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# The subversive potential of queer pornography

## A systemic-functional analysis of a written online text\*

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This paper addresses the question of what potential queer pornography has to subvert hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality. In particular, it engages in the analysis of transitivity and metaphor in an example of queer written online pornography and links this textual analysis to a discussion of the role of text distribution and consumption in realising any subversive potential. The analysis shows that in terms of participant representation, the text reinforces rather than challenges hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality: Although the main protagonists are both ambiguously sexed, patterns of transitivity and use of metaphor construct largely binary gender identities for them, allocating sexual activity to the first-person narrator while casting the Other as passively desiring. In terms of its distribution and consumption, however, the text maintains its subversive potential as it sexualises a public online space and can turn offline public space into a sexual place.

**Keywords:** online discourse, queer discourse studies, space/place, systemic-functional linguistics, transitivity, written pornography

### 1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years or so, there has been an increasing interest in the academic study of pornography, culminating in the launch of the journal *Porn Studies* in 2014. Although research into pornographic texts, both written and visual, can

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be documented as early as the 1960s, such research has largely moved from the areas of law, psychology and history to media studies (e.g. McNair 2002, Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa 2007), anthropology (e.g. Leap 2011) and, less frequently, linguistics (Baker 2004, Koller 2014, Lischinsky 2015; Morrish & Sauntson 2011). The burgeoning interest in the phenomenon since the beginning of the millennium can be linked to socio-cultural changes: As Williams (2004: 1) observes, contemporary pornography studies are notably different from “the kind of agonizing over sexual politics that characterised an earlier era of the study of pornography.” While it is true that radical anti-pornography voices (e.g. Dworkin 1989, Holbrook 1972, MacKinnon 1993) can rarely be heard these days, the “simple fact that ... pornographies have become fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture” has not been met with universal approval or even just indifference (Williams 2004: 1). The “pornification” (Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa 2007) of everyday life, i.e. the increase in amounts and accessibility of pornography as driven by technology, the expanding reach and value of the industry, the integration of pornographic iconography into popular culture and the growing visibility of pornographic artefacts in public space, has brought forth some critical voices. These note that such proliferation entails a reinforced degradation and sexualisation of women, with women now facing demands to not only endure but actively embrace and enjoy their objectification for male pleasure (Long 2012: 111–146). However, such criticism only comments on traditional heterosexual pornography, disregarding the increasing amount and range of other forms of pornographic expressions, such as feminist and queer pornography. As Attwood and Smith (2014: 2) observe, widely available media technology has led to a ‘growing range of independent and alternative productions, while pornographies of all kinds have become accessible to a wide range of audiences.’ McNair (2002: 205) identifies this wider reach of pornography as a “democratization and diversification of sexual discourse” and claims that this change affords “subversive, socially transformative explorations of sexuality and the articulation of sexual identity.” Similarly, Paasonen (2007: 161) sees internet pornography in particular as affording the possibility “to broaden one’s understanding of sexuality and desire beyond preconceived identities, labels and categories.”

In this paper, I will test the claim that some forms of pornography can be subversive and socially transformative. I will do so by engaging in a systemic-functional analysis of how participants are represented at the lexico-semantic level in an instance of queer written online pornography, and by discussing the ideational function of those representations. Systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), particularly the analysis of process types and participants, was chosen along with a focus on metaphoric expressions, in order to test the claim that pornography is exclusively about sex, at the expense of desire (e.g. Glenn 1981). In this context, we can

hypothesise that material and behavioural clauses, along with certain metaphors, such as the well-documented *MACHINE* metaphor (e.g. Weatherall & Walton 1999), tend to realise sex, while mental and relational clauses, and any alternative metaphors, may realise desire. As a form of analysing the language in texts, SFL goes far beyond the rather simplistic account of forms of “textual analysis” that McKee (2014) presents as typical of the humanities. In linking the findings of the linguistic analysis back to genre and contexts of distribution and reception, this study comes closest to what McKee (2014: 56) calls post-structural text analysis. At the level of the text itself, however, SFL is the framework of choice because it offers a nuanced, detailed and rigorous approach to language in use.

Before I proceed to formulate my research question, some clarification of the term ‘queer pornography’ is in order. Differentiating it from ‘trans porn’, which typically involves male-to-female performers partnered with a cis-gendered man, Tibbals (2014: 132) notes that “queer porn features performers of various gender identities and sexual orientations intermixing and exploring genres in ways infrequently seen in other sexually explicit content.” In her definition, Ryberg (2012: 27) additionally mentions the two main goals of queer pornography as “interrogating and troubling gender and sexual categories and aiming at sexual arousal.” The fact that queer pornography seeks not only to arouse but also to transgress and transform means that power operates not only in the text world, i.e. between the protagonists, but also between the author and reader on the one hand and the extra-textual world on the other: Authors of queer pornography produce their texts from a marginal social, sexual and commercial position, with the goal to destabilise gender binaries and not only entertain but also empower the reader in the face of limiting hegemonic discourses. (Incidentally, such hegemonic discourses can be embodied both in mainstream heterosexual pornography as well as in commercial gay male porn.) When readers consume the textual artefacts of queer pornography, they build or reinforce a queer imagination and possibly sexualise public space by engaging in erotic pleasure in spaces that are not designated for the purpose.

The present investigation into the subversive potential of queer pornography is based on the analysis of one text and findings can therefore only be generalised with caution. I decided to focus in detail on one text to be able to demonstrate how a fine-grained systemic-functional analysis, together with a context analysis of discursive practices, can show the ideational functions of participant representation and ultimately uncover how a text-in-context can reinforce and/or subvert dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality. The present text is somewhat unusual in that the author refers to it as ‘porn/erotica’ (see below); in contrast to visual online pornography, including the videos produced by Crash Pad Series, Indie Porn Revolution or Queer Porn TV, written online pornography usually comes under the label ‘erotica’, avoiding the perhaps harsher connotations of the word ‘porn.’

For example, the mission statement of the Nifty Archive ([www.nifty.org](http://www.nifty.org)), which is run by volunteers and on donations, defines its content as “a generally accessible, representative collection of the diverse hopes, dreams, aspirations, fantasies, and experiences of the Queer Community as expressed on the Internet” and points out “the literary content of the collected works archived” (<http://www.nifty.org/nifty/mission.html>). I decided to analyse written pornography, as I shall call it, because it is more varied linguistically than its visual counterpart, including dialogue as well as description and narration. The genre is therefore more interesting for a systemic-functional analysis of how participants are represented and what ideational functions are served by these representations.

Given these interests, the analysis of the selected text will help answer the following questions:

Do the text and its context reinforce and/or subvert hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality? How are the discourse features of transitivity and metaphor used to reinforce and/or subvert such discourses and what role do the distribution and consumption of the text play in this respect?

In the remainder of this paper, I will briefly refer to theories of gender and sexuality as intertwined concepts in Section 2, elaborate on the parameters of descriptive text analysis and explanatory context analysis in Section 3 and present the relevant findings in Section 4. The paper will close with a general discussion, in Section 5, of the subversive potential of queer written online pornography.

## 2. Some theoretical considerations

This paper contributes to queer discourse studies, a perhaps deliberately ambiguous term: On the one hand, it can refer to studies of queer discourse that involve the analysis of instances of discourse that subvert hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, ‘queer discourse studies’ can also mean queer studies of those discourses that “destabilise naturalised notions of gender and sexual identity and ... relativise their absoluteness” (Motschenbacher 2010: 180). As I will investigate how gender and sexuality are reinforced and/or subverted in an instance of written queer online pornography, this paper looks at an example of queer discourse at the same time as representing a queer study of it.

More generally, this study draws on the definition of discourse as textually mediated social action that has both an ideational and an interpersonal metafunction (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 30). The ideational metafunction is realized by the author as representing experience and fantasies from a particular perspective. At the same time, the text realizes an interpersonal metafunction in that it

constructs (sexual) identities associated with relative positions of power, both in the text world and between the author and reader on the one hand and proponents of hegemonic discourse on the other. Such power can be gained through reinforcing, questioning or subverting the status quo, thereby doing ideological work.<sup>1</sup>

As we shall see, one of the ideological functions of pornography as a predominantly fictional or semi-fictional genre (see Heywood 1997 for non-fictional pornography) is to reinforce the concept of ideal types, including hegemonic “originals”, with queer texts subverting them at the same time. Texts that both reinforce and subvert gender categories can be considered queer in line with queer theory’s main tenet that any identity category is problematic, a signifier without a signified that is brought into being through “particular performative practices and performative statements which, through repeated citation, have become associated with a particular category” (Barrett 2002: 29). The analysis in this paper relies on the view that gender and sexual identity constitute a series of reiterable acts, including discursive and sexual acts, which echo previous identity performances. Moreover, like all identity constructions, gender and sexuality, too, are relational, meaning that they are mutually constitutive of other identities, authenticating and being authenticated by them. In discourse, such relational identities are constructed by “tactics of intersubjectivity” (Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 493–494), which are realised linguistically, e.g. in patterns of transitivity.

Sexuality in particular has been defined in different terms, as both “the systems of mutually constituted ideologies, practices, and identities that give sociopolitical meaning to the body as an eroticized and/or reproductive site” (Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 470) and “the socially constructed expression of erotic desire” (Cameron & Kulick 2003: 4). I adopt the former definition in this paper, because it aligns with the ultimate goal of any systemic-functional analysis of transitivity to investigate the ideational function of participant representation and hence to identify the ideologies at work in a text. However, I would emphasise the erotic dimension of sexuality, which encompasses both the eroticised body and the desiring mind. Sexuality thus minimally includes desire and fantasy, and beyond that may also include practice and/or provide the grounds for identity. In the context of this paper, it should be noted that sexual practice can be partly discursive, e.g. exchanges in online chat rooms (Jones 2008, King 2011) or written pornography published on the web. In the next section, I will introduce the instance of online written pornography that serves as data in this study.

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1. In the systemic-functional framework, from which these notions are taken, any text also has a textual metafunction, which serves to “build up sequences of discourse, organizing the discursive flow, and creating cohesion and continuity” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 31). However, the interpretative focus here is on the text’s ideational metafunction.

### 3. Data and analytical framework

Sexualising and queering online space is one of the affordances of the text that is analysed in Section 4. Titled ‘Dark room’ and written by an anonymous ‘Mr J’, who refers to himself as ‘male’ and as a ‘London-based tranny muscle boy’, and elsewhere calls himself ‘rubberboy’,<sup>2</sup> the text is semi-fictional or, in the words of the author, “a blur of fiction, stories, things I have seen, things that have happened and things that might happen” (<http://queerfuckingporn.blogspot.co.uk/>). It was published on its author’s blog, which the author elsewhere describes as “a DIY blog of kinda half fiction/half real queer porn stories.”<sup>3</sup> It describes a decontextualised encounter between two allegorical characters (Pendleton 1992; see Appendix for the beginning of the text), both of whom are ambiguously bodied, with the third-person protagonist at one point explicitly stating that he is trans. He is referred to by masculine pronouns throughout. Given this pronoun use, and the statement by the ‘tranny boy’ author that the text is semi-autobiographical, I have chosen to likewise refer to both protagonists with masculine pronouns. As I will show in more detail below, the text is interdiscursive in that it shows features of gay male pornography, reproducing the ideal of “carnal virility”, which includes — although it is not limited to — an obsession with physical appearance, lack of romantic orientation, the metaphoric conceptualization of men as sexual machines as well as independence and lack of commitment (Glenn 1981: 110–112). Like most instances of pornography, ‘Dark room’ too constructs an exaggerated and ideal type gender identity, but it — at least to some extent — appropriates and subverts it at the same time, making it an example of “netporn” (Paasonen 2007: 164), i.e. pornography that is specific to the internet: alternative, artistic or experimental, typically freely distributed and featuring non-normative sexualities and bodies.<sup>4</sup> As such, the present text is also an instance of queer discourse and it is to its analysis that I will now turn.

In analysing the text, I use a framework that differentiates between discourse goals, i.e. the overall aims that the author pursues with a text, discourse features, i.e. the means by which these goals are realised, and linguistic devices, i.e. the concrete forms that discourse features take. Working bottom-up, I will first engage in a descriptive text analysis, identifying linguistic devices that realise particular discourse

2. On [www.transfriendly.co.uk](http://www.transfriendly.co.uk), accessed 18 July 2014.

3. <http://www.transfriendly.co.uk/index.php?topic=1557.0>, posted 17 July 2008, accessed 18 July 2014.

4. Paasonen (2007: 165) rightly cautions against letting a focus on “netporn” obscure the fact that the vast majority of pornography on the internet is still made up by “mainstream, commercial heteroporn.”

features, here participant representation as realised by process types and nouns/noun phrases or pronouns, together with metaphoric expressions. Analysing the discourse feature of participant representation answers the question about what groups and individuals are represented in a text and how. When combined with an investigation into process type, the analysis further tests whether this particular instance of written pornography is exclusively about sex or whether it also realises desire.

The process type analysis will focus on material and behavioural vs. mental and relational processes, as these are hypothesised to express sex and desire, respectively. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), these four process types — completed in the systemic-functional framework by verbal and existential processes — can be characterised as shown in Table 1 (examples are taken from the text analysed in Section 4.1).

In the analysis of these four process types, metaphoric instances such as ‘had no idea’, the literal meaning of which marks it as a relational process while its metaphoric meaning is mental-cognitive, were dual-coded and counted as both relational and mental processes. With regard to mental and behavioural processes, it should be noted that the verb *watch* is categorised as a mental-perceptive process: Although Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 504) maintain that “clauses of perception [are] either mental (inert perception) or behavioural (active perception)”, listing *watch* as an example of the latter, they equally state that behavioural processes “are the least distinct of all the six process types because they have no clearly defined characteristics of their own ... [t]he boundaries of behavioural processes are indeterminate” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 301). As the authors go on to say that “the most typical pattern is a clause consisting of Behavior and Process only” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 301), and *watch*, as used in the text, almost always involves someone being watched, it is here seen as a mental-perceptive rather than a behavioural process.

I will take a maximally inclusive approach in counting all instances in which participants are associated with a process, whether it is expressed as finite or non-finite verbals (e.g. ‘I held him tight to my face with on hand’, ‘I began to rim him’), as prepositional phrases representing a participant (e.g. ‘what I wanted to do to this little boy bitch’) or as minor clauses without a participant (e.g. ‘Lurking in the shadows. Plotting. Watching.’). (In the latter case, the participant is usually backgrounded rather than suppressed [van Leeuwen 1996] and can be inferred from previous clauses.) There are also frequent representations of body parts, pieces of clothing and physical sensations as engaged in, or at the receiving end of, an action; these will be included when pre-modified with a possessive deictic realising a participant (e.g. ‘Feeling his pussy convulse and tighten, almost crushing my hand’). In qualitative terms, I will investigate how process types and participant representation are linked, i.e. what participants, including body parts etc. with



Table 1. Process types

Process type and sub-types	Definition	Components	Example
Material	'construes a ... change in the flow of events as taking place through some input of energy' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 224)	Actor + <u>Process</u> + <u>Goal</u> ( + <u>Recipient</u> )	'I <u>stroked</u> <u>the side of his face</u> '
Behavioural	'represent the outer manifestations of inner workings, the acting out of processes of consciousness ... and physiological states' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 215)	Behavior + <u>Process</u> ( + <u>Range</u> / <u>Circumstance</u> )	'I <u>was waiting</u> <u>for something</u> '
Mental	'construes a ... change in the flow of events taking place in our own consciousness' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 245)	Senser + <u>Process</u> + <u>Phenomenon</u>	
-Cognitive			- 'I <u>knew</u> <u>he felt pretty nervous</u> <u>an vulnerable at this point</u> '
-Perceptive			- 'I <u>couldn't feel</u> <u>him throb</u> <u>anymore</u> '
-Emotive/desiderative <sup>a</sup>			- 'I <u>asked</u> <u>him if he wanted me</u> <u>to cum in his mouth</u> '
Relational	'serve to characterize and to identify' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 259)	-Carrier + <u>Process</u> + <u>Attribute</u> -Token + <u>Process</u> + <u>Value</u>	
-Attributive			- 'Then I <u>was</u> <u>much better</u> '
-Identifying			- n/a

<sup>a</sup> Emotive and desiderative mental processes are combined because positively or negatively valenced emotions (love, dislike) determine whether something or someone is desired or not.

possessive deictics, are represented in what kinds of processes and whether they function as Actor or Senser or as Goal or Phenomenon. To get a comprehensive picture of the ideational meaning ascribed to participants, I will finally look at how metaphor corroborates or contradicts patterns of transitivity.

Moving on to explanatory context analysis, I will discuss how the features of the text meet the author's overall discourse goals. Although the discourse goals are not explicitly mentioned by the author, he refers to his text as "DIY genderqueer porn/erotica" and, more drastically, as "wank fodder", allowing us to infer that one discourse goal is to arouse and entertain the reader. Further, he repeatedly refers to his queer audience, stating that "I write this for myself and for the queers that might appreciate it. ... I write porn for you likeminded queer perverts to enjoy and contemplate" (<http://queerfuckingporn.blogspot.co.uk/>). The emphasis on queerness suggests a secondary goal of subverting hegemonic discourses on gender and sexuality. Beyond that, the context analysis will utilise the notions of space and place, where "space[s] [are] concrete, physical environments that produce objective opportunities and constraints" (Green, Follert, Osterlund & Paquin 2010:11) while at the same time acquiring meaning through the discourses on them that are produced, distributed and received within a social formation. Endowed with social meaning, spaces become places to which people who move through them attach their beliefs, expectations, goals and norms about their function, characteristics and appropriate uses. With regards to sexuality, this means that spaces are subject to interactions in them and discourses on them that can make them into places in which sexual (inter)action is permissible or even desirable and encouraged, or undesirable, taboo and therefore transgressive when it happens. Whether and what sexual meanings are attached to a space depends on who frequents it and, as a consequence, spaces can, just like discourse, become sites of ideological power struggles.

Such struggles usually centre on the dominant cultural notion of sex as being appropriate only in private spaces (e.g. someone's home) or in spaces that afford privacy with a view to enabling sexual activity (e.g. hotel rooms or video booths). It follows that sex in public spaces such as museums, parks or doorways transgresses this binary and challenges dominant ideologies of sexuality and space. This notion of public spaces and sexual places has been addressed by work in what we might call 'sexual geography' (e.g. Ingram, Bouthillette & Retter 1997). Most pertinently for this paper, Jones (2008) and King (2011, 2012) have worked with a metaphorical notion of space and shown how online 'spaces' can be constructed as sexualised places through computer-mediated interaction. On online 'spaces', King (2012:110) notes that "[a]lthough online locations are not material (tangible) their shape is somewhat influenced by an architecture and décor that is both visible [the ... interface] and metaphorical [the 'site']." The question is in how far

the observations from previous work on space and the making of sexual places can be applied to metaphorical spaces online. It is worth mentioning the idea that public (urban) places “have been *produced* as (ambiently) heterosexual, heterosexist and heteronormative” and remain so “[o]nly through the repetition of hegemonic heterosexual scripts” (Bell & Valentine 1995: 18). In this aspect, online spaces indeed mirror their material equivalents and like them they are open to subversive practice, including discourse practice.

Drawing on these ideas, I will look at what (metaphorical) spaces the text is distributed and possibly consumed in, and what role those discursive practices play in infusing those spaces with meaning and turn them into queer sexual places. Before that, however, the next sub-section will present the findings from the analysis of transitivity and metaphor.

## 4. Analysis and discussion

### 4.1 Representing participants: The text level

In this sub-section, I will first look at the nouns and noun phrases used to refer to the two main participants in the text, before engaging in a detailed analysis of transitivity. To round off the descriptive text analysis, I will show how metaphor provides cumulative evidence for some, but not all patterns of transitivity.

To begin with, the narrator is referred to by the first person singular pronoun throughout, whereas the other protagonist is mostly referred to in unambiguously male terms (‘lad’, ‘boy’, ‘young man’) but also as a ‘transguy’, i.e. by a modifier indicating deviation from the norm (‘guys’), and by the hybrid noun compound ‘boy bitch’. While this makes his gender somewhat fluid, the bodies of both participants are represented as ambiguously sexed and we find references to different genitals and sexual body functions throughout the text: The narrator has ‘furry thighs’ and a ‘cock’, although the latter is the effect of ‘packing’ and its erection leads to the narrator having ‘wet thighs’, while the other protagonist’s sex is even more ambiguous, with references to ‘his cock’ as well as to his ‘boy cunt’ and ‘pussy’. Adams-Thies (2012) discusses the use of ‘pussy’ or ‘boy pussy’ for the male anus in gay male cybersex interactions, concluding that it there serves to represent the anus as a penetrable orifice, to fetishise power and inequality based on heteronormative notions, and to erase gay male femininity from the interaction. The author of the present text may have borrowed this feature from gay male pornography, but at the same time he makes it more complex by applying it to ambiguously sexed bodies.

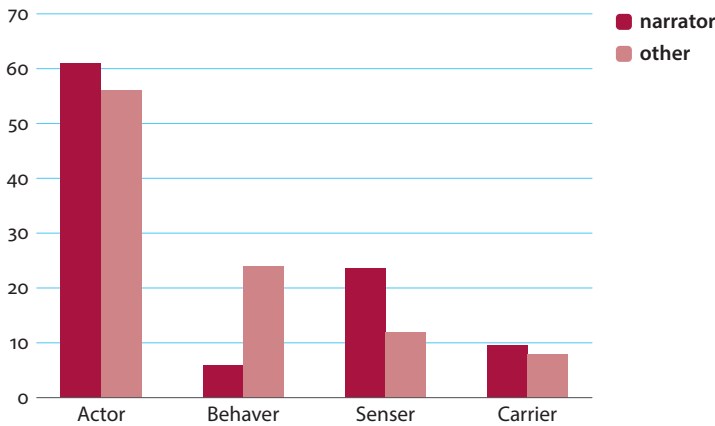


Figure 1. Active roles of participants (percentages)

As for process types, the first-person narrator features as Actor in material, Behaver in relational, Senser in mental or Carrier in relational-attributive<sup>5</sup> process types for a total of 185 cases, with the other protagonist occurring 100 times in any of these roles. The differences in the active role of the two participants are shown in Figure 1.

The difference in the percentages for the Behaver role is statistically significant ( $p = 0.000917$ ), suggesting that the Other, while grammatically active, is represented as semantically weaker because his actions (e.g. breathing, tensing up, shaking) have less of an impact on others. The differences are even starker when we look at how often the respective participants are represented in passive roles, i.e. as Goal in material or Phenomenon in mental processes: In absolute numbers, the narrator is grammatically passive as Goal in 21 cases, of which just under three quarters (71.43 per cent) are reflexive (e.g. 'I carefully removed my fist from inside him', where the Actor's body part, pre-modified by a possessive deictic, is a — metonymic — representation of him). He also features as Phenomenon in six cases. By contrast, the Other is represented as Goal in 71 cases, where the narrator lets or makes him do something, or does something to/with him. Only 17, or 23.94 per cent, of these cases are reflexive. In addition, the Other is cast as Phenomenon three times more often than the narrator, predominantly in clauses such as 'I felt him warming to my touch'. Finally, we can differentiate mental process types into cognitive, perceptive and emotive/desiderative processes (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 257; see footnote for Table 1). The analysis of these sub-types shows that only the narrator is represented as engaged in cognitive processes such as knowing and expecting, and that he is mostly cast as Perceiver, at 64.29 per cent. The latter processes are

5. The text does not include any relational-identifying processes.

predominantly accounted for by watching and feeling the other protagonist and his physical reactions, mostly represented as behavioural, to the narrator's material actions. This is in contrast to the Other, who is not only represented in far fewer mental processes — twelve compared to the narrator's 42 — but whose mental processes are also affective in two third of all cases, mostly referring to what he wants the narrator to do (e.g. 'I could tell he wanted it again'). As we saw above, the overall pattern of grammatical passivity in the process types is mostly accounted for by the Other being cast as Phenomenon, more specifically as being perceived.

To sum up, the narrator is represented more frequently and mostly in the active role, with a high number of reflexive processes where the narrator is represented as both Actor and Goal in material processes. By contrast, the Other is represented as both Goal and Phenomenon significantly more often ( $p=1.85951E-07$  and  $p=0.0143$ , respectively), with fewer cases being reflexive. And finally, only the narrator is represented in cognitive processes, with an additional pattern of the narrator feeling and watching the Other, who in turn wants the narrator to act on him. These findings corroborate and complement linguistic studies on gay male pornography that ascertain a qualitative focus on the first-person narrator (Baker 2005: 187).<sup>6</sup> The fine-grained analysis of transitivity demonstrates that the narrator is both grammatically more active in material, mental and relational processes and also semantically stronger in that he exerts physical and mental control over the Other. It also shows the transactional nature of the encounter, with one participant predominantly acting on the other; notably, there is only one mention of 'we', after the only instance of dialogue — an exchange of a mere five turns — in the text ('that's all we said').

In general, the two main participants are represented in diametrically opposed terms. Where the narrator exhibits physical strength in controlling his own and the Other's body through material processes (e.g. 'forcing his lips') as well as his emotions (e.g. in the relational process 'I don't get nervous'), the other is characterized in terms of physical vulnerability as encoded in material processes (e.g. 'I felt ... his knees waver a bit'). Likewise, the narrator is linguistically assertive, using parataxis and minor clauses in his speech and being liberal with taboo language. In addition, a quick look at verbal processes shows that the narrator employs commands as his prevalent speech act, as reported in his narrative (e.g. 'I told him to turn around'). The Other speaks noticeably less and when he does, is described as 'trailing off', thus being linguistically tentative. In the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity, boys and sexually submissive men are subordinate to men who represent a closer approximation to the hegemonic ideal, so it is not surprising to find that the submissive protagonist is referred to in terms that are (connoted as) feminine and is thus further

6. Tellingly, there is hardly any mention of the narrator's looks, which again shows that the narrative is told from the (literal) point of view of the narrator himself.

disempowered (see Kiesling 2002). Such disempowerment is also achieved through describing the Other's physical beauty in feminine and diminutive terms such as 'cute', 'pretty' and 'little'. However, the Other is described as physically beautiful in masculine terms as well ('I admired his broad back'), again suggesting a measure of ambiguity in both his gender and sex. We also find a use of material processes, modified by adverbs, to represent the narrator's physical tenderness towards the Other (e.g. 'I stroked the side of his face ... gently', 'I gently pulled his head'), which form a marked contrast to the physical strength and control exhibited elsewhere, and can be seen as indicating a certain hybridity in terms of gender performance.

Referring to the narrator's tenderness also contrasts with the dominant metaphors used to characterise his actions. Thus, we find instances of *SEXUAL ACTORS ARE MACHINES*, which was attested by Glenn (1981) as a typical feature of gay male pornography, with the narrator being involved in physical actions such as 'grinding' or 'pumping'. This metaphor is on occasion intensified to *SEX IS WAR* (see Koller 2004: 13 and 16 on the conceptual links between *MACHINE* and *WAR* metaphors), e.g. when the narrator talks about 'invading him from behind'. There is also the conventional metaphor *SEX IS EATING*, which lends itself to metonymic descriptions of oral sex (e.g. 'he feasted on the length of me'). Noticeably absent are metaphors of desire, e.g. *DESIRE IS HUNGER*; overall, metaphoric expression are used for sexual acts, not erotic desire. Such backgrounding of desire in favour of sexual behaviour reflects the sexual rather than romantic/emotional orientation that Glenn (1981) has identified as typical of gay male pornography. The only explicit indications of desire are 'I was taking a particular fondness to one of the boys', a metaphorical process the literal meaning of which is material while its figurative meaning is mental-affective. It is true that mental processes make up the second highest frequency for both participants — 22.64 per cent for the narrator and 15.87 per cent for the Other —, but there is a clear semantic distinction in that the narrator is allocated the culturally more masculine mental-cognitive processes as well as being cast as perceiving the Other, while the Other for his part is perceived and represented as wanting to be acted upon. Not only is this distinction gendered in itself, it also suggest that the narrator acts sexually while the Other realises desire. Concerning the initial notion that material and behavioural processes enact sex while mental and relational processes enact desire, we can say that, while material processes do indeed encode sex, they work together with behavioural processes to represent sexual power relations. In addition, mental process types need to be differentiated to detect binary patterns of perceiving and wanting. Interestingly, relational process types, which were hypothesised to express desire, do little to meet this function in the present text, instead encoding physical reactions and states (e.g. 'I could feel that he was close') and only occasionally referencing identities (e.g. 'It was hardly a shock he was trans in a tranny

club') or representing desire ('I was quite happy entertaining myself', 'I pushed him off me when I had had enough', 'I m quite partial to transguys myself').

In answer to the first part of the research question — Does the text reinforce and/or subvert hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality? —, we can say that the linguistic features in the present text tend more towards reinforcing than subverting dominant notions of gender and sexuality. Ideationally, the participants are represented as binary opposites rather than fluid and merging: Masculine pronouns are used throughout and the author reproduces the ideal of hegemonic masculinity by representing the first-person narrator as overwhelmingly active, controlling and assertive, while the sexually subordinated Other is portrayed as vulnerable and tentative. The metaphors are very much clichés of male-produced and male-oriented pornography, i.e. *SEXUAL ACTORS ARE MACHINES* and *SEX IS WAR*, with no metaphors of desire. And although the author disrupts the belief that the reader builds up about the protagonists' male bodies by occasionally referring to female genitals and body functions, there is little indication that the participants' gender is anything other than masculine. This construction of hegemonic masculinity is queered to only some extent by the few modified compound nouns ('transguys') and hybrids ('boy bitch'), with mentions of the narrator's tenderness and the hybrid physical description of the Other in both feminine and masculine terms working towards the same end. Some of the sizeable minority of mental processes further complexify the stereotypically masculine, because mechanistic and non-relational, quality of the encounter.

Even though the above analysis suggests that the text does more to reinforce than to subvert hegemonic discourses, both reinforcement and subversion also work at the level of context. Therefore, the next sub-section will look at how the discursive practices around queer written online pornography help to sexualise regulated spaces and thereby provide a moment of insubordination and transgression.

#### 4.2 Sexual places: The context level

As an aspect of the discourse practice context, "the interplay of space and place in the elaboration and intensification of particular erotic themes and practices" (Green et al. 2010: 8) needs to be analysed in terms of text distribution and consumption.

While the text world depicts sex in a semi-public sexual place, the text itself sexualises a public online 'space', i.e. the website hosting the author's blog. The hosting company, Blogger.com, can be accessed for free by everyone with an internet connection and the required literacy, and enables users to create a blog within a matter of minutes. The online 'space' in which the text is distributed is therefore accessible for a global public, provided they are literate and have uncensored access

to the internet. The starting page shows only minimal design, leaving it to the individual blogger to appropriate the online space and attach meanings to content and semiotics, thereby turning it into a specific place. Accordingly, the author has sexualised a neutral online 'space' that neither encourages nor discourages sexual activity and, beyond merely sexualising it, has turned it into a queer place with the subversion of hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality sitting alongside their reinforcement, even if the latter is more pronounced at the text level.

Depending on where it is consumed, a pornographic text has the potential to sexualise both ephemeral and (relatively) enduring material spaces, taking the performance and queering of sexed bodies from the text world into public spaces that thereby become sexualised places. Mobile internet access and user-friendly interfaces mean that just like text distribution is widely accessible, text consumption can be ubiquitous, making any space a potential sexual place. This is especially the case for written online pornography that comes without pictures and can therefore be consumed inconspicuously. Online pornography, and written online pornography in particular, comes with practices that can facilitate the sexualisation of especially public space on an unprecedented scale. For the text analysed in this paper, however, it may be safer to say that textually and representationally, the text reinforces rather than subverts hegemonic discourses, although the practices of its distribution and consumption maintain a queer potential as it is published on a public blog and can be read in and hence sexualise public spaces/places.

## **5. Conclusion: The subversive potential of queer written online pornography**

As a genre, queer written online pornography definitely has the potential to, and to some extent does, destabilise dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. In fact, doing so can be posited as one of its overall goals. As is typical of pornography, however, such subversion is always in tension with the reinforcement of hegemonic ideals, where the latter may well serve to meet the, possibly competing, discourse goal of arousal. It is therefore to be expected that any individual text will emphasise one over the other so that destabilisation becomes an effect of the specific balance struck in whatever instance of the genre one looks at. As for the practices of gender and sexuality, queer written online pornography certainly lends itself to almost ubiquitous production and consumption. To the extent that it is subversive, it thereby radically broadens notions of gender identity and furthermore brings queer sexuality to spaces that either do not encourage the sexual activity of reading a pornographic text, such as public transport, or sanction only hetero- or homo-normative sexualities, such as weddings. In all these respects,



written queer online pornography is potentially liberating for non-normative individuals and groups, transcending and pushing the narrow boundaries of what counts as acceptable identities and practices and thereby working towards the wellbeing of marginalised people.

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## Appendix

Mr J (2008, beginning)

I generally take some time to suss out a play space. Everyone does. Or should I say everyone seems to. Checking out the kit... the outfits. Which boys to have your eye on, which girls to KEEP your eye on. Spying in on torture scenes and circle jerks... I love it. Im [sic] sure you can tell.

Well I had heard about this one place. A tranny club most nights. Mainly TV and TS. But it has a mixed night sometimes on a Saturday where all the freaks come out to play and to show off their peacock feathers... new ink and the like. I've heard some stories anyways. Obviously it seemed prime time to get myself down there.

I arrived later than I expected too [sic]. Hurrying into my jock strap, chest harness and boots, amongst the floods of ladys [sic] and ladyboys, all bustling about in pvc and slapping on make-up. I felt ever so slightly out of place... as I adjusted my bulge. Or was it nerves? I banished the idea of nerves to the back of my head. I don't GET nervous. After strolling in and briefly checking out the rooms and the dance floor, I proceeded to go for a cheeky spliff in the smokers part. Yeah. Then I was much better. I don't mind going cruising by myself. Some people think it's weird. I am at my most comfortable. Lurking in the shadows. Plotting. Watching. It allows me to be at my best. Me at my filthiest. When only me and my conscience knows what's gone down.

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