



Biasin, E., & Zecca, F. (2016). Introduction: Inside Gonzo Porn. *Porn Studies*, 3(4), 332-336.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1259178>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/23268743.2016.1259178](https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1259178)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Taylor & Francis at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23268743.2016.1259178> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Introduction: Inside gonzo porn

Enrico Biasin and Federico Zecca

It was the beginning of the 1990s, and the editorial staff of Adult Video News (AVN) needed a new definition in order to make sense of an increasingly popular, ‘indescribable new style’ of pornography, different from ‘traditional movies or just collections of sex scenes’ (Paul Fishbein, quoted in Moreland 2012). Former executive editor of AVN, Gene Ross, is generally credited with using the word gonzo for the first time, with obvious reference to Hunter S. Thompson’s ‘bold, exaggerated, irreverent, hyperbolic and extremely subjective style of writing, which positions the author at the centre of the narrative’ (Franklin 2005, 95). This term seemed perfect to describe this unexpectedly successful wave of first-person and more ‘realistic’ pornographic products that sprung seemingly out of nowhere at the end of the 1980s.

According to Peter Alilunas, the origins of gonzo date back to 1989, when ‘veteran Golden Age performer Jamie Gillis produced and directed *On the Prowl*’ (2016, 202). In this video, Gillis drives the streets of San Francisco in a limousine together with performer Renee Morgan, picking up random guys willing to have sex with her. ‘Unscripted and focused on (and fetishizing) “reality” and “authenticity,” this new style privileged raw depiction of sexual pleasure without traditional narrative, aesthetic, or performative considerations’ (Alilunas 2016, 203).

In the same year, Ed Powers directed the first *Bus Stop Tales* and John Stagliano released the opening instalment of his renowned *Buttman* series, *The Adventures of Buttman*. Both directors seemed to follow the ‘path’ opened by Gillis, in that they employed a non-fictional, ‘documentary’ approach to the depiction of sex. However, Stagliano added another fundamental element to the mix, by adopting a point-of-view style of filmmaking and allowing the female performer to look and speak directly into the camera.

These stylistic choices had enormous influence on the development of pornographic representation in the following years. Retrospectively, critics consider Stagliano’s first *Buttman* a watershed in the history of audio-visual pornography; Roger T. Pipe, for instance, comments on the invention of ‘the Buttman’ as a truly revolutionary event, especially in the context of the late 1980s/early 1990s pornography industry:

Before this movie, porn was a vast wasteland of horrible ‘features’. Everyone felt the need to tell a story even if their heart wasn’t in it. We were over run with poorly shot videos that featured plumbers, pizza delivery boys and other tissue-paper thin plots. All of the sex scenes were in the eight to ten minute range and were literally bad clones of one another. Stagliano took the camera off the tripod, slung it over his shoulder and literally shattered the mold forever. He shot a movie that was totally different in every way. The sex was shot differently, the focus on women’s asses was totally new and the gonzo revolution was born. (Pipe 2004)

The importance of gonzo in the history of adult film can hardly be overstated, mostly because it developed a new pornographic aesthetic, the first to radically move beyond the cinematic model. Gonzo was in fact able to ‘creatively incorporate the economic and technological characteristics of video production and reception to turn them into an aesthetic practice’ (Alilunas 2016, 206); that is, in the first gonzo experiments video technology was no longer employed to mimic – at a ‘lower’ and cheaper level – the standard of the Golden Age

feature-length film. Instead, gonzo maximized the potential of video in order to produce an entirely new way of representing (and performing) sex: non-narrative and more ‘intimate’, raw and bold in contrast to the glossy, plot-oriented features produced by 1980s dominant companies, such as VCA or Adam & Eve.

During the 1990s, gonzo became one of the main lines of production of mainstream pornography, gaining a pre-eminence in the adult video market that lasts until today. To have an idea of the current volume of production of gonzo companies, we can compare the release schedule of a pornographic studio specialized in porn parodies and narrative films like, for instance, Digital Playground with that of a gonzo studio like Jules Jordan Video: while the first releases an average of one or two films per month, the second generally releases more than five videos per month; this number grows even more if we consider a gonzo distributor like Evil Angel, which releases around 20 videos per month on average.

Because of its economic and ‘aesthetic’ centrality, gonzo is somehow placed in the eye of the storm of contemporary debates around pornography, and especially of anti-pornography discourses on addiction, degradation and violence against women (Dines 2010; Purcell 2012) and men (Jensen 2007), therefore becoming the *bête noire* and the specific target of a sex panic, pro-censorship agenda. Partly as a response to this ideological approach, in the last few years scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds (Biasin and Zecca 2009, 2010; Maddison 2009, 2012; Stüttgen 2009; Biasin 2013, forthcoming; Maina 2014; Tibbals 2014; Alilunas 2016; Zecca, forthcoming) have adopted a critical perspective on gonzo, in order to make sense of its historical, cultural and political meanings.

This special issue aims at expanding this debate, and more specifically it intends to contribute to the development of a more articulated comprehension of gonzo. This project is grounded in the understanding of gonzo as a complex semiotic, cultural and social object, which needs to be approached through various, interrelated theoretical perspectives (media studies, film theory, cultural sociology, gender studies, legal theory). According to such a premise, the articles included in the special issue focus on some of the many aspects of contemporary gonzo, with specific attention to its textual features, historical and industrial background, discursive constructions, gender and genre conventions, and legal implications.

In their article, Giovanna Maina and Federico Zecca go beyond current interpretations that define gonzo as either a pornographic genre based on specific sexual content or a filmmaking form simply characterized by the active role of the camera. In order to do so, they define gonzo pornography as a stylistic model that is, as an integrated system of formal and content features, in turn shaped by economic and social constraints. Moreover, the authors outline some of the historical developments of the model, from Stagliano’s early (pseudo)documentaries to contemporary ‘factual spectacles’.

Such a linear development is partially called into question by Renato Stella in his article. Stella is more inclined to see gonzo as informed by a circular scheme, where two main typologies – labelled here as ‘industrial gonzo’ and ‘amateur gonzo’ – have been influencing each other since the advent of video technology, and whose permanent interplay has reconfigured the realm of pornographic representation: this interaction has paved the way for the birth of hybrid forms like the industrially-produced Pro-Am (professional/amateur) porn and other materials that emphasize the convergence between non-professional and industrial procedures.

The difficulty of reconstructing a historical lineage (and a shared definition) of gonzo pornography is also highlighted in Alberto Brodesco’s contribution. Through a digital eth-

nography of online spaces such as Yahoo! Answers, Wikipedia, Urban Dictionary and PornHub, Brodesco investigates the definitional efforts of users of these websites to establish clear boundaries between gonzo pornography and non-gonzo materials such as amateur. As Brodesco shows, these online discourses conceptualize gonzo pornography according to three main semantic fields: sexual violence, women's condition and authenticity.

The relationship between women's sexuality, rough sex and truthfulness is attentively explored by Matt Lodder in his article on female gonzo director Mason. Lodder performs a close examination of Mason's work, focusing in particular on the filmmaking strategies she employs to represent and mediate women's sexual identities. According to Lodder, in her films Mason negotiates and negates many gonzo conventions (beginning with the male gaze) in order to construct a subversive female sexuality – empowered, self-aware and authentic – completely detached from a conservative and patriarchal model.

As the case of Mason demonstrates, gonzo porn can be (re)appropriated in order to produce new meanings or aesthetics. In his article, Joseph Brennan suggests that the category of gonzo is a useful tool for considering the gay sites Fraternity X and Sketchy Sex. Brennan argues that these sites rearticulate the aesthetics of gonzo, employing a number of gonzo techniques – such as camera looks, props and the 'official notice of compliance' – to enhance the realness of their videos, characterized by the controversial depictions of violent and unsafe sexual practices.

In recent years, some producers of gonzo pornography have exceeded the thresholds of permissibility of US society, eliciting the reaction of the government. Ingrid Olson's article explores the intersections between US legal actions against pornography, self-censorship within the adult industry, and the social constraints that discipline a community. Focusing on a specific case study – the legal history of Extreme Associates' trials in the 2000s and the reaction of the porn industry as a whole – Olson reconstructs the corpus of spoken (and unspoken) rules that constitute the standard of tolerance in contemporary US society.

Discussion of gonzo pornography continues in the Forum section of this issue of Porn Studies, further elaborating some of the questions addressed by the special issue's articles. In his piece, Paul Morris, owner of the US gay pornographic studio Treasure Island Media, explains the reasons why a queer gonzo cannot exist if not in a reversal (that is 'oznog') of straight gonzo itself, or at least of its identitary and symbolic implications. At the same time, Morris provides an insightful historical overview of the American gay porn industry, and especially its reaction to both the HIV crisis and the advent of video technologies, initially seen as inherently associated with the rough and immediate representation of 'risky' sex. Finally, the interview with John Stagliano that closes the Forum constitutes an important contribution to the reconstruction of the developments of gonzo pornography; the founder and owner of Evil Angel also sheds light on some important economic and expressive aspects of gonzo production, as well as on the impact of web 2.0 on the adult business.

In this special issue we have tried to demonstrate that gonzo pornography is far from a simple, unproblematic object; rather, it needs to be investigated as a field of creative and economic forces. In other words, we think that the interaction of different production routines, directors' stylistic choices, studios' industrial policies, performing practices and consumer habits gives rise to a complex system that is worth analyzing organically, in all its constitutive elements and in the relations it develops with other systems within the field of adult entertainment, as well as in a broader cultural landscape. The articles that follow have tried to scratch the surface of this complexity. Much remains to be done: for instance, in

terms of the transnational circulation of images and practices, political implications of gonzo sexual representation, detailed case studies on single studios, directors and performers, and so forth. We hope that this special issue will encourage other scholars to join us in this direction.

References

- Alilunas, Peter. 2016. *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Biasin, Enrico. 2013. *Oscenità di brand. L'industria culturale della pornografia audiovisiva contemporanea*. Milan: Mimesis.
- Biasin, Enrico. Forthcoming. 'The Paradox of Visible. Il gonzo pornografico e la battaglia (anatomica) dei sessi.' In *Sex(t)ualities: corpi, raffigurazioni, rappresentazioni*, edited by Silvia Antosa and Mirko Lino. Milan: Mimesis.
- Biasin, Enrico, and Federico Zecca. 2010. 'Putting Pornography in its Place.' In *Extended Cinema. Le Cinéma gagne du terrain*, edited by Philippe Dubois, Frédéric Monvoisin, and Elena Biserna, 359–363. Udine: Campanotto.
- Biasin, Enrico, and Federico Zecca. 2009. 'Contemporary Audiovisual Pornography: Branding Strategy and Gonzo Film Style.' *Cinema & Cie: International Film Studies Journal* 9 (12): 133–147.
- Dines, Gail. 2010. *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Franklin, Bob. 2005. 'Gonzo Journalism.' In *Key Concepts in Journalism Studies*, edited by Bob Franklin, Martin Hamer, Mark Hanna, Marie Kinsey, John E. Richardson, 95–96. London: Sage.
- Gillis, Jamie, dir. 1989. *On the Prowl. USA*.
- Jensen, Robert. 2007. *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*. New York: South End Press.
- Maddison, Stephen. 2009. "'Choke on it, Bitch!": Porn Studies, Extreme Gonzo and the Mainstreaming of Hard-core.' In *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualisation of Western Culture*, edited by Feona Attwood, 37–54. London and New York: IB Tauris.
- Maddison, Stephen. 2012. 'The Limits of Pleasure? Max Hardcore and Extreme Porn.' In *Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen*, edited by Claire Hines and Darren Kerr, 113–125. London: Wallflower Press.
- Maina, Giovanna. 2014. 'Grotesque Empowerment: Belladonna's Strapped Dykes between Mainstream and Queer.' In *Porn After Porn: Contemporary Alternative Pornographies*, edited by Enrico Biasin, Giovanna Maina, and Federico Zecca, 83–106. Milan: Mimesis International.
- Moreland, Rich. 2012. 'Recognition of the Cameraman.' *3hattergrindhouse*. March 22. Accessed 15 April 2016. <https://3hattergrindhouse.com/2012/03/22/recognition-of-the-cameraman-6/>
- Pipe, Roger T. 2004. 'Adventures of Buttman, The.' *Rogreviews*, February 22. Accessed 15 April 2016. <http://www.rogreviews.com/12882/adventures-of-buttman-the>
- Powers, Ed, dir. 1989. *Bus Stop Tales. USA*.
- Purcell, Natalie. 2012. *Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary: The Politics of Sex, Gender, and Aggression in Hardcore Pornography*. New York: Routledge.
- Stagliano, John, dir. 1989. *The Adventures of Buttman. USA*.

- Stüttgen, Tim, ed. 2009. *Post / Porn / Politics. Queer_Feminist Perspectives on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex_Work as Culture Production*. Berlin: b_books.
- Tibbals, Chauntelle Anne. 2014. 'Gonzo, Trannys, and Teens – Current Trends in US Adult Content Production, Distribution, and Consumption.' *Porn Studies* 1 (1–2): 127–135.
- Zecca, Federico. forthcoming. 'Ways of Showing It: Feature and Gonzo in Mainstream Pornography.' In *Routledge Companion to Media, Sex, and Sexuality*, edited by Feona Attwood, Brian McNair, and Clarissa Smith. London: Routledge.