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Fucking with distinction: a contextualised film review of *I Want Your Love*

Elly-Jean Nielsen*

Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada

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The 2012 gay male pornographic film, *I Want Your Love*, is at the vanguard of this genre. Director Travis Mathews has created a new flavour for his consumers: the 71-minute feature film consists of uncensored sex accompanied by a realistic narrative and an indie aesthetic. Thus, the film blends the unlikely combination of cutting edge and highbrow with hard core. *I Want Your Love* has few sex scenes ($n = 5$) and thus greatly favours plot over sex (i.e., ~5:1). Further, its impressive filmic achievements, in terms of meanings and aesthetics, should not be overlooked. The film's innovative take on sex as light, fun, intimate and yet full of foibles contrasts the maxim that gay male pornography is a medium used solely for viewers' sexual arousal. If today's creators of porn follow Mathews' lead – and film what I term 'fucking with distinction' – *I Want Your Love* will represent the stepping stone into the indie porn flick movement.

Keywords: gay male pornography; narrative; plot; indie cinema; aesthetics; verisimilitude; *I Want Your Love*

How will today's avid viewers of gay male pornography react if porn is trending in the direction of the 2012 film *I Want Your Love*? Are viewers' desires for subtle, albeit prominent, narrative plotlines in pornography on the rise? Do viewers care if the ratio of plotline to graphic depiction of sex is roughly 5:1 (i.e., there are 56 min of plot to 15 min of sex in *I Want Your Love*)? Finally, to what extent do the viewers of gay male pornography applaud the recognition this film received at LGBT film festivals worldwide? These are questions invoked by few scholars and which are cause for contentious, emotionally aroused debate, for these queries do not address the primary purposes of pornography for the gay male subject – namely, sexual arousal and masturbation. Indeed, if the composition and style of this film become emulated in future porn texts, it may be worrying to some viewers.

The lay understanding that 'porn is cheap, lowbrow, not very good art' (O'Toole, 1999, p. 85) is a maxim that is changing. Through describing the notable *cinematic* achievements of *I Want Your Love*, I further the argument made by O'Toole (1999) that porn – and more specifically gay porn – should be treated like a proper film genre. In particular, I invoke two key, interrelated features of the film that are an unprecedented combination in gay male pornography to date: an indie aesthetic and the use of narrative. I begin with a discussion of the film and its pedagogical potential, followed by separate analyses of narrative and indie aesthetics in relation to the genre of pornography. Undoubtedly, the questions posed above have provocative implications; however, as

*Email: elly-jean.nielsen@usask.ca

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long as the indie continues to prevail in broader film culture, there is plenty of room for the 'indie porn flick' to become a viable porn aesthetic.

The plotline of *I Want Your Love* is easy to describe: if you have seen any number of indie films released in the last 10 years, then you will know this story well. Jesse is a mildly nihilistic, struggling artist residing in North America's gay nucleus: San Francisco's Castro District. Due to financial stresses, he must move back to his hometown in the Midwest. Jesse and his friends are trendsetters or hipsters, if you will: they don vintage clothes, have tattooed arms, use record players and enjoy art. In gritty film images, shaky camera techniques and multiple close-ups, this film caters to a realist aesthetic. The film's story offers a very brief snapshot of Jesse's life, centring on his last 2 days in San Francisco. In contrast to the canonical narratives characteristic of the typical Hollywood film, there is little conflict or drama (Newman, 2011), with the anti-climactic plot displaying Jesse's life of urban destitution, distraught/ambivalent feelings, neuroses and self-indulgence.

I Want Your Love is remarkably honest about the ambivalence and confusion over relationship break-ups. Despite Jesse's longing for intimacy with his ex-partner, Ben, the pair appears to tacitly agree their relationship has ended, thus opening up space for sexual or romantic encounters with other men. For example, Jesse, who is troubled by his mixed feelings towards Ben, as well as his imminent relocation to Ohio, confides in his neighbour, Keith. When with Keith, Jesse refers to his recent reuniting with Ben as comfortable, but not sexy. Over the film's duration, the relationship between Keith and Jesse develops but when their relationship comes to a sexual point, Jesse announces midway through that 'this is not what he wants'. Ben's ambivalence is also perceptible in the film. Realistically, he comes across as yearning for Jesse's approval (e.g., he buys a new shirt before seeing him) but he is also intrigued by other men. Indeed, Ben's sexual encounter with Brontez, a stylish and witty Black man, is titillating and successful in comparison with Jesse's liaison with Keith. Jesse's inability to perform sexually is indicative of the inner conflict he has throughout the film.

I Want Your Love blurs the lines between narrative storytelling and pornography (Holden, 2012). Long before *I Want Your Love* was created, Dyer (1985) commented on how the underlying narrative of pornography is often romantic. He stated that pornography constitutes a form of gay cultural production in which various dialectics are played out: romance and promiscuity, security and freedom, making love and fucking. Furthermore, Dyer (1985) emphasised the pedagogical aspects of porn by stating boldly that romance in porn can teach valuable lessons about emotional feelings. (However, Dyer also acknowledged that this aspect was seldom appreciated by viewers.)

It seems *I Want Your Love* is a follow-up to Dyer's (1985) commentary. Indeed, Holden (2012), like many other reviewers, acclaims director Travis Mathews for filming non-performative – though explicit – lovemaking between men. For example, through the use of highly lit flashbacks, Mathews beautifully shoots Jesse and Ben. The two men sensually touch and gaze into each other's smiling eyes while engaging in deep conversation. Although an emphasis on the cum shot and the 'celebration' of promiscuity, which serve as Pendleton's (1992) main critiques of pornography, are still present in *I Want Your Love*, the film does not reaffirm these values. Rather, the film displays sex between men with genuine affection for one another (Holden, 2012), as well as the realities of casual sex for this subculture in this geographical area.

As seen in *I Want Your Love*, Mercer (2004) highlights the urban gay lifestyle as one of the key settings for gay male pornography where 'youth, physical beauty, sexual availability and promiscuity' (p. 158) are expected. It has been argued that the mythology

of an urban gay utopia promotes an unattainable physical ideal for the consumer; however, Mercer (2004) appropriately notes that pornography is a genre of fantasy, not of politically correct orthodoxies. In line with this critique, *I Want Your Love* provides footage of ‘real’ (albeit sexy) bodies having ‘real’ (fully exposed) sex. However, in contrast to most gay male porn flicks, there is considerable variation in the bodies appearing in *I Want Your Love* – including diverse physical types, amounts of body hair and dick sizes.

As previously mentioned, *I Want Your Love*’s heavy use of narrative in comparison with sex scenes is highly distinctive. Perhaps there are viewers who believe pornography captures ad-lib sexual encounters, with no prior planning, in documentary-like fashion. Escoffier (2007), however, comments on the notable scripting of sex in pornography, both in the figurative and literal sense; that is, he elucidates that pornography, like every other genre of film, requires scripts as well as camera movement, composition, editing, sound recording and music. Dyer (1985) has said that narrative is porn’s very basis. Whether a ‘bare narrative’, consisting of pornographic loops, or a more elaborate narrative, the purpose of pornography is coming-to-visual-climax (Dyer, 1985). Thus, a narrative in porn, however simple, is an unavoidable fact.

As porn is about sexual fantasy, it often invokes fragments or whole utopian narratives (Escoffier, 2007). The recurrent discourses in gay male pornography include the ‘fetishisation of the sailor, the soldier, the prison inmate’ and other prototypes of ‘rugged masculinity’ (Mercer, 2004, p. 156). These implied narratives are enhanced by a range of expected visual indicators: uniforms, typical physiques, set design and various props (Escoffier, 2007). Moreover, O’Toole (1999) has stated that ‘porners’ get a kick out of copying Hollywood. However, these common sexual fantasy scenarios are not the only type of gay male pornography. Directors are replacing the hackneyed scenarios of sailors and rough trade with highly erotic, sophisticated and self-reflexive sexual encounters (Capino, 2005), and this phenomenon certainly can be seen in *I Want Your Love*.

Considering porn is used primarily for masturbation (Escoffier, 2007), the un/necessary presence of plot in porn represents an issue with pronounced sides. There are theorists (e.g., Rich, 2001; Žižek, 1991) and viewers alike who believe a strong narrative in porn is a pointless distraction, a cue to fast-forward (Escoffier, 2007). Others, however, find a strong narrative to be an asset to pornography, essentially heightening sexual excitement. Escoffier (2007), for example, asserts that gay male pornography is often about sexual identity and, thus, calls for both plot and sexual action.

These narratives often explore interplay between sex and the dynamics of power through social roles and stereotypes (for example, gender, age, body type, or sex role) and cultural mythologies (religion, sports, masculinity/femininity), and are often stories of sexual acceptance, transgression, and a utopian freedom from the encumbrances of everyday life to engage in sexual activity. (Escoffier, 2007, p. 69)

This quote underscores the complex renderings in gay male pornography, such that the interplay between discursive registers heightens conflict, anticipation and desire among characters (Williams, 1989).

Viewers’ dis/taste for a healthy narrative will likely vary according to their situation, including their mood at the time of consumption (Escoffier, 2007). Given diversity as a principle, there are those who desire jerk off material to closely resemble a Hollywood story form, except in the place of something ‘coy and euphemistic, you get a full-scale hard-core sex scene’ (O’Toole, 1999, p. 85). Moreover, as O’Toole (1999) argues, many

viewers enjoy narrative-based porn and watch it right through until the end before contemplating sexual activity. Thus, plot and story do appear to matter to many viewers of gay male pornography.

Whether to your satisfaction or distaste, *I Want Your Love*, which contains much less footage of explicit sex compared with character and plot development, is at the vanguard of modern pornography. This is not to imply that full-bodied narrative in porn was unprecedented prior to *I Want Your Love*. Popular feature-length gay porn films such as Jerry Douglas' *More of a Man* (1991) had an intentional use of narrative; however, there are a number of differences between these films that should be considered. For one, the sex scenes are much longer and more fantasy oriented (e.g., sex on a float during a pride parade, sex through a bathroom peephole) in *More of a Man* compared with the realistic plotline of *I Want Your Love*. While the lead character in *More of a Man*, Vito, is also fraught with inner turmoil, this conflict is decisively based on his Catholicism and resultant internalised homonegativity, rather than the ambiguous melancholy of Jesse in *I Want Your Love*. Lastly, where *I Want Your Love* appeals to artistic realism, the sex scenes in *More of a Man* occur on 'what is clearly a studio set' (Cante & Restivo, 2001, p. 225) with 'an obviously faked soundtrack' (p. 227). In short, *More of a Man*, with its emphasis on sex, fantasy and pornographic tropes, appeals to the standards of most pornographic films.

Thus, what separates *I Want Your Love* from other narrative porn films is that the plot is more nondescript: it has less to do with fantasy and more to do with reality. Despite the intentional weight on narrative over fucking, the sex scenes are still quite raw and uncensored, though safe (i.e., condoms are used during sequences depicting anal intercourse). In offering the golden combination of a good story and well-filmed sex, Mathews' film gained much respect at LGBT film festivals worldwide. Indeed, properly integrated sex flowing from a film's narrative is what some say differentiates good pornography from bad pornography (e.g., O'Toole, 1999). Since the indie films of our time deliberately have subtle plotlines and expose a character's everyday life as lived, they represent a suitable terrain for candid sex to enter in as a self-reflexive spectacle.

I Want Your Love is a filmic text which adheres to the most cutting-edge, up-to-date features of indie cinema. As Netflix becomes increasingly populated with low-budget, independent films, it is not surprising that the film produced by NakedSword Entertainment (a gay porn studio) caught up to – and capitalised on – this era's fastest growing cinematic trend. Escoffier (2007) posits that narrative porn flicks will often cater to pre-existing film genres. By adhering to a genre's filmic conventions, not only is there less of a need to develop characters and storyline, but filmmakers are also capable of aligning their film with popular social types and cultural mythologies (Escoffier, 2007). For example, Jerry Douglas' *Flesh and Blood* (1996) includes a strong narrative and exploits the filmic conventions of a film noir. Indeed, a 'full-fledged erotic adaptation of the original' (Escoffier, 2007, p. 73) points to the concept of simulacra, a 'central cultural fact of our postmodern condition' (Bogue, 1984, p. 5).

Looking forward, the cultural capital of *I Want Your Love* is generated in a different manner. Rather than utilising mimesis or parodying a mainstream film tradition, Mathews rides the tidal wave of the cresting indie film aesthetic. For the purposes of a film review of *I Want Your Love*, three indie qualities are worth highlighting: indie's use of certain formal and stylistic conventions that are indicative of its artistic sophistication and emergent high culture; the genre's notable culture of alterity – of counter-hegemony and political progression; and the genre's *independence* – its freedom, autonomy, and authenticity (Newman, 2011).

For example, the creative license that goes along with indie cinema is indicative in the use of the actors' own names in *I Want Your Love*, enhancing the film's verisimilitude (Capino, 2005) and giving credence to the actors' real life experiences. The film's raw self-reflexivity is also displayed through the acknowledgment of STIs in a humorous scene between Ben and Brontez. While Ben is shopping for a new shirt for Jesse's going-away party, the two engage in conversation as Brontez simultaneously provides blunt fashion advice and quick repartee. Although the two are engaging in low-level flirting, Brontez recalls how he caught crabs three times from the same man. Brontez's witty self-deprecation conveys a faint message to the viewer about the realities of unsafe, casual sex in a way that mainstream pornography avoids at all costs.

Indie's character-centred narrative is a particularly critical idea to adopt with respect to *I Want Your Love*. Indie films 'tell stories about fairly ordinary people in recognizable places and situations' (Newman, 2011, p. 87). The goal of the indie film is to capture the essence of recognisable lived experience on camera. By catering to low-key sophistication, technically restrained directors are starting to have less and less 'happen' to their lifelike characters. The 'subtle, artful narrative' (Newman, 2011, p. 96) centring on Jesse in *I Want Your Love* is exemplary in this regard. Capturing the everyday, mundane lives of unheroic characters, the film's sex scenes are naturally divergent from mainstream pornography's emphasis on hyperbolic, flawless and invigorated sex.

How does *I Want Your Love* prove itself to be an indie porn flick? Like the indie films of our time, the story is not complex or muddled, but sublime; however, the film also has considerable pornographic achievement (O'Toole, 1999). High-end filmmaking need not indicate vanilla sex, and Mathews undoubtedly stakes his claim as an artistic filmmaker throughout the film's rather raunchy sex scenes. The episode between Ben and Brontez follows the classic pornographic script of 'kiss-kiss-suck-suck-rim-fuck-cum-the end' (Morrison, 2004, p. 213) but includes realistic foibles. The encounter occurs in a bedroom at Jesse's going-away party, and thus, when a party guest realistically comes to the door looking for Jesse during Ben and Brontez's 'suck' stage, the men's passion is briefly interrupted. Aware that Ben and Jesse used to be lovers, Brontez inquires whether the disturbance and mention of Jesse will 'fuck him up' – that is, will he lose his hard on? Ben and Brontez self-consciously laugh off the interruption and continue. Thus, even during *I Want Your Love*'s most conventionally erotic sex scene, realistic quirks arise.

For every scene that puts sex on full display, there are at least two scenes of romantic lovemaking or homosocial bonding in *I Want Your Love*. For example, homosociality is displayed when Jesse receives an ostensibly platonic foot massage while bathing from his best friend, Wayne. Romantic lovemaking is seen in the sex scenes between Wayne and his partner, Ferrin, in which the couple is often shot playfully giggling and affectionately stroking each other. Although romance in mainstream pornography is by no means entirely absent (e.g., there is a highly staged candlelit sex scene in Douglas' *More of a Man*), the romance in *I Want Your Love* contains the unique combination of sex and play. One of the couple's post-coital scenes is particularly unique in which they playfully rub ejaculate on each other. Thus, by representing gay men's sex as light and fun, this film separates itself from the prototypic gay pornographic film.

Despite the inclusion of many qualities of sex – the good, the bad and the ugly – the techniques Mathews employs to film sexual friction in *I Want Your Love* are by no means customary. The typical positioning of bodies in gay male pornography, which is to support maximum visibility (Dean, 2009), is not acted out in *I Want Your Love* for the sex scenes

are often out of focus, darkly lit, or the bodies are tangled in a way that precludes a clear view of penetration. Harris (1997) saw contemporary pornography as catering to the audience's point of view, as a pleasurable visual and voyeuristic event compared with 'old' forms of pornography from the 1970s that centred on the actor's point of view. However, if Harris' theory is correct, Mathews' more recent film swings the pendulum back, as sex is once again filmed from the actors' perspective rather than for the purposes of the imagined viewer.

One artistically designed scene in *I Want Your Love* has striking filmic achievements and illustrates the 'old' idea, according to Harris (1997), of entering the porn star's consciousness. The highly lit flashback Jesse has of making love with Ben shows details of the narrative and simultaneously creates a strong emotional resonance (Newman, 2011). Mathews cleverly begins by shooting Jesse from a high angle, as we enter Jesse's wandering mind, he listens to a record and reminisces on his treasured days with Ben. Mathews cuts back and forth from the (darker) present to the (brighter) past, creating a textual metaphor. In the last segment of the romantic flashback, diegetic and non-diegetic sound become indistinguishable as he shoots the scene to the crackle of the record player's static – the end of the record symbolising the end of Jesse and Ben. Scenes such as this vividly display Mathews' talent as a director and as a storyteller and showcase the indie porn flick's enormous potential to illuminate the lives of gay men.

Conclusion

Is the sole purpose of gay male pornography to arouse the viewer? A close review of Travis Mathews' (2012) film *I Want Your Love* indicates that pornography has broken through the confines of this singular purpose, by creating a realistic portrayal of love, intimacy and sex between men. Harking back to the opening questions of this article, it is difficult to know how viewers of gay male pornography will react to the emergent indie porn flick, if the trend continues to gain recognition and momentum. Indeed, the debate over the compatibility of narrative and sexual action in film may be alive and well today, but pornographers at the forefront are using plot to point to their films' literary and artistic values (Escoffier, 2007; O'Toole, 1999). However, the 'highly charged symbolic and erotic milieu such as the gym, the barracks, the dungeon, the alleyway, or the warehouse' (Escoffier, 2007, p. 76) are, perhaps, waning in influence if films like *I Want Your Love* – which capitalises on representational verisimilitude – become in vogue. The film displays sex in a candid fashion, towards a utopian place where fucking and intimacy are not mutually exclusive and foibles are not to be feared or frowned upon.

With the accessibility and ubiquity of amateur and hard-core pornography in our modern milieu, the artistic merit, self-reflexivity and verisimilitude of *I Want Your Love* should not be overlooked. The film stakes a claim that pornography, art and romance need not be considered incompatible and simultaneously argues that viewers of pornography are capable of enjoying, and indeed desire, realistic texts. Furthermore, it sets a precedent that gay male pornography is a genre worthy of artistic recognition. By falling outside the parameters of commercialised pornography, and bearing the imprint of an indie aesthetic, Mathews' film is at the vanguard of erotic cinema. Until gay male pornography is regarded as a legitimate form of film, we will do well to critically examine and appreciate *I Want Your Love* for its ability to capture fucking with distinction.

Notes on contributor

Elly-Jean Nielsen began graduate studies in psychology at the University of Saskatchewan in 2012 in the stream of Culture, Health and Human Development. Her previous qualitative research centred on disclosures of queer identities in an academic context. Her future PhD research will focus on expressions of queer experience through art forms (e.g., film, print art, spoken word poetry).

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