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# Raw fantasies. An interpretative sociology of what bareback porn does and means to French gay male audiences

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Abstract: This chapter uses John Gagnon and William Simon’s sexual script theory in order to make sense of gay men’s relation to barebacking fantasies. Bracketing moral panics, it proposes an interpretative sociology of how gay men who enjoy watching barebacking pornography account for the relation between their pornographic fantasies and their sexual realities. Barebacking pornography is a controversial entertainment that relies on an eroticized focus on condomless “raw” and “juicy” anal penetration. It emerged in the US in the late 1990s and mainstreamed over the decade of the 2000s in France, while HIV were remaining high among gay men. Based on the analysis of sixteen in-depth interviews, this chapter analyzes how the sexual subjectivities of HIV-positive and HIV-negative gay men have been differently fragmented by moral panics regarding the carnal appeal of barebacking fantasies.

The word “barebacking” originates in North American rodeo culture, where it refers to riding a horse without a saddle. In the 1990s, while the experience of HIV seropositivity is profoundly transformed for those who benefit from the arrival and enhancement of antiretroviral therapies, this expression is re-signified in North American HIV positive gay male subcultures to refer to the pleasures of condomless anal sex and bodily fluids exchange (Rofes 1998; Adam 2005; Race 2007; Dean 2009). As Barry Adam stresses, barebacking is a specifically poz’ and metropolitan invention “that makes sense in [the] particular context (...) of major cities where a critical mass of HIV positive men have lived in a close proximity over years, have formed social networks and have developed a micro-culture of ideas and expectations” (2005: 343).

Crossing sexual and national frontiers, barebacking has become a slippery signifier and may now refer, both in scientific and everyday life language, to any kind of condomless anal sex

between men, regardless of the context in which it takes place (Berg 2009; Girard 2013), although scientific discourse most often reserves the use of the word to intentional unprotected anal intercourse<sup>1</sup> among white middle-class gay-identified men of the Global North. Pronounced with French accent and sometimes translated as “*nokapote*” (slang for “no condom”), this signifier crosses the Atlantic and emerges in the French public sphere in the late 1990s as a label for a new public health problem: gay men’s growing attraction for unprotected anal intercourse (Broqua 2006; Le Talec 2007; Girard 2013).

Focusing on raw anal sex and juicy ejaculations spilling into mucous orifices, barebacking pornography emerges in the 1990s as a transgression of the safe-sex rule that had been established in the US gay porn industry in the late 1980s (Patton 1991; Escoffier 2007: 239-241, 342). Original bareback porn studios, such as Treasure Island Media, frame this transgression of safer-sex rules in a broader subcultural aesthetic of transgression composed of tattoos, piercings, working-class masculinity, group sex and watersports (Dean 2009: 97-144). Although it is most of excluded from institutional gay spaces dedicated to watching and celebrating gay porn (saunas, sex clubs, magazines, awards ceremonies), barebacking pornography gets increasingly popular in France throughout the 2000s, especially through online studio Eric Videos<sup>2</sup>. Bloggers specialize in the activity of gathering what they consider to be the best of online bareback porn video<sup>3</sup>, and specialized online communities<sup>4</sup> (Mowlabocus 2007, 2010a) as well as mainstream porn tubes (Mowlabocus 2010b) open spaces for the commenting and sharing of both studio- and home-produced barebacking pornographies. The collaborative creation and management of tags on 2.0 Internet porn

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<sup>1</sup> “Unprotected anal intercourse”, translation of the French “*rappports non protégés*” refers to public health discourses over condomless anal sex. “Condomless anal sex” is used in this chapter as a more neutral label, as opposed to the ideological and affective load of both “unprotected anal intercourse” and “barebacking” labels.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ericvideos.com>

<sup>3</sup> See for instance blogs such *Trou à jus* (<http://www.trouajus.fr>), literally “cum hole”, and *Le Blog de Chris* (<http://blog-de-chris.erog.fr>)

<sup>4</sup> The most important French-speaking online community is *Bareback Zone*: <http://www.bbackzone.com>

platforms implies that a “bareback” browsing can nowadays lead to very diverse content: vintage “pre-condom” 1970s gay pornography, contemporary gay amateur couple videos, as well as bisexual, transgender or straight porn videos. Through this process, the signifier “barebacking” loosens, and representations of gay unprotected anal intercourse move from scarce and confidential in the 1990s to abundant and accessible within a single click from any computer connected to the Internet in the 2010s.

In the meantime, declarations of unprotected anal intercourse with sexual partners of unknown HIV status, as well as HIV incidence rates, remain high (Broqua et al. 2003; Bozon and Doré 2007). The relation between the mainstreaming of barebacking pornography and high declarations of unprotected anal intercourse is most often, both in the international scientific literature and in the French political debate, framed in terms of causality: condomless gay pornography should be if not banned, at least more regulated, because “exposure” to its images triggers HIV risk-taking<sup>5</sup>. Meanwhile, the queer debate tends to oppose a heroic celebration to an apocalyptic condemnation of barebacking practices, alternately producing portrayals of “barebackers” as morally abject or icons of a new resistance.

### **Sexual Scripts and Cultural Studies**

Moving beyond these interpretations of the phenomenon, this chapter proposes a sociological understanding of how different gay men have differently invested the scenarios of barebacking pornography over the past fifteen years in France. Following the path of audience ethnography developed within Cultural Studies (Morley 1980; Radway [1984] 1991) this

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<sup>5</sup> What is rarely taken into account in these discussions is that gay men also watch condomless straight porn and that condomless gay porn is watched by both male and female, straight and queer audiences

approach broadens the narrow focus on the spectator/video relation of the “direct media effect” paradigm<sup>6</sup> and takes into account the wide range of reception practices – from surfing to archiving, from watching to fantasizing, from masturbating to cruising, from celebrating to despising and from hiding to sharing – through which the images, sounds, texts and objects of barebacking pornography are materially embodied and discursively articulated by audiences. These practices are here considered as a pointer to how gay male subjectivities have been affected by the relative dilution of fragments of barebacking culture into mainstream gay culture over the last fifteen years. The aim is on the one hand to understand how the pleasures and meanings of barebacking pornography are shaped by audiences’ trajectories and contexts, and, on the other hand, to understand how bareback porn reception practices shape in return gay men’s sexual subjectivities (Foucault et al. 1988).

The argument is based on the analysis of face-to-face interviews with sixteen gay and bisexual men<sup>7</sup> I have met in the context of an ethnographic investigation conducted in Paris and its surroundings between 2008 and 2012<sup>8</sup>, on the broader theme of the social uses of pornography and the constructions of masculinity. Out of these sixteen interviewees, thirteen are HIV-negative, three are HIV-positive, and ages range from 24 to 54. The group studied has unfortunately little class and race diversity as, out of sixteen participants, fifteen identify as “white” and ten have management, intellectual or liberal profession occupations. If some prefer straight pornography, all watch gay pornography on regular basis. Three say they only

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<sup>6</sup> The “direct media effect” paradigm, which dominates the public debate over porn audiences, relies on the hypothesis of a direct effect of media representations upon audience behavior. This paradigm is intensively criticized by media scholars since the 1950s but remains hegemonic when the issue of pornography’s “effect” is raised (Attwood, 2007)

<sup>7</sup> As I collected little material on bisexual men’s sexual relation to women, this chapter does not question this group’s specific relation to barebacking. It should also be noted that all participants are cisgendered and that gay FtM’s specific relation towards HIV prevention remains unaddressed in most of the “barebacking” scholarship.

<sup>8</sup> This research was made possible by a three years doctoral scholarship granted by the French National Research Agency on AIDS and Viral Hepatitis (ANRS).

watch “safe<sup>9</sup>” pornography while thirteen say they are more intensely turned on by barebacking pornography. This chapter focuses on these last thirteen spectators; in other words on the very audience that has been framed as a “problem” by the “direct media effect” discourse.

The analysis of these spectators’ discourse calls upon John Gagnon’s and William Simon’s (Gagnon and Simon 2003) conceptualization of the complex and contextual relations between “cultural scenarios” (here, barebacking pornography), “intrapsychic scripts” (the subjective reworking of its images, sounds and texts) and “interpersonal scripts” (gay and bisexual men’s risk-reduction practices with their partners). With no pretention of uncovering unconscious motivations, I am only interested in the link between barebacking videos (“cultural scenarios”) and risk reduction practices (“intrapsychic scripts”) as this link is discursively and reflexively articulated by spectators themselves. I put aside the unanswerable question of whether or not participants told me the truth about their practices, and can only rely on the sincerity displayed by the majority of the participants. In order to understand how the fantasy/reality divide operates in the sexual subjectification logics of different barebacking porn spectators, I compare two opposed configurations: HIV-negative spectators who declare protected anal sex with all their partners on the one side, and HIV-positive spectators who declare condomless anal sex with (presumed) occasional seroconcordant partners on the other side. Table 1 exposes how the thirteen spectators who say they are more intensely turned on by barebacking pornography account for their risk reduction strategies with their sexual partners.

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<sup>9</sup> Even in francophone contexts, pornography featuring condoms is commonly referred to as “safe”. This does not mean that all pornography featuring condoms provides good labour conditions for its performers or that it is effective at promoting safer-sex towards its audience.

	<i>Protected anal sex with all partners</i>	<i>Condomless anal sex with (presumed) seroconcordant boyfriend</i>	<i>Condomless anal sex with (presumed) seroconcordant occasional partners</i>
<i>HIV-positive</i>	Gaëtan <sup>10</sup> (gay, 35)	---	Laurent (gay, 42) Bruno (gay, 53)
<i>HIV-negative</i>	Stéphane (bisexual, 24) Frédéric (gay, 28) Matteo (gay, 30) Michel (bisexual, 43) Marc (bisexual, 47) Bernard (gay, 54)	Antoine (gay, 35) Jean-Claude (gay, 52)	Sébastien (gay, 37) Pascal (gay, 46)

*Table 1. The five ways in which bareback porn spectators account for risk reduction strategies*

### **“Raw” pleasure: defining a common basis to audiences’ enjoyment of bareback porn**

The context of these interviews, in which bareback porn emerges as a topic, is that of a conversation between two gay porn spectators with no direct social ties, who meet through an announcement spread through a gay dating website, an online barebacking forum, a gay library, the mailing list of a bisexual organization, as well as informal friendship networks. The conversations last from one to six hours. I did not use the “barebacking” label unless the interviewee does so, because the stigma this label carries can lead to self-censorship, as well as to leave as open as possible the range of signification associated to the absence of condoms on screen. The word’s first occurrence is most often in answer to the questions “Is the type of sex you enjoy watching also the type of sex you enjoy having?” and “does the presence or

<sup>10</sup> Participants’ names are modified in order to guarantee anonymity. The interviews have been recorded after oral consent on part of the participants. They have then been integrally transcribed from oral to written for analysis.

absence of the condom on screen makes a difference?” Another question I ask at the end of the interview is “what do you think about the current concern over the effects of condomless porn over audiences’ prevention practices?” As with Laurent, this last question is often answered ironically: “Well, you know I bought a few straight porn videos, and yet I never took the plunge to heterosexuality [we both laugh]!”

By taking distances with the concern over direct effects (for instance through this conniving laugh with Laurent) and by encouraging (mainly through nodding and smiling) descriptions of gut reactions of pleasure and disgust, as well as aesthetic considerations on the matters and textures of pornographic images, my aim is to prevent spectators from seeing me, a PhD student in sociology funded by a public health institution, as the incarnation of the safe sex rule and to perform disembodied moral postures. Accounting for one’s barebacking fantasies came out as a particularly difficult exercise for participants who are or have been volunteers for AIDS or gay rights organizations in which having such fantasies or consumption practices can be considered as politically unsuitable and shameful. The role I play as an interviewer is to limit the moral rationalization of their fantasies, by eventually sharing my own taste and passion for barebacking pornography.

Following the tradition of queer ethnography (Rubin 2002), this investigation develops an “interpretative” approach in the weberian sense that it parts from the subjective meaning (Weber [1922] 1978) bareback porn spectators give to their own reception practices; a subjective meaning which is necessarily reconstructed (Radway [1984] 1991: 5) both by the interactional context of the interview in which it is performed, and by my own contingent reconstruction of what this or that barebacking porn video might feel like (Probyn 1993 ;



Ahmed and Stacey 2001: 1-17) to different other queer male bodies, that have a different history than mine, which is young and (so far) HIV-negative.

Most interviewees use the word “bareback” as a synonym for condomless pornography. Through this word, the absence of the condom is articulated with larger significations. To my first question about their pornographic preferences, Pascal and Michel, two bareback porn enthusiasts, respectively open their answer by “Well I like very hardcore videos, with barebacking and a lot of very extreme stuff” and “What I appreciate is the whole bareback thing”. When I asked Didier, a bareback porn despiser, whether the presence or absence of condom on screen makes a difference, his answer is: “no, it doesn’t, condoms do not bother me, its part of those natural things. It’s not a choice criterion. And I would even say... that bareback porn often involves some violent stuff... that turns me off.” “The whole barebacking thing”, “very hardcore”, “extreme”, “violent”: in most of its first occurrences, the word “barebacking” is used to signify ranges of pleasures and disgusts which largely exceeds the mere absence of the condom on screen. Here is how Laurent accounts for the pleasure he gets from the moving images produced by Eric Videos, a studio that frames, in a French translation of the North American barebacking imagery, condomless anal sex within a broader aesthetic composed of S&M, watersports and sportswear fetishism, amateur-like “authenticity” and “proximity”, as well as butch masculinity, alternately emphasized through reference to muscle, body hair, heterosexual, working class and/or “Arab” and “Black” attitudes<sup>11</sup>:

*I like Eric Videos a lot. You know it’s this guy named Eric – he’s on Bareback*

*Zone actually – who lives in Paris. And just as me, he’s good at cruising straight*

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<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of race and class politics of representation in French gay male pornography see (Cervulle and Rees-Roberts 2010: 51-80)

*dudes! For me, that's the ultimate trip: meeting a straight guy, taking care of him, wanking together, and eventually fucking hardcore. It's even better if it's in an orgy and you get serial-fucked. I like to transpose and to imagine I'm in his place when I watch the videos. [...] What I enjoy watching is entangled bodies, with big cocks... The purest state of... The most animal version of a dude's body you can think of. With body hair. With direct action and little talk. No scenario. An amateur, homemade image. Between buddies. And in exciting, natural places: a toilet, a bar, a hotel room, with this guy who arrives by surprise and fucks the other raw. (Laurent)*

The polysemy of the word “raw”, translation of French words “*cru*” (uncooked, blunt, graphic, harsh, crude) and “*brut*” (untreated, unrefined, rough, gross), is probably the best at seizing the articulation of meaning at work in the enjoyment of bareback porn. This raw intensity contrasts, in the discourse of these thirteen bareback porn spectators, with the “artificial”, “featureless”, “clinical”, “plain”, “bland” and “polished” imagery of safe porn (elements subsumed in the French word “*lisse*”).

### **The place of bareback porn in the construction of barebacking sexual careers**

In sociology of deviance, a “career” (Becker 1964) refers to the genesis and development of activities considered by a moral majority as “deviant”, drawing attention on the social processes through which contested subcultural experiences and identities emerge. This notion is here used in the context of sexual safety norms, in order to account for the subjective transformations at work in some gay men’s transition, from the respect to the transgression of the condom use norm with occasional partners.

Bruno, Laurent and Sébastien are all three in long-term gay relationships and express mostly their sexuality outside of the couple, with occasional partners. Their engagement in what they label as “barebacking” sex is concomitant with a disengagement from couple sex. Bruno, now 53 and HIV-positive, starts this transition in the late 1990s when HIV-negative, at a time when bareback porn video is still very confidential in France. Laurent, 42, turns to both bareback porn and practices in the mid-2000s, ten years after his HIV-positive diagnosis. Sébastien, 37 and HIV-negative, only discovers barebacking in the late 2000s. Each of these three gay men articulates different narratives of how a fraction of gay men have invested emerging barebacking “cultural scenarios” (barebacking pornography), “intra-psychic scripts” (raw fantasies) and “interpersonal scripts” (not using condoms with occasional partners) throughout the decade of the 2000s. Bruno first discovers condomless sex, then discovers bareback porn, and only then turns HIV-positive:

*All started when, one day, in Le Far West, this porn theater that used to be in the Strasbourg-Saint-Denis neighborhood... I was in a cabin, sucking a guy... And he came into my mouth, by surprise. And I caused a fuss! I grabbed the guy... I'm not a violent person at all, I never learned to fight... But I grabbed the guy, I took him out of the cabin and started yelling at him: "You're nothing but a scumbag! How can you do this?!" I was so angry. And once I had yelled, I dissolved into tears... So that was in 1997. The following year, in another context, I started having domination/submission relations with some guys. I was especially seeing a guy in Toulouse, in the South West of France. I saw him two or three times. A first time during the summer, in July I guess. Then I came back to visit him in October. This is when he fucked me raw. Tthis time my reaction was completely different,*

*because I had the impression of discovering something. It made me anxious. I was feeling guilty and thinking “you shouldn’t be doing this, you shouldn’t. Stop. Stop. Stop.” It’s the story of the angel and the devil: the angel says “stop” and the devil says “have fun”. And the “have fun” won. It triggered something new in my sexuality. Not straight away; I didn’t rush into it. But it affected me. I started having this kind of practices around 2000-2001. From time to time. Having fun. Feeling guilty. And it is like this, by meeting partners who had such practices, that I discovered bareback porn. If I remember well, the very first bareback porn movie I saw was in an orgy I had at a partner’s house, with three or four guys [...] I remember I was stunned and captivated by what I was seeing. To see a movie like this with hot guys, beautiful, well hung... It was something new and different... Because at that time so many people were ill or had already died... So to see gay men that were clearly not so young, in good shape, super beautiful and super hot... It was an unsettling contrast. [...] So I went to Bareback Zone to know more, because I really felt the need to be part of a community, to have people who could understand me. Because it is disturbing to have such kind of practices. [...] Before discovering it on screen I discovered it by doing it and living it. Sometimes you discover things in porn and then do them. Sometimes it’s the opposite. [...] In the space of 3 or 4 years my relation to all this completely changed. (Bruno)*

Laurent moves from a small city in the South West of France to work and live in Paris in 1991, at the age of 22. The early 1990s is a moment in which he discovers metropolitan gay culture, with an emphasis on its sexual dimension (cruising bars, night clubs, sex shops and porn theaters), after what he describes as sexually frustrating teenage years. His intimate

sexual world becomes deeply influenced by Jean-Noël René Clair's<sup>12</sup> porn movies featuring “authentic” firemen and soldiers. He discovers his HIV-positive status in 1994 and rapidly finds a medical treatment that suits him. His taste for bareback porn only develops ten years later, in 2005, at the very moment when this entertainment becomes highly controversial. While bareback porn is attacked by AIDS activists (Act Up Paris 2005) and censored on French television (Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, 2006), it is also intensely debated on an online barebacking community he starts frequenting: “I discovered bareback porn at this time, first through a guy I met on Bareback Zone, and then, through the magazines, I discovered there were people against it, arguing it was degrading and dangerous. This fiendish side of it attracted me. And I started buying some.” Laurent buys his first Treasure Island DVDs during touristic trips to Berlin and Amsterdam, that he then shares and exchanges with HIV-positive fuck buddies. In the meantime, Laurent, in a similar way to Bruno, turns to new ways of dealing with prophylactics in his online sexual interactions: “First I tackle the issue of sexuality, of seropositivity. If the guy wants to fuck without condoms, we fuck without condoms. If he wants to fuck with condoms, we fuck with condoms. Most of the time, on Grindr<sup>13</sup> it's with condoms, unless the guy puts it really clear in the conversation that this is what he wants. If I want to fuck without condoms it's with HIV-positive guys, and rather on Bareback Zone.” Sébastien only develops a temptation for condomless sex after having discovered bareback porn, while remaining HIV-negative:

*It's with the apparition of bareback porn, turning to videos with cum eating, that I started to let go, and to allow myself these practices, about two or three years ago.*

*It's true that the apparition of condomless porn... and you know even in porn with*

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Noël René Clair was together with Jean-Daniel Cadinot the main French porn director in the 1990s. He is famous for staging “heterosexual” men masturbating in front of a camera within the minimalist, amateur-like, manly aesthetic of a locker room.

<sup>13</sup> Grindr is a geolocalized smartphone application “for gay, bi and curious guys” which is most often used for instantaneous casual sex

*condoms, there's more and more cum eating going on... Anyways, watching it also changed my sexual practices. I think it's also because I desperately wanted it, and it really makes me high. Because I see it like a trip. So what is the cause and what is the effect? It's hard to tell. Is it because this desire is inside me, because I desire it so much, that I end up giving way to the temptation. Or is it because I watch bareback videos that I do what I do? I sincerely think that bareback video has influenced me. And I make no moral judgment on this. I will never blame a video, or society, or whatever, on this. I really don't make any moral judgment. I just try to understand, to read articles, to inform myself. [...] Even if I'm careful, if I measure the risks I take, even if I get tested regularly, even if I raise the issue and try to discuss it as much as possible with my partners... It still pisses me off. Because once you taste condomless sodomy, especially as a top, after this, using a condom becomes really boring. [...] I have trouble living with it. Not so much in other people's eyes, because it shouldn't be any of their concern. But it's for myself. It pisses me off.*

While Sébastien remains reluctant, Laurent and Bruno intensely invest barebacking fantasies. Bruno writes his own barebacking sexual stories, posts them on an online forum dedicated to the sharing of barebacking sexual fantasies, as well as he reads and comments the sexual stories of other amateur writers. His stories are inspired both by his own sexual adventures and the performances of his favorite porn performer, Peto Coast<sup>14</sup>. These writings are in part motivated by dissatisfaction with the genre's dominant gonzo style and lack of scenario, which Bruno regrets, and likes to enrich in his personal imagination and style. In order make his interest in bareback porn as discrete as possible, thus preventing conflict with his

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<sup>14</sup> Peto Coast is a porn star from Netherlands branded as an “agressive top” who is very popular among bareback porn spectators after having performed for Machofucker Studios and Eric Videos.

boyfriend, Bruno never purchases bareback DVDs and only watches videos on his personal laptop. Laurent has a gigantic collection of US bareback porn videos, to which he is strongly attached. He puts in parallel the way 1990s gay porn participated in his coming to terms as gay with the way 2000s bareback porn participated in his coming to terms as a sexually active HIV-positive man, referring to the latter as his “second coming-out”.

In the narratives of Laurent and Bruno, porn reception practices appear central to the construction of barebacking sexual careers. Watching, fantasizing, collecting, rewriting, sharing and debating barebacking pornography contribute to the development of a barebacking subcultural sensibility. The tense domestic cohabitation of “immoral” bareback porn DVD boxes and Internet archives on the one hand, and appalled, moralizing boyfriends on the other hand, moreover reveals the stigmatization logics of “barebackers” at work in mainstream normative gay culture. However different in their succession and relation, these shifts in pornographic tastes, personal fantasies and prophylactics are described as a turn towards a set of fantasies, sensations, emotions, self-representations and relations to others which draw the contours of new sexual experiences and sexual worlds which can be subsumed in the expression “culture of barebacking” or “barebacking subculture,” once the notion of subculture is ridden from presumptions of unity and coherence (Race 2007; Dean 2009).

### **Consonant and dissonant pleasures: thinking the variety of connections between fantasy and reality**

In order to compare different forms of connection with and appropriation of barebacking pornography, table 2 distinguishes two ideal-typical ways in which images resonate

(Paasonen, 2011) with the sex audiences have with their partners, and with how they identify sexually. The middle column presents the words participants most often use to say how bareback porn can be consonant with their practices and identities. The right column symmetrically lists the expressions used to signify dissonance between pornographic fiction and lived reality.

<i>Bareback porn is...</i>	<i>consonant</i>	<i>dissonant</i>
<i>... with the sex I have with my partners</i>	Feel Transpose Remember What I like to do	What I do not do What I cannot do What I should not do What we used to do before AIDS
<i>... with how I identify sexually</i>	Confirm Coming to terms	Only a fantasy I separate my fantasies from my reality I do not make a fixation

*Table 2. Two ideal-typical forms of subjective connection with bareback porn*

There are certainly many practices Bruno, Laurent and Sébastien enjoy watching in bareback porn but never put into practice. One of Laurent’s unfulfilled fantasies is for instance bottoming in a bukkake and getting “splashed with sperm by many guys at the same time.” Their relation to bareback porn can nevertheless be described as consonant as far as what they enjoy watching positively echoes the condomless sex they have with occasional partners and how (in the case of Laurent and Bruno) they identify as HIV-positive gay men. All three describe how they can transpose the sounds and images of bareback porn into embodied memories, or “somatic archives” (Paasonen 2011: 202-204) of how bareback sex feels and tastes like to them: “when I get sucked and the guy takes my juice in the mouth, it really turns



me on. And it works the same the opposite way: when I suck a cock and the guy comes in my mouth, I love it. I love feeling this cock jolting. And I can feel this in videos. I mean: I transpose the real life pleasure in the video” (Sébastien). Laurent and Bruno also frame their relation to bareback porn in terms of positive identification. They “recognize” (Laurent) themselves in the bodies and practices depicted and say it has played an important part in their self- “realization” (Bruno).

For spectators who have as little unprotected anal sex as possible, bareback porn can still be consonant with a gay kinky lifestyle organized around casual sex, group sex and gender power play. Although Jean-Claude insists on the fact that he is very strict on condom use, his bareback porn tastes and his own sexual adventures are closely tied up and influence each other. His discourse recurrently goes back and forth between descriptions of his enjoyment and fascination of the Eric Videos studio films and the persona he performs when cruising on online chats and in saunas. The narrative around “Eric”, a 40 years old bottom who videotapes his rough sexual encounters, has indeed many similarities with the way Jean-Claude accounts for his own sex life, who loves being photographed and videotaped while performing intense bottoming. The character of Eric is alternately presented in his discourse as a mirror and as an ideal of his sexual life style and persona, at the crossroads of what he likes to do and what he would like to do if he was in better physical shape, as Jean-Claude’s sexual activity is diminished by health problems.

The emphatically masculine gender performances common in barebacking pornographies can also echo – most often within gender normative constructions<sup>15</sup> – gay male audiences’ own attraction to and/or identification with butch masculinity. Matteo repeatedly insists on his will

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<sup>15</sup> See the work of Richard Dyer ([1985] 1992) for an analysis of the conventional constructions of masculinity in US gay pornography

and capacity to dissociate his barebacking pornographic fantasies from his own “safe” sexual life. This 30 years old HIV-negative gay man however frames his taste for Treasure Island Media scenarios in the broader taste for hot hardcore sex involving masculine hairy men, that can eventually be performed with condoms: “what I like in bareback porn is that it’s usually more passionate. The guys are sweaty and you can feel the heat of their blood through their skin. It’s not too nice, not too reflexive. They’re really into it! This is particularly strong in Treasure Island Media, but you can also find it in studios that are not bareback, such as Cazzo<sup>16</sup>. What I’m looking for is first the hair and the muscle, and then the violence of the relation. It doesn’t have to be S&M, but it has to be intense.”

### **The place of bareback porn is the construction of “safe” realities**

While bareback porn is conceived by Bruno and Laurent as an entertainment made by and for HIV-positive gay men invested in barebacking subculture (and it initially was), bareback porn’s main audience seems nowadays composed in the majority of HIV-negative men who have little knowledge and experience of barebacking culture, and who use condoms as often as possible for anal sex. The only moment when this latter category of spectators gets to fearlessly feel the raw and juicy sensations of condomless sex and internal ejaculation is through the audiovisual mediation of bareback porn. Also contrasting with Laurent and Bruno’s intense investment into bareback porn culture, the will “not to make a fixation” on barebacking and to dissociate barebacking “fantasy” from their own “reality” is at the center of this spectatorship.

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<sup>16</sup> Cazzo Films is a Berlin based studio which has produced and distributed over eighty films since 1996, of which very few are bareback

In this audience's discourse, the pleasant reading of barebacking porn as being about fluid "freedom" is contrasted with a sexual experience "constrained" by surrounding risks. For these spectators the investment of the barebacking imagery as being all about "freedom", beyond "limits" and "boundaries" is to be understood in contrast with the rules and anxieties which organize their affective relation to their partners' bodies.

In a similar way in which porn companies such as Falcon Studios reframe pre-condom videos as "bareback", the pre-AIDS era is often recalled, both by audiences who have known this period *and* by audiences who are too young to have so, as an era of "sexual liberation" in which "everything was possible" because HIV transmission risk was absent. Bernard, who was 27 in 1981, when appeared the first cases of what soon became known as AIDS, feels "it is obvious that it is easier to fantasize on unprotected sex, even more for a generation as [his], that has lived at a time when sex was completely liberated of all that." Pascal, 46, never really got used to latex protection, often "slips away" from the safe sex rule, and recalls a remote "lost paradise" of the "two or three years before the arrival of AIDS" in which he discovered gay promiscuous sex in the cruising areas of Parisian public parks.

Although Antoine has condomless anal sex with his seroconcordant HIV-negative boyfriend and is too young to have known the pre-AIDS era, he still invests this narrative of nostalgia which opposes current limitations to past freedom: "what I like in bareback porn is that the sex is totally liberated from the constraints of the condom. The ejaculation is totally free. I guess it reminds us the times before AIDS, when there wasn't so much drama going on, when we didn't have all these constraints, where we weren't afraid. So bareback porn frees us from the prevention that is imposed upon us in our everyday lives."

This account of watching bareback porn as returning fictionally to a “lost Eden” is also present in the discourse of Gaëtan, an HIV-positive gay man who used to have a multi-partner sexual life (including a one-year career as a porn performer) and who is now in a sexually exclusive relationship with his HIV-negative boyfriend, who is hostile to his former porn career and to his on-going taste for bareback porn: “It’s the sexuality I used to have and I can’t have anymore since I’m HIV-positive. So probably I’m looking for a kind of lost Eden [ironic laugh]! [...] Before I did not have this constraint, but now I have to protect my partner. [...] In real life, there is this barrier, this fear, that you don’t have in porn. In porn, in fantasy, you can let go. But in real life you must pay attention to the condom, to not coming in the mouth, etc. When I watch a porn video, I don’t want to see this boring and frustrating stuff [laughs]! I mean: what’s the point?” The rhetoric of catharsis is often associated to the fantasy/reality opposition: watching porn is framed as a practice through which tensions are “expelled” (Gaëtan) and which provides an emotional “resource” (Pascal) for gay men who long for condomless anal sex and try to resist the temptation.

Another common way of connecting with bareback porn, among HIV-negative audiences whose only contact with barebacking culture is an occasional masturbation session on a porn tube video, is to represent it as the strange, exotic spectacle of the moral “other”. Frédéric, a 28 years old gay man, watches time to time bareback videos on the Internet because they tend to focus on the pornographic “numbers” (Williams [1989] 1999: 120-152) that most titillate him: “enormous orgasms” and “abundant ejaculations.” Although he gets pleasure from its sounds and images, Frédéric holds a generally negative opinion on the morality of bareback porn: “I think it’s bad. But anyways they often warn before the video: “not to be imitated.” And I don’t think people are stupid. We know enough about AIDS. If you want to self-destruct, it’s your problem!” For Frédéric, “real life” bareback sex can only be about “stupid

[...] self-destruction”. This negative moral judgment fits in with his broader negative vision of sexual promiscuity, multi-partnership and public sex that he articulates: “I see depressed people who accept to be fucked without condoms in a cellar, in front of other people... and among gays, it’s very widespread! It freaks me out to see so many deranged guys. And it’s the same at Le Dépôt<sup>17</sup>: it’s dark, with people, sweat, you cannot see who’s touching you... I don’t like these sexual places where there is this violence, this consumption. I want a place where I feel good, clean.” For Frédéric, the spectacle of bareback sex has to occur in a “clean” domestic setting, which should be saved from the “dirty” reality behind the images. This overlapping of the fantasy/reality and dirty/clean oppositions can in this case participate in the construction of a gay male HIV-negative identity “protected” through the marginalization of both HIV-positive people and kinky sexual lifestyles and practices, associated with “risk”.

When Antoine says that “even if it’s attractive in fantasy, it’s something that I keep off from, by security and self-esteem, so there’s clearly a gap between what we accept to watch, what we’re attracted to, and what we do in real life”, he similarly highlights how the divide between barebacking “fantasies” and a safe “reality” can be taken in an opposition between the “destructive” and the “constructive”, in which the essentialized “barebacking” entity serves as a foil to highlight the health, reason and safety of people who have sex with condoms. Another form of exoticization of bareback sex at work in HIV-negative audiences can be its investment as an essentially “fiendish” and “transgressive” world. Michel, a 43 years-old bisexual man, who just got out of 15 years of heterosexual marriage during which he had to hide from his wife to watch gay porn, is thrilled by the vision of bareback sex “because it is [insists] the ultimate transgression... something [he] watch[es] precisely because [he] would never do it in his everyday life.” For Jean-Claude, who excitedly yet

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<sup>17</sup> Le Dépôt is the largest and most popular gay male sex club in Paris. It sets a dark construction site atmosphere.

hesitatingly handles the vocabulary of bareback culture, the mysterious resonance of slang words and urban myths participates in the thrill of the entertainment.

### **Conclusion: Dissonant scripts and fragmented subjects**

Considering that “since the late 1970s, anal sex had become the narrative focal point of gay porn” (Escoffier, 2009: 185), the arrival of condoms at the end of the 1980s with safe porn and its removal with the arrival of bareback porn at the end of the 1990s represent two major shifts in the history of the explicit depiction of gay male sex. When connected with stubbornly HIV incidence statistics among gay men, this cultural transformation is too often misread as an effect of “barebacking” pornography over “barebacking” practices.

The analysis of audiences’ discourse evidences that the opposition between “bareback” and “safe”, far from neutrally describing the presence and the absence of condoms, articulates with a wider range of oppositions such as hardcore/softcore, kinky/vanilla, extreme/classic, deviant/normal and dirty/clean. The overlapping of these oppositions means that pornographic scenes representing condomless anal penetrations or ejaculations in the mouth tend to be less spontaneously decoded as “at risk” when they are not associated with a “deviant”, “extreme”, “barebacking” imagery<sup>18</sup>. Risk indeed tends to be less visible when represented within the “charmed circle” of “good, natural, normal, blessed sexuality” (Rubin, 1984: 281). In a cultural context in which risk is framed within barebacking, and barebacking is framed within (arousing or disgusting) “deviance”, what tends to become invisible is the risk that occurs outside of the barebacking imagery, within the norm: without piercings, tattoos, watersports

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<sup>18</sup> For a more through analysis of similar findings in bareback porn audience studies, see the forthcoming results of the Porn Laid Bare research project conducted in the UK by Justin Harbottle, Sharif Mowlabocus and Charlie Witzel.

and without the filmic hyper-ritualization and extravagant fetishism of sperm implemented in the 1990s by pioneering barebacking pornographers.

A second conclusion is that moralist discourses over bareback porn, far from neutralizing its carnal appeal, actually intensify it. To communicate their pleasure, bareback porn spectators use words such as “filthy”, “dirty” and “degrading”, which are also at the core of the aesthetic, moral and political condemnation of this controversial entertainment. This inversion of moral values relates both to a specifically queer sensibility (Halperin 2007; Edelman 2009) and to a more general trait of commercial pornography, in which “the affective forces of filth become titillating” (Paasonen 2011: 59). This semantic proximity between public displays of pleasure and disgust for barebacking pornography indicates that its images are taken in an “affective economy” (Ahmed 2004: 44-49) by which their moral condemnation in most French public arenas, instead of downplaying their carnal appeal, only limit public declaration of their consumption, while jointly intensifying and privatizing the “fiendish” pleasure of watching them. Barebacking pornography thus becomes the carnal appeal of the “obscene” – etymologically, of what is all together arousing, dirty and secret (Kendrick 1987; Williams 2004). From there, one way of understanding the popularity of barebacking pornography is that it has become the most “pornographic” of all gay pornographies.

A third and last conclusion is that the moral condemnation of bareback porn audiences – even more than the mainstreaming of explicit representations of condomless anal sex itself – has fragmented gay men’s sexual subjectivities. To take up John Gagnon’s and William Simon’s terminology, bareback porn audiences who use condoms as much as possible for anal sex experience conflicting “intra-psychic” and “interpersonal scripts”: if their embodied fantasies, thoughts, tastes and attractions inspired from bareback porn are part of their everyday-life

subjective reality, framing those as “mere fantasies” drifts barebacking away from their public persona and sexual roles. The tensions between “fantasy”, understood as “what I would like to do” and “reality” understood as “what I cannot do” plays an important part in the thrill of the barebacking pornographic entertainment for these spectators: the visual pleasures of watching cannot be separated from an experience of sexual relations as limited and constrained. While gay men engaged in a culture of barebacking have developed new queer bonds through sexual online and offline networks, their former social bonds have only been maintained at the condition of silencing and hiding their investment into barebacking, as their lovers and friends often perceive it as essentially “dangerous”, “ill” and wrong”. In both cases this subjective fragmentation is to be linked with the “barebacker” stigma and the difficulty to publicly speak of one’s own barebacking fantasies.

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