

**Slash and porn: Media subversion, hyper-articulation, and parody**

Booth, Paul. "Slash and Porn: Media Subversion, Hyper-Articulation, and Parody." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 2014. DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2014.893985

In this paper I examine the rise in popularity of pornographic parody, and compare that to slash fan fiction. Parody, an imitation that implicitly critiques an original work, is an important element of contemporary media texts. Through satire, parody offers a subtle, yet powerful critique of contemporary culture. Beyond mainstream media texts, parody is also a staple genre of the pornographic canon. Although multiple types of pornographic parodies exist, I concentrate on heterosexual parodies of mainstream film and television made by professional American pornographic film studios. Another media product that demonstrates parody is slash fan fiction, the writing of highly sexualised fan fiction. By queering traditionally masculine texts, slash creates a systematic comment on the patriarchal sexuality of popular culture. I first discuss pornographic parody, specifically focusing on *Star Wars XXX*. I next claim that a useful lens through which to define and delimit porn parody comes through Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. I compare both slash fan fiction and porn parody through this lens. I argue that slash fandom has the potential to subvert patriarchy, while the more commercial porn parody hyper-articulates it.

Keywords: pornography, slash, fan, parody, carnival

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Parody is a work of imitation that implicitly critiques its object of mockery through satire. While parody itself may be a genre (Harries 2000), it can also be a part of other genres. For example, parody is a staple genre within the pornographic canon. Porn parody critiques through the combination of satire and sexuality. Usually comedic (though not always), these ‘pornedies’ are ‘a hybrid mode that pornographically lampoon a mainstream cultural product’ (Shelton 2002, 125). For example, two years after *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) became the first X-rated film to win an Academy Award, the Swedish studio Pure Gold Entertainment released *Midnight Plowboy* (1971), about a country bumpkin who arrives in Hollywood where he boards in a house full of prostitutes. The names of the parodies are often funny: the humour of these parodic titles comes not just from the punning nature of the words, but also from the juxtaposition of what would be considered a ‘mainstream’ media text with overt sexuality, as Peter Lehman (1996, 49-50) suggests. But at the same time, porn parodies also ‘solidify and reify [porn] conventions by highlighting their ubiquitous presence’ as conventional (Martin 2006, 196).

This paper focuses on the popularization of pornographic parody from a cultural studies viewpoint (see Attwood 2002); namely, I want to look at our cultural moment and the way porn parodies reflect our particular mediated era. By depicting sexuality pervading mainstream media, these parodies create a spectacle of sexuality within popular culture, as scholar David Andrews (2006, 237–38) asserts. I.Q. Hunter (2007, 133) discusses porn parodies as a way of interpreting larger cultural practices. He claims that examining the way individuals ‘use’ pornography for various reasons opens up useful avenues to ‘consider porn-viewing as lived experience’. The

cultural studies paradigm of understanding meaning as readers construct it necessitates a revisitation of pornography's masturbatory use. Porn overwhelmingly *says something*, both as a cultural product and as a spectacle.

Culturally, the popularity of porn parodies can be attributed to multiple factors. Schneider (2012) and Lowder (2011) have both noted that the more narratively-driven pornographic parody film creates more interesting pornography, and appeals to both sexes. In contrast, traditional mainstream porn tends to be marketed mainly to heterosexual males. Furthermore, Beggan and Allison (2003) note that the narratively complex and self-reflexive plots of the pornographic films of female director Candida Royalle contribute to a 'safe space' for female viewership. Also appealing to a greater range of viewers is the rise of more 'normal' looking male stars, like James Deen, who seem to have attracted a large female fan base (Hess 2011)—in contrast to the corpulent and/or macho actors of the past who tended to appeal (or, at least, not offend) a male audience (Shelton 2002). Even erotica has become more mainstream and visible with female audiences, as the extreme popularity of *New York Times* bestseller E.L. James's BDSM erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequels indicates (Romano 2012).

Whatever the reason, pornographic parodies illustrate a 'pornification' of mainstream media (Nikunen, Paasonen, & Saarenmaa). Pornification describes the way mainstream media texts appropriate the aesthetics and ideologies of pornography, making pornography "mainstream" itself. For example, the sitcom *30 Rock*, of which a porn parody exists (*30 Rock XXX – A Parody*), featured a porn parody within its own show (a parody of a parody by a parody) in episode 4.2, 'Into the Crevasse'. Tracy Jordan, star of *The Girly Show* (the show-within-a-show), shoots a porn parody of *The Girly Show*'s other cast members and producers. As *The Girly Show* is a parody of *30 Rock*, the parody-within-the-parody-within-the-show then

becomes a reflection of *30 Rock* itself. Another comedy show, *Reno 911*, has had a porn parody made, *Reno 911 XXX*. Following this, the creators/stars of the original *Reno 911* then made a video on the website *Funny or Die* which humorously reflected on the fact they have been parodied. In effect, the original *Reno 911* augmented the parody, bolstering its legitimacy through their own creative comedy. The NBC sitcom *Parks and Recreation* made light of porn parody in episode 5.16, 'Bailout', by depicting 'Too Big to Nail', the porn version of protagonist Leslie Knope's government bailout of a local video store. And it's not just traditional media that draws attention to porn parodies. Social media has become a major venue for porn stars to court mainstream acceptance. Many stars use Twitter and Tumblr to highlight their celebrity (Lowder 2011).

As pornography becomes more mainstream, then, it is worthwhile examining it as a cultural force. One way that porn parody has been discursively framed is through the language of fandom. Discourse from the porn industry itself characterizes porn parodies as a type of fan film: as Tessa Stuart (2013, ¶8) writes, although they 'are called parodies for legal purposes, but they're really closer to erotic fanfiction'. Arguing that porn parodies are more about the costumes, sets, and characters than they are about the sex, Stuart (¶20) quotes parody director Axel Braun: "I'm basically making fan films with boobs," he says. "I'm making them primarily for people who don't like porn, for people who are fans of the source material". As I show in this article, both pornographic parodies and slash fan fiction manifest characteristics that can be described through Mikhail M. Bakhtin's (1984b) notion of the carnivalesque. Slash fiction is a type of fan writing that depicts a (usually homo-)sexual relationship between two characters who do not normally engage in one (it is named for the punctuation between the character's names; e.g., Kirk/Spock fiction). Fan fiction, or the creation of original writing using the characters from

already existent media texts, operates largely outside mainstream media. Ultimately, slash fandom and porn parody are two sides of the same coin: porn parody highlights a socio-cultural parody of sexuality within mainstream media; this same parody is also made through slash fiction's potential to subvert mainstream media.

In this article, I want to examine how as a major industry, pornography reveals cultural obsessions and desires. Pornographic parody depicts sexuality pervading the mainstream media, creating a systematic comment on the nature of the parodied culture itself, and can be read alongside the non-commercial writing of slash fiction. Yet, porn parody supports mainstream tropes of sexuality while discourses on slash emphasize its critical stance in multiple contexts. After discussions of pornographic parodies and slash fan fiction as carnivalesque modes of fiction, I examine pornographic parody as a subcultural text that ultimately reifies the commercial market, despite the satiric potential articulated by the genre.

### **Pornographic parodies**

Parody is, famously, double-voiced (Bakhtin 1981). It speaks both of and to a particular text. As Morson and Emerson (1990, 152) describe, parodic discourse...becomes 'an arena of battle between two voices' (citing Bakhtin 1984a). That is, parody functions by utilizing the same discourse it mocks in order to make its point. As Davisson and I (2010, 78) have argued in the past, parody works through familiarity with cultural knowledge. For example, to parody a film genre, one must have knowledge of the genre in order to exceed the boundaries of that genre. As Neale and Krutnik (1990, 18) describe, humorous parody must draw on specific, recognizable

conventions to make us laugh (see Martin 2006, 196). But the act of parody also cements these conventions firmly in place.

As cultural critique, parody intertextually references the pantheon of texts that make up our mediated culture (Rose 1993, 37). For example, in his analysis of *The Simpsons*, Jonathan Gray (2006) describes the way that parody and creates a space for critical self-reflection by the audience. As sociological practice, parodies ‘transcend their textual homes...becoming part of common culture and of everyday life’ (199). Parody ‘seeks both to teach and to correct’, and ‘works as an intertextual force to re-evaluate, ridicule, and teach other genres’ to viewers (4). Through the detailed allusions to a multitude of other texts, *The Simpsons* invokes a form of contemporary parody-of-reference. Yet, as Gray suggests, this parody becomes critical and thoughtful through the interest and values created by the audience who watches and interprets.

Porn parody is no different from other types of parody. It must necessarily follow the trajectory of the original in order to effectively parody the mainstream text: ‘the porn film industry is implicated ...in its habitual desire to remake, and so parody [features] both prior cultural texts and famous national icons’ (Stringer 2002, 33). Film scholar Dan Harries (2000, 4) divides ‘parody’ into different categories including textual/representational and socio-cultural. Many porn parodies are textual/representational, meaning that they use semiotic resemblance to make a point, often featuring celebrity look-alikes (e.g., *Hustler's Untrue Hollywood Stories: Lindsay Lohan*). Other porn parodies can critique at a deeper level, using the depiction of pornography to make a comment not about a particular referent, but about larger cultural ideologies. For example, the porn parody titled *Here Cums the President* features scenes between various historical Presidents of the United States (Washington, FDR, LBJ, Kennedy, Nixon, and Clinton). This film subverts typical Presidential behavior, and attempts (successfully or not)

humor even during the sex scenes. For example, Kennedy lies in bed with Marilyn Monroe and intones, ‘Ask not what I can do for you, but what you can do for my cock’. Although on the surface this may appear to be a textual parody of Kennedy’s Inaugural Address (and not a very good joke), the overall parodic moment pushes the generic boundaries of both pornography and parody through socio-cultural parody of the presidential office and the hypocritical behavior. There is more than just a reference to a single text; there is a reference to an entire culture of presidential power.

As Stringer (2002, 1) notes, writing here about Japanese porn parodies, ‘it is never simply critical or destructive...but also expressive of a certain affection for the very thing it mocks’. A porn parody must involve some of the semiotic *aspects* of the original: many actors use parodic voices similar to the characters in the original text many plot similarities exist, and many props, locations, and names are the same (or similar). For example, in *Friends XXX*, the action takes place not in New York’s *Central Perk*, but in Los Angeles’s *Canoga Park*. Even so, the six friends—in the original, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe, Joey, Ross, and Rachel; in the parody, Moanica, Sandler, Freebie, Joe, Russ, and Rachelle—still sit around the couch as they often do in the TV show. The plot is a conglomeration of multiple episodes, as comedy writer Sarah Schneider (2012, 2–3) notes in her description of the film:

Here, we learn that ‘Russ’s’ wife Carol has cheated on him with another woman (season 1) [and] ‘Moanica’ and ‘Sandler’ are getting married (season 7)... ‘Freebie’ (solid) accidentally mentions a secret bachelorette party that the girls are having for Moanica, despite the fact that Moanica told Sandler he couldn’t have a bachelor party. (A very specific plot from Season 8, Episode 8).

The parody works here because it puts the audience in the *Friends* mind-set, even though the differences between the two are overt. Pornographic diegesis attempts parodic mimesis As Peter

Lehman (1996, 46) suggests, porn parody functions precisely because of Hollywood *can't* do what porn does:

unlike mainstream narrative film and television, porn offers a context in which momentary, fragmented humor that is not part of a unified aesthetic can function in a manner that its legitimate counterparts cannot normally accommodate.

Although seemingly innocuous, porn parody integrates its humour with an ulterior, critical motive. Stringer (2002, 8) notes in his description of *Abnormal Family*, a porn parody that mocks and subverts famous Japanese director Yasujirō Ozu, that the parody 'turns its generic conventions completely around' and 'points towards the interrogation of the ideological assumptions' of the original text (13).

Similarly, Martin (2006) discusses the relationship between comedy and pornography, arguing that both genres become sites of radical experimentation and pleasure (she also cites Williams 1989, who argues similarly). For Martin (2006, 199), pornographic parodies might serve to 'undermine patriarchal power'. I.Q. Hunter (2006, 325) further notes that porn parody often contains 'a few hints of subversive intent', including critiques of the original's 'repressions and erotic possibilities'. Porn parody works as critical parody because the images to which it alludes indicate a particular attitude or value system through the references. Sexualizing mainstream media invites the 'imitation and transformation of another's words', as Dentith (2000, 3) shows. Porn parody transforms the viewership of another's media text, 'revoicing' and augmenting it through a systemic reappropriation of media content that highlights sexuality as its main focus (Dentith 2000, 184).

### **Slash fandom and the carnivalesque**



Like porn parody, slash fan fiction positions sexuality at the centre of the media text, and, as Rachel Shave (2004) describes, renegotiates of the boundaries of gender norms, character relationships, and heteronormativity in popular media. Tending to be written more by women than by men (Jenkins 1992), fan fiction in general highlights a re-reading of mainstream media with a subversive intent. Slash fiction increases the subversion through erotic depiction of nominally heterosexual main characters. As Jenkins (2006b, 72) describes in an oft-quoted passage:

When I try to explain slash to non-fans, I often reference that moment in *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* where Spock is dying and Kirk stands there, a wall of glass separating the two longtime buddies. Both of them are reaching out towards each other, their hands pressed hard against the glass, trying to establish physical contact. [...] Slash is what happens when you take away the glass. [...] The glass represents those aspects of traditional masculinity which prevent emotional expressiveness or physical intimacy between men.

Slash, in other words, can represent for many fans (although not necessarily for all, e.g., Jenkins 2006b, 78) a deliberate and insightful critique of contemporary patriarchal culture, couched in often-humorous and usually erotic gay fiction. Of course, not all slash is subversive. One interpretation of slash sees its transgressive potential as the most relevant factor in its writing; another interpretation acknowledges slash's normative and ideological similarities to the text it references. These are not clear-cut categories, and slash is inherently multifaceted: 'the meaning of the [slash] text can shift depending on how different readers take up the stories in different times, places, and cultures' (Flegel and Roth 2010, ¶1.2). Slash rejects the notion 'that gender roles are fixed and predetermined and embrace the idea that sexuality can be fluid and filled with

various erotic possibilities' (Katyal 2006, 485; see also, Busse 2006). Slash represents empowerment, and denotes the creation of a queer space for re-reading mainstream media texts.

There are a multitude of reasons why fans might write slash fan fiction. Psychologists Salmon and Symons (2004) have suggested a psychological and evolutionary rationale for slash fiction; yet cultural studies researchers (e.g., Driscoll 2006, Woledge 2006) have turned instead to look at more culturally based rationales for this genre of fan fiction. On the one hand, a more 'normative' approach to slash fandom sees its subversion as more reliant on the text than it is liberated from it, especially in relation to already 'canonically queer' texts like *Queer as Folk* (Hunting 2012, ¶0.1). In this interpretation the 'contested term' of slash becomes 'interrogated' as a manifestation of subtextual elements within the text itself (Hunting, ¶1.4; Jones 2003). On the same token, these subtexts are today largely dependent on the tropes and aesthetics of slash fiction as it is discursively constructed by mainstream culture, and even this more 'normative' slash can still subversive: Hunting (2012, ¶5.2) shows how normative slash stories '*reject* the canonical narrative that the characters have chosen and *develop their own rules* for a relationship that privileges monogamy and traditional romance'.

On the other hand, in the more 'transgressive' approach to slash fiction, fan writers subvert the tropes of a patriarchal society, 'creating pleasures found lacking in original products' and not embodied in popular culture (Penley 1991, 139). Many fan researchers see slash fiction as a way to write outside the hierarchical restrictions of mainstream, patriarchal society. For example, Katyal (2006, 469) argues, 'slash empowers the virtual community [of fan fiction writers] to actively rework traditional narratives'. Although slash fiction predominantly features male protagonists, these men often act in ways outside traditional gender roles. Nathan Rambukkana (2007, ¶23) describes slash as a 'queer space' that inverts traditional sex and

gender orderings. Characters engage not just in homosexual acts, but also in active renunciation of society's stolid mores. In this way, slash 'queers' mainstream culture, in the sense that Doty (1993) might suggest refers not to sexuality *per se*, but to the contra-normative positioning of sexuality within media texts. But just as Doty (104) argues that 'the more the queerness in and of mass culture is explored, the more the notion of what is "mass" or "popular" is therefore "straight" will become ... highly questionable', so too does examining sexuality in mainstream media reveal the subcultural appetite for sexual explicitness as well.

Here, both slash fiction and porn parody become specific examples of texts using sexuality to comment on, and critique, contemporary society. However, an important difference between the two reveals their underlying cultural relevance. As a product of audience writing, slash fandom stems from a non-commercial interpretation of the media; sexuality is used as a way of critiquing (or experiencing differently) a media text. Alternately, pornographic parody is produced in an overtly commercial environment, and the focus on sexuality highlights and underscores our cultures' reliance on sexuality as a key trope in contemporary media. Specifically, if slash fiction allows the reader (and the writer) to re-examine the traditional notions of patriarchy within traditional society through *subversion* of the sexuality of the main characters, porn parody does the complete opposite: it forces the audience to confront the patriarchal modes of contemporary media through overt *hyper-articulation*. Since the women writing slash fandom 'are already intimately familiar with the trappings of patriarchal assumptions, many women may find it easier to rework and record these conventions from within rather than starting from an entirely new set of conventions' (Katyal 2006, 486). Similarly, the specific 'over-the-top'-ness of sexuality in porn parody, in effect, allows viewers to see the same emphasis within mainstream culture.

### **Seeing the carnivalesque in slash and porn parody**

The carnivalesque literary style offers a fruitful lens through which we can examine porn parody and slash fan fiction. At once, the carnivalesque is both a literary mode of subversion and also a site where the norms of society are reified. Carnival was a time of rebellion, when the norms of society were subverted. Historically, the carnival represented a state-supported but ideological counter-intuitive space for redemptive and assertive rebellion, a ‘transitory, resistant site where norms are playfully inverted’ (Shave 2004, ¶1). For Bakhtin (1984b), the carnival became a metaphor for contemporary literature. The carnivalesque, in turn, represents this style of literature, reflecting this rebellion, this subversion, through the novel: a site of radical experimentation in polyphonic voice, character, and narrative (Zappen 2000). Bakhtin’s analysis of the novel celebrates the subversiveness and resistance to authority implicit in the novel’s form: as different voices (the author’s, the narrator’s, the characters’) meld in the text, so the novel allows ‘an active creation of the truth in the consciousnesses of the author, the characters, and the reader, in which all participate as equals’ (Morson and Emerson 1990, 234–37, 251–59; cited in Zappen 2000). At the same time, the carnival, like the novel itself, must stem from a sanctioned force, reifying the culture in which it sits: for the carnival, the state permits this subversive rupture in order to relieve cultural tension; for the novel, the polyphonic voice takes on the identity of the author-figure. It is because of this tension between subversion and reification that the carnivalesque mode becomes tied to porn parody and slash fan fiction..

Media scholar Rachel Shave (2004, ¶8) has specifically connected slash fandom to the carnivalesque, writing that:

Through mocking societal norms, carnival makes visible the social nature of hierarchical structures. The medieval carnival resisted the 'prevailing truth' and 'established order' of the church and the feudal state. In slash, the resistance is against the norms and strictures of patriarchal society, destabilising and marginalising heterosexuality.

Bakhtin (1984b) conceptualized this notion of the carnivalesque from the pageantry and subversiveness of the carnivals of early Europe, specifically drawing on the writings of Rabelais as quintessentially carnivalesque in nature. As he (1984b, 10) writes, the carnival 'was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete' (see also Booth 2010 for a link between carnival and contemporary fandom). Today, we most commonly recognize the remnants of this festival in carnivals like Mardi Gras, which is commonly associated with binge drinking and sexuality (codified, for instance, in the now-bankrupt pornographic series of films *Girls Gone Wild*). Carnival was a time for subversion, where groups of people unified to act out their frustrations with the prevailing authority. There are three aspects of the carnivalesque that are best exemplified by pornographic parodies and slash fandom: grotesqueness, hierarchy reversal, and regulated rebellion.

In terms of slash fandom, grotesqueness, hierarchy reversal, and regulated rebellion manifest in the relationship between the original narrative and the subversion of that narrative by the fan author. For Bakhtin (1984b, 303), the carnival is a particular manifestation of a Rabelaisian grotesqueness, a 'gross exaggeration and hyperbole' of the human body. The carnival relishes the grotesque, as it takes, expands, and 'unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' (26). Carnival is a release, a festival of 'exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness' (303). In tandem, the grotesque illustrates the limits of the human body: through bodily excess, through bodily transgression, or through sheer bodily volume. To see the extreme

power of the human body, we must experience it at its limits: gluttony, drunkenness, and debauchery are rewarded at carnival. To be a part of carnival is to allow it to overtake one's conception of the 'normal' world, the external reality one must deal with on a daily basis. Slash fan fiction represents this grotesqueness specifically through both its erotic spectacle of the male body as well as the extension and subversion of the typically heteronormative narrative structure of the original text. By exceeding the boundaries of the text, both in terms of narrative and in terms of gender roles, slash fan fiction *is* grotesque. Symbolically, fandom itself can also be interpreted as grotesque, in the carnivalesque sense that it grows outside the original narrative borders. It may not be *bodily* but it is hyperbole.

Further, a key highlight of the carnival was the hierarchy reversal—the moment when the poor could act rich, the underclass could act highborn, and the weak would be celebrated for their strength. The carnivals of early Europe reversed the hierarchies of the day through humour and celebration, creating a specific, ritualized opposition to the status quo. As Bakhtin (1984b, 10) explains, carnival 'celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions'. Nothing symbolizes this hierarchy reversal better than the crowning and decrowning of the mock King, an everyday citizen proclaimed the ruler of the carnival. This crowning event focused on the transitory nature of hierarchy and power: 'the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position' (Bakhtin 1984b, 124). Just as important as the crowning, however, lies the decrowning, which 'functions precisely because it is a direct address to the carnival participants' (Booth 2010, 68). The participants in the carnival dethrone the mock King and reclaim their own power. Fans, too, have an epic hierarchy reversal: as Jenkins (2006b, 42) writes, they use fan fiction as a way of maintaining a 'moral

authority' over their requisite text: fans can focus their fiction on reframing characters or events, exalting lesser-known figures or dethroning protagonists. Slash fan fiction similarly enacts such hierarchy reversal through the change in gender roles – males become passive, sexuality takes precedence over repression, and emotional reactions are placed at the forefront of the narrative instead of backgrounded, as in heteronormative mainstream media texts.

Finally, although carnival appears to be a fully autonomous time of rebellion, it is in fact a state-supported and regulated event. Carnival can be seen as a supported release of tension: a 'valve' permitted to happen in order to eek off any possibly true anti-authoritarian characteristics. Eagleton (1981, 148) describes this release as a 'licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony'. Just as carnival exists in a subversive but implicitly supported environment, so too does the work of fans. Although not overtly endorsed, fan fiction often seems to be implicitly condoned by the very producers it appears to subvert. The reason for this passive support is simple: fans encourage other fans to purchase more products. Few, if any, fans read *just* fan fiction – most read fan fiction in conjunction with the experience of the extant text itself. Slash fan fiction, although rarely explicitly condoned, exists as a codified subversive reading. Slash fandom is deliberately subversive: as Katyal (2006, 464) notes, any sort of 'queering mainstream works, while endlessly entertaining, can also be construed as a brazen act of civil disobedience against the frameworks of intellectual property'. Although perhaps not explicitly supportive, mainstream media often implicitly accepts slash – as in the case of the show *Supernatural*, which talks about the fandom's slash fiction within the show itself (see Zubernis and Larsen 2012). Fan fiction in general seems to be a form courted by those from whom the fan has poached material. For example, Melissa Anelli (2008, 86–100) describes how Warner Brothers allowed fan fiction writers to work within the world of the *Harry Potter*

franchise: they see fan fiction as free marketing for the films. Similarly, the illegal downloading of copyrighted TV shows like *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009) or the new series of *Doctor Who* (2005–present) may itself be supported: ‘there’s a strong sense that [the] act of piracy...was unofficially encouraged’, in order that media products get free and effective advertising (Pesce 2005, 3). Fandom is a transgression, but it is a transgression, like carnival, both visible and approved.

It is not just slash fandom that has reinvigorated carnival in an online venue. If slash fan fiction is a way of playing with gender norms, then applying the notion of the carnivalesque to porn parody reveals an overall hyper-articulation of the sexualisation within our culture. By depicting sexuality and sexual acts pervading the mainstream media, parody creates a systematic comment on the nature of popular culture itself. According to Shelton (2002, 121), ‘Laughter functions in porn primarily as a permissible rupture of hegemony in order to signify crisis and to prod structures of authority into renewing themselves’. In other words, porn parody functions to make porn more acceptable and to expose ‘what is always pornographic about mainstream culture’ (125). Porn parody films highlight an undercurrent of sexuality within all mainstream texts by providing negotiated readings of mainstream media. Kipnis (1996, 163) goes one step farther, arguing that, historically, pornography has ‘operated against political and religious authority as a form of social criticism, a vehicle for attacking officialdom’. She calls pornography a rule of transgression, and shows that ‘it’s a precisely calculated intellectual endeavour’ (164). Kipnis’s point relates pornography to carnival through these transgressive acts, through the power of the performance. The use of parody is a historically significant act, as parody has always suggested alternate readings of mainstream society: parody ‘enables [media] properties to become nonexclusive, non-sovereign entities’ (Katyal 2006, 479). Similarly,



although she doesn't specifically describe it as such, Frueh's (2003, 446) denotation of her experiences with food and sex reflect the carnivalesque atmosphere also described by Bakhtin. She links the extreme bodily reactions of orgasm and mastication. She describes sex as de-hierarchical: 'I love sex with men', she writes, 'they become feminine. I become masculine. We are both and neither gender'. The role reversal inherent in carnival erupts for Frueh in sex, orgasm, and dessert.

### **Examining porn parody as carnivalesque**

To see the way that porn parody revisits and exemplifies the carnivalesque, I want to examine one particular parody in detail: *Star Wars XXX – A Porn Parody*. Like the softcore spoofs described by Iain Robert Smith (2012, 112), *Star Wars XXX* seems to have been released to capitalize on 'existing consumer knowledge of the mainstream hit they are spoofing'. The film is meticulous in its detail: as noted on review website *Xcritic* (2012, 1), 'At first the film feels like a full blown parody, the first few minutes feel more like *Airplane* meets *Star Wars* than a porn'. The film itself straddles the comedy/drama line, as some scenes are seemingly shot entirely for humour's sake—C3-P0 luxuriates in a hot oil bath—while others are more serious. In an over two and a half hour film, it's also notable that only about half the film consists of sex scenes. Indeed, there is an extended battle scene against the Death Star towards the end of the film that runs almost half an hour without mention of, or actual, sex.

While porn-parodying *Star Wars* is not in itself remarkable, what makes this film particularly relevant to the carnivalesque and fan fiction is the way in which it interacts and speaks to the numerous fan parodies of *Star Wars* that have been made over the past few

decades. *Star Wars* has a thriving fan base (Jenkins 2006a; Brooker 2009), although not all of the fans enjoy slash (see Brooker 2002). However, *Star Wars* fan fiction and, relevantly, fan videos have been copied and shared for decades, going all the way back to the release of the original *Star Wars* (1977) film, when Ernie Fosselius made the fan parody *Hardware Wars* (1977).

*Star Wars XXX – A Porn Parody* fulfils the three tenets of the carnivalesque that I mentioned above. Like all hardcore pornographic films, *Star Wars XXX* enacts a particular unique grotesqueness that revels in bodily excess. Actors and actresses are physically gifted (or enhanced) in length, girth, and usability of various body parts. Bodies are contorted to give the most overt views of these body parts: the twisting, turning, and exertions of the actors emphasize the power and physicality of the human body. The obvious bodily fluids—semen, sweat, spit—are also on display, highlighting aspects of human biology and physiology. As in all pornography, the body is on display, but it is not a ‘normal’ human body: it is a body at its extreme (extreme pleasure, extreme pain, extreme sex), pushed to the limits of physical endurance. In one sex scene, two swarthy men and two lavishly bedecked women—all four actors in garish ‘alien’ makeup—have an intense orgy that lasts through multiple partners, positions, and exercises. The exhaustion of the participants is visible throughout. The ability of the actors to place themselves in different contortions is acrobatic. Another scene finds two female Stormtroopers engaging in sexual escapades with the Chewbacca figure—a hirsute individual so thick with fur they have to bunch it in their hands to make the relevant body parts visible. In a Rabelaisian way, the grotesqueness of this Wookiee three-way emphasizes the outer edge of human ability, physiological response, and physical endurance.

If the carnivalesque represents a form of hierarchy reversal, so too do pornographic parodies. Pornography is a form of media dependent on graphic depictions of sex: what other

media texts hint at, pornography makes visible. Sex becomes the most important part of the media text. This visibility reveals an intimate obviousness to sex. Furthermore, hierarchy reversal is exemplified through the depiction of the Stormtroopers. Traditionally, Stormtroopers are considered male and never take their masks off. In *Star Wars XXX*, however, the Stormtroopers are all female and become unmasked throughout the film. Given no 'face' to envision with the original Stormtroopers, one may remember the women from the parody. Just as with the *Friends* parody, viewers get into a '*Star Wars*' mind-set watching the *XXX* version.

Other hierarchies from the original media text become overturned as well. As Shave (2004) notes, a key element of the carnivalesque that manifests in slash fiction is the reversal of gender roles; especially given the explication of a homosexual relationship in the text where one doesn't normally exist, subverting gender and sexuality are paramount to slash. *Star Wars XXX* does the same. The original *Star Wars* concentrates on Luke's story, and while Luke is certainly an important character in the parody, the *XXX* version more often hinges on Leia's captivity and escape from the Death Star. The gender roles stereotypically asserted by prototypical pornographic films are hyper-emphasized in parodies, mocking contemporary gender stereotypes through overt articulation. Women take a more central role in pornography in general, and in porn parody specifically. Women are also most often the central characters in porn parody, to the extent that, many characters who are male in the original text, like the Tusken raiders, are made female in the parody (*This is Jaws XXX* goes so far as to make female the protagonist, Richard Dreyfuss's character, Matt Hooper). This type of feminization is common in slash fiction, which upends traditional gender roles by illustrating, as Jenkins (1992) puts it, an eroticization of male characters put into female positions in the narrative.

Yet, *Star Wars – XXX Parody* does the same with the characters of Han and Luke. As previously mentioned, in the *Star Wars XXX* film, the Stormtroopers are all women and their outfits, skimpy by Stormtrooper standards, are undoubtedly feminine, with exposed midriffs, ample PVC bosoms, and curved buttock plates. In the original film, Han and Luke rescue Princess Leia by disguising themselves as Stormtroopers. To parody that scene in the XXX version, the two male protagonists, therefore, have to don feminine outfits. Surprisingly, there is no joshing or heterosexual posturing between the two characters. Only one joke marks this transvestism (Leia comments about Luke's feminine features). Indeed, in the original *Star Wars* film, Leia was equally dismissive of Luke's rescue (and appearance), so one might argue that the porn version mirrors this aspect of the original as well. The queering of the characters in this parody seamlessly meshes with the queerness of slash.

Finally, it is important to note that carnival is an officially supported event, a way for the masses to 'vent' all the pressures of being repressed by an authority. Thus, carnival becomes a way for regulated rebellion: the state of dissent becomes appropriated by the object of dissent to relieve the pressures necessary for dissent. Porn parody, as a commercial product itself, is, of course, part of the culture that is being critiqued. Through mockery and parody, it critiques the mainstream qualities that it also inherently relies on for its audience. Porn parody takes mainstream media and, making explicit sexuality within the media, relieves the sexualized desire of viewers through release. This process is first and foremost a commercial enterprise, and a lucrative one. In 2006, for example, the porn industry made over 13 billion dollars (Ropelato 2006).

The Internet has made it easy to find both pornography and slash fan fiction, making these subcultural products more readily available. They are not mainstream, but they are easily

accessible. Pornography exists outside of, but also tangential to, the system it mocks. For example, despite being available only to those in the US over 18 and in specialty shops and online retailers, *Star Wars XXX* was advertised to me on some of my (cult) sci-fi and media blogs. *Star Wars XXX* was not in mainstream stores, but it also wasn't hard to find online. It may not be mainstream, but it's also not completely hidden. Textually, *Star Wars XXX* is most definitely not equivalent to *Star Wars*, and therefore exists tangentially to the traditional film: but it is just far enough outside the system itself to be able to make a comment on the system.

### **Slash and porn**

Pornographic parody is a commercial, subcultural text that ultimately reifies the very markers of the commercial market, despite the satiric potential articulated by the mainstream genres of parody and pornography. It may critique mainstream media, but also concretizes its ideological boundaries. It enacts this critique through a carnivalesque attitude towards the media. Relatedly, slash fan fiction also parodies mainstream media, but does so by subverting ideological boundaries through the carnivalesque. Beyond the gender-bending aspect of both the parody and the fan work, there are other similarities. Both fandom and pornography are often at the forefront of technological change. Fans create new texts with new technologies; porn producers often embrace new technology as a distribution system through the web. Both slash fan fiction and porn parodies are more accessible than ever before, augmenting and solidifying their place within (sub)cultural practices. Perhaps the popularisation of the Internet has facilitated a requisite impact on both paradigms of production and reception. Furthermore, both porn parody and slash fan fiction reference esoteric details from the text. Both create alternate readings of the main text

but still pay homage to the originality of the extant genres. And, tellingly, both illustrate the moral authority of fans over what they perceive as the true direction of the text. For example, *Star Wars XXX* illustrates the common fan mantra that ‘Han shot first’ in *Star Wars* twice, once in the bar with Porn-Greedo and second at the end when Han is involved in a three-way with Leia and Luke (who are not siblings in the parody, another reversal). In all these respects, the slash texts and the porn parody texts exemplify the key carnivalesque characteristics of contemporary parodic culture.

A main point of difference between the two, then, illuminates that porn parody is overtly commercial and emphasizes a producer-led creation while slash fandom is overtly non-commercial, and has the potential to overturn the producer/consumer dialectic. In terms of the carnivalesque, slash fiction appears to be the overt representation of the sexualisation of media by consumers; porn parody by the producers. Thus, while both porn parody and slash fiction work as critiques of the mainstream media system, each approaches the ‘system’ differently. Slash feminizes men (in action, not in looks), standardizing the gender, as a critique of patriarchy. Porn parody masculinises women (in action, not in looks), creating a single-gender text (Kipnis 1996), as a hyperbole of patriarchy. As Stringer (2002, 19) points out, parody of any sort ‘can reproduce the pleasures of a prior text while simultaneously interrogating the assumptions upon which that pleasure is based’ (19). Thus, porn parody *works* simply because it articulates sexuality within popular culture. Similarly, slash fiction *works* simply because it is making a statement about the heteronormativity of mainstream culture. In both respects, we can see how these critiques function through the lens of the carnivalesque. Both porn parody and slash fan fiction represent the coming together of sex, culture, and audience. Just as fan studies aims at using fan work to illustrate the activity of all readers, pornographic parody can be used as

a way of articulating the sexual undercurrents evident in all mainstream media. Through an obvious focus on sex, pornographic parodies highlight and underscore our cultures' reliance on bodily sexuality as a key trope in contemporary media.

### Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Carolyn Bronstein and Debbie Pressman, for offering advice in the writing of this article. The author also wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on revision.



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