



**'Girls and Corpses': The 'Tattoo-Titted Freakdom' of Bonnie Rotten**

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Abstract:	Bonnie Rotten's onscreen persona drew equally on punk-inspired and horror iconographies. A conjunctural aesthetic epitomised in the ornate spider-web pattern tattoos that adorn her breasts. Other designs homage cult horror films, as seen in—the zombie design from <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> (1968) on her stomach, as well as iconographic references to classic slasher flicks such as <i>A Nightmare on Elm Street</i> (1984) and <i>Friday the 13th</i> (1980). In this article I examine how Rotten's branding as a 'punk model' signifies her 'rebellion'— vis-à-vis corporeal embodiments of the grotesque, carnivalesque, and the abject – in an articulation and reframing which has become familiar within contemporary pornographic production.



## **Porn Studies – Porn Performers Special Issue**

### **‘Girls and Corpses’: The ‘Tattoo-Titted Freakdom’ of Bonnie Rotten**

In 2014, Bonnie Rotten (AKA Alaina Hicks) became the first ‘alt porn’ porn star to be crowned Female Performer of the year at the porn industry’s most prestigious awards ceremony, the Adult Video Network Annual Awards.<sup>1</sup> Prior to her retirement from porn in 2020, Rotten’s success in the adult industry had its roots in her unique ‘alternative’ appearance—her body is heavily-tattooed—and her porn star persona was characterised by her exaggerated onscreen performance style; this includes a repertoire boasting displays of projectile ‘squirting’ coupled with frequent ‘spit play’. Taking her stage name from a zombie pin-up design tattooed on her left leg (nicknamed Bonnie Rotten), her onscreen persona drew equally on punk-inspired and horror iconographies. This conjunctural aesthetic is epitomised in the ornate spider-web pattern tattoos that adorn her breasts. Other designs homage cult horror films, as seen in—the zombie design from *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) on her stomach, as well as iconographic references to classic slasher flicks such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980). In this article I examine how Rotten’s branding as a ‘punk model’ signifies her ‘rebellion’—vis-à-vis corporeal embodiments of the grotesque, carnivalesque, and the abject—in an articulation and reframing which has become familiar within contemporary pornographic productions.

### **Persona, Self-branding and the Female Grotesque**

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<sup>1</sup> At 21 years old, earning the award marked a highpoint of Rotten’s early career. Rotten entered the adult industry at 18, after winning the ‘Ms. Dead Indiana Beauty Pageant’, a beauty pageant celebrating ‘alternative’ models at the Indiana Days of the Dead convention. Rotten’s prize included a feature photoshoot for *Girls and Corpses* magazine in Los Angeles, a niche horror porn publication featuring centrefold images of alternative models, surrounded by stock horror imagery which includes semi-decomposed zombies, spider-webs and skeletons.

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3 Punk, or rather Rotten's 'punkness', functions as a marker of both her alterity and as signifier  
4  
5 of her 'authenticity'—perhaps exemplifying what Florian Cramer has termed 'a rhetoric of  
6  
7 the authentic' (Cramer 2007: 174). The function of punk within Rotten's branding parallels  
8  
9 the ways 'punkness' has been used within alt porn, giving a distinct 'edge' to a performer's  
10  
11 persona (Maina 2014), consolidating (self-)branding strategies (Biaisin, Maina and Zecca,  
12  
13 2014), and ascribing a 'rebellious' image to kinds of production and their output (Attwood  
14  
15 2014; Maina 2014; Paasonen 2014; Smith 2014). Nevertheless, there are ambiguous elements  
16  
17 to Rotten's affiliations with the subcultural, and/or her self-identification with the punk  
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19 moniker that enable a conscious 'play' with the signifiers of punk, without maintaining a  
20  
21 credulity to the puritanism of the ethics of the punk subculture more broadly.  
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29 Rotten's signature 'look' certainly shares the subcultural imaginary of her alt porn  
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31 contemporaries: an aesthetic that discernibly contrasts with what Feona Attwood has labelled  
32  
33 the 'cookie-cutter' porn star mainstream archetype (2012: 47). Even so, Rotten's career  
34  
35 evidences a radical departure from the independent production model adopted by most alt  
36  
37 porn performers and producers.<sup>2</sup> Rather than constituting her marginality to the mainstream,  
38  
39 Rotten's alterity points to the success of her self-branding in ways that recall Susanna  
40  
41 Paasonen's dissection of the label 'alt' and its functions in contemporary pornographic  
42  
43 production.<sup>3</sup> As Paasonen argues, the 'alt' designation is a mode of niche market placement  
44  
45 (Paasonen 2014), which demarcates self-professed 'alt' porn from 'mainstream' porn; or,  
46  
47 more specifically, the *idea* of the 'mainstream', which is often used symbolically to organise  
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54 <sup>2</sup> Rotten has worked for some of the major mainstream porn production companies, beginning her career with  
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56 shoots for *New Sensations*. Following her retirement from the industry in 2015, she briefly returned to porn in  
57  
58 2018 with a series of films in partnership with *Brazzers*. Her success in these 'straight' productions has meant  
59  
60 Rotten has been credited as paving the way for tattooed girls to appear in mainstream porn.

<sup>3</sup> Although beyond the scope of this short essay, Rotten has, since her second (and presumably final) retirement  
from porn, openly championed gun culture, posting regular content on social media in which she handles and  
shoots an assortment of weaponry in the context of competitive shooting. She also openly embraces her right-  
wing political beliefs and orientation, defining herself as a conservative.

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3 heterogenous objects under a single label against which some other object can be designated  
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5 (e.g. as ‘alternative’, ‘political’, ‘radical’ or ‘rebellious’).  
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10 The ‘grotesque’ constitutes a central thematic in the visual lexicon of Rotten’s body  
11 art; her intertextual corporeality includes horror references and imagery (Jones, 2018)  
12  
13 juxtaposed with the ‘freak show’ attraction of the ‘bearded lady’—the opposite of traditional  
14 femininity. Mary Russo identifies the ‘grotesque body’ with ‘non-official ‘low’ culture or the  
15 carnivalesque, and with social transformation’ (1995, p. 8). Thematically, Rotten’s horror  
16 iconography—exemplified in the semi-decomposed zombie tattoo on her stomach, associated  
17 with the macabre and uncanny—works through its juxtaposition with Rotten’s conformity to  
18 feminine beauty ideals (slim physique with large, enhanced breasts, bronze skin and  
19 classically attractive features) to present a ‘grotesque’ image that signals an excess; perhaps  
20 recalling the Kantian dichotomy of the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘sublime’ (Nead 1992: 26). Thus  
21 Rotten’s appearance suggests a ‘symbolic inversion’ of feminine beauty codes, correlative to  
22 ‘carnavalesque’ tradition, presenting an image of the porn star as marked by the alterity of  
23 ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1995: 203).  
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42 While Rotten’s ‘surface’ bespeaks elements of the grotesque and carnivalesque  
43 thematic traditions, then, as Attwood reminds us, ‘Porn is a refusal of artifice’ (2012: 44).  
44  
45 Attwood points to the necessity of considering Rotten’s pornographic performances against  
46 the ‘artifice’ of the ‘cookie-cutter’ porn archetype (2012: 47). The dynamics of her  
47 performance, her performative gestures, offer her audience a uniquely grotesque embodiment  
48 of sex.  
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3 In the following scene analysis, I discuss the concept of ‘grotesque degradation’  
4 (Langman, 2004: 194) in relation to selected scenes from Rotten’s ‘world tour’ of 2014-2015,  
5 in which she starred in films for German porn production company, *Magma*, as well as  
6 *PublicBang* (distributed by US company, *BangBros*). Focusing on these works demonstrates  
7 how ‘presentations of actual sexual interactions in pornography may signal an alternative  
8 logic of filmic production centred on the spectacular body’ (Smith, 2012: 194). Rotten’s  
9 performances are striking for their shared preoccupation with the enactment of ‘grotesque  
10 realism’ and through her embodiment of the grotesque her challenge to the ‘compulsory  
11 heteronormativity’ (Rich quoted in Rubin 1994: 66) that saturates hardcore.  
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### 28 **Rollergirl vs. Bad Boys**

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30 Filmed in Switzerland during her promotional tour of 2014, *Rollergirl 1* (2014) opens with  
31 Rotten entering a tattoo studio on roller skates. She is filmed receiving a tattoo on the inside  
32 of her left forearm; her facial muscles responding involuntarily to the pain caused by the  
33 piece. The subtle evocation of pain here evidences a visual clue reminiscent of Linda  
34 Williams’s notion of the ‘involuntary truth’ that guides hard-core porn, suggesting the play  
35 with ‘mask and masquerade’ in the consequent narrative, as the film stages various visual  
36 enactments of the ‘frenzied search’ for Rotten’s ‘involuntary’ bodily response (Williams  
37 1989: 48).  
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51 Having been ‘inked’, Rotten then takes to the streets, much to the bemusement of  
52 passers-by. Arriving at her rendezvous, she strikes a pose outside of an erotic cinema; as  
53 Rotten is pictured drinking a beer, a muted electro soundtrack plays out in the non-diegetic  
54 space of the scene. Turning, Rotten pushes through the doors, proceeding to skate along a  
55 corridor of erotic video cabins, before entering a screening room. One of her own blowjob  
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3 scenes plays on the film screen, as she tentatively enters the theatre, establishing eye contact  
4  
5 with her co-partner Mike Angelo; Angelo, with penis already engorged, notices Rotten as she  
6  
7 approaches and sits in the row in front of him. The scene then plays out along the following  
8  
9 lines: Angelo stimulates his protruding penis; reaching over and grabbing Rotten, she  
10  
11 responds vigorously by forcing his fingers into her throat. The pair spit into each other's  
12  
13 mouths. Rotten engages in a series of acrobatic postures, in which she is bent over rows of  
14  
15 seats and reverse 'pile-driven'. The camera emphasises Rotten's anus as central to these  
16  
17 sexual positions. Occasionally, alongside her distinctive 'squirting' display and passionate  
18  
19 verbal exclamations, there is a brief glance of Rotten onscreen, fragmenting or perhaps  
20  
21 multiplying the dynamics of the gaze through visual excess.  
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29 Throughout, the movie theatre's all-male audience provide a spectrum of different  
30  
31 reactions to Rotten's performance(s): the young man closest to the action appears flushed and  
32  
33 embarrassed: another divides his attention between the screen and stealing glances at Rotten  
34  
35 and Angelo; while a man in the background appears generally indifferent to the action. For  
36  
37 the finale of their scene, Rotten and Angelo occupy the space in front of the cinema screen as  
38  
39 if the collective gaze is now fixed on their activity rather than the screen. Despite the rigour  
40  
41 of the shoot, there are humorous moments in the scene and Rotten gives no indication that  
42  
43 she is not a willing participant in the performance. Rotten confirms her own agential capacity  
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45 during the scene, for example when Angelo implores Rotten to squirt once more, she pauses  
46  
47 the action and laughs 'no more'.  
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55 Certainly the sequence is an example of the hard-core tropes of 'extreme anal'  
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57 observed by Enrico Biasin and Federico Zecca (2009): the hyperbolic expression of the  
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59 'frenzy of the visible' (Williams 1989: 36). In his discussion of 'extreme anal' star Rocco  
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3 Siffredi, cultural studies scholar Steven Maddison sees this ‘new’ mode as ‘characterised by  
4 fetishistic practices that were once synonymous with gonzo genres, but which can now be  
5 found across most porn styles’ (2012: 88). Noting the influence of Siffredi, ‘Buttman’ John  
6 Stagliano and Max Hardcore, Maddison also identifies ‘double-penetration, ass-to-mouth,  
7 cum swapping, anal gaping and violent ass fucking’ (88) as elements of extreme anal  
8 presented through the infliction of pain, coded as bodily transmogrification, and the  
9 phallogentric ‘destruction’ of the anus (Waldby quoted in Maddison 2012: 87).

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22 Viewing a range of her scenes, Rotten’s anus does appear as a site of ritual mutilation,  
23 re-inscribed upon the female form in practices of heteronormative anal sex, which requires  
24 the expansion of the anus to facilitate penetration. Following Williams, Rotten’s revelation of  
25 her inner sphincter signals a promissory fantasy for her male co-star, propelled by an  
26 unconscious desire to reveal the authentic site of female desire; with the emergence of  
27 Rotten’s inner-corporeality, its materiality disclosing itself as penetrated orifice, he enacts the  
28 ‘frenzied gaze upon the female body’ (Williams 1989: 267). In Maddison’s (2012) reading,  
29 this ‘frenzied gaze’ is constitutive of hard-core performance styles in which the rapid  
30 succession of hard-core sex sequences serves as a ‘narcissistic evasion of the feminine ‘other’  
31 deflected back to the masculine self’ (Williams 1989: 267). Julia Kristeva (1980) conceived  
32 the anus as the site of desire, as perversion, and the threshold of the abject: the ‘gaping’  
33 rectum remains frozen as a corporeal ‘truth’ of ‘fundamental incompleteness’ (28).

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51 Rotten manages to ejaculate four times in the scene, but not satisfied with the trace of  
52 Rotten’s ‘viscous fluids’ already produced, Angelo takes to stretching her anus, imploring to  
53 her ‘push it out baby’. The dynamics of control and agency are distributed and weighted  
54 towards Angelo as the male performer, and as Kristeva reminds us, ‘at the same time that  
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3 immersion gives him the full power of possessing, if not being, the bad object that inhabits  
4 the maternal body' (1980: 54). Rotten laughs off Angelo's requests for her to cum even more,  
5  
6 and he laughs in turn – the spontaneous eruption of laughter brings a level of Brechtian self-  
7  
8 consciousness to the scene, temporarily suspending the frenzied action to highlight its  
9  
10 absurdity. Yet laughter onscreen jars somewhat with the duress visibly encoded upon  
11  
12 Rotten's body.  
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19 As an example of 'grotesque degradation', the scene might offer a 'compensatory  
20  
21 fantasy for a male viewer' (Maina 2014: 101). Various males look at Rotten in this scene  
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23 such that the threat of Rotten's performative excess is redrawn and compensated for. As I  
24  
25 outlined above, we see multiple gazes at work, suggesting the excess of Rotten's  
26  
27 'spectacularity'. Some of the intradiegetic audience look at Rotten distractedly, their gaze  
28  
29 flitting between the sexual activity happening in front of them, and the hard-core scene  
30  
31 playing on the cinema screen. As Angelo obsessively pursues Rotten's squirting response,  
32  
33 those attempts at revealing Rotten's 'indiscreet jewels' become a process of control over her  
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35 body—for the male audience, the threat of the object is displaced onto the 'contained' cinema  
36  
37 screen—the demands upon the performer produce a hyperbolic performance while constantly  
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39 demanding more.  
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46 While in Germany on her world tour, Rotten filmed several outdoor scenes for  
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48 *PublicBang*. Filmed in the Kreuzberg area of Berlin, *Bonnie Rotten Squirts in Public* (2014)  
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50 features a POV Blowjob scene followed by a hard-core sequence. Approaching the apartment  
51  
52 complex, Rotten is seen in short skirt, leather jacket and boots, while her co-star is dressed  
53  
54 more casually, in loose jeans and a hoodie. Rotten plays to her 'bad girl' persona, greets him  
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56 with 'I wanna' fuck', to which the cameraman responds with 'shut the fuck up'. Rotten and  
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3 her co-star Alberto Blanco have sex in the apartment stairwell, and the camera pans to show a  
4  
5 group of three males watching from the staircase below. Once again the cameraman  
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7 reprimands Rotten telling her to quieten down as she is penetrated. She spits back at her co-  
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9 star from a ‘doggy style’ position, and, appearing to orgasm, douses her male partner in  
10  
11 ejaculate. The scene culminates with Rotten in a POV position on a balcony in one of the  
12  
13 apartments; she stands up and squirts in the direction of her co-star. The idealised porn  
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15 consumer—the young male subject—is literally re-presented onscreen, as a conduit through  
16  
17 which the Rotten’s ‘hyperreality’ can be received as ‘real’.  
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24 Rotten’s squirting performance operates uniquely here—as she ejaculates, she stands  
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26 up and projects her discharge into the face of the male performer. This practice can be  
27  
28 commonplace in pornographic subgenres such as femdom (female domination), it is much  
29  
30 rarer to see female performers squirting at their male partner in heteronormative hard-core.  
31  
32 Rotten’s squirting performance in this scene is more than a reversal of power dynamics and  
33  
34 their visual manifestation through ejaculation. The sheer volume of her ejaculate neutralises  
35  
36 the established erotic sequence of penetration. As Rotten gleefully expresses her approval and  
37  
38 arousal, the co-star and cameraman promptly erupt in hysterics—recalling Kristeva’s  
39  
40 assertion that ‘laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection’ (1980: 8). However, more  
41  
42 than this, the excess that characterises Rotten’s performance suggests a ‘hyperreal’ strategy  
43  
44 of ‘sign’ oversaturation, and the ‘truth’ is performed to hyperbolic excess; yet this encounter  
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46 with the ‘truth’ of Rotten’s sexual pleasure becomes a ‘sign’ of disavowal.  
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54 There are skills underpinning Rotten’s squirting performance—forms of corporeal  
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56 knowledge and physical labour—which parody the masculine logics of the ‘money-shot’,  
57  
58 hard-core’s ritualistic ejaculation regime. Rotten’s excessive display outdoes the ‘spectacular’  
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3 masculine ‘cumshot’ (‘rubbing his face in it’, so to speak)—and doing it four times!  
4  
5 However, returning to Williams’ psychoanalytic reading of hard-core, this ‘excess’ can be  
6  
7 read as demanded by a masculine need for compensation against ‘castration’. Neoliberal porn  
8  
9 paradigms privilege excess and extremity as central markers of novelty and visibility, and  
10  
11 Rotten’s ‘regulated’ body performs its very abjection through excess; yet in doing so, it  
12  
13 speaks to the inherent nature of artifice in the neoliberal order, as her abjection becomes  
14  
15 ‘surface’ alterity. Rotten’s ‘squirting’ is no more a statement of her ‘truth’, that is her  
16  
17 ‘involuntary jewels’, than any other representation of women’s pleasure articulated within the  
18  
19 hard-core genre.  
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27 Rotten’s performance seems to subvert the usual coding of bodily abjection according  
28  
29 to the conventions of hard-core. Rather than present her genital area as the passive receptacle  
30  
31 of male domination and passive penetration, she ejects forcefully in a hyperbolic display of  
32  
33 female excess. Perhaps then the clip’s ambiguous balance on the threshold of porn and  
34  
35 parody suggests a divergent sub-trend within hard-core, appealing to the demographic of the  
36  
37 young urban male who co-stars with Rotten; the neoliberal ‘flexi-worker’ who seeks  
38  
39 pornography characterised by outbursts of laughter as opposed to the simulated torture of  
40  
41 ‘extreme anal’ productions. Taking Williams’ analogy of the speaking ‘eroto-genital’  
42  
43 complex to its logical ends, Rotten’s display can be seen as a bodily rejection of the phallic-  
44  
45 power paradigm.  
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52 The recurring presence of a gang of male onlookers that populate the clips surveyed  
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54 here recalls the dynamics of the ‘freak show’; a thematic that permeates the structural  
55  
56 ‘paratexts’ of Rotten’s porn persona. Rotten’s own corporeal bricolage is presented as an  
57  
58 embodied source of ‘grotesque realism’, which demands a crowd of perversely fascinated  
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3 young males within the diegetic frame; amounting to a visual excess of masculinity, in  
4  
5 combination with the compulsory male co-star. The relative anonymity of the males on-  
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7 screen opens up a complex dynamic, suggesting the literal embodiment on-scene of the ‘male  
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9 gaze’.  
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## 16 **Conclusion**

17  
18 These films take pleasure in fetishising Rotten’s deviant persona: the alterity of her ‘alt’ status  
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20 becomes manifests within her performances expressed by her spitting, gagging, and squirting.  
21  
22 The abject is continued through the staging of Rotten in a diegetic mise-en-scene placing her  
23  
24 within settings that analogises this ‘alt’ imaginary: having sex in stairwells, car parks, and  
25  
26 other liminal ‘non-spaces’ (Augé, 2009) of the post-industrial landscape. The prevalence of  
27  
28 her placement within these spheres mobilises Rotten as a means to explore and make sense of  
29  
30 her placement within these spheres mobilises Rotten as a means to explore and make sense of  
31  
32 the urban landscape. But more than this, these stagings can be seen as an allegory of the  
33  
34 precarity of labour for the contemporary porn starlet; she is portrayed as an individualised  
35  
36 subject, reduced to her brand, who has to navigate the physical urban environment seeking  
37  
38 ‘casual’ sex in precarious conditions. Rather than foreground her as a star, these films  
39  
40 undermine her star presence and the connotations of celebrity persona, to index a certain level  
41  
42 of authenticity. Yet, Rotten is far from a passive agent here; resistance comes from her bodily  
43  
44 excess, which parodies the power-plays of extreme hard-core. She instigates the pornographic  
45  
46 action, thinks nothing of dousing her male co-star, and thereby subjects him to the ‘money  
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48 shot’ and the ‘ritual humiliations’ (Maddison, 2012) of gonzo pornography, in subversion of  
49  
50 the gendered power dynamics typical of hard-core.  
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57 Rotten’s visual performance coheres with Mark Fisher’s (2009) analysis of ‘capitalist  
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59 realism’, and the impossible demands placed on the subject for creative labour it entails. The  
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3 performance can be read as a means of disciplining the deviant ‘grotesque body’, which both  
4  
5 provokes a gaze as ‘spectacle’, but is also the subject of disavowal in respect of its  
6  
7 ‘abjection’. As I have highlighted here, Rotten’s performance is structured by masculine  
8  
9 anxiety: her stagings a symbolic ‘spectacle’ which plays out this ‘containment anxiety’. Thus,  
10  
11 her performances are not to be understood as transgressive, but as a ‘sign’ of the successful  
12  
13 regulation of the female body. Yet, in another light, Rotten’s ‘spectacular’ bodily excess  
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15 occurs on her own terms, a catalyst for the temporary suspension of power dynamics,  
16  
17 subjecting the male performer to a ritualistic dousing. From this perspective, the inversion of  
18  
19 some representational tropes might signal a shift away from the ‘simulated’ ‘biopower’  
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21 inscribed upon the body in earlier hard-core trends.  
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