

Imagining the She/Male: Pornography and the Transsexualization of the Heterosexual Male: Psychoanalytic Reflections

Lynne Zeavin, Psy.D.

Institute for Psychoanalytic Education, New York University Medical Center

In his essay “Imagining the She/Male: Pornography and the Transsexualization of the Heterosexual Male,” Escoffier (this issue) brings a particular type of pornography to our attention. He asks our consideration of the scenes in which the object of desire is a male to female transsexual body—prior to surgery, penis intact. After noting a surprising rise in popularity of this category porn he asks us to consider the desire responsible for the upsurge—to understand and to situate it within contemporary culture.

I agree with Escoffier that the desire in question is not new. What is new are the images of this—medically mediated—physical form. This image, this form, allows for the satisfaction of very deep desires.

The desire(s) being satisfied are old, but the means, and medium, of satisfaction are new. As I contemplate both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of these desires, I find myself thinking about the very foundations of psychoanalytic theory. I begin there.

The desire in question finds satisfaction in its contemplation of the image of an ostensibly female body with a penis. This image is neither of the body of a “man” nor of a “woman.” The image is of a body that is neither one nor the other, a double-sexed body, without gaps or lack.

I move from there. I ask, is the body in question a concretization of a very early fantasy, a body that is simultaneously mother and father, mother in father, father in mother? I also ask, does the body in question satisfy a desire to see a female body with a penis, the “uncastrated” woman of archaic fantasy, or, alternatively, to see a male marker joined to female secondary characteristics—breasts and femininity?

I ask, how many boys assume—hope, even—along with little Hans, that their mothers have “widdlers” too?

Here she is, then, I think, that mother, that woman of primordial fantasy.

Or maybe not. Is she that mother? Is she a mother at all?

What I imagine is that, in some elemental sense, the body has everything. This or that here become this and that. A body that precedes lack, precedes sexual differentiation, precedes separateness—might this image, this body, correspond to the residue of a very early, primitive infantile fantasy?

Escoffier's question about the status of this desire propels me to considerations of unconscious fantasy and to the workings of the primary process.

I take as my subject the hypothetical viewer of the she/male porn, the presumptively heterosexual male that Escoffier writes about in his text. That is, I imagine this imagining subject.

Working from the premise that desire is structured around unconscious fantasy, I attempt to generate various hypotheses concerning the desires at work in this imaginary subject.

I start with the regions of the mind that Freud was aiming to describe in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Three Essays on Sexuality* in 1905. There, Freud talks about the very beginnings of sexual desire. Sexual desire arises as an excess. Freud famously uses the example of the baby at the breast who lingers there, even after hunger is sated. This lingering is both the marker of and the opportunity for an excess pleasure, a pleasure not essential to the satisfaction of hunger.

Freud (1905) calls this excess "sensual sucking." Here, sexuality begins. And it is from here, from this moment of excess pleasure at the breast, that all subsequent desire derives. All desire is indebted to, and is a version of, the desire satisfied via "sensual sucking." We come off of the breast wanting "more," "again." We aim to repeat what we've had, first by means of hallucination, a rudimentary form of fantasy.

Freud (1905) is here charting the workings of instinct (drive). For Freud, instinct always has an aim and object and source. The aim of the instinct is always the same: satisfaction. The Source is the body. The object is that through which the instinct achieves its aim.

Melanie Klein builds on Freud. She teaches us that sexual aim is always intertwined with sexual object and that this object, however it is represented in the mind, is crucial to the formation of the ego. For Klein, the mother, of course, is not a whole person yet, but a breast is itself the site of longing. Klein argues that the baby not only experiences the mother as breast but also will have a sense of the father's penis as part of this "mother."

The first body, then, the site of the first sexual desires, the "mother's" body, has, as its crucial constituents, breast and penis. This mix of parts gives the child an early sense that the mother is not the infant's alone.

For the infant the wish to possess the mother is a wish to possess her entirely. If there are limits, the infant wants the limiting factor eliminated, or, failing that, wants to possess it as well. The penis—what Lacan calls the "phallus"—is this limiting factor. It forms a primal pairing from which the infant is crucially excluded. How the infant negotiates this primal exclusion is the stuff of development.

What the infant does with the fact that the mother is beyond his sole possession, how he situates himself in relation to the primal couple, how he introjects their various parts, the fantasies he has about their coupling—whether creative or destructive—will all have significance for the development of the capacity to think, that is, to bear and to represent difference, limit, separateness, and loss.

Fantasy facilitates thinking. We can think difference and loss while fantasizing sameness and possession. The substrate for fantasy is the primary process. Freud formulated the primary process (1895, 1900) in order to account for dreaming and for the unconscious. "Process" here refers to the process through which perceptions are used to facilitate wish fulfillment. The characteristics of primary process include an absence of contradiction, displacement and condensation, timelessness, undifferentiation of external and psychical reality, replacement of logical

connection and causal-temporal logic with event sequences and contiguity, and replacement of similarity with identity.

Primary process does away with the elemental problems presented by “reality.”

The primary process short-circuits difference and distinction. Its complement, secondary process, respects difference and distinction—most elementally, it distinguishes between hallucination and perception. The secondary process tolerates traumatizing perception. This capacity to tolerate trauma is what Alan Bass (2000) refers to as the secondary process work of “including the traumatic within itself” (p. 33).

To return now to the imagined viewer of she/male porn: I think that viewer is in a state somewhere between hallucination and reality, where the potentially traumatic dimensions of sexual difference need not be endured. Needing not to endure, finding a way around what might otherwise be unendurable, the viewer—with the image as perceptual evidence—might be employing what Bass (2000, following Freud) calls disavowal. The she/male scene can function to organize and contain what, otherwise, might have had to be disturbingly split off.

Following is a clinical example—that is, an example that seems to me to represent problems and solutions similar to the ones I think of while imagining the excited viewer of she/male pornography.

A patient of mine, a woman, regularly dreamed of herself having a penis. She was in bed with a man and looked down at her genitals only to discover that she was in possession of a penis. For her this dream was steeped in wish, the dream image offering perfect solution to a range of desires. For my patient, having a penis of her own would be her way of entering her mother’s mind and being able to occupy her. Her older brother was in her view capable of this, and in her fantasy, it was his penis that made it so. My patient’s penis envy, such as it was, was envy of the brother’s capacity to fill the mother’s mind. It was also a way around the painful experience of her father wanting her mother, indeed choosing her mother over her in the primal scene. Having a penis of her own meant that she didn’t need to face oedipal disappointment or loss—she had what her father had that was what her mother wanted.

My patient lived her dream in some respects. Many aspects of life were likened to the “next big thing.” Her language was filled with dreamlike references: I’ve got it all sewn up, I need a big thing to organize myself around. Her oedipal fantasies consisted of having what her father really wanted and in this way being able to outdo her mother.

But on another level, a level far less conscious for my patient, she craved her mother’s attention and love. Her mother had come across in the analysis as fairly tuned out. One story of my patient from early childhood depicts this. She had had a toileting accident while in preschool. The mother was called to collect her child but didn’t come for a very long time, leaving my patient feeling dirty, small, and forgotten. Somewhat later in life her mother told her that she had not been planned or wanted, and the mother had thought of aborting the pregnancy. The awful part of this was it was said as if merely sharing news, something her daughter would be curious about. In fact my patient was thrown into chaos, being unable to think about what her mother had actually said.

In a rather concrete way, then, my patient recruited various aspects of her external reality to make up for the drastic absence of her mother, or more accurately, the presence in her mind of a hateful and aborting mother whom on one level she had felt wanted to be rid of her. The penis dream then can be seen as being the embodiment of what she felt her mother would want: a son, a husband—not another girl at all.

Via the dream then, she solved the problem of wishing for her mother and feeling herself to be the small, dirty, forgotten girl of her childhood. Having a penis or its endless substitutes via external reality was the solution to her problem. She could not face her envy and despair—she recast it in terms of something she already had. In this she defended against an aspect of her external reality and internal reality—needing the penis to address her murderous internal maternal object. Having a penis was a dream, but it played out in sex with her husband in countless scenarios where she would wear a dildo and surprise him by having a penis of her own. This was endlessly provocative and exciting to each of them.

For her, the element of surprise allowed a degree of control over her partner, a reversal of that underlying view of herself as dejected, without, dirty, and alone. Something about having the penis allowed her to feel simultaneously woman and man, mother and father, not outside of the primal scene, not even in the primal scene, but *the* primal scene—taking the part of each parent, embodying each, missing nothing. At its most basic level my patient via this sexual scenario was overturning her most profound fears of separateness, smallness, helplessness, envy, and loss. I argue that the viewer of she/male porn, via sexual excitement and arousal, may likewise be contending with these deeper regions of the mind, deeper and more primitive anxieties and fears. It might be true too though that the porn is not so much exciting as reassuring, not so much erotic as a means of hypnotic self-soothing.

I suggest that the viewer of she/male porn may be recruiting the pornographic image in the same way that my patient dreamed her dream and played in sex.

I suspect the pornographic image offers a concrete object for the viewer, an object presented on-screen that makes up for one that need not be either dreamt of or constructed in fantasy.

I think the pornographic she/male scene functions in lieu of dreaming. It serves dream's purpose: it provides a visual scene in which wishes are satisfied. The image on the screen saves the viewer from doing the often psychically demanding work of making his own dream. The pornographic image provides structure and coherence, allowing for sexual excitement and satisfaction while, at least potentially, fending off traumatic aspects of the image it obscures, that is, the image of sexual difference, the troublesome separation of "she" from "male."

Some generalizations seem in order here: every dream enacts the illusion that wish can be satisfied by a manufactured perception. All pornography, including the she/male category, does the same.

Whether in dream or via the pornographic image, why I wish remains opaque to me.

The wish is granted, just as it was when I could hallucinate a means of satisfaction.

The she/male is an image, obliterating, on-screen, the boundary between what was once a perception—a perception that generated the work of wishing and desire. The she/male on-screen corresponds to a "she/male" once constructed via primary process.

This original image of the "she/male" derives from the territory described in Freud's (1905) three essays. The original sexual object is an imagined one: polymorphous; variable; pieced together; constructed so as to satisfy wishes and prevent loss, frustration, and trauma.

I suggest that the original—privately constructed—image of the she/male is the product of concreteness. To be concrete—in Alan Bass's (2000) conception—is to impose wish fulfillment (the primary process domain) on external reality. Multiple shifts occur as a result of the concrete solution: the tension between what I think and what you think, between external and internal reality, between I and you—these tensions are eliminated.

Similarly the distinction between perception and wish (memory) is suspended. The priority of secondary process over primary process is inverted; wish dominates; perception submits.

I wonder if part of what is gratifying about she/male porn is that the viewer is taken into a world where on-screen perception confirms a private wishful image; that is, for the moment, the difference between wish and perception collapse. Tension is reduced; the need for psychic work is eliminated. The yield might be both relief and satisfaction.

Britton (2003) describes some individuals who believe that “the infant mother relationship is inferior to the primal scene” (p. 68). The usual idealization of childhood, and of the relationship with the mother, is missing. Instead what is idealized is the imagined parental relationship. “For men this is characterized by hero worship of physically powerful men and day dreams of sexual encounters with unknown women who are perceived as sexual and *not as maternal*” (italics added; p. 68). We can certainly wonder whether the she/male image combines, indeed condenses, the idealized parental couple into a single entity. This on-screen entity is an image of a powerful woman/man—explicitly nonmaternal—and, given the penis, concretely nonmaternal. The penis functions as a reminder that this will never be a maternal body—it cannot bear children, it cannot be impregnated.

This line of thought leads to another.

For Freud (1905), the fetish stood for the missing maternal phallus. I think, then, that the on-screen image of the she/male may counter the disruptive original encounter with the perception of the mother’s genital, a perception that likely included the sense of lack. Primary process might have countered that original perception with an image that undid lack, that undid genital sexual difference. The result might be a primal image of the mother containing not only breasts but also penis. This image assuages all manner of anxiety about lack—separateness and loss, a lost body part, a lost object. I/we/you can be man and woman, I/we/you can have man and woman, I/we/you need not chose, I/we/you need not worry about being chosen.

To conclude, I turn to Bion. Bion (1962) developed a theory of thinking. For Bion, the beginnings of thinking are grounded in the capacity to bear absence. (For Bass [2000], concreteness develops in response to the absence of this capacity.) For Bion, thinking arises out of the awareness and tolerance of separateness. Separateness is endurable only if it can be “thought.”

As David Bell (2011) points out, Bion’s theory of thinking gives new meaning to Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. Bell reminds us that dreams not only occur at night but also are continuously part of all mental life. He states,

During the day we might walk along and see a red car and a blue car—which to our conscious mind, might have little meaning. But the unconscious mind is always seeking out ways to represent its contents, to express itself. So the images are stored and put together with other images to represent, for example the red car and the white car doing something to each other, something that has sexual implications [p. 92].

It is my contention that the on-screen image of the she/male in pornography is an undreamt dream. It renders the necessity for the dreamer to dream the dream obsolete. Still the mind of the viewer has stored its own versions of white cars and red cars, breasts and penises, and all the rest—and the pornographic moment allows for their representation, and satisfaction.

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AUTHOR BIO

Lynne Zeavin, Psy.D., is a psychoanalyst on the faculty of the Institute for Psychoanalytic Education affiliated with New York University (NYU) Medical Center and on the faculty of NYU School of Medicine. The author of numerous articles on female sexuality, the analyst's pregnancy, and the work of the contemporary Kleinians, Dr. Zeavin is on the Editorial Board of the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* and in private practice in New York City.

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