

Performing the unaffected audience: ‘mature and responsible’ men accounting for their pornographic fantasies

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Abstract:

Public discourses over the behavioural effects of pornography traditionally contrast ‘affected’ audiences with ‘unaffected’ experts. In France, these discourses now target so-called ‘uncivilized’ (the figure of the ghetto youth) and ‘excessive’ male audiences (the figure of the porn addict). They also promote the ability to draw a clear line between ‘fantasy’ and ‘reality’. By describing how self-declared ‘mature and responsible’ porn viewers euphemize their problematic fantasies (e.g. rape scenarios), this article examines some of the ways in which such third-person effect discourses operate at the level of the audience’s self-reflexivity. It shows how this norm of the mature and responsible viewer, together with the framing of racism and sexism as individual deviances, generates reluctance on the part of viewers to engage critically with their sexual fantasies. Such self-censorship is finally analyzed both in terms of inability and unwillingness to elaborate a language in order to make sense of how gender and race shape sexual fantasies.

Keywords: self-censorship, pornography, sexuality, gender, race, heterosexuality, whiteness, hegemonic masculinity, third-person effect, sexual media education

The creation in the 19th century of ‘obscenity’ and ‘pornography’ as categories of censorship was a decisive move in the implementation of the bourgeois public sphere (Hunt 2004) and the reinforcement of social control over young, female, working-class and colonized sexualities (Sigel 2005). European bourgeois ‘men of science’ claimed the responsibility to ‘neither blush nor smile’ in the face of obscene images and to prevent ‘dangerous’ and ‘vulnerable’ audiences from accessing them (Kendrick 1987). Conservative media regulation authorities, positivistic academic research, moralist sexual media education as well as

scaremongering journalistic portrayals of pornography's negative effects can be considered together as the contemporary reconfiguration of this social control apparatus. Today, as in the 19th century, a key feature of the discourses over pornography's behavioural effects is the opposition between 'us' and 'them' (Attwood 2007) by which mature and unaffected experts take charge of immature and affected audiences. In France, as in other national contexts¹, media regulation authorities justify censorship of pornography in part on the basis of its supposedly 'proved' sexist behavioural effects on young viewers (e.g. Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, 2004). The general focus on the youth is often replaced in the media by a more narrow focus on the role of porn consumption among the non-white working-class suburban youth (generically referred to as '*jeunes de banlieues*') as a cause for gang rape (generically referred to as '*les tournantes*') (e.g. Drouet 2011) or even riots (e.g. Finkielkraut 2006). This particular framing of the porn effects problem in the French public sphere is made possible by the whitewashing of sexism and male violence in mainstream political and journalistic discourse, especially through the representation of young Arab and Black men as misogynistic delinquents and/or Muslim fundamentalists (Guénif-Souilamas 2006). In parallel, the figure of the porn addict is the main angle through which adult male porn viewers are addressed. Adapting North American narratives (Levine and Troiden 1988), French medical studies and television reports articulate a scenario in which 'excessive' and 'uncontrolled' porn consumption can turn innocent – white, heterosexual and middle-aged – 'guys next door' into antisocial 'perverts' (Vörös 2009).

Watching pornography is a widespread cultural practice in France. In 2006, one woman out of five and one man out of two claimed they watched porn 'often or time to time' and such claims are evenly distributed among men of different social classes (Bozon, 2012). This article shifts the focus from marginalized groups to a socially advantaged, self-proclaimed 'mature' and 'responsible' male audience. By focusing on everyday self-censorship practices, it examines how the above-mentioned third-person effect discourses (Davison 1983) operate at the level of audience self-reflexivity. The following observations are based on an audience reception study I conducted in Paris, France, from 2008 to 2012². The broader study explores the gender dynamics at work in practices such as surfing, watching, reimagining, archiving and discussing pornography. The fieldwork consisted of in-depth interviews with thirty-four viewers, combined with the replication of their online sexual meanderings (Vörös 2015). Twelve of these viewers identify as heterosexual white men³, whose status range from upper-working class to upper-middle class, and ages that range from 29 to 62. When asked about their opinions on pornography and its effects, these socially advantaged viewers insist they are mature and responsible enough to achieve distance and distinguish fantasy from reality, in contrast with so-called dangerous and vulnerable audiences. In my explorations below, I describe how the notions of audience maturity and responsibility participate in the construction of a culturally specific form of hegemonic masculinity⁴. Rather than focusing on the material experience of navigating pornography (Paasonen 2011), this article focuses on this audience's inability and/or

unwillingness to make critical sense of the gendered and racialized dynamics at work in their pornographic and masturbatory practices.

Us and them: performing the mature audience

Notions of maturity and responsibility are central to the way in which these viewers account for their spectatorship. At the end of every interview, after having extensively discussed pornographic tastes and habits, I asked the following question ‘What do you think about the concerns over the effects of pornography?’ The almost unanimous answer can be summarized as: ‘pornography has no significant effect on myself but I worry about its effect on young people.’ In asking this question, I involuntarily led my interviewees into reenacting the hegemonic frame of a public debate in which adults, implicitly presented as unaffected by pornography, share their concerns over affected young viewers.

- [Interviewer:] So there is this concern over the effects of pornography on behaviours...
- [Vincent, interrupts:] Me? Do I worry about the effect pornography might have on my behaviour?
- Oh, that is not exactly what I meant, but it’s an interesting question...
- No. I’m really not worried about myself. I worry about non-discerning audiences (age 30, manager, in a couple).

An important discrepancy exists between, on the one hand, first person humorous memories of discovering pornography during teenage years and, on the other hand, third person effect discourses over the dangers of exposure to pornography for young people. During our first interview, Sylvain (age 28, unemployed, single) describes watching pornography as a positive experience of sexual exploration for a self-defined ‘late virgin’ like him, who had his first sexual relation ‘only’ two years ago. During our second interview, Sylvain surprisingly expressed his concerns over young folks who ‘discover porn before ever having sex and are poorly informed.’ In a similar way, although Nicolas (age 30, engineer, in a couple) remembers he was ‘ready’ to watch porn at the age of 13, he now thinks 12 year old teenagers are ‘not mature enough’:

The first time I watched porn I was almost 14. It was an age when I think I was psychologically prepared. I really could see a difference between fiction and reality. [...] I grew up with the Internet, but there’s no comparison with what’s going on now. Nowadays, 10, 11, 12 years old kids have a perfect mastery of the Internet, at an age when you are not at all ready to watch such images. The other day I read that two boys out of three watch porn before the age of 12. Before the age of 12! [...] It’s hard to tell what kind of effect this will have on these young generations. For the older ones, I think there’s nothing to worry about. (Nicolas)

These adult viewers frame the problem of young audiences' access to pornography both in terms of age and generation. The supposed incapacity of younger generations to distinguish fantasy from reality is related to their media overexposure. Pierre (age 44, cook, divorced, one child) opposes his own generation, who perfectly understand that 'pornography is fantasy, not real life' to the 'Millennials' who he claims 'have already watched porn by the age of 14 or 15'. Pierre is particularly concerned with the effects of gang bang porn (representing one woman having hardcore sex with several men) on some of the boys in his neighbourhood:

Some kids think a bunch of men having sex with one girl is normal. They think it actually happens in real life. I'm not saying all these kids are the same but, clearly, something has changed, it's not the same anymore. I've heard kids in my block say 'Oh she's hot, I want to gang bang her!' So when I hear this I stop by them and I say 'Excuse me, I didn't hear well... Gang bang a woman!? No, you cannot do this to a woman. You have to be in love in order to have sex with a woman. (Pierre)

When invoking 'youth', these men tend to articulate notions of age and generation along with notions of gender, class and race. Echoing public discourses linking young men's porn consumption to aggressiveness, rape and riots in non-white working-class neighbourhoods, the youth issue [*le problème des jeunes*] is often a euphemism for the ghetto youth issue [*le problème des jeunes de banlieue*]. According to Julien (age 28, manager, single) watching porn only becomes a problem when it takes place within the context of gang rapes [*tournantes*]. The scapegoating of working-class Black and Arab men articulates with larger claims about masculinity. Julien elaborates on the importance of being a 'responsible' and 'respectful' man in contrast with the vulgarity of 'thugs' who boast about their 'big dicks' and 'treat women like whores.' Louis (age 30, engineer, single) makes fun of black male porn performers who 'have huge dicks but can't handle anything else.' If a (strong) penis is presented as a necessary component of manhood, masculinity is defined in relation to family and work:

We're all men but... For me, a man is somebody who handles his life, who handles his parent status – because I'm a dad – and who handles his social status – whether you're an employee or you're the boss. That's what masculinity is about. (Pierre)

Following the body/mind hierarchy that historically sets the foundation for the construction of white bourgeois masculinity (Dyer 1985, 1997) these men value 'masculinity' [*masculinité*], connoted as intellectual, above 'manliness' [*virilité*], connoted as rough. The physical strength of porn performers, framed as an 'animal' and 'natural' expression of

manliness, is certainly valued in the private domain of sexuality. Viewers nevertheless insist on their ability to keep a good distance from the 'vulgar' roles of 'big dick' hypermasculinity and 'slut' hyperfemininity. Vincent (30, manager, in a couple) dismisses pornographic manliness as 'lacking self-questioning.' Although he masturbates with pornography and goes to the gym on a weekly basis, he considers these bodily practices are 'stupid' and 'superficial.' Maintaining a fit and toned body is nonetheless important to him, as part of an ideal of health and sophistication.

The performance of the unaffected audience is here tied to the performance of a 'mature and responsible' masculinity. Also, the ability to take distance from pornographic images is defined as the exclusive property of well-educated viewers.

Drawing a clear line between fantasy and reality

Sexual media education experts regularly call on audiences to draw a clear line between pornographic fantasies and 'real life' sex (Alptraum 2013). To shift the focus of the study towards '*the perceived nature, purpose and role of sexual fantasies*' among different audiences (Barker 2014: 151) and to consider, as a matter of comparison, non-monogamous gay and bisexual men's experiences, allows us to get a glimpse at the diversity of the everyday uses of the often taken for granted notion of fantasy. Pornographic images are highly social and visible in gay male spaces such as sex-clubs, saunas, porn theatres or on hook-up devices (Mowlabocus 2007), and gay and bisexual men who regularly participate in these spaces tend to elaborate a narrative where fantasy and reality collide, for instance when evoking their own amateur pornographic production practices. These viewers also stress the importance of different gay and bisexual pornographic subgenres in the understanding and transformation of their own sexual attractions and practices. Gay pornographic scenarios can themselves be self-reflexive in restaging, through documentary-like aesthetics, the role of pornographic media in gay sexual encounters (Dyer 1985, 2004). Interviewees who participate in these subcultures often describe watching gay porn as a practice of looking at contemporary representations of gay social life. In contrast, viewers of all sexual orientations and pornographic tastes tend to agree on the fact that conventional straight pornographic scripts are traditionally fanciful, absurd and unreal. Some heterosexual men such as Pierre (42, cook, single, divorced, one child, member of a porn fan forum) imagine gay male sexuality as a heterotopia where everything is possible, while they lament the limitations of 'real life' heterosexuality:

Of course pornography is fantasy. Of course when the postwoman rings your doorbell, she's not gonna kneel and blow your dick. That's obvious. When you enter a garage, you know very well you're not gonna have sex with a sexy female mechanic. [...] Why isn't all this possible for us, heterosexuals? (Pierre)

When single or monogamous heterosexual male interviewees account for their relation to pornography, they often claim their ability to draw a clear line between 'fantasy' and

'reality'. This opposition is less descriptive – as it says very little of the role of these fantasies in the shaping of who they are and what kind of sexual relations they have – than normative: 'bad, degrading' pornographic scripts *should* be separated from 'good, respectful' monogamous scripts. When asked whether 'What you enjoy watching is also what you enjoy doing?' these viewers give a negative answer and explain how fantasy and reality, perversion and normality, exoticism and everyday life, hardcore and softcore, degradation and respect do – and must – follow opposite paths. It is also striking that none of the heterosexual men interviewed present pornography as a positive source of sexual education. For instance, on the one hand, Fabrice (age 42, mixed-race, technical worker, in a couple, two children) links his passion for North American gonzo pornography with his coupled sexuality (his wife and he often play a DVD during sex) and with some of his bodily practices (abdominal workout and testicle shaving), thus describing how fantasies are embedded in everyday routines. On the other hand, when explicitly asked about the notions of fantasy and reality, he insists on his ability to draw a clear line, as if I were accusing him of disrespecting women in general or his wife in particular.

- [Interviewer:] What you like to watch is also what you like to do?
- [Fabrice:] Well women usually don't like facial ejaculation. As it happens, my wife does not like it. But she likes watching porn. She's into blow bangs [one woman performs fellatio on several men]. Time to time, we watch a DVD when making love. [...]
- Did you ever learn something from watching porn?
- It's hard to say because sexuality is... [interrupts and starts again] So I know there is this whole concern about the fact that nowadays kids are growing up with porn and we should be careful. I've always liked porn and I always knew it isn't real life. I really think it's a matter of education. I think I was well brought up by my mother. I never disrespected a woman. Never. So I don't think there's any causal relationship. [...] Some things turn me on, but I would never reenact them. I would never get into a blow bang with my wife. I would never invite five dudes and... [interrupts and starts again] This wouldn't be fantasy any more. [...] You should never forget it's a staged fantasy. It's out of touch with reality. (Fabrice)

Separating reality from fantasy, being a responsible viewer and acting as a respectful heterosexual male partner are presented as three inextricable qualities, in a context where men's sexual media education is haunted by the essentialized figure of the 'deranged' porn consumer, addicted and/or violent.

A moral approach to representation of gender and race

Queer and sex-positive feminist subcultures have elaborated frameworks in which to make sense of tensions between political orientations and pornographic attractions⁵. During one

of our interviews, Wayne (age 30, student, female-to-male trans, pansexual, queer activist) takes up such a framework to describe his attraction towards essentialized representations of masculinity:

- [Wayne:] I really love power play scenarios [...] I think it's linked to the idea that the essence of a man is to be a rapist and to display his power over women's bodies; you know, the idea that women are holes for men to stick into. This fantasy is very much linked to the fact that I myself don't have a cisgendered dick.
- [Interviewer:] How is that related?
- I think I fantasize a lot on what I can't do. [...] It's the essentialism of the scenario that hooks me up. And essentialism does not match very well with queer bodies with prostheses and so on. When you fantasize this way, [smiles, ironical] you forget all your good resolutions and you go deep in stuff that politically sucks. And essentialist views on masculinity are part of that. (Wayne)

In contrast, when political issues are addressed, self-proclaimed 'mature and responsible' men spend more time talking of the porn they do not watch or of the audiences they do not identify with, rather than talking of the porn they do watch or what kind of porn viewers they actually are. Two different stages in the interviews tend to generate two different forms of audience discourse. In a first phase of the interview, I asked about pornographic tastes and routines, while adopting an empathic posture. Here, fantasies are often organized around the ideas of female sexual submissiveness and availability. In a second phase of the interview, I asked for opinions regarding pornography and opened a debate with interviewees about their views on gender, race and sexuality. When confronted with a question on feminism ('Some feminists say that straight pornography is a genre made by and for men, often to the detriment of women, what do you think?') and political issues ('What do you think about power play in pornography?'), these viewers tended to disavow the tastes and practices they had espoused earlier in the conversation. After insisting he dislikes porn and prefers 'erotic' representations of sexuality in auteur cinema and experimental film, Adrien (age 29, artist, in a couple) describes how he navigates on porn tubes where he has 'pretty standard fantasies' such as 'good looking girls,' 'amateur-like videos' and 'two men fucking one woman.' He immediately clarified he 'does not like all this submission and violence.' An hour later, when the conversation shifted towards political issues, he spontaneously negated his attachment to straight porn: 'I totally agree [with the idea that straight pornography is a genre made by and for men, often to the detriment of women] and that's one of the reasons why I don't watch porn. Or at least no not so often.' When confronted with feminist views, a common reaction among these men was to negate or euphemize their own attachment to pornography. A common feature of anti-pornography discourse – the framing of gender power play as a morally unacceptable form

of a degradation of women – was here taken up by porn viewers in order to shield against what they interpreted as a possible accusation of sexism.

Self-censorship is particularly strong with regards to fantasies of rape. Nicolas (age 29, engineer, in a couple) described how he can be ‘turned on’ by scenarios in which the female performer appears to be ‘forced,’ but immediately clarified ‘it doesn’t happen often’ and he ‘can’t explain it.’ In a similar way, Vincent (age 30, manager, in a couple) first described his attraction for porn scenes featuring female anal submission, before immediately clarifying he ‘keeps critical distance’ from such ‘staged brutality,’ and finally claimed he has no attraction for female submissiveness. Louis (age 30, engineer, single) wavered between two ways of aligning his fantasies of non-consensual sex with his moral principles. On the one hand, he tacitly acknowledged a tension between his fantasies and his beliefs, through the use of the conditional tense (‘I don’t want to be linked to these fantasies, it would be devastating, I would not be able to stand it’) and self-interrupted thoughts (‘it’s a mixed feeling, I don’t know how to...’). On the other hand, he denied any attachment to such scenarios by aligning *ex post* his fantasies with his moral principles: ‘I’m only turned on when the motivations of the female character are clear and when she drives the interaction.’ The word ‘rape’ was never pronounced and naming as such one’s own fantasy is made impossible in a context where those who have rape fantasies are envisioned through the essentialized figure of the ‘rapist’.

Rather than conceiving gender as a structure of power that shapes fantasies, bodies and relationships, what prevails among this audience is a moral approach to sexism, which is considered as an individual form of deviance. Also, what they label as sexist are the most theatrical forms of male domination and female submissiveness, whereas the gendered norms and hierarchies that underpin a large range of erotic representations of heterosex tend to be considered as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’. In insisting sexism is not their problem, they furthermore identify with the model of a ‘cool’ and ‘uncomplicated’ masculinity. This model of masculinity is defined in contrast with the problematic masculinities of the macho (who takes manliness too seriously) or the geek (who fails at manliness). This masculinity is presented as balanced (rather than excessive), laid back (rather than anxious), disinhibited (rather than hung-up) and natural (rather than self-conscious). It is further defined in contrast with both machismo and feminism, which are framed as two identical attacks on peaceful and relaxed gender relations. Such a model of masculinity can be conceived as hegemonic in so far as it normalizes gendered hierarchies.

A similar shift from political introspection towards moral condemnation is at work when race and racism are addressed. ‘Raceless racism’ (El Tayeb 2011), here understood as the simultaneous affirmation of racial fantasies and negation of race as a political issue is made possible by sentences such as ‘No, I don’t make a difference, but...’ The following excerpt of the interview with Alain (age 53, television stage worker, divorced, one child) is typical in the way white men can share their fascination for black penises – a historical site of white anxieties and pleasures (Mercer 1991) – just after insisting on their own colour blindness.

- [Interviewer:] Does skin colour makes a difference?
- [Alain:] None!
- None?
- None!
- You don't pay attention?
- Never!
- Porn websites often specify it...
- Oh yes, there's a bit of everything out there. Look at big US porn studios: you'll always see at least one black guy, you know, given the reputation they have... which is often justified... when you look at the size of their tool. However they're often bad ejaculators. [...] But, no, no, sincerely, colour really makes no difference to me. [...] Racism does not affect me [...] It's really not part of my world [...] It's like homophobia. These are words that do not exist to me. Well I know they exist but... (Alain)

In an all-white context, interviewees decode the question 'Does skin colour makes a difference on screen?' as 'Are you a racist?' to which they ought to give the moral answer 'No.' Instead of conceiving racism as a political system based on institutionalized forms of racial difference, French white viewers tend to conceive racism as an individual form of moral deviance (Cervulle 2013). The two most frequent answers to the question on skin colour were 'No, I'm not a racist because I watch porn videos with people of colour' and 'No, I'm not a racist because I don't think in terms of race.' The very fact of seeing race is framed as a racist form of reasoning: 'So maybe there is something racial behind all this? But I never went so far in thinking about it, because I'm not a racist' (Pierre, age 44, cook, divorced, one child).

Two performances of white heterosexual masculinity seem to coexist among this audience. On the one hand, an obscene (vulgar and private) performance consists in navigating on porn websites investing the affective power of racialized tags such as *beurette* [belittling word for young French Arabic women⁶] in order to intensify pleasure. On the other hand, in the public performance of a respectable white masculinity, any eroticization of race is condemned as racist. This tension between obscenity and respectability can be observed in Gérard's (age 62, white, retired policeman, divorced, three children) doublespeak. In the context of a porn fan forum conversation, with the mediation of a computer and the protection of a pseudonym, Gérard appears very articulate about his taste for Arab female performers he labels as *beurette*. In the context of a face-to-face interview with a sociologist, he however denies this racialized pleasure ('skin colour isn't very important to me') and frames race as a typically North American problem⁷: 'they have what they call interracial porn, it's something typically American.' Such a denial cuts short any kind of critical reflexivity upon the gendered and racialized dynamics at work in his specific attractions towards Arab female performers. These white heterosexual male

viewers tend to negate the pleasure they take from images that could be labeled as sexist or racist rather than to engage in a reflection on how their fantasies might be shaped by gender and race. When a pornographic scenario appears to represent gender and race relations in a questionable way, it is assigned to othered, morally condemnable, sexist and racist audiences.

Masculinity and immaturity in porn fan cultures

Whereas the place of pornography in adult heteronormative male bonding is often limited to conventional and impersonal bawdy jokes, online fan forums offer a space where viewers share intimate details about pornographic tastes and pleasure techniques. The French-speaking porn fan forum I observed from 2010 to 2012 gathered several hundred participants, among whom were twenty to thirty very socially active ones, who also met offline for drinks, dinners and special events related to the adult industry⁸. In contrast with the ‘taboos’ and ‘judgment’ porn enthusiasts may face in other settings (family, colleagues, friends, partners, etc.) the forum is described as a space where confidences are made possible by anonymity and attentiveness.

What I like about this forum is that it’s a space for porn enthusiasts. It’s a community where everyone, behind their screens, can tell which performer they like, what turns them on, what genres they watch, what they expect from such upcoming DVD, etc. (Fabrice, age 44, mixed-race, technician, in a couple, two children)

The dudes on the forum can be completely open about watching porn and jerking off to it. For instance, I love girls who piss all over themselves – it really turns me on. If I like this but it’s not your kick there’s nothing to worry about, because people don’t judge. [...] Respect is very important because, even if we’re between dudes and all, watching porn is very intimate issue. (Pierre, age 42, cook, divorced, on child)

If male fandom in general is typically represented as sexually immature and failing at being properly masculine (Jenkins 1992: 9-49), the porn fan is more specifically represented as failing at enacting ‘conquering, adult’ heterosexual masculinity. In this discourse, the sexual passivity of the porn viewer is contrasted with the sexual activity of the seducer. Especially at the beginning of the interviews, I found some heterosexual men feel more comfortable with sharing their seduction tips and anecdotes rather than their autosexual habits and pornographic tastes. In parallel, some participants in online forums disregard fellow forumers by representing them as stuck in front of their computers and unable to have ‘real sex’ with women. Also, a vivid interest in sexual fantasy, as well as male bonding through watching and sharing porn – two key features of the online fan culture I observed – tend to be framed as obsessions and frustrations that ought to disappear once teenager years are

over. For instance, if Nicolas (29, engineer, in a couple) presents his discovery of pornography between 14 and 16 as 'normal', since 'all the young guys of this age did it', he also insists he is now past this stage. When remembering how he and his friends used to identify with the protagonists of *American Pie* (Weitz and Weitz 1999), an iconic teen movie that stages a group of boys who share their sexual fantasies and desperately try to lose their virginity, Nicolas insists this is not who he is anymore:

- [Nicolas:] It spoke to me at that time but today, it doesn't any more. Apart from a few ridiculous tricks, it wouldn't make me laugh any more.
- [Interviewer:] What spoke to you in *American Pie*?
- [Nicolas:] I think part of the laughter comes from the fact that I'm thinking 'That's them, but it's really not me' [...] Some situations are funny but I really never identified with these characters.

To take on a porn fan identity is often to be considered sexually immature. Bertrand (age 42, unemployed, single) curates a blog dedicated to a French porn star, to whom he relates in terms of devotion. He makes sense of this attachment by linking it with his taste for hard rock and presents himself as a rebellious teenager who refuses adult masculinity:

I don't identify as a man, as this is defined by society [...] I don't relate to the image of the strong, manly, man. I feel more like a teenager. Anyways, that's a psychoanalytical issue [laughs]. [...] I think my relation to porn has always been childish. I always needed passions and emblems. AC/DC is also something very powerful in my life. Then of course heavy metal is less embarrassing than pornography [laughs].

Bertrand has been single for the last ten years and has had few sexual partners during this period. By concentrating his sexual activity around watching, sharing and curating pornography, he has developed a fetishistic relation to heterosexuality, in the sense of a substitution of the sexual act for its pornographic representation. Bertrand successively claims and regrets this deviance from conventional heterosexual couple life. Although it is embedded in mixed feelings, this porn fan identity is a site from which he questions the normative definition of white middle-class adult heterosexual masculinity. His eclectic blog also includes a section on 18th and 19th century revolutionary female figures and he is well aware of contemporary feminist debates around sexuality. Contrary to the anti-pornography feminist belief that porn consumption mechanically reinforces hegemonic constructions of masculinity, Bertrand's story shows that to invest time, interest and energy into porn cultures can open space for critical reflection on gendered norms and hierarchies. However, an important limit to the emergence of alternative views on gender within the fan community in which he participates is its sexist double standard: female participants have left the forum after accusations of being either too seductive or too vulgar.

Conclusion: Unpacking audience self-censorship

The regulation of sexual media in North American and European societies is often described as having shifted in the 1970s from ‘obscenity’ to ‘onscenity’, which ‘is not the end of obscenity’ (Williams 2004: 265) but rather its definitional crisis. Contemporary controversies around the effects of pornography in the French public sphere are indeed less about excluding inappropriate audiences than about encouraging audiences to self-regulation. Discourses over the negative effects of pornography on ‘uncivilized’ (the figure of the ghetto youth) or ‘excessive’ male audiences (the figure of the porn addict) operate less as an invitation to specifically drop pornography than as a broader encouragement to make a mature and responsible use of sexual media, especially by drawing a clear line between fantasy and reality. This norm of the good viewer, coupled with the framing of racism and sexism as individual deviances, generates, on part of the white heterosexual men I interviewed, a reluctance to engage critically with their fantasies. Such self-censorship can be analyzed both in terms of inability and unwillingness to elaborate a language in order to make critical sense of how gender and race shape their sexual fantasies.

Selective self-censorship, on the one hand, can be interpreted as a strategy that is deployed in certain contexts by white heterosexual male viewers in order to avoid any political conversation about gender and race in pornographic representation. In this case, to not give an account of one’s own fantasies is also a strategy to not have to account to feminism. To claim the ability to discern reality from fantasy, while scapegoating non-white working-class youth, morally deviant individuals and immature audiences, is to endorse an elitist definition of audience reflexivity, understood as a property of socially advantaged men. When it is effective, this rhetoric prevents us from understanding the ways in which men’s porn reception practices participate – in complex and uncertain ways – in the reproduction of gendered and racialized relations of power.

Generalized self-censorship, on the other hand, can be interpreted as the sign of an inability to articulate a discourse that would make critical sense of one’s own gendered and racialized fantasies. Several factors can be identified as the causes to this second type of self-censorship. The devaluation of porn use as a cultural practice is a primary factor. Viewers whose class position depends upon cultural capital tend to disregard the pornographic images they watch and the autosexual practices they engage in. This can discourage them from articulating critical statements embedded in their personal experience as a porn viewer. Stereotypes surrounding porn consumers are a second factor. The essentialized figure of the violent porn consumer can deter men from attempting to elaborate a framework that would enable them to take critical distance from their own fantasies of male physical strength, female sexual availability and rape (among many other themes discussed during the interviews). The heteronormativity of mainstream sexual media education discourse is another factor. The ways ‘bad, pornographic’ fantasies are associated with a narrow focus on the most sensationalist representations of male domination and female submissiveness and often opposed to ‘good, respectful’

monogamous practices tend to leave unquestioned the gendered norms and hierarchies that organize more normalized and naturalized heterosexual scripts. The norm of colour blindness is also a problem as it prevents the elaboration of a discourse on the mechanisms through which white masculinity might be reproduced through pornographic practices. A final key factor is the liberal conception of the individual viewer as able to draw a clear line between fantasy and reality and thus control his or her own views and sensations. Presenting fantasies as ‘unreal’ prevents viewers from intervening in the way they matter and shape their bodies and relationships. A common task to both sexual media scholars and educators could be to articulate a plurality of alternative models to the single norm of the ‘good’ viewer. There is in particular a need for representations of affected yet critical and hedonist yet accountable porn viewers.

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Notes:

¹ Such as the USA (Williams 2004), Australia (McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008) and the UK (Attwood, Bale and Barker 2013, Smith, Barker and Attwood 2015).

² Fieldwork began when undertaking a Masters degree on the receptions of gay male pornography. It continued while undertaking a doctoral study in sociology at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris (EHESS) and was made possible by a three-year scholarship from the French National Research Agency for AIDS and Hepatitis (ANRS).

³ Unless specified, all the interviewees cited in this article identify as white heterosexual men. Participants gave oral consent to being interviewed after a short presentation of my research and a guarantee of anonymity.

⁴ In reference to the critical re-reading of the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' by Demetriou (2004), Connell, Messerschmidt (2005) and Beasley (2008).

⁵ Porn reception studies have examined queer audiences (Ryberg 2015; Smith, Attwood and Barker, 2015b) and described the tensions between sexual fantasies and political beliefs among feminist viewers (Ciclitra 2004).

⁶ The pornographic website Pornhub revealed that in 2014 *beurette* was the most browsed keyword from viewers based in France. For an analysis of this pornographic subgenre, see Fassin and Trachman (2013). For a postcolonial critique of the category, see Guénif-Souilamas (2000).

⁷ In the French context, racial issues are often framed as specifically American and the word 'interracial' is often pronounced with an ironic English accent by white interviewees.

⁸ On forums which gather heterosexual men, the relation to male peers is often more important than the relation to female porn stars (Lindgren 2010).