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A rough trade

Martin Amis reports from the high-risk, increasingly violent world of the pornography industry

Martin Amis
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Pussies are bullshit. Don't let them tell you any different. "Answer me something," I said to John Stagliano. We were stepping out of the porno home - on to the porno patio with its porno pool. This was Malibu. Down the slope and beyond the road lay the Pacific Ocean; but the Staglianos have no access to its porno shore, in the evening they can watch the porno sunset with its porno pink and mauve and blood-orange, and then linger awhile, perhaps, under a porno moon. "Answer me something. How do you account for the emphasis, not just in your . . . work but in the industry in general, how do you account for the truly incredible emphasis on anal sex?"

After a minimal shrug and a minimal pause Stagliano said, "Pussies are bullshit." Now John was being obedient to the dictionary definition of "bullshit" which is nonsense intended to deceive.

With vaginal, Stagliano elaborated - well, here you have some chick chirruping away. And the genuinely discerning viewer (jack-knifed over his flying fist) has got to be thinking: Is this for real? Or is it just bullshit?

With anal, on the other hand, the actress is obliged to produce a different order of response: more guttural, more animal. As Stagliano quaintly puts it, "Her personality comes out." He goes on: "You want guys who can fuck really good and make the girls look more . . . virile." Virile of course, means manly; but once again Stagliano is using the King's English. You want the girls to show you "their testosterone".

The name of Rocco Siffredi, again and again, was wistfully and reverently conjured. Rocco, the big-dorked Italian, and porno's premier buttbanger or assbuster (to use the dialect

of this tribe).

"Rocco has far more power in this industry than any actress," said Stagliano, pleased to be pulling one back for the boys (generally speaking, men are the also-rans of porno). "I was the first to shoot Rocco. Together we evolved toward rougher stuff. He started to spit on girls. A strong male-dominant thing, with women being pushed to their limit. It looks like violence but it's not. I mean, pleasure and pain are the same thing, right? Rocco is driven by the market. What makes it in today's market place is reality." And assholes are reality. And pussies are bullshit.

Features and gonzo

There are, at present, two types of mainstream American pornography: Features and Gonzo. Features are sex films with some sort of claim to the ordinary narrative: characterisation, storyline. "We don't just show you people fucking," said a Features executive. "We show you why they're fucking." These movies are allegedly aimed at the "couples market". Couples, it asserted, want to know why people are fucking. I can give these couples a three word answer that will hold true in every case: for the money.

In *Flashpoint* (Wicked Pictures), for instance, a bunch of porno stars are dressed up as firefighters. As the film opens, we see the porno stars sliding down the pole and boarding the crimson firetruck. An exploding car, a colleague (not a porno star but an ageing extra) falling in the line of duty. There follows an insanelly boring funeral, which includes the whole of the Lord's Prayer and the slow and solemn furling, by a porno star, of the American flag. Porno star Jenna grieves for the fallen extra. After returning from the funeral she finds herself alone with another porno star dressed up as a firefighter. He seeks to assuage her grief, so she gives him a blowjob plus full intercourse. The next sex scene, which occurs about a millennium later, is also triggered by grief counselling. Here a male porno star comforts two female porno stars, one of them anally . . .

After a while you begin to think that porno stars, despite being very bad at acting, are very good at acting in one particular only: they can keep a straight face. But then humourlessness, universal and institutionalised humourlessness, is the lifeblood of porno. Films like *Flashpoint* go out to the video stores and, in the soft version (where the hard action is partly obscured by some stray object - a fireman's hat, say, or a fireman's boot), are sold to cable and to hotel chain franchises, and so on. Features owes the humiliating fatuity of its conventions to an old legal precedent called the "Miller Test".

Miller v California (1973) established that a dirty movie was obscene if it was "utterly" without social, literary, artistic, political or scientific "value". In juridical terms, the key word here, of course, is "utterly" and millions of dollars have

been spent on its definition.

With a wife like Hillary, Bill Clinton could never be a true pal of porno, but he largely left it alone on First Amendment grounds. Unlike his two predecessors, who systematically harassed the industry with confiscations, multiple prosecutions, fines, jail terms. It's a fair guess that porno never felt more gorgeously secure than when Clinton, in his second term, became in effect the porno president.

Now porno is tensed and braced for changes. It feared Gore. It dreaded Bush. Gonzo porno is also known as "wall-to-wall". It shows you people fucking without concerning itself with why they're fucking. There are no Lord's Prayers, no furled American flags in Gonzo. Features porno is much, much dirtier than it used to be, but Gonzo porno is gonzo: way out there. The new element is violence.

Strength and Pain

I had lunch with Temptress (Features). I had lunch with Chloe (Gonzo). And the next day I joined Chloe on the set of Welcum To Chloeville.

My lunch with Temptress was a relatively sedate affair. At first I was reminded of the time I interviewed Penny Baker, a Playboy Playmate of the Year: within a minute I had run out of questions. Temptress, like Penny, seemed to be inhibited by the presence of a company executive - in this case Steve Orenstein of Wicked Pictures, for which she is a contract player. But Temptress loosened up.

"Tell me, Temptress," I said (having apologised for the corniness and mild hostility of my inquiry), "what won't you do?"

"I won't do anal," said Temptress. "They keep trying to coax me into it. You know: 'Just a finger or a tongue. Or just a little bit: just the tip.' But I won't, I used not to do facials. But I do them now."

Temptress is not talking about beauty treatments. She is talking about the destination of what is variously referred to as the "pop-shot" or the "money-shot": the ejaculation of the male.

"What happens," I asked, "when a co-star can't get hard?"

The fiasco used to be the nemesis of porno. A penile no-show could make the difference between profit and loss. But the situation has been changed, I was told, thanks to Viagra. On Viagra, the actor performs 45 minutes behind schedule, with a flushed face and a headache. "You also lose a dimension," John Stagliano would explain. "The guy's fucking without being aroused." He's just "showing off" - and pretty soon you're back to bullshit.

Another thing with Viagra is that the guy can have a problem with the pop-shot, thus endangering the facial.

"What do you do then, Temptress?"

"You get some pina colada mix. The cock's in your mouth and you let it, like, ooze out around it."

Physically Temptress reminded me of the daughters of my friends. She didn't sound shy, but she looked it. With her long straight hair frequently steered over her shoulders by her slow-moving hands, with her face unglazed by cosmetics, with her gently narrowed eyes, she exuded what Philip Larkin called the "strength and pain/Of being young". I asked about her history and she told me something of it. And there was strength and there was pain (and there was certainly youth: Temptress is 21).

"But I don't want you to write about that. And could you not mention my real name? . . . I don't have relationships any more. They make life unstable. The only sex I have is the sex on screen."

Temptress is one of the lucky ones. She's a star. After lunch I went to Wicked Pictures and had a talk with Jonathan Morgan (performer turned director) in a computerised cutting-room while he edited his latest Feature, a fantastically unfunny comedy called Inside Porn.

"Ah," said Jonathan. "Now here we have a double anal."

A double anal is not to be confused with a DP (double penetration: anal and vaginal). A double anal is a double anal. And there have been triple anals, too. "The girls could be graded like A, B and C. The A is the chick on the boxcover. She has the power. So she'll show up late or not at all. Ninety-nine point nine per cent of them do that." He gestured at the screen and said, "Here you have a borderline A/B doing a double anal. Directors will remember that. She'll get phone calls. For a double anal you'd usually expect a B or a C. They have to do the dirty stuff or they won't get a phone call. You've had a kid, you've got some stretchmarks - you're up there doing double anal.

"Some girls are used in nine months or a year. An 18-year-old, sweet young thing, signs with an agency, makes five films in her first week. Five directors, five actors, five times five: she gets phone calls. A hundred movies in four months. She's not a fresh face any more. Her price slips and she stops

getting phone calls. Then it's, 'Okay, will you do anal? Will you do gangbangs?' Then they're used up. They can't even get a phone call. The market forces of this industry use them up."

I thanked Jonathan Morgan for his candour. But he wasn't

as candid as Chloe. We met in the lobby of my hotel and we strolled out to her Mustang.

"See that?"

The number plate said: STR82NL

"Straight to anal," said Chloe.

And she hadn't even got started.

Chloe was gonzo. She gave me the truth.

Extreme Productions

A single issue of Adult Video News (April 2000) yields the following. Last October porno star Vivian Valentine attended the XXX-Treme Adults Only vacation in Mexico sporting the black eye she copped from Jon Dough on Rough Sex (Anabolic Video).

"I have no regrets or bad feelings about it," she said. Regan Starr who worked on the second film in this "line", Rough Sex 2, had a different take. "I got the shit kicked out of me," she said. "I was told before the video - and they said this very proudly, mind you - that in this line most of the girls start crying because they're hurting so bad . . . I couldn't breathe. I was being hit and choked. I was really upset, and they didn't stop. They kept filming. You can hear me say, 'Turn the fucking camera off', and they kept going." The director of the Rough Sex series (now discontinued), who goes by the name of Khan Tusion, protests his innocence. "Regan Starr," Tusion claims, "categorically misstates what occurred."

If you don't like Khan Tusion, you won't like Max Hardcore. AVN's regular "On the Set" column carries a cheerfully scandalised account of the making of Hollywood Hardcore 13. In this scene, actor-director Hardcore is having rough sex with Cloey Adams, who is pretending to be under age. "If you're a good girl, I'll take you to McDonald's later and get you a Happy Meal." Hardcore then "proceeds to piss in her mouth". Addressing the camera, Cloey Adams says, "What do you think of your little princess now Daddy?" Nor is Hardcore through with her. "Turning to the crew, he calmly says, 'I'll need a speculum and a hose' . . . One of Max's favourite tricks is to stretch a girl's asshole with a speculum, then piss into her open gape and make her suck out his own piss with a hose. Ain't that romantic?"

Now. American porno (and how could it be otherwise?) is market-driven. We can see what the above tells us about porno. But what does it tell us about America? And if America is more like a world than a country, what does it tell us about the world?

- The average American spends three hours and 51 minutes of every day watching porno (video and internet).

- The average non-homeowning American male spends more on porno than he spends on his rent.
- Porno accounts for 43.5% of the US Gross Domestic Product.

Like pussies, these statistic are bullshit.

I made them up. But the true figures are similarly wild, similarly dizzying, similarly through-the-roof. This isn't bullshit.

- Porno is far bigger than rock music and far bigger than Hollywood.
- Americans spend more on strip clubs than they spend on theatre, opera, ballet, jazz and classical concerts combined.
- In 1975 the total retail value of all the hard-core porno in America was estimated at \$5-10 million. Last year Americans spent \$8 billion on mediated sex.

Whatever porno is, whatever porno does, you may regret it, but you cannot reject it. To paraphrase Falstaff: Banish porno, and you banish all the world.

Chloe

"I have herpes," said Chloe as she drove me to a smoker-friendly bar. "After you've been in this business for a while, you have herpes. Everyone has herpes. On the set sometimes you'll say to a guy, 'What's this?' And he'll say, 'What? That? It's a fuck sore.' And it may well be a fuck sore, what with all the traffic. But it's more likely to be a herpes sore, and that guy shouldn't be working. My movies are all-condom, but condoms won't protect you from herpes. They don't cover the base. Sometimes when you're doing girl-girl you'll say, 'Honey, I think you should go and see someone.' It can be a very stinky scene down there. I'll send her to a porno-friendly doctor (the others treat you like shit) and she'll come out holding her Flayll prescription with multiple refills."

Chloe is 26. For 10 years she trained as a ballerina; then, at 17, she got into drugs, mostly speed ("I'd fuck for 72 hours"); at 20 she started shooting up heroin and was already in the industry by the time she quit, over two years ago. Chloe has fair, fine red hair and a warm and clever face. She has a ballerina's body: strong legs, a full muscular butt -

"- and no tits. It's true that some Features companies urge the girls to have implants and offer to pay for it. On the road [ie, stripping] girls used to boast about the cubic capacity of their titjobs. 'I've got 840s.' 'I've got 1220s'. One of them turned to me and said, 'Get tits or suck cock.' I'd rather suck cock, I really would."

If you're going to be a porno star, what do you need? It's pretty clear by now. You need to be an exhibitionist. You need to have a ferocious sex drive. You need to suffer from *nostalgie de la boue* (literally "mud nostalgia": a childish, even babyish delight in bodily functions and wastes). And - probably - you need damage in your past. You also need to be humourless. Chloe is not humourless. When she talked to me she was like someone peeping over a wall demarcating two different worlds, telling me stories about the other side.

"I like to be peed on. I like being spat on: it feels like come on your chest. I like to be choked. I like to be fisted. Here we have the 'no-thumbs' rule? A girl can have 16 fingers up her. But no thumbs." She laughs, and continues: "For vaginal I prefer a girthy kind of dick. And some of these guys" - Chloe seizes the broad base of a water glass on the table before us - "are like this. For anal I prefer a longer, thinner kind of dick."

"So when you do DP you get one thick one and one thin one."

"Right . . . No. Come to think of it," she said brightly, "I get two thick ones. I like to feel crammed. You know, I did my first anal for \$200? I still can't believe that."

"And what are your rates now, Chloe?"

"In Gonzo, you're paid, not by the picture, but by the scene. So it's girl-girl: 700, plus 100 for an anal toy. Boy-girl: 900. Anal: 1,100. Solo [a rarity]: 500. DP: 1,500. I won't do anal fisting or double anal. People ask me how I can hang on to my title as Anal Queen of LA when I won't do double anal. But I have hung on to it."

In common with about 10% of the porno girls (her estimate), Chloe retains the approval of her parents (and so does Temptress). In fact, Chloe's guardians are gonzo. She recently shot a film out near their place, and her stepfather (while absenting himself from his stepdaughter's scenes) "was like a towel-boy". And Chloe's mother, for two years running now, has marched out of the AVN Awards, brandishing Chloe's Best Anal trophies above the heads of the crowd.

After lunch we drove to Chloe's apartment: barred gates, the feel of a two-floor motel, a modest, comfortable, orderly apartment, featuring a cute black cat with a porno name, Siren. Chloe thinks that some porno girls get their names by looking out of the window at the road sign: Laurel Canyon, Chandler, Cherry Mirage.

For a while Chloe talked about her love life. She is torn, at present, between the neglectful Chris, a rock musician (bass), and the attentive Artie, a fellow performer. She suspects that Chris just strings her along because it's a status symbol for a rock star to have a porno-star girlfriend.

Chris, I think, knows about Artie. But Artie doesn't know about Chris.

"And with Artie, he comes over and I'm horny as hell and he says, 'I can't, I have to do two scenes tomorrow.' "

"With private sex, is there a crossover in your head?"

"Oh yeah. I find myself thinking, 'Fuck. I should be being paid for this.' Or 'Fuck. I wish I had a camera.'"

"I'd better not write about Chris and Artie."

"Go ahead. They'll both be over anyway. Here, it doesn't last."

Chloe was unforgettable. I won't forget the way she said this (she said it with sorrowful resolve): "We're prostitutes . . . There are differences. You can choose your partners, and they're tested for Aids - you won't get your john to do that. But we're prostitutes: we exchange sex for money."

"You've thought this through."

"I looked it up in the dictionary and that's what it says."

In etymological terms pornography is what I'm doing: I'm writing about whores. I will see Chloe on set tomorrow morning. The scene they'll be shooting? Gonzo girl-boy-girl anal.

Mister Monster

Towards the end of *Rabbit At Rest*, John Updike writes: Rabbit thinks of adding \$5.50 to his bill to watch something called *Horny Housewives* . . . The trouble with these softcore porn movies on hotel circuits, in case some four-year-old with lawyers for parents happens to hit the right buttons they show tits and ass and even some pubic hair but no real cunt and no pricks, no pricks hard or soft at all. It's very frustrating. It turns out pricks are what we care about, you have to see them. Maybe we're all queer, and all his life he's been in love with Ronnie Harrison.

Or, as a friend would put it to me later that week: It's no good without *Mister Monster*. You must have *Mister Monster*. Must you? Gore Vidal once said that the only danger in watching pornography is that it might make you want to watch more pornography; it might make you want to do nothing else but watch pornography. There is, I contend, another danger. As I sampled some extreme productions on the VCR in my hotel room, I kept worrying about something. I kept worrying that I'd like it. Porno services the "polymorphous perverse": the near-infinite chaos of human desire. If you harbour a perversity, then sooner or later porno will identify it. You'd better hope that this doesn't happen while you're watching a film about a coprophagic pigfarmer - or an undertaker. That week in Los Angeles I found out what I don't like.

I don't like Mister Monster.

High up in higgledy-piggledy Hollywood Hills, I hobnobbed with Andrew Blake, the Truffaut of porno, and two incredibly beautiful girls in incredibly expensive underwear (and six inch heels).

Strictly speaking, Blake's work is Gonzo: scriptless, storyless, with the performers interacting with the camera. But Blake is pre-eminently "high-end". His actresses look like voluptuous fashion models, and he flatters and glorifies them on the screen, with oils, unguents, silks, cords, ribbons, textures.

"I hired Monica because she has these beautiful breasts," he told me, "and that's what we're going to be concentrating on. I've never worked with Adriana before but she seems to be really something."

Laconic, gruff, direct and, of course, humourless, Blake goes about his business.

"Now put your hand into her panties . . . And maybe a nipple comes out, a nipple is revealed? . . . Squeeze them, caress them, do the whole nine yards with them . . . Try opening your legs. Kind of tease the panties . . . Don't smile so much. Just kind of be into yourself . . . So is the bra ready to ride? Kiss the nip . . . Arch up your butt a little more . . . Cross and uncross your legs. Show a little pussy . . . Now this is the panties coming off . . ."

Behold. A platonically perfect pubis, wearing nothing but the latest hairstyle, a minimal mohawk.

"This must be a tough day's work for you," said the make-up girl amiably. "Someone's got to do it. Right?"

Her remark obliged me to examine my "affect", or feeling-tone. I admit to a strong sense of furtive beauty-assimilation. But the instinct being aroused in me was not sexual so much as protective. Naked Adriana was 20 years old. And the last thing I wanted to see, at that moment, was Mister Monster.

Outside, during an intermission, Blake said in his flat, declarative style, "I'm into looking at woman. Not all this 'pissing and fisting'. I've never had any legal problems."

Work permit

A "tough" day's work for me, then, and the same could be said for Adriana and Monica. They weren't being slapped around by Khan Tusion or peed on by Max Hardcore. But were they being "used up"?

If you're a porno performer, your latest HIV test is your work permit. Two years ago the actor Marc Wallace started to become evasive about his work permit. He was using an

out of town health centre and seemed to be fudging his results. By the time he was found out, Wallace's condition was fulminant. He infected six actresses.

"The tests we take only test for Aids," says Chloe. "We've contained Aids in the industry but what about all the others? You know we're now up to Hepatitis G?"

"You should be at least 21 before you work in this industry. You should know your body, understand your body. But that would wipe out half of San Fernando Valley. There are whole lines on the 18 pluses."

And there are: Dirty Debutantes, Nasty Newcomers, Filthy First Timers . . .

One of the actresses infected by Marc Wallace (his condition now is so pitiful that no one thinks him worthy of persecuting) is Mrs John Stagliano. Stagliano himself, the pioneer of gonzo, is HIV-positive (he contracted the virus recreationally, in a Rio bordello). A medium-sized fortune has been made by Stagliano, in a business where, contrary to popular belief, very few fortunes are made. But I often think of the Staglianos, out by the pool, gazing at an ocean to which they have no access.

Gonzo Girl-Boy-Girl

Chloe's shoot is on Dolorosa Drive.

The porno house, the porno fish in the porno tank (the fish are porno-coloured: yellow, mauve, blood-orange), the porno TV set (as big as a double refrigerator), the porno deck, the porno pool, with a plastic duck floating around in it. Beyond the fence stands the house of the pain-in-the-ass neighbour who keeps climbing on to the roof with a mouthful of nails to get himself shocked enough to call the police.

Girl-boy-girl: the girls are Chloe and Lola (a friendly American-style beauty); the boy is Artie (Chloe's offscreen lover: tattooed, muscular, balding). Artie seems to be a nice guy, but he keeps talking with a jokey French accent. Porno performers are great ones for funny voices, funny faces. German scientists, Russian spies, French connoisseurs; in Features they can keep it up all movie long.

There is a crew: the DP (for the time being this means Director of Photography) and the sound-recordist, who go about their business like middle-aged handymen; a plump youth who seems to be there for general work experience; and Chloe's sister, Shannon, caterer and towel-girl. Chloe will soon be calling out to Shannon, "Stop that phone!" Shannon: "It's the home phone! There's like ten of them!"

Artie is giving us more French accent, then more French accent, while Chloe and Lola strip for the "pretty girl" shots that will go on the box-cover. Chloe, with whom I spent five

hours the previous day, walks past me, naked. It doesn't bother her that she's naked. She doesn't know she's naked.

The porno stills by the porno pool. "See pink? Want lots of pink?" "Let's have some booty." "Open it? You want it all?"

It is barely 10 o'clock in the morning, and I am, I realise, experiencing the kind of anxiety that usually precedes a mild ordeal. A line is about to be crossed. I shouldn't be here. None of us should be here. But we all have work to do.

Fifteen minutes later, referring to the achievements of Lola, Chloe stabbed a hand through the air at me, and shouted with joy and triumph (Chloe is the director, remember, and she was thrilled to have this scene in the can): "That's the kind of blowjob I was telling you about yesterday!"

I reeled out into the yard with my notebook, laughing, and shaking my head. There are plenty of "jokes" on a porno set, and there is much raucous mirth to dispel tension. But only a Chloe, only an exception, can inject humour. She sounded like Mel Brooks, in *The Producers*, saying, "That's our Hitler!"

The kind of blowjob Chloe was telling me about yesterday was this kind of blowjob. It is as if the girl's passionate - indeed desperate - intention is to kiss the boy's lower abdomen. She faces an obstacle. She can't go around it. She has to go through it. "I mean," Chloe had said admiringly, "some of these girls go down. Drooling and slobbering, saliva everywhere, choking dry-heaving."

It had to be said that the dry-heaving, from Artie's point of view, was visibly efficacious. When Lola was done, he gazed down with some complacency as Mister Monster went from three o'clock to half past 12.

And that was the tenor of it: heat. That is where the market is taking us: toward heat, intensity, a frenzied athleticism. More than this, porno, it seems, is a parody of love. It therefore addresses itself to love's opposites, which are hate and death. "Choke her!" "Spit inside me!" "Break me! You can't break me! Try!" "COMING!!!" Chloe screamed this last word like a mother answering a child's cry from the other end of the house. Then, to Lola, "Choke me!" And Chloe's entire upper body flushed with pink, and she seemed to swoon . . .

"I wanna piss," said Artie, during one of his many intermissions.

For a moment the DP's eyes widened in alarm. He thought, wrongly, that Artie wanted to piss on camera. "Pissing is as bad as coming," he confided to me. "They're supposed to piss and they can't. They go off to the shower, then they say they can piss and they can't."

Artie trudged back from the can, worriedly nursing his condomed erection. "God I'm old," he muttered, as he headed back to the fray.

Well I'm old too, and I blew a kiss at Chloe and took my leave - before the anal and the popshot. Shannon drove me back to the hotel. Poor Shannon: she was having one of those days. First, shopping in a health-food store, she dropped a jar of wheatgerm on her foot and was now limping heavily. Then she discovered that her boyfriend was cheating on her - and she fired him. Contemplating the suspension of her love life, Shannon said sadly, "And when you compare it to that, the sex doesn't seem much anyway."

I knew what she meant, in a sense. Chloe-Artie-Lola made me feel like a virgin.

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