

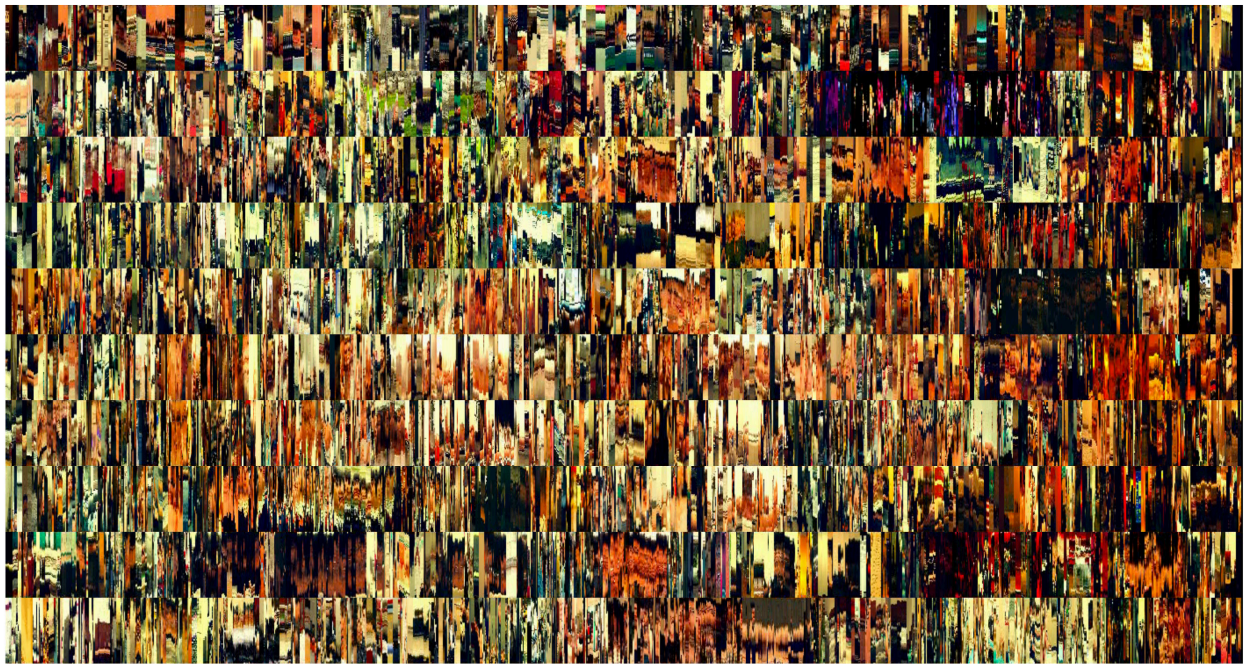
Make Your Own Neverland

Where Nonfiction Film Interacts with Lesbian Porn

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Jonathan Harris's *I Love Your Work* (2013) is an interactive documentary environment that depicts "the realities of those who make fantasies."¹ Alternately referred to by its creator as a film and a portrait, the piece collates fragments of the quotidian lives of nine women who make lesbian pornography. Harris follows each woman for one full day of a consecutive ten-day shooting schedule (one is featured twice), capturing one ten-second video clip every five minutes to create a six-hour timeline of a total of 2,202 clips. The navigable environment is freely previewable, but costs ten dollars per twenty-four hours of access and is limited to ten scheduled views per day, evoking the exclusivity and expense of paywalled online porn sites (a premium package is also available for just three hundred). Harris limits his clips to ten seconds to invoke the format of free teasers that elicit payment from horny surfers, claiming that these "fractured windows... are partially teasers for porn, but primarily teasers for life" and generating what Maria Engberg calls a procedural or combinatory aesthetic (2016, 38). The paradigm-shifting rise of tube sites in the early 2000s brought instantly and freely accessible amateur content, promos linked to subscription-based material (which frequently terminate just before the money shot), and pirated professional video, arranged spatially to allow maximal simultaneous engagement before selection. But Harris's film emerges at a moment when demand for specialized or upmarket, even ethical, pornography is on the rise.² *I Love Your Work* is an innovative and potentially problematic incursion into the privacy of those who make it their business to make public that which is most intimate.

I Love Your Work is a new media artifact, and due to its countless possible permutations, the piece can never be read the same way twice, or perhaps more appropriately, engaged with or participated in twice. Its interface constitutes both an amalgam of the ten concurrent timelines and a rhizomatic tapestry of moments, each of which displays a timecode and the name of its subject. The possibility of conventional formalist textual analysis or close reading is dubious, for in the case of interactive documentary, according to webdocumentarian Alexandre Brachet, "Interface is content" (Rose 2014, 208). Thus, I will attempt to bring my exploration of the material and its database into constellation with two disparate fields of scholarship: feminist (and lesbian-feminist) approaches to lesbian pornography from the aftermath of the mid-eighties feminist sex wars, and more contemporary theoretical analyses of interactive and web documentary practice and spectatorship. It is important here to not consider the emergent



Paradey, Hamilton, Pickett

I Love Your Work

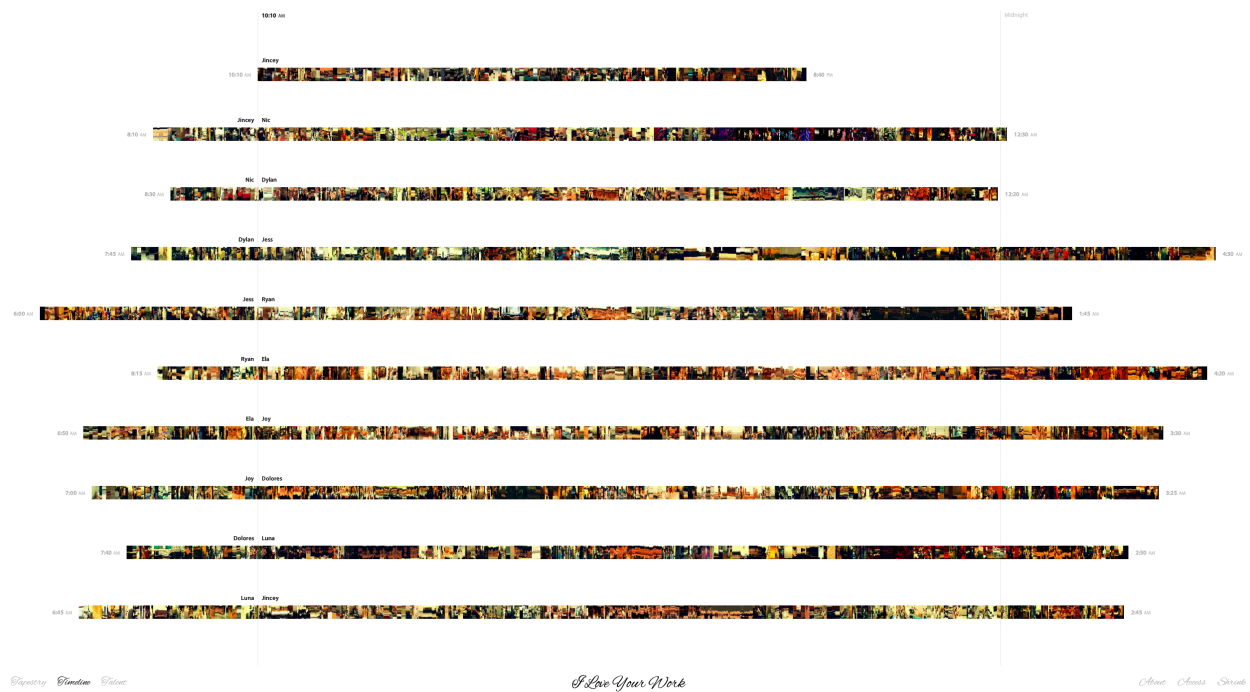
Abate, Amadio, Strick

interactive documentary mode as an innately new, novel, digital evolution of the form, but as Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi suggest, as “a form of nonfiction narrative that uses action and choice, immersion and enacted perception as ways to construct the real, rather than to represent it” (2012, 125).

A number of complexities and potential problematics arise, for I am dealing with a male-authored text that presents the female body both in the context of private life (see scopophilia and voyeurism in dominant cinema) and erotic lesbian imagery (so often appropriated or exploited in mainstream porn for the heterosexual male gaze). What can it mean that *I Love Your Work* shares in so many ways a point of access, however reflexively, with cyberporn? Does limited voyeurism (thanks to the ten-seconds-every-five-minutes model) actually succeed in interrupting or interrogating scopophilic pleasure? How do scrubbing the image and toggling between coincident timelines reflect the actual ephemeral experience of online porn consumption? To what extent can the pleasure of the performer subversively preclude the pleasure of the hidden onlooker? And whose gaze is variously solicited in mainstream heterosexual porn, in mainstream woman/woman porn, in feminist lesbian porn, and in the documentation of the making of feminist lesbian porn?

In *I Love Your Work*, the viewser (a popular portmanteau of viewer and user intended to succeed the traditional cinematic spectator in the field of new media, one that is here remarkably and amusingly apt) participates in the construction of the construction of sexual fantasy. The interface is a mosaic of filmed moments, shot and organized linearly, but nonlinearly navigable, effectively allowing its viewser to edit their own narrative to taste. We are enabled by the precise,

Figure 1.
Tapestry view.



mathematical infrastructure to select and reorganize clips at will, which calls into question the filmic notion of a finished product and refuses the mastery over the image permitted by traditional montage. As the architecture dictates, all clips must end at ten seconds; such truncation precludes the duration needed to gain spectatorial purchase on a character or story, to be sutured into a scene. Time itself is distilled and synthesized, and the sheer number of moments that take place in transit (cab, sidewalk, subway) make us consider how our own time is allocated in urban life. The experience is rhizomatic in the sense that the interface provides interminable and nonhierarchical points of entry and exit and truly infinite navigability between these points, but also because all nine women know or know of each other and exist within a shared community of lesbian porn makers. Beyond the day Harris spends with each of them, many reappear on other days, most often in the context of sex work. Indeed, eight of them are involved, as performers or facilitators, in the production of a ten-part self-pleasure series by Juicy Pink Box Productions called *Therapy* (Jincey Lumpkin, 2010).

As noted, several concepts gleaned from the critical scholarship on lesbian and woman/woman pornography in the context of the feminist sex wars are useful in unpacking Harris's film and its implications, including especially Deborah Swedberg's identification of an oppositional or resistant lesbian pornographic gaze. She suggests that the lesbian consumer of heterosexual male depictions of lesbian sex can in fact reappropriate and reclaim pornographic images of women without sacrificing her pleasure or subjectivity, thus destabilizing the very structure of erotic representation: "As her sexual pleasure is foregrounded, unlike in other contexts, a lesbian may easily fill in the gaps in intelligibility" (Swedberg

Figure 2.
Timeline view.

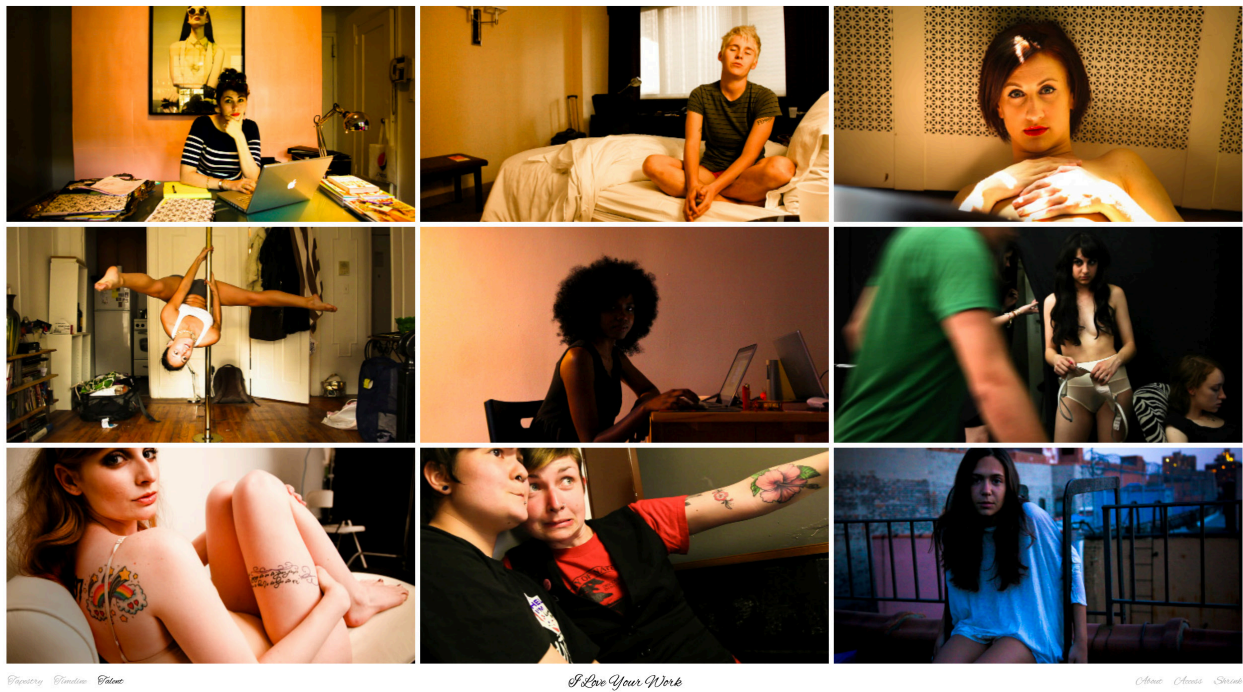
1989, 607). Cherry Smyth similarly attempts to realign pornographic analysis to account for a lesbian gaze and to reclaim lesbian filmic desire as an act of assertion and self-representation. She addresses the significant and subversive absence of the money shot in lesbian porn, arguing that the woman performer signifies “her pleasure by sound and gesture ... Coming, unlike in much heterosexual and gay male porn, does not immediately signal the end of the sexual act and thus the video. This openness challenges the values of dominant cinematic structures which insist on narrative resolution” (Smyth 1990, 156). I find that the interactive architecture of *I Love Your Work* reflects this endlessness native to lesbian porn; there is potentially no end to the film, just as there need be no decisive end to the acts of lesbian sex depicted and discussed therein.

Terralee Bensinger traces a shift from spectator to community in process as collective fantasy (here the Juicy Pink Box community) and demonstrates how a reframing of pro-sex lesbian pornographic activity can disrupt hegemonic representational practices, but most importantly for us, how such a redefinition of community stimulates a displacement into what Teresa de Lauretis calls the realm of elsewhere:

Such spaces are likely to be located at the margins of already existent culture, appearing as gaps or interstices within the dominant representational formations.... These (no)places are what de Lauretis speaks of as the ‘elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations,’ and it is here that the feminist subject, now figured from a lesbian nuanced perspective, can begin to move more freely...onto a pro-sex lesbian scene of desire within which traditional pornographic ‘ways of seeing’ can begin to be deconstructed and transfigured through displacement and re-vision. (Bensinger 1992, 77–78)

In my view, *I Love Your Work* takes place in and renders partially visible this interstitial realm of elsewhere, this (no)place scene of lesbian desire. As Joy, a production assistant and stylist on the set of the *Therapy* series, suggests, “Well, I guess Neverland just, you know, doesn’t exist, so, you can make your own.” Harris’s film solicits us, through interactivity, to fill in Swedberg’s gaps in intelligibility and to construct our own Neverland from the fragments available in de Lauretis’s displaced elsewhere.

Two powerful emblems pervade *I Love Your Work* and so deserve a brief aside. For Heather Butler, the butch, as “the visible marker of lesbianism,” proffers maximum visibility and destabilizes dualist conceptions of gender, overthrowing heterohegemony in the process: “She is the certificate of authenticity in lesbian pornography for lesbians; she turns the screen into a potentially safe space for the visual representation of lesbian desire; and she inspires trust in her lesbian viewers”; in conjunction with the femme, she “can provide us with new ways of viewing pornography” (Butler 2004, 169). Two of the women in *I Love Your Work* identify as “dykes” or “babydykes,” and their presence both in the film and in the film within the film establish authenticity because they constitute a threat to the male porn spectator; by emulating him, they resist being sexually consumed by him, complicating and ultimately wresting from him his scopophilic drive. The



second symbol is that of the dildo, which for Butler importantly “functions as a pleasure-giver, not a pleasure-seeker”; it doesn’t come, stays hard and is detachable, displacing dominant Lacanian ideas of phallic power: “the phallus does indeed belong to any and everyone...[it] is not the penis, but, rather, a detachable, performative, even phantasmic object that nobody owns and that everybody can play with, wear, or discard” (2004, 183). The strap-on in particular provides a kind of agency to its wearer and can, for Smyth, “subvert the potency of the penis by reasserting women’s sexual sufficiency and proving that the woman lover is more powerful than any male rival...[it] signifies the lack of fixity of gender.... Women control the phallus as never before” (1990, 157). As actor and educator Nic, one of the film’s nine performers, puts it, “Sometimes you just want a cock.”

As an interactive environment, *I Love Your Work* constitutes what Gaudenzi calls a “living documentary,” a relational entity based on the dynamic relationships that form between user, author, and code via a human-computer interface and its attendant ecosystem (2013). By her logic, Harris’s film is an adaptive, autopoietic assemblage of interdependent elements. As users, we are “internal to the system. It is not one object ... but a cloud of possibilities that depends on the possible relations between several dynamic systems: a user, an interactive structure, a database of content and a technical and cultural context” (Gaudenzi 2013, 90). *I Love Your Work* also deploys what Marsha Kinder terms database narrative structure, exposing “the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and are crucial to language” and revealing “the arbitrariness of the choices made and thereby challeng[ing] the notion of master narratives

Figure 3.
Talent view.

whose selections are traditionally made to seem natural or inevitable” (2003, 349). The ruptured images intrinsic to *I Love Your Work* carry a subversive potential: they expose the normally hidden architecture of the database and enable us to see (and indeed operate) the narrative engine. For Kinder, “the process of retrieval necessarily involves ideology and desire: where are we permitted to look and what do we hope to find”; such questions are tellingly applicable to the experience of seeking databased porn online (349).

For Adrian Miles, faceted, granular, multilinear works like Harris’s have crystalline structures that irrevocably alter the role of the filmmaker: the filmmaker no longer determines fixed relations between shots through editing, but rather assembles sets of possible relations that will be uniquely realized as permutational sequences by the user in conversation with the interface (Miles 2014). Miles posits that while interactivity “is often regarded as the addition of complexity and choice to what we make and how we view it, it is in fact best considered a reduction, a choreography of the radically open of the virtual and the crystalline through the reducing interest of decision ... reducing the set of all that could be to what is” (2014, 76–7). Finally, Sally McMillan acknowledges the extent to which “interactivity may be in the eye of the beholder,” a sentiment that sounds suspiciously like the old “I know it when I see it” rationale for recognizing and categorizing obscenity and porn without clear parameters (2002, 165).

I hold that by rendering limitedly visible de Lauretis’s realm of elsewhere, her (no)places and blind spots of (re)presentation, and Butler’s potentially safe lesbian screen space, Harris succeeds in effacing the stigma that surrounds lesbian pornographic production without falling prey to the exploitative capacity of (some) traditional nonfiction filmmaking. In turn, he provides us with the tools to fashion our own elsewhere Neverland, consequently placing on us the onus of exploitation and (re)presentation. Elizabeth Cowie observes that documentary film aligns our scopophilic and epistemophilic drives, “a curiosity to know satisfied through sight ... the wish to see what cannot normally be seen, that is, what is normally hidden from sight” (1997). And Belinda Smaill, addressing specifically what she terms the pornography documentary and affective responses that attend the figure of the woman porn star, notes that works at the intersection of the ethnographic and the erotic, those that turn especially on the aestheticization and fetishization of the sexualized female body, necessarily confound both drives—the admixture of these two nonfiction modes forecloses the possibility of being entirely satisfied by either the pleasure represented or the pleasure in knowing the other (Smaill 2009). The pornography documentary ambivalently aims to pull back the curtain on a commercial industry while also offering “a pleasurable viewing experience in which a sexual spectacle is always immanent but almost never fully realized” (2009). Harris’s film betrays forbidden images, but its ruptured multilinearity precludes voyeuristic pleasure. The act of navigating and interacting with *I Love Your Work* achieves in its viewer an embodied hyperawareness of their gaze and choices, productively subverting the traditional safety of pornographic spectatorship via the complicity of constructing a narrative and the juxtaposition

of extreme erotica with the quotidian experience of city dwelling and labour. It is an exposé bereft of exposure.

Regarding the perennial question of authorship, much pornography is subject to the same contradictions of gender and power regardless of authorial intent due to the fact that dominant pornography is always already such a highly codified mode. Like documentary, porn is up to the beholder to assign, interpret, and/or appropriate meaning. Porn can be fruitfully thought of as a predigital interactive mode of image-making and consumption, and in its current networked iterations, according to Harris himself, “is the staging ground for almost every new digital technology ... Porn is the elephant in the room of the Internet.” The spectator is interpellated in a much more significant, dare I say embodied, way than in mainstream film practice and is engaged by a medium intended for arousal, self-pleasure, and masturbation. Linearity is present in porn, but matters less than in other modes, if at all; the rhizomatic, archival, and databased structure of access to online porn in the digital age already involves toggling between clips, fragments, and segments, finding one or several that generate the appropriate desired response in the viewer’s body. Scrubbing the image to locate the money shot and assembling compilations of particularly affective moments are part and parcel of the contemporary porn consumer’s experience of spectatorship. Indeed, porn flicks tend to end not when the narrative or the experiment reaches completion, but when the user does, finishes up, achieves what they came to do. *I Love Your Work* reflects and critiques this pleasurable relation to the image, and succeeds in exposing the apparatus, refusing a fixed spectator position, denying (or at least displacing) pleasure, and (con)fusing modalities of documentary and fiction. It interrogates film language, practice, and the depiction of reality, and constitutes an innovative and productively countercinematic work of visual culture, one that reveals the fantasy hidden in the everyday.

Notes

1. *I Love Your Work* can be found at <http://iloveyourwork.net>, and all quotations attributed to Harris herein appear on the site’s frequently asked questions page.
2. A popular Reddit thread (https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/arhrhi/people_who_pay_for_porn_what_is_everyone_else/) from early 2019 revealed that consumers continue to pay for porn in an era of ostensibly limitless access for a number of reasons beyond evading persistent ads on tube sites, including having niche interests and using novel media (e.g., virtual reality), a partiality for camming and following particular performers (who often end up performing emotional as well as sexual labour for their clients), and millennials’ generational willingness to pay a premium for content they care about (along with a general shift to à la carte subscription-based models in other areas of life and media consumption).

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