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QUEER UTOPIA, GAY DYSTOPIA

Power, Sex, and Pornography in the Films of William E. Jones

By Izzy (Isaac) M. Tragarz

In this essay, I analyze the short films of director William E. Jones and how these films depict the shift from the gay community's egalitarian origins to the modern neoliberal and discriminatory gay community. I begin my work by analyzing Jones' *Tearoom*, which presents the "queer utopia" defined by egalitarianism shown in the titular "tearoom" (or area for homosexual public sex), where men have sex freely without regard to identity. Then, I discuss how Jones' film *More British Sounds* uses sound to highlight the emerging identity-based hierarchy common in Bondage, Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadomasochism (BDSM) gay pornography in the 1980s. Next, I show how Jones' *The Fall of Communism as Seen Through Gay Pornography* showcases the degeneration of gay sexuality from egalitarian to a sexuality defined by predatory and class-based roles. Finally, I highlight how Bruce LaBruce's film *Raspberry Reich* shows that modern gay sexuality is able to be redeemed into its original egalitarian form, as Bruce proves with his use of leftist imagery in the film.

I. Introduction

A dark musty room, filled with the latent smell of urine and feces, and the feeling of eyes watching one's every move for a telling sign. To some, this is a nightmare, to others, a utopia. This utopia might appear to be a typical restroom to the straight gaze, but to the well-trained eye of the hedonistic homosexual, this is the epitome of the tearoom. The tearoom is one of many names for a place, secluded from the hustle and bustle of daily life, where one can participate in cruising: the act of engaging in public sex as a gay male. The bathroom as a tearoom, and the sex that goes on within, is the subject of the film *Tearoom*, by William E. Jones. The film consists of illegally obtained footage of police surveillance of a tearoom in Mansfield, Ohio, in 1962. It captures the environment of the tearoom perfectly, it is both eerie in its total silence, a decision by Jones to not add any sound to the found footage, and celebratory of the queer utopia within a tearoom. The idea of the queer utopia is challenged by two other works by William E. Jones, *More British Sounds* and *The Fall of Communism as Seen Through Gay Pornography*, as both films dive into the grim realities outside of the queer utopia, which infiltrate the queer utopia and cause it to become a gay dystopia. This queer utopia is a display of egalitarian gay power dynamics, as compared to a dystopic neoliberal and hierarchical form of gay sexuality. In this essay I analyze how Jones uses the archive to display the downfall of the queer egalitarian utopia into the hierarchical gay dystopia.

II. “Cruising for a bruising”—cruising, the gaze, and *Tearoom*

Tearoom’s opening sequence is sterile and scientific: the film’s title card is followed by a shot of the outside of the titular tearoom, the restrooms in the main square of Mansfield, Ohio. This shot pans across the main square, showing the sign that marks the restroom and the surrounding area. The following sequence is akin to a medical film: the camera goes down the stairs into the bathroom, and an intertitle in chalk flashes, proclaiming that there are “15 steps” that lead into the bathroom. The shots succeeding this sequence show the physical space of the bathroom, zooming in on peeping holes for men in stalls to watch other men at urinals, and the two-sided mirror that the investigators will shoot from. The sequence ends with the door opening to show a smiling camera operator, before the door closes and it is revealed that the door and surrounding areas are covered in measurements written in chalk, presumably to be used as evidence in the trial that led to the arrest of thirty-eight men.¹

How does the physical space in this film, one that led to the involuntary detention of thirty-eight men in psychiatric facilities, one marked by surveillance and fear and homophobia, also act as a utopian space? To queer cultural theorist José Muñoz, the cruising ground, or “tearoom” such as depicted in this film, was, and still is, a gateway to the queer utopia. Utopia, to Muñoz, is the cultural memory of a space “outside of heteronormativity.”² One such space outside of heteronormativity was the cruising ground, as this space offered an experience for homosexual public sex outside of the heteronormative world. Gay writer and performer John Giorno further elaborates this in his memoirs, where he writes after leaving a cruising restroom in 1982 New York City that “It always was a shock entering the straight world . . . full of grim people sitting dumbly with suffering on their faces and in their bodies, and their minds in their prisons.”³ In other words, the cruising ground is a space for men to engage in a hedonistic other world free from heteronormativity, a queer utopia.

However, is this utopia truly queer? Queer scholar Jane Ward argues that the tearoom was decidedly not queer, as tearooms “were valued locales among straight men [who wanted to have sex with other men] precisely because of their disconnection from gay bars and other places where gay men might congregate.”⁴ The tearoom attracted men who did not identify as gay, according to Laud Humphreys’ 1968–1970 study of sex between men in cruising restrooms, because these cruising restrooms offered sex for straight, married men that was a “form of orgasm-producing action that is less lonely than masturbation and less involving than a love relationship.”⁵ Furthermore, the straight-identifying men of the tearoom were more often than not conservative, racist white men. This is evidenced in the fact that all but one man interviewed by Humphreys was white and held conservative beliefs, in addition to a “tip” about cruising restrooms by a white police officer. This officer suggested going to a different restroom because the park Humphreys was in was being “clamped down on” due to “trouble with” Black men. Ward suggests that the popularity of the tearoom among these men acted as a form of “white solidarity,” allowing a form of homosexual expression that was explicitly not gay because all participants were straight-acting married white men.⁶ I disagree with the notion that these participants were not gay. Firstly, as David Chauncey points out in his book *Gay New York*, “Historians have argued the men involved in such same-sex relationships should not . . . be classified as homosexual, since no concept of the homosexual existed. . . . Nonetheless, these same historians persist in calling such men heterosexual, as if that concept did exist.”⁷ Due to the lack of proper conceptualization, Ward argues that men who engaged in cruising were decidedly straight, even though division between gay and straight was not as persistent in the pre-stonewall era.⁸ Additionally, in conservative places, such as St. Louis, Missouri, where Humphreys conducted his research, there was simply no alternative to a heterosexual identity. Therefore, with a lack of an alternative identity, there simply was no option to identify as gay. Similarly, suburban centers and small towns were also (and still are) likely *not* to have gay bars or meeting

1 William E. Jones, *Tearoom* (2nd Cannons Publications, 2008).

2 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009).

3 John Giorno, *You Got to Burn to Shine* (Serpent’s Tail, 1993), quoted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

4 Jane Ward, “Bars, Bikers, and Bathrooms: A Century of Not-Gay Sex,” in *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* (New York University Press, 2015), 71–72, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479860685.003.0002>.

5 Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade* (Duckworth, 1970), quoted in Ward, “Bars, Bikers, and Bathrooms.”

6 Ward, “Bars, Bikers, and Bathrooms.”

7 George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 1st ed. (HarperCollins, 1994).

8 Chauncey, *Gay New York*.



Figure 1. William E. Jones, still from *Tearoom*, 2007.



Figure 2. William E. Jones, still from *Tearoom*, 2007.

places for gay people. Therefore, the tearoom was the only option people had to engage in MSM (men who have sex with men) sexual activity. I do believe that some of the men indeed identified themselves as straight, but it is important to note that these aforementioned conditions such as a lack of conception and legal restrictions possibly prevented them from identifying as gay. Furthermore, the act of cruising itself was queer in essence, not because of the homosexual behaviors or the people gathered there, but because of the egalitarianism that took place in cruising restrooms such as the one documented in *Tearoom*. This is not to say that the tearoom was completely devoid of racism, lookism, etc., as any group-meeting space undoubtedly involves people who are racist, lookist, etc. However, the *potential* for the cruising ground to be a queer utopia—a paradise where egalitarianism is embraced—is already radical in itself.

While there is much debate among queer scholarship on the use of contemporary terms in describing past events, I believe that both the men portrayed in *Tearoom* and the cruising done by these men are inherently queer. Queerness, as defined by scholar Cathy Cohen in her seminal essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” is “a different conceptualization of sexuality . . . to replace socially named and presumably stable categories of sexual expression with a new fluid movement among and between forms of sexual behavior.”⁹ The act of going to a restroom to have sex with men and then going home to a wife, in other words, living a heterosexual lifestyle while performing homosexual acts, is a perfect example of Cohen’s definition of queerness. There is a fluidity between the men’s identity and their actions, which goes against these “presumably stable categories of sexual expression.” The egalitarianism within the cruising restroom is extremely evident in the film *Tearoom*, as Mansfield’s cruising restroom was “the one place in the city where [sic] there was no discrimination, where both black and white, the elite and the derelict, came to meet with few words spoken was Central Park.”¹⁰ This is seen in the film when multiple shots show a white man fellating a Black man (fig. 1) and a man in a T-shirt having sex with a man in a more formal collared shirt (fig. 2). Yet, even if the film itself shows egalitarianism, the question still remains: how is egalitarianism inherently queer? The definition of what a queer text is as posited by Teresa de Lauretis provides an answer. In her seminal work “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future,” Lauretis argues that the film *Crash* is a queer film not because of the film’s obsession with fetishism and sexuality, but because of “its heterotopic vision of sexuality as drive and of the radical irrelevance of gender, sexual identity, or anatomy to sexuality as such.”¹¹ This “radical irrelevance of gender, sexual identity, or anatomy” is a defining trait of egalitarianism, as the egalitarian ideal is a world that is free of biases towards one’s defining characteristics, be that anatomy, gender, race, etc. These shared ideals, therefore, mark egalitarianism as a queer idea.

This notion of egalitarianism within the cruising ground is troubled due to critics of the cruising culture such as Ward and gay academic Leo Bersani. While Humphreys’ interviews cited by Ward only involved one

9 Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3-4-437>.

10 Peter Mars and John Butler, *The Best Suit in Town* (Royal Palm Press, 2001), quoted in Jones, *Tearoom*.

11 Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future,” *GLQ* 17, no. 2-3 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1163391>.



Figure 3. William E. Jones, still from *Tearoom*, 2007.



Figure 4. William E. Jones, still from *Tearroom*, 2007.

person of color, there is the question of whether this selection was implicit or not. Were there no men of color in the cruising restroom, or did Humphreys not bother to report it? Given the dubious nature of his report, with Humphreys knowing the sexual identities of the men “he studied because he covertly followed them home,” it is important to note this possible exclusion of cruisers of color.¹² Bersani’s criticism comes from his observations of the cruising areas in gay bathhouses, where he notes that, “Your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours.”¹³ While this is true, the fact there is even a *possibility* to have sex with whoever one wants in a cruising ground is what makes these cruising grounds egalitarian. It is also important to note that not all queer theorists view cruising as a necessarily “bad” act, as authors and professors Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner discuss in their essay “Sex in Public” the powerful community building aspects of cruising, and the safety present in having sex at an exclusively homosexual location outside of the homophobic public.¹⁴ It is liberating that there exists a place, outside of the draconian heterosexual world, where there is even a *possibility* for race and class to not come into consideration when looking for sex. Although the hierarchy of attractiveness is still present, in the queer utopia, this hierarchy goes beyond the boundaries of race and class. Even if this possibility of egalitarianism is not manifested and a hierarchy is present, the fact this possibility for egalitarianism is *present* means that there is, at the very least, a ghost of egalitarianism lurking in the shambled spaces of the cruising ground.

This idea of the ghost of past ideals lurking in queer spaces is one that is essential to the idea of the queer utopia to Muñoz as well. Muñoz recounts photographer Tony Just’s project of documenting, through photography, the same cruising restrooms described by Giorno in his writings. Muñoz describes these photographs as having a ghostly aura, an aura that reenacts the “ghosts of public sex.”¹⁵ With a trained eye, someone viewing these photos can “catch other visual frequencies that render specific distillations of lived experience . . . it can potentially see the ghostly presence of a certain structure of feeling.”¹⁶ In other words, the experience of cruising in these restrooms is documented by the “immaculate state” of the restrooms captured in Just’s photographs, creating an otherworldly or ghostly aura that puts forward the lived experience of cruising. In *Tearoom*, Jones conjures up these same “visual frequencies [sic] that render specific distillations of lived experience” by repurposing the police footage of past cruisers in Mansfield, Ohio into an art piece. This repurposing of literal visual evidence that jailed, and potentially led to the lobotomization of men who had sex with men in public restrooms, creates an art film that finds joy in and reclaims or queers the surveillance footage that ruined past queer lives.

Tearoom reclaims the archival footage of police surveillance as a queer film through a singular minimal edit. In an interview I conducted with Jones, he stated that the only edit he made to the original surveillance footage to create *Tearoom* was putting the ending sequence showing the exterior and interior of the cruising

12 Ward, “Bars, Bikers, and Bathrooms.”

13 Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (1987): 197, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

14 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344178>.

15 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

16 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.



Figure 5. William E. Jones, still from *Tearoom*, 2007.

ground in the original footage to the very beginning of *Tearoom*.¹⁷ This turns the surveillance footage into a queer art film by presenting the titular tearoom as a space outside of the sterile, draconian world of the heterosexual. The relocation of the ending shots to the beginning creates a dichotomy within the film, contrasting the world outside of the cruising room with the queer utopia of the cruising room itself. The establishing shot (fig. 3) defines the space outside of the restroom as beautiful, with the foliage and statues of the park that the restroom lies in within full display.

The next shot presents the dark stairway that leads to the restroom (fig. 4), with the intertitle “15 steps” shown. This intertitle introduces the aura of surveillance and authoritarianism present within the rest of the establishing shots, as the inclusion of such an arbitrary detail of how many steps are in the stairwell reminds the viewer that what they are seeing was originally used for evidence within a courtroom. The approximate next four minutes present the restroom devoid of life, the camera sterily surveillancing a simple public restroom. This is similar to Muñoz’s observations on Just’s photographs of empty cruising restroom, where “the pictures, through the negative charge of absented bodies, instill in the spectator a sense of gathering emptiness.”¹⁸ The only shot that shows life is when a door that is covered by writing is opened to reveal the cameraman, but this too is marked by an aura of sterility and an authoritarian gaze. This authoritarian and sterile aura is present due to the fact that the door is covered with scientific measurements, marking the site as one to be examined and not enjoyed (fig. 5). However, the sterile environment marked by the authoritarian gaze of the police surveillance is changed when the footage showing the cruisers, which encompasses the rest of the film, begins.

This reclamation of the draconian surveillance footage into a form of queer art is also present within the very title of the film itself. The word “tearoom” itself was associated with authoritarian, as it was used “in reported criminal prosecutions of homosexuals in the late C19 [nineteenth century].”¹⁹ Jones again uses signifiers of surveillance, in this case the word “tearoom” and its association with criminal prosecutions, in his film to show that although the film presents a queer utopia, there is still the menacing context of the film’s original purpose as police surveillance footage. This is not to say that the word “tearoom” was used exclusively as a word by the police, as Laud Humphreys’ work, which documents the public toilet cruising grounds, is called *Tearoom Trade*. Humphreys, as a gay man himself, would have been familiar with the cruising grounds of the 1970s and would have used “tearoom” intentionally to refer to such an environment. Therefore, the word “tearoom” itself is as complicated as the film itself, having a history of being used by both the police and the gay community.

The transfer from an environment devoid of life to one that is filled with queer joy begins with the transition of the surveillance of the environment to the surveillance of the cruisers. This shot shows a finger plugging up a hole used for peeping at men at the urinal, and as the finger plugs up the hole, a yellow tint gradually fills the screen accompanied by figures of circles, until the screen turns a matte yellow before a cut to black (figures 6, 7,

17 William E. Jones, interview with Izzy (Isaac) M. Tragarz, December, 2024.

18 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

19 Tom Dalzell and Terry Victor, eds., *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2008).



Figure 6. William E. Jones, still from *Tearroom*, 2007.

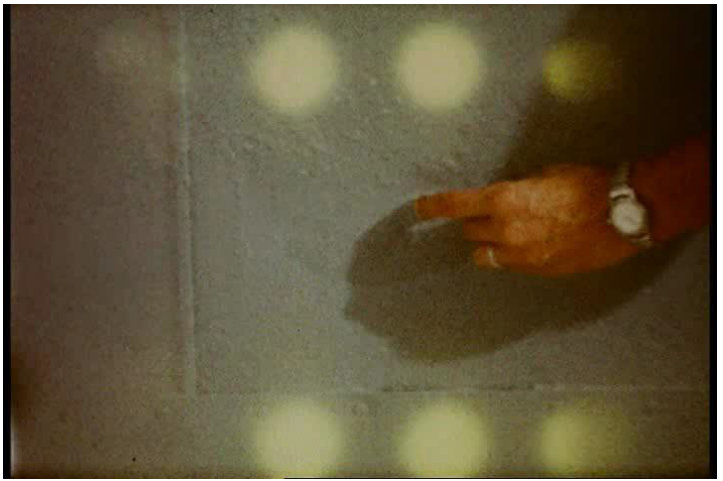


Figure 7. William E. Jones, still from *Tearroom*, 2007.



Figure 8. William E. Jones, still from *Tearroom*, 2007.

and 8). After this cut, the first man outside of the police surveillance is shown in a dark shadow. This miraculous (if the shot is indeed unedited) yellow tint indicates a shift in environment: although the tearroom presented in the rest of the film is the same bathroom, the aura of queerness is present through the depiction of men cruising. The yellow's stark contrast to the bathroom painted in blue breaks the previously established color environment, a break that creates an opening for the cruising room as a queer utopia. This yellow gradient resists the blue environment that marked the previous sterile, authoritarian establishing sequence. Therefore, this gradient creates an environment outside of the surveillance state of the police. Thus, the previous establishing shots present "a space of emptiness [that] is meant to make room for other worlds of sexual possibility."²⁰

Regarding this new environment, one may question whether it is truly filled with queer joy. Throughout the film, the men mostly do not express joy, their faces seem to convey more of a banal "going through the motions" attitude towards their homosexual encounters (fig. 9). There are some examples of men smirking (fig. 1), but the majority of them have stoic and blank expressions while they have sex. Queer joy is indeed difficult to locate in the film, however, the act of simply having homosexual sex is in a sense an expression of queer joy. These men in the cruising ground did not *need* to come to the tearroom, as brothels and other legal means of procuring sex were available in Mansfield at the time.²¹ The tearroom, therefore, acts as an environment that is diffused with a different kind of sexual energy outside of the heterosexual institutions of sex, one that attracts gay sex in public. This energy, and the radicalness that comes from it, makes public sex a form of queer joy itself. In other words, the laissez-faire attitude towards sex and the ability to have queer sex is *in itself* queer joy due to the fact that queer sex is able to be had.

20 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

21 Mars and Butler, *The Best Suit in Town*, quoted in Jones, *Tearroom*.



Figure 9. William E. Jones, still from *Tearoom*, 2007.



Figure 10. William E. Jones, still from *Tearoom*, 2007.

The environment of queer joy and sexual liberation is present not just in the aura, but in the mise-en-scène of the film: men have sex outside of the singular stall, men look through the peephole, and men exchange fellatio while standing within the stall. While cuts interrupt the footage, there are not scenes in the conventional sense as there is no way to establish when each action is happening. With the lack of natural light, it is impossible to tell what time of day it is in the restroom, let alone what day each “scene” takes place in. There are sequences of white that intercut the film, and after each sequence of white, the film appears in a different hue. This most likely occurred from in-camera editing, with each day’s film being a slightly different color. Still, the reappearance of multiple people across multiple days of shooting makes it difficult to pinpoint when exactly each sequence is taking place. Lacking a sense of time, the remainder of *Tearoom* seems to take place in a void visually and temporally distinct from the outside world lit by the sun in the establishing shot. This void itself is the queer utopia that Muñoz writes about, a world “outside of heteronormativity,” i.e., a respite for these men who have sex with men within the conservative Mansfield.²² In a sense, this void is heaven: the restroom is a respite for free love where race, class, time, and the need to conform to heterosexuality does not exist. Rings of light over the men’s heads appear throughout the film as well, which further shows how the cruising restroom is an utopian heaven to these men (fig. 9). Even with the introduction of the camera’s POV leering into the bathroom, surveilling the persons inside, there is a remnant of the liberating gaze of the cruiser. Like the word “tearoom” itself, the camera is a mixture of both the oppressor and the oppressed, mixing queer utopia with the surveillance of said queer utopia that led to the incarceration of thirty-eight men. The camera, and the tearoom itself, is not a perfect utopia, but that is what makes it queer. It exists both on the outside and is affected directly by the homophobic world; in other words, it is imperfect and queer.

In Jean Ma’s essay “The Haunted Movie Theater,” Ma postulates that the film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* engages in the act of cruising through the film’s seemingly painfully long shots of men in cruising situations. The sexuality of the film, presented through the camera’s gazing stare, “is curiously stalled, never realized in a teleology of consummation or coupling. It circles and lingers upon signals of sexual interest yet to be fully deciphered.”²³ A shot within *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, a long take of men in a restroom, causes the camera to participate in this act of cruising because this shot itself follows the tenets of cruising, that being a long gaze that can never be truly realized, or never “fully deciphered” (e.g. if a potential partner does not return a mutual interest). The camera’s gaze in *Tearoom*, while antipodal to the long takes of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, participates in this cruising as well. The camera focuses on certain individuals and starts recording when the individuals are in frame. The recording ends when they are off frame (in contrast to the long takes of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*), which is essentially an extension of the cruiser themselves. There is a desire to look, to document if a bathroom occupant is interested in sex or not, that is similar both to the cruising subjects and the draconian lens of the police-placed camera, though the

22 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 35.

23 Jean Ma, “The Haunted Movie Theater,” in *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888028054.001.0001>.

camera looks for the possibility of a future of prison instead of a future of sex. Hence, by looking at the cruisers, the camera itself is being queered, participating in this queer act while simultaneously documenting the act for punitive purposes.

Jones' work not only queers the idea of utopia by presenting the seemingly dark and dreadful bathroom as a place for free queer expression; he also queers the idea of the archival documentary itself as well. Stella Bruzzi writes in the chapter "The Event: Archive and Newsreel" in her book *New Documentary*, that "a clear distinction exists between 'newsreel' and 'documentary,' . . . whilst the newsreel is limited to showing events, it is the function of a documentary to provide structure and meaning."²⁴ What is intriguing with Jones' works is his ability to queer this concept of the documentary itself, particularly in *Tearoom*. His ability to show the minimally edited police surveillance footage and not provide any "structure and meaning" in a formal sense (i.e. adding voice-over explaining the footage, providing relevant information through title cards, etc.) while still providing an artistic and thought-provoking film is remarkable. Jones is able to queer the archive, taking this footage that was used for homophobic persecution of gay men and liberating it into a piece celebrating the queer cruising utopia, by simply doing nothing to the film. *Tearoom* is also similar to other archival documentary films as the film showcases that "general theses can be extrapolated from specific historical images and that the historical event does not only reside in the past but is inevitably connected to the present."²⁵

The film's connection to the present is found in *Tearoom*'s lack of editing. It is with the knowledge of the viewers today and their gaze backwards into the time of *Tearoom*, a gaze fueled by a proliferation of gay rights in America, that the film is able to provide a commentary on queer utopia. The simple fact that the viewer can view this film as an art piece in its naked (unedited) truth, and not a disgusting showcase of gay behavior as it was viewed as in the 1960s, shows that the film is linked to the present through the contemporary viewer themselves. Again, what makes *Tearoom* radical is its departure from the use of intervening images from other sources, such as a montage of a Civil War soldier compared to an American soldier in Vietnam as seen in *The Year of the Pig*, and its ability to present this commentary in its unedited truth.²⁶ *Tearoom* presents itself as a document to queer life that does not necessitate the need of other images to make its claim known, the act of queer cruising is radical enough.

The film's deafening silence as well allows for the viewer to interpret the film without the influence of a voice-over that presents the narrative for them. Any semblance of story is found in the documents that make up Jones' book that accompanies another book, which is also titled *Tearoom*. The book presents historical documents that tell the story of what led to the footage being recorded (a conviction of a pedophile that spurred a crackdown on "perverts"), how Jones acquired the film, and his own thoughts on the film. Again, Jones queers the medium of the documentary by having its background information in the form of a book instead of putting in the film itself. Jones himself remarks that "I can write texts that are more complex than the narration of a film can be."²⁷ While most of Jones' other films use sound, he still manages to queer these films with the dissonance between the audio and the visual, which is most prevalent in his short film *More British Sounds*. This introduction of sound begins the degradation of the queer utopia showcased in *Tearoom*, with sound introducing confusion, chaos, and the beginnings of neoliberal hierarchy to the queer utopia.

III. Antipodal Anglos: dissonance and dystopia in *More British Sounds*

Jones' 2006 film *More British Sounds* is striking in its dissonance: various audio clips from the film *British Sounds* by Jean-Luc Godard play, sometimes stuttering over one another, over footage from the British-themed gay pornographic film *The British Are Coming*. *More British Sounds* is not subtle in its dissonance between sound and image: the second line that one nameless female voice-over speaks is, "Sometimes the class struggle is the struggle of one image against another image . . . in a film, this struggle is between images and sounds." This

24 Stella Bruzzi, "The Event: Archive and Newsreel," in *New Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2006).

25 Bruzzi, "The Event."

26 Bruzzi, "The Event."

27 Thom Andersen and William E. Jones, *Thom Andersen / William E. Jones (Between Artists)* (A.R.T. PRESS, 2013)



Figure 11. William E. Jones, still from *More British Sounds*, 2006.

dissonance itself is part of what makes *More British Sounds* follow a tradition of sound and image dissonance in queer film, which, as well as the very explicit nude males present in the film, make the film a queer art film.

Juan Suárez writes in his essay “The Sound of Queer Experimental Film” that “sound . . . in queer experimental film disrupts textual ‘oneness.’ Abrupt juxtapositions of heterogeneous acoustic material and deliberate mismatches between sound and image disrupt textual unity and reveal the material heterogeneity of the image, dispelling its illusiveness.”²⁸ The disruption of “oneness” is apparent in *More British Sounds*, as sounds of mid-20th century British leftists discussion of topics such as workers’ alienation does not match sonically with the images that make up the visual aspect of the film. One such example of this sonic mismatch is when these sounds are heard over a British man in an equestrian riding uniform erotically “punishing” his subordinate (fig. 11). Suárez also notes in this essay the works of Jones, specifically the works *V.O.* and *Film Montages* and how these works explore “loss and recovery” by remixing sound as a “form of mourning, an attempt to replicate and internalise what has been lost, yet can be restored only as intermittent, fragmentary memories lodged in the material traces of film.”²⁹ As with *Tearoom*, Jones queers the film by extending from the film’s queer visual depictions of male subjects in erotic situations to the medium of film itself.

This queering of the sound from the visual is not an uncommon trait within queer films, though Jones’ queering is a departure from the campy disconnection from sound and sight in other queer experimental films.³⁰ For example, the short film *Matzo Maidels* by Jenni Olsen humorously puts a heavily New York–accented speech sprinkled with Yiddish sayings over vintage Lesbian stag films. Unlike *Matzo Maidels* and other camp-influenced queer experimental films, Jones in *More British Sounds* dissociates the sound from the visual in a manner that is not campy, but in a serious and somewhat terrifying manner.

The voice-over in *More British Sounds* is noticeably corrupted from its original form. Jones overlays the original voices from *British Sounds* voices over and over on top of the footage, causing them to repeat themselves and overlap each other, becoming nearly incomprehensible at times. The vocal cacophony during certain points at the film is so distracting that the arousing aspect of the pornography that these voices are played over is completely negated by the auditory overstimulation. In a sense, when viewed as a product of its pornographic base, *More British Sounds* fails as pornography by becoming so overstimulating that it fails to produce any arousal. However, if stimulation is the point of pornography, i.e. to arouse and stimulate the viewer sexually, then is *More British Sounds* still an authentic pornographic film? In this manner of thinking, Jones queers the idea of pleasure and pornography all together. He produces the question of whether the possibility of having too much of a good thing, in this case simulation, hinders the production of pleasure? Jones, in asking this question, queers his pornographic source material by stripping it from its goal of producing arousal, both using and questioning pornography in order to create queer art film.

28 Juan A. Suárez, “The Sound of Queer Experimental Film,” in *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film* (Oxford Academic, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190469894.003.0013>.

29 Suárez, “The Sound of Queer Experimental Film.”

30 Suárez, “The Sound of Queer Experimental Film.”



Figure 12. William E. Jones, still from *More British Sounds*, 2006.

Authenticity also plays a major role in *More British Sounds* due to the film's inherent inauthenticity. *The British are Coming*, the original pornographic film that serves as the visual landscape of Jones' piece, is inauthentic at its core: the film was produced by Los Angeles-based gay hardcore pornography production company HIS Video.³¹ As hardcore pornographic film was illegal in the United Kingdom until recently, the film presumably had to be shot in the US to produce the desired effect of British-coded gay characters having hardcore gay sex. This inauthenticity is extended from the source material into *More British Sounds* as Jones' film questions the idea of stimulation to the point of overstimulation as an authentic or inauthentic (failure to be a) pornographic film. This questioning of the film as a pornographic object extends to questioning the gay community in maintaining the queer utopia found within the tearoom. *More British Sounds* queers the film's source material into a scathing commentary on the homosexual community, unlike the reappropriating of homophobic footage in *Tearoom*. In relation to *Tearoom*, this question of authenticity and pleasure questions how the queer utopia that is present within the titular tearoom has progressed, or rather regressed. With the liberalization of the gay community that occurred since the 1962 events depicted in *Tearoom* to the contemporary 1980s of *The British Are Coming*, had utopia been realized and made mainstream? Had the gay liberation movement succeeded in its goals of fundamentally changing the idea of sexuality and true acceptance for homosexuals?

The answer is a resounding "no." In *More British Sounds*, the gay community seems, if anything, to be more restrictive and restraining than the extremely (and literally) underground sex scenes that take place two decades in the past in *Tearoom*. On a visual level, the hierarchical and oppressive side of the gay community is seen in the elements of sadism and masochism (S&M) portrayed in the film. The subordinate of a lavishly decorated soldier is "forced" to lick the soldier's boots (fig. 11) and in another scene inside of a locker room a cricket player roughly handles a man for him to lick various parts of the cricket player's body (fig. 12). The hierarchy and strict rules portrayed in the S&M portions of the film are antipodal to the idea of the queer utopia, a vision for the gay future as egalitarian and pleasure-filled. It is important to address the idea of gaining pleasure from S&M, and the idea of pornographic film as separate from the material that it visualizes. If the men depicted in the film are gaining pleasure from their degradation and upholding of hierarchical sexual values ("the dom" and "the sub"), is it truly degrading? Or is it all make-believe?

The idea of the pleasures in the pornographic film being not truly degrading or simply "make-believe" is obscured by the sonic aspect of *More British Sounds*. In standard gay pornography, sound serves a unique purpose as "'bottoms' are typically expected to maintain an orgasmic 'sound' throughout intercourse" in order to show the viewer that the bottom is being pleased without visually showing it. A bottom's orgasm and pleasure is not shown as "the end of a scene can be signaled by the 'bottom' reaching orgasm. However, their (visual) orgasm is often secondary to the 'showstopping' performance of the top."³² By obscuring this standard of gay

31 "The British Are Coming," Gay Erotic Video Index, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://gayeroticvideoindex.com/video/11748>.

32 Sharif Mowlabocus and Andy Medhurst, "Six Propositions on the Sonics of Pornography," *Porn Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2017.1304236>.



Figure 13. William E. Jones, still from *More British Sounds*, 2006.



Figure 14. William E. Jones, still from *More British Sounds*, 2006.

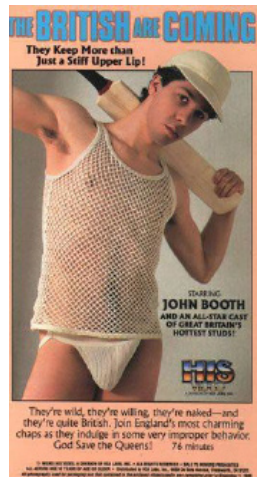


Figure 15. VHS cover for *The British Are Coming*, 1986.

pornography, that being auditorily confirming the pleasure of the bottom, *More British Sounds* obscures if there is any actual pleasure going on. There is no panting or moaning of the S&M bottom in the films as the audio track of *The British are Coming* is replaced by the cacophony of voices from *British Sounds*. Therefore, the question of whether these men are actually enjoying their experience as a masochist cannot be answered. With a lack of auditory confirmation and, at best, a lukewarm visual response (fig. 13) from the majority of the actors, the default answer to this question of pleasure is, at best, a lukewarm maybe, and at worst, a hard no. While *Tearoom* too does not audially confirm the pleasure of bottoms when they have sex, there are several points where the bottom grins and visually confirms pleasure, unlike *More British Sounds*.

The S&M costumes themselves also reveal a dissolution of the queer utopia once seen in *Tearoom*, as the British-themed costuming shows how nationality has infected its way into the once egalitarian queer utopia. In *The British are Coming*, men wear costumes that signal Britishness, namely a royal riding uniform and a cricket uniform, though only the hat and jockstrap remains (fig. 14). These costumes exhibit a concept of Britishness that only works as a fantasy, as the pieces were presumably acquired in Los Angeles where the film was produced, not in Britain as the film's box art claims (fig. 15). Outside of a production of inauthentic Britishness, one that is rooted in an American idea of Britishness produced by an American company, *The British are Coming* is steeped in class politics not found in the cruising restroom of *Tearoom*. Scholar John Mercer notes that British gay pornography "is organized around the eroticisation [sic] of notions of social class, social role and whiteness," which is extremely prevalent in *The British are Coming*.³³ The film's eroticism, or at least that which is present in the scenes shown in *More British Sounds*, is entirely based around the notion of class.

33 John Mercer, "A World of Men: Race, Ethnicity and National Identity," in *Gay Pornography: Representations of Sexuality and Masculinity* (I. B. Tauris, 2017).



Figure 16. William E. Jones, still from *More British Sounds*, 2006.

Drawing on a previous example, a subordinate of a stereotypical costumed royal equestrian licks the boot of his superior, culminating in the superior groping the subordinate with his riding crop. Even in scenes where social class is absent due to a lack of costuming, power and hierarchy is still shown in the rough commanding movement of the cricket player encouraging a man to lick him, and the final scene showing a timid man looking at the genitals of men framed as powerful with their upright and cocky posture (fig. 16). This is a staunch difference from the queer utopia present in *Tearoom*, where men had sex with one another regardless of class status or race. It appears that Bersani's concerns over the "pecking order" of gay men in cruising becomes evident in this mid-1980s pornographic film, one that idealizes the inauthentic British white man.

Returning to the argument that this is all "make-believe," there is the question of whether this eroticization of class-differences is problematic. After all, if the pornographic image is inherently disconnected from reality because pornography produces a fantasy that is (usually) unachievable in the real world, the imagery presented can be viewed as inconsequential as it is a mere fantasy. Queer historian Jack Halberstam retorts this idea in his essay concerning the role of fascist imagery in (the largely homosexual) S&M/Leather sexual communities, aptly titled "'The Killer in Me Is the Killer in You': Homosexuality and Fascism." Halberstam argues that the presence of fascist imagery in sources influential to the gay leather community, namely Tom of Finland's artwork, should not be ignored and should be critically examined, while still being enjoyed as erotic material.³⁴ As the film's fantastical representations of British iconography is still steeped in class-differences, as well as echoes of imperialism in the royal equestrian uniform, the film needs to be critically examined.³⁵

In addition to the visual references towards class-difference and other forms of hierarchy present in the film, *More British Sounds* uses its chaotic soundscape to further underline the degradation of queer utopia. The issue of class structure and hierarchy made even more apparent with through decision to include the voice-over from *More British Sounds* that discuss class, marking the inherent divide between the subordinate lower class and the superior upper class as unavoidable with the voice-over's constant and nearly irritating discussion of class-based issues over scenes that eroticize said class-based differences. The overlapping and often unintelligible repeating of lines further solidifies these differences, as the uncomfortable and confusing sound environment created by this overlap not only strengthens the dissonance between the image and sound, but also presents a dissonance between the erotic fantasy and reality. Jones, in putting a soundtrack that deals with film vital issue of class and class struggle, removes the erotic and fantastical nature of the image source, queering this source and pornography in general. If pornography is meant to present a fantasy outside of reality that titillates the viewer, the uncomfortable and serious nature of the voice-over reminds the viewer that reality still affects the fantastical

34 Jack Halberstam, "'The Killer in Me Is the Killer in You': Homosexuality and Fascism," in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394358-008>.

35 This is not to say that S&M and leathersex are inherently discriminatory forms of sex. Many BDSM practitioners advocate for egalitarianism, both inside and outside of the bedroom (or dungeon). I am simply stating that the roots of the hierarchy that make up BDSM practices needs to be critically examined in order to understand why people enjoy these forms of hierarchy as sexual practices, and why they are included in *More British Sounds*.

image of pornography. Fantasy and reality can never truly be separate, and this is evidenced by the uncomfortable and stark reality present in the soundtrack, the opposite effect of what pornography attempts to provide a viewer. *More British Sounds* queers the idea of pornography itself by creating an uncomfortable rather than erotic viewing experience, a discomfort that is influenced by the very reality that pornography tries to escape from.

If *Tearoom* is queer utopia, then *More British Sounds* is the beginnings of a gay dystopia. The egalitarian site of the cruising ground has been transformed into the hierarchical dystopia of gay pornography. Like *Tearoom*, *More British Sounds* queers the archival images that make up the film. However, unlike *Tearoom*, *More British Sounds* presents not the cruising ground that is separate from the harsh realities of everyday life and promotes egalitarianism, but an erotic site that eroticizes hierarchy. Returning to Halberstam, even if this form of hierarchy is eroticized and therefore not to be taken seriously, it is important to note that the idea of hierarchy *itself* is being glamorized, seriously or not. What causes such a shift from the egalitarian to the unequal in these films?

Given the film's production year (1986) is in such close proximity to Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" essay (1987), I find it appropriate to look to this essay for guidance. Bersani laments the inequality found in the gay community, most notably in the cruising environment of bathhouses, where "Your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours."³⁶ This is a remarkable shift from the non-hierarchical gay sex that occurs in *Tearoom*, which is especially surprising when both areas are gay cruising grounds. The reason for this shift can be found in the co-opting of straight and capitalist society by gay men after the mainstream acceptance of homosexuality. For one, the bathhouse is a space that is inherently capitalist: a cruiser pays to go into the cruising ground in an explicitly private space, as compared to the tearoom, which is public and free to use. In terms of broader general co-opting of straight and capitalist culture, this can be found in the attitudes of gay men at the time of Bersani's writing. Bersani notes that:

The very real potential for subversive confusion in the joining of female sexuality [i.e. a male being penetrated or dominated, a role traditionally taken up exclusively by women] . . . and the signifiers of machismo is dissipated once the heterosexual recognizes in the gay-macho style a yearning toward machismo, a yearning that, very conveniently for the heterosexual, makes of the leather queen's forbidding armor and warlike manners a perversion rather than a subversion of real maleness.³⁷

Therefore, to Bersani, the gay male identity is one that has been co-opting the machismo of straight culture and all the various "-isms" that come with it (racism, sexism, classism, to name a few) in order to act out this "traditional" notion of masculinity that gay men find attractive. This is seen in *More British Sounds* as the form of class-based differences are presented through the clothing of the models, e.g. the upper class riding uniform versus the simple boxers of the lower class. Even though class-based differences can still be visually pointed out in the United States, e.g. the "Value Brand" T-shirt versus the Gucci T-shirt, the United Kingdom is unique in its solidified class-based hierarchies. While anyone in the United States can (supposedly) become a millionaire, only those born or married into royalty or lordship in the United Kingdom can truly be a noble or aristocrat. With this marriage not being afforded to gay couples at the time of the film's production, the eroticization of UK class differences becomes much more disturbing: the demeaning place that the "sub" is in is one that he will likely be in for the rest of his life, as he was not born an aristocrat. While this may be erotic for some, the notion of being a subordinate forever even within a gay relationship, a gayness that was once defined by an egalitarian queer utopia, is very harrowing.

Gay history shows that co-opting machismo and all the problematic aspects that come with it was not always the default for the gay male community. George Chauncey notes that the homosexual community of turn-of-the-century New York defined itself by its separation from straightness, while still being attracted to macho ideals of men like sailors.³⁸ While middle-class gay men at the time often viewed themselves as more

36 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

37 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

38 Chauncey, *Gay New York*.



Figure 17. William E. Jones, still from *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Porn*, 1998.



Figure 18. William E. Jones, still from *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Porn*, 1998.

“normal” than the effeminate, often lower-class “fairy,” this self-distinction as “normal” was one out of necessity. To Chauncey, “While most men could elaborate the ways in which they were different from the fairies, they needed to do so only because the similarities seemed so frighteningly apparent.”³⁹ In other words, the turn-of-the-century gay community in New York had machismo gay men, but this machismo came out of a necessity to conform to a straight, homophobic, and capitalist culture rather than co-opt it. There was still a need to conform to heterosexuality even in the more accepting environments of homosexuality like Bersani’s example coming from San Francisco, but the co-opting of this machismo into the gay sexual identity itself marks a shift from the necessity of conforming in the early twentieth century to the desire to co-opt in the 1980s. While previous generations of gay men co-opted machismo in order to blend in, contemporary generations of gay men co-opted machismo for sexual desire. When this sense of machismo is achieved, the heterosexual, to Bersani, will still view it as a cheap and inauthentic mimicry of the heterosexual machismo. However, this is not to say that the co-opting of machismo for the purpose of sexual desire is a completely negative action. Even if racism, sexism, and classism makes up these forms of machismo, as long as the discriminatory roots of this machismo are addressed, these forms can be reclaimed as a queer act. See for example the various people of color, disabled, transgender, etc., leathermen that make up the ranks of various leather competitions.

The gay dystopia of machismo is explored even further in Jones’ most popular film *The Fall of Communism as Seen Through Gay Pornography*, which exemplifies the inequalities that make up the machismo desire of mainstream gay erotic imagery through the exploitation of lower-class men in post-Soviet Eastern Europe.

IV. Conquered Caucasians: exploitation and subjectivity in *The Fall of Communism as Seen Through Gay Pornography*

The idea of the gay dystopia reaches its zenith in Jones’ most popular film, *The Fall of Communism as Seen Through Gay Pornography*. The film opens with footage of a young man removing his shirt, leaving him standing in his underwear. His hands are over his head, and his expression signals slight discomfort. This image (fig. 17) and Jones’ voice-over, “Even in an unlikely place, it is possible to find traces of recent history,” summarize the thesis of *The Fall of Communism*, namely, the rise of exploitation in the gay community as seen in gay pornography (the aforementioned “unlikely place”). The next clip reveals the film’s source material, as the intertitle tells, “All of the following images came from pornographic videos produced [sic] 1993–98 in Eastern Europe and distributed in the US.” The first pornographic sequence shows many young Russian and Eastern European men strip and perform sexual acts with an expression of discomfort (fig. 18). The film’s titlecard then appears over a panning shot of a map of Soviet Russia. After the titlecard, another intertitle appears saying “Old and New,” introducing a sequence of shots that guide the viewer through Moscow, a city that is a prime source for “Eastern European



Figure 19. William E. Jones, still from *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Porn*, 1998.

videos produced for export with Western money,” according to a voice-over by Jones. It is odd that these images of beggars, Soviet architecture, and street vendors come from pornographic videos, as these images are not erotic or tantalizing in the slightest. Their inclusion becomes apparent as *The Fall of Communism* continues. After this sequence, there appears a freeze frame of a young man in a soldier uniform who “will seduce a comrade under a picture of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev,” again told by voice-over by Jones. The voice-over continues, “Symbols of the old and new co-exist in the fantasy world of gay porn. Anachronisms may be unnoticed by viewers who fast-forward through the boring parts.” This prominent symbolism of both pre- and post-Soviet Moscow in “the boring parts” of this gay pornography acts as a signifier of the Soviet world. By bombarding the viewer with symbols that are explicitly Soviet such as a red star with Lenin’s face in the middle, these signifiers create an environment that is defined as Soviet. This follows the same function as the British imagery in *More British Sounds*, as both use stereotypical forms of nationalistic symbolism to produce an “authentic” national imagery in gay pornography, in order to fetishize a specific nationality. These fetishizations of nationalities are, thus, a further manifestation of power and hierarchy in the gay dystopia.

One reason for the presence of hierarchy in the use of British imagery in *More British Sounds* may come from the elaborate riding uniforms (fig. 11) and general uniform fetishism in the gay fetish community. This extends to the power dynamics produced by these uniforms, as discussed in section III. Similar dynamics are present in *The Fall of Communism* with the stereotypical symbolism of the Soviet. In an interview I conducted with Jones, he stated that he produced this film as he found the subject of the naïve and exploited Eastern European and Muscovite young men fascinating, due to the fact that “White people had never been humiliated like this before.” The Soviet imagery thus presents a subject that is fit to be exploited, given the fall of communism that is mentioned in the film’s title. This is not uncommon with the portrayal of the colonized subject as sexually submissive in the eyes of the colonizer, as Edward Said notes in *Orientalism*, “cultural, temporal, and geographical distance was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise.”⁴⁰ This is explicitly present in post-Soviet Russia, as Dan Healey observes that “the colonial gaze was apparent here [Western gay pornography depicting and using Russian models]—Russia was offered as the sexually available Other for the Western porn consumer.”⁴¹ While this desire for the nationalized subject is similar to *More British Sounds*, there is a remarkable extension of the subject of desire from the submissive person to the submissive country. Unlike the desire for the submissive person in *More British Sounds*, *The Fall of Communism* showcases a desire for the submissive *country*. Since the stereotypical imagery of Soviet Russia in this film does not come solely from the attire of the nationalized subject, which is the case in *More British Sounds*, but instead comes from the environment of Soviet Russia itself, the degrading gaze has extended from the person to the country. The hierarchical nature of the homosexual desire has

40 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/berkeley-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5337468>.

41 Dan Healey, “Active, Passive, and Russian: The National Idea in Gay Men’s Pornography,” in *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

thus become an extension of colonialism. The desire to conquer the submissive body has now become the desire to conquer the exploited nation.

This desire of conquering the nation *in addition* to the nationalized subject culminates in the final shot of this sequence of Soviet imagery preceding the pornographic shots. This shot shows a young man's torso and his apparel: white briefs (a.k.a. "tighty-whities") and a shirt with an American flag graphic (fig. 19). This shot lingers for a few seconds without audio, before cutting to the next montage. The lack of the young man's face in this shot presents the young man as a blank canvas, something for the Western viewer of this pornography to project their desires onto. Furthermore, the inclusion of stereotypically American garb such as the "tighty-whities" and American flag graphic shows that this young man has been conquered both culturally and physically: he now sports the clothing that symbolizes America and not the stereotypical national uniform like in *More British Sounds*. This lingering shot forces the viewer to contemplate as well as potentially project their own desires onto the young man, making them complicit in this conquering of the Soviet subject. The act of viewing the gay pornographic video and indulging in these desires thus makes the viewer an extension of the man behind the camera that exploits these young men.

The use of the stereotypical Soviet imagery also acts not only as a marker of authentic nationality, but as a signifier of domesticity. In my interview with Jones, he explained that the pornographic tapes he sourced that were found in video stores acted as an "unintentional documentary," which provides a glimpse into the houses of the models appearing in these films.⁴² Authenticity in this case is extended from the notion of an authentic nationality as evidenced with visuals of stereotypical national imagery to the notion of authentic livelihood, presenting the model's home as untouched and thus giving the viewer a glimpse into their "authentic" selves. This view of the "authentic" model is done by providing a view into the place where the model is most likely to be authentic and not put on a persona: their homes. Using the home as the space for these videos not only provides a glimpse into the lives of the models but also brings to attention the fall of communism in Moscow.

By using the domestic space of the models as a space of commerce, as the purpose of these videos is to make money for both the producer and the models, there is an abandonment of socialist values that made up the Soviet Union. Marx states in his theory on the alienation of labor that "he [the worker] feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home."⁴³ Due to the alienation of the worker from his product, Marx proposes that there is a distinct difference under capitalism between work and leisure, as work produces a salary and leisure does not. The neoliberalism that exploits the models in these pornographic source materials, as neoliberalism has now forced the men to model for a salary, in a sense queers the Marxist idea of alienation from labor. This is because in using the home as the set for these pornographic videos, labor and leisure (in the form of the domestic) have become one in the same. However, this queering is not a positive form of queering, as it leads to the exploitation of the models as seen in these films, which is similar to Bersani's critiques of the queering of "machoness" as discussed in the previous section. This extends to pornography itself in a sense, as the pornographic industry commodifies the act of sex, the ultimate act of pleasure, into a business. It is therefore unsurprising that the alienation of labor is a recurring theme throughout Jones works, as the discussion of "worker's alienation" also was a major recurring soundbite in the voice-over of *More British Sounds*.

After the presentation of Soviet imagery, there is a montage of various young men looking into the camera while the voice-over states that "Something that distinguishes Eastern European gay porn is the number of men looking into the camera. Performers may be inexperienced . . . others are openly hostile in the atmosphere of coercion that pervades some of the videos." The act of looking into the camera during a scene is a naïve mistake, it breaks the illusion that the camera is viewing a scene with an unknown presence. This naïveté in the performance of the models is not un-arousing through its breaking of the fourth wall but is in fact one of the main appeals of this genre of pornography. The act of looking into the camera, done by the models unaware of the unwritten rules of filmmaking shows that these models are *authentically* naïve, and therefore are somewhat "willing" to be exploited. The "willingness" to be exploited comes from this authentic naïveté that signals to the viewer that the men are truly destitute and as such are willing to be in pornographic videos, even if they do not have any

42 Jones, interview.

43 Karl Marx, "Estranged Labour," Marxists Internet Archive, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>.



Figure 20. William E. Jones, still from *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Porn*, 1998.

experience being in them and may not be gay. This naïveté essentially proves to the viewer that the models are not professional actors, that they are truly desperate to do anything for money in the poverty-stricken post-Soviet Eastern Europe, even if acquiring that money means being a model in a pornographic video. The hostility or resigned indifference present on the faces of the young men (fig. 20) are not conventionally sexually attractive; they are not the telltale signs of pleasure interpreted by the viewer as the sense of joy that comes in (authentically) having sex.

This lack of pleasure is actually what makes the film pleasurable to some viewers. Mark J. Kiss and Todd G. Morrison write in their essay “Eroticizing Desperation: Poverty Gay-for-Pay Porn” that the appeal of “gay-for-pay” porn, i.e. gay pornography that has a “straight” actor perform homosexual acts for money, comes from the humiliation of the “straight” performer.⁴⁴ There is a sense of revenge that comes from this type of pornography, where the gay benefactor to these “straight” men are the ones in power, and not the straight man. Therefore humiliation acts as a form of eroticization, as “these interactions with the straight performers enact retaliation akin to stating, ‘Who’s the fag now?’”⁴⁵ While the pleasure in the films shown in this montage do not necessarily come from humiliation of the “straight” actor, as later in the film some models explicitly state they experience same-sex attraction, these actors are still humiliated when they are shown to explicitly not be enjoying what is happening to them. Therefore, the act of not enjoying this sex is what makes the film enjoyable to the Western viewer, enacting a form of sadism towards the exploited actor.

After this montage appears another montage of the film titles of the gay pornographic source material. Titles flash before the viewer, again seeking to portray a sense of “Sovietness,” with titles such as “Comrades in Arms” and “Perestroika” (meaning reconstruction, a policy in post-Soviet states to reconstruct their economy after the downfall of the Soviet Union). Jones again in voice-over tells us that “The main attraction is that Eastern European sex-workers often earn one-tenth the wages of their American counterparts.” With this voice-over, it becomes explicit through the all-knowing voice of Jones along with the visuals of the naïve models that the main attraction in these videos is exploitation.

Following the title-card montage, a section of the film entitled “Screen Tests” takes up the remainder of the film. The section opens with a young man, fully dressed, being interviewed by a man behind the camera. This continues with four other men. The men are asked questions such as what their sexual fantasies are, what their sexual orientation is, and how they would feel if someone watched them have sex. In response to the last question, the fourth man says it would depend on who was watching. The man behind the camera states, “In this case it would be an old man like me,” to which the young man responds, “I wouldn’t like it . . . but now I take it as work.” What is revealed by these interviews is a plethora of information. Three of the men are straight: they respond to questions regarding their sexuality with answers (relayed through a translator) such as “He likes to

44 Mark J. Kiss and Todd G. Morrison, “Eroticizing Desperation: Poverty Gay-for-Pay Porn,” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-021-09828-7>.

45 Kiss and Morrison, “Eroticizing Desperation.”



Figure 21. William E. Jones, still from *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Porn*, 1998.



Figure 22. William E. Jones, still from *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Porn*, 1998.

be with boys and with women” and “[he likes to be with] women and very young boys.” Unlike the American poverty gay-for-pay actors analyzed by Kiss and Morrison, the models in these videos are not exclusively heterosexual. The non-heterosexual model therefore does not fall into the claim that the fantasy provided by these films are revenge fantasies against the heterosexual male. However, as previously stated, there is still a degree of exploitation as noted by the models’ naïveté and the final model noting his uncomfortableness but putting up with it as he notes, “I take it as work.” Furthermore, there are no signs of “machoness” in the models that are synonymous with Western heterosexuality as defined by Bersani. With a lack of heterosexual revenge but an air of exploitation still present, the source material for *The Fall of Communism* eroticizes the poor male subject not as a straight man to have revenge be taken out on, but as a poor worker to be dominated. The notion of “revenge domination” in Western gay-for-pay pornography is a hierarchical concept, but the unapologetic exploitation of these young men in the source material takes this idea of hierarchy in a gay dystopia a step further.

This unapologetic exploitation is in the final sequence of the film, where the unnamed man behind the camera “inspects” the models. One shot in particular, and the climax of the film, exemplifies the exploitation taking place, as the man behind the camera opens the model’s mouth with his finger, presenting him as more akin a plaything than a human being (fig. 21). Notable here is that the face of the man behind the camera is never shown, only his arms and legs when he pokes and prods the models (fig. 20). While the camera shot is not point of view (POV), there are connections between the absence of the man’s face and the use of POV in exploitative pornography. Writing about the pornographic series CzechBoys, a modern internet gay pornographic series that features similar exploitation as shown in this film, Joseph Brennan writes:

POV both establishes the narrative voice and positions the viewer within this perspective. The particular standpoint promoted is one in which the man wielding the camera, the cashed-up Westerner, is the one with the power (to ‘pursue’ Czech boys and to penetrate them) and ‘the only one having a good time.’⁴⁶

Though the camera is not in POV form in these screen tests, both POV in the CzechBoys series and the camera in *The Fall of Communism* present a fantasy that positions the viewer as the exploiter. This is done through the removal of any identifying material of the man behind the camera exploiting the boys in *The Fall of Communism*, creating an anonymity of the exploiter which then allows for the viewer to project themselves onto the anonymous exploiter. This itself is similar to the camera’s function in *Tearoom*, where the camera’s gaze is scientific and draconian towards the men in the cruising ground. Similarly, in *The Fall of Communism*, the “inspection” of the boys, probing their mouths with the man’s finger (fig. 21 and 22), makes the camera more scientific than it

46 Joseph Brennan, “Exploitation in All-Male Pornography Set in the Czech Republic,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417719012>.

is erotic, as it is in *Tearoom*. It is as if the mythology of the queer utopia has gone full circle, though corrupted as it is now the gay dystopia full of hierarchy and exploration rather than the utopia presented in *Tearoom* of egalitarianism and sexual liberation.

The reasoning for such fetishization of the exploited is theorized by critics Rich C. Cante and Angelo Restivo. Writing about national imagery in the transnational gay pornography of mononymic gay porn producer Bjorn, some of whose films are ones that make up the archive that Jones uses, the two theorize that:

The appeal of the non-identitarian, when combined with such exoticist rhetorical dimensions, perhaps brings the Western spectatorial ‘desire’ for such models (as pornographic personas) in line with a desire for a sort of ‘virgin’ untainted by an identitarian [sic] ‘gay’ model that is presumed to be Northern, Western, and non-indigenous to the places represented in the process.⁴⁷

In other words, transnational gay pornography intends to display the model in a way that is not aligned with Westernized notions of the gay sexual identity (i.e. the hierarchy of top and bottom). Jones, however, queers this idea of the models as virgins untouched by Western identities by highlighting the exploitation that they face (literally) by the hands of the producers of the videos they appear in. The notion of the “non-identitarian” virgin is impossible to achieve if the Western linking of sex, money, and power are present, which are very much in the films highlighted by Jones in *The Fall of Communism*. Therefore, Jones eschews this fantasy by highlighting the identitarian exploitation inherent to the film’s production, which is exactly what the film’s “non-identitarian virgin” is supposed to be liberated from.

Exploitation of the Eastern European models is particularly interesting considering the view of gay pornography in post-Soviet Russia. Some Russian-made gay pornography did not employ a strict hierarchy of “top” versus “bottom” and the power dynamics that come with these strict roles. While there were models of “top” and “bottom” in gay pornography, the hierarchy established by these positions were less strict than the hierarchy seen in the pornography that makes up *The Fall of Communism*. This hierarchy is exemplified when the man behind the camera acting as the “top” repeatedly uses his power as economic provider for the models in order to inspect them like animals, much to the declared discomfort of the models.

One example of this less rigid hierarchy is described by Dan Healey in the gay pornographic film *Kazaki* (Cossacks). There are signifiers of the vulnerable “bottom” that exists in order to be dominated by a “top” in the form of a “youthful blonde messenger” who offers himself to a well-endowed Cossack chieftain.⁴⁸ While “subsequent scenes involve the messenger’s . . . non-reciprocal ‘servicing’ of a ‘top,’” this hierarchical model of sexuality is subverted in the final scene where an orgy commences.⁴⁹ In this orgy, “the men adopt as their collective bottom an . . . alpha-male (and the man with the biggest physique in the cast). . . . Close-ups reassure us of his consent: he smiles and laughs.”⁵⁰ Unlike in *The Fall of Communism* where the models are completely dependent on the wills of the man behind the camera in order to survive through the payment, the Russian-produced pornographic film *Kazaki* subverts these strict hierarchies by having the one who conventionally has all the power in the gay pornographic scene, the “alpha male,” be a bottom without any coercion as he visually signifies his mutual pleasure through “smiles and laughs.” Therefore, the hierarchy and coercion in pornography with Russian iconography is a uniquely Western invention, as Russian-produced gay pornography with equally Russian themes (the Cossack) offer an alternative to strict hierarchies as seen in Western pornography.

Even during the era of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), gay life was less hierarchical than gay life in the West. Apart from the obvious persecution of gay men in the USSR, the gay lifestyle was quietly tolerated and operated in different ways than gay men in the West. Journalist Tom Reeves notes in his travelogue article “Red & Gay” about the gay community in East Berlin and the USSR that “Soviet gays like their East

47 Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, “The ‘World’ of All-Male Pornography: On the Public Place of Moving-Image Sex in the Era of Pornographic Transnationalism,” in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, 2nd ed., ed. Pamela Gibson (British Film Institute, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781805751175.ch-010>.

48 Healey, “Active, Passive, and Russian.”

49 Healey, “Active, Passive, and Russian.”

50 Healey, “Active, Passive, and Russian.”

German counterparts have come up with a life that is in some ways less brutal than the ‘free world’ gay ghettos.”⁵¹ One man named Klaus who was interviewed by Reeves notes that during his visit to West Berlin from East Berlin, “He found what he considered crass competition, coldness, bitchiness. He found it hard to fit into a community and find friends.”⁵² This is in contrast to Reeve’s description of the Soviet gay “community,” as he writes that:

[Klaus] had a small circle of gay friends who visited opera and theater, picniced [sic], or read poetry together in the evenings. They were not part of a larger gay scene—none existed. That very fact made them aware of each other’s needs, careful of each other’s feelings. The extreme nature of their problem led them away from promiscuity and stereotyped ‘gay’ casual sex into honest, loyal relationships.⁵³

The description of the gay life in East Berlin is not to say that the life of gay men in the USSR was idyllic; it was anything but as men had to remain closeted lest they be arrested. I also disagree with Reeve’s idea that promiscuity and “stereotyped gay casual sex” is completely antipodal to “honest loyal relationships,” as the two are not mutually exclusive. However, the Soviet gay “community” that was fostered around friendship and “honest, loyal relationships” is interesting to note compared to the “coldness, bitchiness” that was interpreted by Klaus in West Berlin. Due to the criminalization of homosexuality, Reeves notes that gay Soviet men were “very private, their style is not at all affected by mass media or elite propaganda, as it increasingly is in the United States (the Mafia bars, the slick porno, the tired Advocate).”⁵⁴ In other words, the lack of a mass gay community allowed for a unique trend to occur in the lives of some gay Soviets, one marked by friendship and not the “bitchiness” of the West. It is important to note as well that these Soviet men were presumably of upper-class standing in the USSR, as marked by their ability to speak English to communicate with Reeves, their ability to party and travel freely, etc. I do not intend to say that the lives of these men are the definitive view of Soviet gayness, but that a common trend is formed when analyzing the lives of these particular gay Soviets.

Jones in his interview with me noted that *The Fall of Communism* was not shown for five years after it was first released in 1998 due to it being “too close, too relatable.”⁵⁵ In other words, the exploitation found within gay pornography is not a distant fact of the past in these archival Russian porn movies but is still very much present in today’s neoliberal world. For example, the eroticization and exploitation of poverty in order to acquire models for a pornographic film are still very much popular in today’s pornographic films, with companies such as Czech Hunter and Debt Dandy. These production companies pick up (purportedly) straight and destitute men on the street and promise to give them cash in exchange for sex, or in other words, they depict “a fantasy of straight men forced to engage in gay sex on camera.”⁵⁶ Using data from Alexa, a web service that tracks visits to websites, the website str8upgayporn.com found that Czech Hunter is the thirty-eighth most visited gay porn website in the world, with 569,774 visits in 2021.⁵⁷ This shows that the exploitation “genre” of gay pornography is still thriving, presumably even more so than 2003 when *The Fall of Communism* was released due to the popularization of the internet and internet pornography. This continued popularity of gay exploitive pornography cements the Western neoliberal gay community as one that has fully embraced the hierarchical, exploitative gay dystopia, a community that has seen the suffering of others through the power of the internet and eroticize it instead of resolving said suffering.

At the end of the film, when asked why the model participates in the movie, he states, “The money,” as interpreted by a translator. The man behind the camera responds, “Oh, the money! Yes, well, that is a very good reason.” This exchange marking the end of the film summarizes the descent of the gay community from queer

51 Tom Reeves, “Red & Gay,” *Fag Rag*, 1973.

52 Reeves, “Red & Gay.”

53 Reeves, “Red & Gay.”

54 Reeves, “Red & Gay.”

55 Jones, interview.

56 Brennan, “Exploitation in All-Male Pornography Set.”

57 Zach, “Here Are 2021’s Most Popular Gay Porn Websites in the World, Ranked from 50-1,” STR8UPGAYPORN, January 16, 2021, <https://str8upgayporn.com/most-popular-gay-porn-website-2021/>.



Figure 23. Bruce LaBruce, still from *Raspberry Reich*, 2004.

Figure 24. Bruce LaBruce, still from *Raspberry Reich*, 2004.

utopia to gay dystopia. Rather than have an egalitarian view of sex, a view that does not discriminate between Black and white, rich and poor, that makes up queer utopia, the gay dystopia and subsequently the gay community, as evidenced by this dialogue, is shown to now be defined by hierarchy and exploitation. With the fall of queer utopia in gay explicit films, is there any hope for redemption of the gay community? Famed gay filmmaker Bruce LaBruce believes that radicalness and egalitarianism is still possible in the gay community as shown in his infamous film *Raspberry Reich*.

V. Conclusion: “Join the homosexual intifada!”—reclaiming queer utopia in *Raspberry Reich*

If Jones’ *More British Sounds* and *The Fall of Communism* offer visions of a gay dystopia filled with assimilation to hierarchical views towards sex and power, then Bruce LaBruce’s *Raspberry Reich* offers the reclamation of the radical power of queer sex. *Raspberry Reich* follows a group of German male leftists led by a female leader named Gudrun, who spouts such slogans as “Join the homosexual intifada!” and “Heterosexuality is the opiate of the masses!” throughout the film. The film’s loose story follows the group as they kidnap the son of a German millionaire to negotiate for the release of Red Army Faction (RAF) prisoners, but once it is revealed that the man’s father has disowned his son for being gay, the “revolution is postponed,” as put by an intertitle towards the end of the film. Though the revolution is not successful, the lives of the characters are forever changed: the hostage and a kidnapper fall in love and run away together, and the female leader and her husband give birth to the “next leader of the revolution.”

The film is tinged with a camp aesthetic: the automated dialogue replacement is sloppy, the camera is shaky, and leftist slogans fly in and out of frame like a PowerPoint presentation. LaBruce argues, however, that this is not camp but is rather what he calls “anti-camp.” Bruce writes in his manifesto aptly titled “Notes on Camp/Anti-Camp” that modern camp has undergone “complete normalization and de-contextualization away from subversive or transgressive, countercultural impulses in the service of capitalist exploitation.”⁵⁸ LaBruce’s answer to this disregard for the subversiveness of camp is present in *Raspberry Reich*, where he presents “revolution in its most excessive form as consumption, by staging revolution as ‘deviant’ sexuality.”⁵⁹ This is most evident in the constant barrage of political messaging in Gudrun’s dialogue, shouting the aforementioned leftist slogans and monologuing about Marcuse and her namesake, the leader of the RAF named Gudrun. Throughout the film, male sexuality is positioned with leftist imagery, such as a man donning tighty-whities before masturbating in front of a figure of Che Guevara (fig. 23) and two men having sex in black balaclavas reminiscent of the original Red Army Faction (fig. 24). As tighty-whities represent the American conquest in *The Fall of Communism*, LaBruce’s use of the white briefs worn in front of a leftist figure shows how the modern homosexual can be liberated into true

58 Bruce LaBruce, “Notes on Camp/Anti-Camp,” *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* 21, no. 2 (2014), quoted in Jennifer Creech, “Gudrun Is Not a Fighting Fuck Toy: Spectacle, Femininity and Terrorism in *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* and *The Raspberry Reich*,” in *Spectacle*, ed. Jennifer Creech and Thomas O. Haakenson (Peter Lang, 2015).

59 Creech, “Gudrun Is Not a Fighting Fuck Toy.”

radicalness through resituating this image of Americanism into a leftist environment. Throughout the film, leftist slogans, both original and ones spoken by Gudrun, appear as text on the screen, either floating along or rapidly flashing on the screen. These pseudo-intertitles incorporate a tongue-in-cheek form of sloganeering, bearing messages such as “Madonna is counter-revolutionary” and “Watching a straight porn is counter-revolutionary.” The political messaging of the film is certainly satirical, as the revolution never actually occurs, and the messaging is shown ad nauseam. Despite this, the ability for homosexuality and radicalness to liberate oneself is very much present. In one sequence, the kidnapper and captive have sex with one another (the captive being the one to initiate it, thus dodging acquisitions of coercion). After this sequence, the two confess their love to one another and later go on a bank-robbing spree. Two transformations occur with this coupling, one with the class-betrayal of the bourgeois son of a bank magnate and the other being the seeming realization of the leftist’s attraction towards men.

What is also notable about this sequence, and the other sex scenes throughout the film, is the bombardment of leftist imagery in the sex scenes. In the first sex scene in the film that occurs in Gudrun’s bedroom, sex occurs with imagery of the RAF and other leftist posters surrounding the couple, and in the last sex scene the men have sex in front of the leftist icon wallpaper found earlier in the film while slogans such as “Make (revolutionary) love” glide across the screen, with occasional flashing lights appearing. While Creech argues that LaBruce in the film “undermines our relationship to the image . . . by artificially eroticizing the revolutionary commodity, and by interrupting the supposedly erotic coitus with humorous revolutionary rhetoric,” the sheer abundance of leftist imagery in actuality *reinforces* this connection between revolution and sex.⁶⁰ He enacts his anti-camp form by repeating this association, even if it is ironic and tongue in cheek, to the point that queer sex and revolutionary become one in the same. LaBruce camps this leftist imagery in presenting it through the film ad nauseam, using his “anti-camp” form to bring back the subversiveness around queer sex by associating it with leftist imagery.

Raspberry Reich presents a form of queer radicalness not through leftist sloganeering, but the radicalness of queer sex itself. *Tearoom* introduces this concept of queer radicalness by presenting the titular tearoom as a space of egalitarian-fueled queer utopia. This utopia has been damaged by the hierarchy and nationalism adopted by gay men’s embrace of heterosexual-backed machismo in the form of a gay dystopia, as seen in Jones’ films *More British Sounds* and *The Fall of Communism as Seen Through Gay Pornography*. However, the radicalness of the queer utopia is still present in an untapped form as presented by *Raspberry Reich*. When presented with these images of a queer utopia, past and present mainstream gay dystopia, we should not merely long for the radical past but turn towards the conformist present and recognize it as wrong, paving the way to a truly queer utopia.

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