking out queer industry stalwarts such as Madison Young and Nina Hartley, and performing less traditionally heterosexual acts such as fisting and pegging (Justine Joli Lost, Annelle 2010; Strap Attack 6, Silvera 2011). This foregrounded context of sexual fluidity sees Grey utilize the corporeal extremes of gonzo to dissolve the heteronormative, as well as existential, boundaries of the body; the highly androcentric exploration of the grotesque in

films such as *Razordolls* is shown to be just one way in which bodily 'obscenities' can trouble the unproblematically feminine figure of traditional feature pornography.

Like *Squirt Gangbang*, Jay Sin's (2007) aesthetically self-conscious *Anal Acrobats 3* demonstrates Grey's use of the grotesque to assert the non-normativity of female sexuality in less androcentric contexts. Dressed in minimalist bunny costumes, Grey and Dana DeArmond hop around a bright, white space, empty but for a fluorescent green mat that gives the scene a fantastical and childish quality. The women hop and giggle, sniffing each other's bottoms and rubbing noses. Grey then sits over DeArmond's face and slowly pushes out a round, brown anal bead, with obvious parallels to a rabbit dropping, into DeArmond's waiting mouth. DeArmond then capers away and squeezes out her own brown sphere onto the white floor, Grey hopping over to sniff and taste it. Like the luxurious moments of *Squirt Gangbang*, the film has a slow, dreamlike quality that posits modes of sexual interaction that operate outside a recognizable, heteronormative world. Grey's relish of bodily permeability as she sniffs DeArmond's anus with glee and licks the edges of her opened ass troubles essentialist ideas of safely enclosed bodies and subverts the notion of the female body as monolithically heterosexual or vaginal; it subverts too the aggression and maleness within which gonzo customarily allows such anal explorations to take place. Their rabbit personas gesture towards the playful potential of the grotesque so often missing in the hostile masculinity of gonzo's corporeal forays, as they parody the rigid erotic possibilities of the heterosexual couple in a jokey blend of 'bunny fucking' femininity and scatological, queer anal play.

The non-normative, 'extreme' explorations of the body with which gonzo is particularly interested amplifies not only pornography's imperative to uncover 'hidden [bodily] truths' (Williams 1989, 45), but the status of these expressions as 'involuntary confessions' (1989, 50). Linda Williams' term gestures not only towards the veracious value of expressions deemed beyond the performer's control, but to the constructed shame of these revelations. The profoundly contained body parts and fluids which gonzo films seek to drag out and display, such as stomach contents or the walls of colons, endow these films with a particularly abject and humiliating force: these revelations, and the intense physical sensations which accompany them, are physically and morally unclean. The customary machismo of gonzo amplifies too the gendered nature of these guilty admissions. Historically embedded socio-religious notions of female sexuality as inherently dirty and/or dangerously unknowable, foster an

imperative to drag out instructive signs of its workings, in order to purify or, in the case of pornographic film in particular, to transform the pure into the thrillingly abject. Pornographic film synthesizes the gendered history of cinematic indexicality and visuo-medical bodily excavation (Jordanova 1989; Cartwright 1995) so that the responsibility of disclosing bodily truths to the camera converge on the female porn performer in particular. Female displays of sexual feeling in pornographic film, whether through the expulsion of fluids, shows of orgasm or verbal expressions of intense sensation, are simultaneously fetishized and judged. The out-of-control ‘confessions’ which pornography seeks customarily take place, therefore, within a heteronormative power dynamic, the female body confessing to the palimpsestuous male figure of performer, director and presumed male viewer. In its aggressively probing attitude towards the female performers and its extraction of such extreme and often painful corporeal proofs, gonzo amplifies the involuntary component of women’s sexual expressions and heightens the power disparity between male and female performers. Often eroticizing women’s descent into abjection and deepening the gendered shame of the pornographic confessional, gonzo typifies the power dynamic Foucault describes as necessarily at work in the ritual of confession, stating that it ‘unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of [an ...] authority who requires the confession [who] [...] interviews in order to judge, punish, forgive’ (Foucault 1998, 61).

Grey’s positive celebration of female corporeality reformulates this dynamic of male procurement and female shame. Her assertion of the normalcy and acceptability of women’s enjoyment of abjection refuses the taint of obscenity appended to the female performer. Grey consistently rejects terms and attitudes which construct female sexuality as somehow indecent and vulnerable to corruption. In *Acid Rain’s Couch Candy*, for example, a highly normative, heterosexual film consisting entirely of blow job and vaginal penetration sexual numbers, the male performer at one point remarks to Grey accusatorily ‘You like that dick, don’t you’ (Brat 2007). Grey immediately responds ‘Yea I do! You like fucking pussy, don’t you!’, steadfastly rejecting the notion that a woman’s enjoyment of penetration is in any sense embarrassing. Similarly, in *Swallow My Squirt 4*, Grey excavates as she conjures the misogynistic prostitute–client dynamic that pervades porn’s diegeses and power dynamics, mockingly describing herself not only as ‘a nasty little whore’ but sneeringly referring to the male performer as a ‘trick’ and ‘a nasty fucker’ (Nutsack 2006). Grey demands that any stigma attached to female sex workers is equally

applicable to her male co-stars, as well as showing, in her amused toying with the concept, that the whore persona is one which can be performatively taken up and cast off by women without leaving any moral stain. By refusing any shame associated with the grotesqueries of gonzo in particular, and female sexuality in general, Grey subverts the confessional component of pornographic film.

Grey problematizes too the involuntary basis of the pornographic confessional. Her active pursuit of the intense and ‘out-of-control’ (Williams 1989, 50) as a vital component of her exploration of bodily limits means that any display of intense sensations are not uncontrolled but thoroughly purposeful and designed. The Kink site [FuckingMachines.com](#), for example, encapsulates gonzo’s desire to uncover more extreme proofs of physical sensation, with its focus on the strength and relentlessness of its various dildonic machines, designed, as it states, to ‘push [women] over the edge’ (Fucking Machines 2009). Yet Grey’s numerous appearances on the site demonstrate her complete jurisdiction over these acute sensations, positioning the machinic components with careful forethought, and then calmly bracing herself against the mechanical force as the cranks and pulleys start to turn. The eventual animalistic screams she lets out signal not a hysterical female body that is out of control, but a highly disciplined body that exercises complete control over its enjoyment of physical abandon. This control of the out-of-control dissolves the aspect of the pornographic confessional that seeks to represent the female sexual body as expressing its unruly sensations involuntarily, subverting the power dynamic founded on the notion that the female body is mastered and made to speak by a male figure who extracts and visually consumes these admissions. Grey’s sexual displays are therefore not what Foucault describes as the confessional ritual’s ‘obligatory [...] expression[s] of [the] individual [sexual] secret’ (Foucault 1998, 61). They are not forcibly taken against her will but very purposefully created by her own volition, Grey therefore rendering the involuntary confession of alternative gonzo into a powerful voluntary exclamation. Grey therefore reformulates the amplified truth claims and bodily rawness of gonzo in a way that not only modifies this particular pornographic style, but undermines the gendered confessional foundation of the broader pornographic film genre.

Grey similarly redeploys the androcentric aggression common to gonzo, overturning the style’s depiction of ‘agency and power as exclusively male prerogatives’ (Maina 2014, 115). Grey’s ceaseless ragged screaming in scenes quickly became one of her most distinctive features, Grey stating to one



interviewer: ‘I don’t want to hear sexy moans, I want to hear degradation, grunting, hyperventilating’ (Stosuy 2006). Although such emphatic articulations cater well to gonzo’s desire for proof of women’s uncontrollable sensations, Grey’s shouting functions instead to cast off the imperative of unproblematic, feminine sexiness associated with breathy ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’, and proffers instead the brutal and uncanny cry of the human stripped bare. More, however, and in ways which differ, for example, from the emphasis on surrender tendered in Joanna Angel’s performative explorations of extreme sensations, Grey’s roaring is designed to fracture the male supremacy that pervades the gonzo style. Where Angel tends to emphasize mastery and gratitude, rolling her eyes to the back of her head, quivering and going limp with senselessness and communicating with her male co-star with phrases like ‘Thank you for your fucking cock’ and ‘It feels so goo!’ ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ (Stockings, Angel 2015; Double Anal FTW, Angel 2017), Grey utilizes the hostility of gonzo to mock and criticize the men who fuck and watch her. Grey maintains an aggressive stream of instructions and insults throughout her films, explicitly explaining in one interview: ‘I [...] write dialogue [...] to fuck with my partner in the scene’ (Firecloud 2009). Foregrounding the desires and failures of her male consumers, Grey draws attention to male performers’ bent or unsatisfying penises and casts aspersions on their sexual abilities: ‘Do you know how to use that thing?’ (There’s Something About Sasha Grey, Third Degree Films 2012). Grey’s insults and instructions prod at the anxiety which skulks around pornographic film and feeds its monomaniacal representations of incontrovertible male power and prowess: that the man is sexually inadequate and the woman’s enjoyment is a masquerade. Her furious orality functions as an exacting commentary, Grey endowing herself with a narratorial power that asserts that her representation in sexual terms does not negate her ability and right to define the meaning of both the scene and her own body. Following in the tradition of explicit body performers like Annie Sprinkle, who famously declares in her 1990s performance Public Cervix Announcement ‘You wanna see pussy, I’ll show you pussy!’ (Sprinkle 1991, 97; original emphasis), Grey demands that she is a prominent hermeneutic figure in her porn films. In Couch Candy, for example, Grey shouts at her male co-star:

Put your fucking crooked cock in my fucking pussy [...] Pound my fucking dirty cunt [...] This fucking dick is good but it could be fucking better [...] I didn’t say fuck me good, I said fuck me raw [...] I know you can do better [...] Come on you fucking bitch, are you scared? [...] Who

knew a little guy like you could fuck me fast [...] Did I tell you to fucking stop? [...] No! you fucking bitch don't stop! (Brat 2007)

Her demands refigure female orifices as active, demanding and completely under female control, casting off their chauvinistic connotations as passive holes to be taken and what Maina terms the gonzo distinction between 'an active/penetrating masculine principle and a passive/penetrated feminine' (2014, 115). Grey's explicit knowledge of and jurisdiction over her 'fucking dirty cunt' demonstrates the absurdity of pornography's common depiction of the male performer as best placed to understand and produce desired sensations in the woman's body. Penetration is concomitantly recast as a somewhat pathetic act, a desperate service provided, often in vain, for the woman's pleasure, as opposed to its common representation in gonzo as a bludgeoning ordeal perpetrated by men for an enjoyment that operates at the woman's expense.

Across her filmic work, Grey's constant questions to the viewer – 'Do you like that?', 'You like that don't you', 'You're so fucking dirty', and so on – similarly shift porn's resolute and judgemental focus from the female performer onto the male viewer. Such speech functions to make the viewer uncomfortably conspicuous and locates the responsibility for porn's perverse representations firmly with the consumer. Grey uses the direct address to the camera common in gonzo to similar effect. Grey steadfastly meets the gaze directed at her with parity and power, her defiant and mocking look critically foregrounding the viewer and showing that being looked at does not preclude looking out. Yet Grey does not look in order to allow unproblematic access to her experience; displaying what Rebecca Schneider calls 'sighted eyes [...] in the body of the seen' (Schneider 1997, 35), Grey's gaze is a disparaging one that implicitly critiques those who consume her. Maina and Zecca describe the reassuring 'coincidence' which the female performer's gaze at the camera is supposed to produce, 'between what appears on screen and what characters see [and] feel' (2016, 343). Grey, however, uses her gaze outwards to open up a critical and reflexive gap between the viewer's expectations and her performance. The direct address of gonzo customarily functions to communicate the vulnerability of the female performer as she looks entreatingly and wide-eyed at the camera; at particular 'extreme' moments during a film, her look is meant to show that she is feeling emotionally and physically overwhelmed. Grey's dispassionate stare down the camera lens, however, refuses an easy communication of her experience for the viewer,

asserting the incommunicability of her sexual self for the camera, as well as her stubborn refusal to create unproblematic alliances between what the viewer wants and what she decides to give them. Her ability to maintain a completely blank face while being penetrated and shouted at, at times archly raising an eyebrow or sniggering quietly to herself as if in on a private joke, asserts that any ‘truths’ of her body are hers to display or withhold, and that no male performer will extract any expression she does not decide to give.

Thus, Grey reframes the abjection, aggression and truth claims of gonzo to express a powerful and authentic female sexuality that subverts the machismo with which these traits have become so rigidly associated in the gonzo style. Grey’s deployment of dominant features of gonzo troubles the heteronormative power dynamic on which the pornographic feature film is founded, and which gonzo in particular has amplified, dissolving the patriarchal confessional component so profoundly etched in pornography’s filmic history.

### The problem of postfeminist individualism

The power and control with which Grey continues to be associated, and which has earned her her feminist associations, derives not only from her alt porn-inflected creativity and her subversive deployment of gonzo’s stylistic features, but from what Rosalind Gill calls ‘knowingness’ (2007, 20). In her introductory letter to major mainstream porn agent Mark Spiegler at the age of 18, Grey demonstrated an unflinching awareness of her commodity status in the now well-known statement: ‘I am determined and ready to be a commodity that fulfils everyone’s fantasies’ (Grigoriadis 2009). Grey’s tenacious acceptance of marketization – ‘everything in life is a transaction’, she states elsewhere, ‘You have to give something to get something’ (‘Sasha Grey talks about’ 2008) – and her ambition to ‘be my own product’ (‘Sasha Grey talks about’ 2008), typifies the ‘sexual entrepreneur’ (Gill and Harvey 2011, 52) of postfeminist culture. Grey’s enthusiasm for this role, and her ability to wield her commodity status with such ferocious aplomb, constitutes precisely what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra term the ‘state of vitality’ (2007, 9), necessary for sexual and economic success at the nexus of neoliberal and postfeminist culturo-economies.

Grey’s enthusiastic rage and purposefulness distinguishes her from the traditional, victimized figure of the sex worker who drifts into porn out of financial necessity. However, her emphasis on her free choice to enter the porn industry as the necessary context within which her performances are to be

understood demonstrates precisely Gill's critique of the postfeminist necessity that women 'make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom [and] autonomy [...] no matter how constrained their lives may actually be' (Gill 2014, 119). With varying degrees of explicitness, Grey acknowledges the economic deprivation within which her career, like the majority of porn performers, is embedded. Her talk of having to 'creat[e] opportunities for myself', after growing up in California's run-down North Highlands, and her celebration of being 'hungry' because it makes you 'get up and scream and say I can do this' (YouTube 2008) gesture towards the economic precarity of neoliberalism. At times, Grey recognizes too the specific brutalities involved in the porn industry, where zero-hours contracts, no union representation, significant health risks and systemic gender inequalities converge. The economic necessity to be 'resilient and flexible' (Harris 2004, 6) undoubtedly produces a sexual corollary, so that Grey's enthusiastic engagement with the abject and aggressive, her preparedness to be treated like 'a piece of meat', is a prerequisite for a pornographic career. Grey's descriptions of the need for pre-scene mantras and nightly mental and physical preparations intimate the specific emotional and physical difficulties involved in porn performance. Her advice to young women considering working in the industry is starker:

Understand that it's a business, and that if she isn't tough and if she doesn't have her shit together she shouldn't even think about doing porn. It will chew you up and spit you out if you don't know what the real deal is. Other people making money off your pussy and asshole. You're a piece of meat. If you can handle that and want to enter into this experiment called porno, then welcome to the thunderdome. (Dirty Hank 2011)

Despite Grey's tacit acknowledgement here that the exploitative focus of the porn industry is women – it is having a 'pussy' that makes you a 'piece of meat' – Grey typifies what Shelly Budgeon calls the 'regime of personal responsibility' (2011, 286) that is central to both neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. Grey locates responsibility not with the entrenched inequalities of the industry but with the individual women who must function effectively within it. She bemoans, for example, the 'backstabbing [...] of paltry, immature dumb bitches' (Dirty Hank 2011) and, as the previous sections have explored, fosters a performative style that showcases her individual ability to survive.

In *The Girls of Red Light District* (Red Light District 2010), for example, Grey's unflinching strength in the face of ruthless commodification is undoubtedly impressive. The film features Grey being 'gang banged' by 15 men, who violently and rapidly doubly and triply penetrate her in a 90-minute-long film, shouting at her to move more quickly, regularly slapping her across the face and yanking her around by her hair. Given Grey's performative objective to display the ferocity and insatiability of her desires, she must rival the physical capabilities of her male co-stars, although she is severely outnumbered. Grey therefore ensures that she ceaselessly shouts for penetration faster than the men can supply it, grabbing at feet to shove into her vagina in moments when the male performers need to rest, and attempting on a few occasions to hit men back after they have slapped her. Yet, despite Grey's lucky alignment between the commercial demand for androcentric savagery and her specific taste for the rough and revolting, Grey's attempts at performative innovation and her impassioned exploration of sexuality are clearly severely hampered by the misogynistic context of such productions. In this film and many others, Grey's male co-stars clamp their hands over her mouth to stop the stream of sound and verbiage, and although her refusal to be silenced demonstrates her fortitude, her muffled shouts, emerging from under hands and from between buttocks, simultaneously signal a profound suppression. Grey describes resignedly that her biggest discovery in making porn was that 'even though I may not want to perform a certain way [...] they don't want me to talk [...] be loud [...] I've learned to accept that and [...] perform the way they want me too' ('Sasha Grey' 2011). The laughter and sly grinning common in Grey's performances is notably absent in *The Girls of Red Light District* and although her passionate and often playful anger work to belie the entrenched misogynies of the industry, here it seems a direct sign of her rage at the disrespect and instinctual belittlement with which she is treated. Attempting to wield the behaviours and attitudes afforded her by pornography's most patriarchal excesses as tools of feminist resistance, while remarkable, is extremely vulnerable to co-optation, Grey's championing of sexual extremity and rage used to excuse real, not playful, violence and humiliation. In a short interview after the film, as Grey exhaustedly dabs at her body with tissues, she comments on how sore and swollen her vagina is and euphemistically refers to the production as 'challenging'. Although she clearly prides herself on the professionalism and resilience required to perform effectively in such a context, embedding notions of female strength in the stoical acceptance of these conditions precludes a critique of why such



punishing modes of interaction have become such an established signifier of female sexual empowerment. The conception of Grey as ‘liberating female sexuality’ (Hogarth 2017) derives not, then, from a recognition of the profoundly gendered inequalities at work in pornography’s iconographic systems, but from the ‘power feminism’ (Wolf 1994, 180) discourse of the late twentieth century: Grey’s individual economic success and her ability to carve out moments of creative fulfilment within an industry which, by her own admission, ‘still vilifies [...] sex positivity’ (Hogarth 2017) is celebrated as a feminist triumph.

This focus on individuality not only prohibits an acknowledgement of mistreatment and inequalities in pornography that operate on thoroughly gendered grounds; it also produces a deeply problematic universalization of Grey’s highly specific sexual proclivities. References to the “‘Sasha Grey-ization” of modern sexuality’ (Tavana 2016) and the commonly held view that Grey ‘helped usher in the wave of BDSM-positive books and films, like the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise’ (Tavana 2016) demonstrate Grey’s instrumental role in the evolution of a dangerous synonymy between abject and aggressive sex and female sexual empowerment. Increasingly, the right to enjoy energetic abjection and aggression which Grey champions has become their necessity to do so: the postfeminist equation ‘Good Feminism = Great Sex’ (Siegel 2007, 10) shifts even more problematically to Great Sex = Violent Sex. Grey describes the mainstreaming of more extreme sexual behaviour, for example, as ‘a great moment [...] It’s a great thing to allow women to feel liberated with their fantasies and not feel inhibited by them’ (Stern 2011). Liberation is uncritically aligned with extremity. A woman’s ability to enthusiastically ‘take’ whatever misogynistic treatment is meted out has become the ultimate demonstration of female sexual power. Violent penetration, fish hooking, shit-talking, being spat at, and so on, become, paradoxically, the principal avenues through which women demonstrate their sexual control and power. Well-known performers who have come after Grey, such as Riley Reid and Belle Knox, describe Grey as a major figure in their own performative development (Kapelovitz 2014; Valentine 2018) and similarly declare their enthusiasm for ‘rough, kinky dirty sex [and] [...] being pushed to my limits’ (Jack 2014). This uncritical synonymy between female empowerment and sexual violence feeds, too, the increasingly entrenched notion that the porn set, in its recognition that women’s sexuality need not be preciously preserved from the world of commerce, is the ideal emancipatory platform for women to freely explore those unfeminine and subversive aspects

of their sexuality that society effaces. Expressing a common paradox, and in stark contrast to her above description of the industry's harshness, Grey refers elsewhere to porn sets as 'safe and controlled environment[s]' (Tobias 2009) where 'I love being scared, feeling unsafe, but subconsciously I know I am in control' (Stern 2011). Grey's individual enjoyment of fear and her experience of the absence of control as precisely her way of feeling in control create a catch-22 that postfeminist pornographic discourse has been quick to utilize. Women demonstrate their empowerment through their willingness to undertake aggressive sexual acts and therefore the more violent a representation is, the more a context of female autonomy and consent is assumed. James Deen's language of BDSM contracts and consent alongside multiple female performers' accusations of sexual assault is only the most recent example of how a genuine focus on the context in which performative aggression takes place has become more absent as the normalization of sexual violence has rendered it ever more essential; Grey's eloquent articulation of her preference for such sexual extremes becomes part of the confused rhetoric that uncritically posits aggression in porn production as necessarily empowering and safe.

## Conclusion

Sasha Grey remains a dominant figure in the cultural landscape of twenty-first-century pornography, and her performative style continues to be strikingly original. Grey undoubtedly achieved her objective too, to innovate pornographic representation and to change cultural expectations of what female sexuality could look like. By prominently contextualizing her gonzo performances with the artistic motivations, autonomy and ethical authenticity more traditionally associated with alternative pornographies, Grey demonstrated how defining elements of the consistently androcentric style could be made to express important aspects of female sexuality. In place of the monolithically pretty, pliant and passive female figure of feature pornography, Grey used the corporeal grotesqueries and hostility of gonzo to display an authentic female sexuality that was disgusting, 'unfeminine' and angry. Crucially, she employed the aggression and bodily veraciousness of gonzo to upset the inveterate heteronormative power hierarchy amplified by gonzo and embedded in pornographic film more generally. By triumphantly displaying her sexual expressions with such adversarial control, Grey rejected the notion of female sexual revelation as something shameful which requires a guilty

revelation, dismantling the confessional component of pornographic film which so dominates the patriarchal basis of the genre's development. However, Grey's performative style also operated within a cultural and economic context that renders her 'legacy' not an entirely positive one. The celebration of Grey's individual sexual and economic successes is used to obscure the gendered inequalities of porn production; the universalization of Grey's particular sexual tastes has rendered her an influential part of the increasingly dominant perception that violent and misogynistic sex is the apex of female sexual power. Although Grey provides vital displays of a critical, powerful and complex female sexuality, she demonstrates simultaneously how such an impassioned 'hunger to explore [her] own sexuality' (Stosuy 2006) can be exploited by the structural misogyny that continues to reign in twentyfirst-century pornography.

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