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# ‘Girls and corpses’: the ‘tattoo-titted freakdom’ of Bonnie Rotten

James Forsyth Anderson

ADSS, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

## 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 *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 13th* (1980). In this article I examine how Rotten’s branding as a ‘punk model’ signifies her ‘rebellion’- vis-a- -vis corporeal embodiments of the grotesque, carnivalesque, and the abject – in an articulation and reframing which has become familiar within contemporary pornographic production.

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## Introduction

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 characterized by her exaggerated on-screen 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 on-screen persona drew equally on punk-inspired and horror iconographies. This conjunctural aesthetic is epitomized 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* (Romero, dir. 1968) on her stomach, as well as iconographic references to classic slasher flicks such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, dir. 1984) and *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, dir. 1980). In this article I examine how Rotten’s branding as a ‘punk model’ signifies her ‘rebellion’ – vis-à-vis corporeal embodiments of the

**CONTACT** James Forsyth Anderson  j.f.anderson@northumbria.ac.uk  ADSS, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

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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

Punk, or rather Rotten's 'punkness', functions both as a marker of her alterity and as a signifier of her 'authenticity' – perhaps exemplifying what Florian Cramer has termed 'a rhetoric of the authentic' (2007, 174). The function of punk within Rotten's branding parallels the ways 'punkness' has been used within alt porn, giving a distinct 'edge' to a performer's persona (Maina 2014), consolidating (self-)branding strategies (Biasin, Maina and Zecca 2014), and ascribing a 'rebellious' image to kinds of production and their output (Attwood 2014; Maina 2014; Paasonen 2014; Smith 2014). Nevertheless, there are ambiguous elements to Rotten's affiliations with the subcultural and/or her self-identification with the punk moniker that enable a conscious 'play' with the signifiers of punk, without maintaining a credulity to the puritanism of the ethics of the punk sub-culture more broadly.

Rotten's signature 'look' certainly shares the subcultural imaginarity of her alt porn contemporaries: an aesthetic that discernibly contrasts with what Feona Attwood has labelled the 'cookie-cutter' porn star mainstream archetype (2012, 47). Even so, Rotten's career evidences a radical departure from the independent production model adopted by most alt porn performers and producers.<sup>2</sup> Rather than constituting her marginality to the mainstream, Rotten's alterity points to the success of her self-branding in ways that recall Susanna Paasonen's dissection of the label 'alt' and its functions in contemporary pornographic production.<sup>3</sup> As Paasonen (2014) argues, the 'alt' designation is a mode of niche market placement, which demarcates self-professed 'alt' porn from 'mainstream' porn; or, more specifically, the idea of the 'mainstream', which is often used symbolically to organize heterogeneous objects under a single label against which some other object can be designated (e.g. as 'alternative', 'political', 'radical', or 'rebellious').

The 'grotesque' constitutes a central thematic in the visual lexicon of Rotten's body art; her intertextual corporeality includes horror references and imagery (Jones 2018) juxtaposed with the 'freak show' attraction of the 'bearded lady' – the opposite of traditional femininity. Mary Russo identifies the 'grotesque body' with 'non-official "low" culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation' (1995, 8). Thematically, Rotten's horror iconography – exemplified in the semi-decomposed zombie tattoo on her stomach, associated with the macabre and uncanny – works through its juxtaposition with Rotten's conformity to feminine beauty ideals (slim physique with large, enhanced breasts, bronze skin, and classically attractive features) to present a 'grotesque' image that signals an excess; perhaps recalling the Kantian dichotomy of the 'beautiful' and the 'sublime' (Nead 1992, 26). Thus, Rotten's appearance suggests a 'symbolic inversion' of feminine beauty codes, correlative to 'carnivalesque' tradition, presenting an image of the porn star as marked by the alterity of 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995, 203).

While Rotten's 'surface' bespeaks elements of the grotesque and carnivalesque thematic traditions, then, as Attwood reminds us, 'Porn is a refusal of artifice' (2012, 44). Attwood points to the necessity of considering Rotten's pornographic performances against the 'artifice' of the 'cookie-cutter' porn archetype (2012, 47). The dynamics of her performance, her performative gestures, offer her audience a uniquely grotesque embodiment of sex.

In the following scene analysis, I discuss the concept of ‘grotesque degradation’ (Langman 2004, 194) in relation to selected scenes from Rotten’s ‘world tour’ of 2014–2015, in which she starred in films for German porn production company, Magma, as well as PublicBang (distributed by US company BangBros). Focusing on these works demonstrates how ‘presentations of actual sexual interactions in pornography may signal an alternative logic of filmic production centred on the spectacular body’ (Smith 2012, 194). Rotten’s performances are striking for their shared preoccupation with the enactment of ‘grotesque realism’ and through her embodiment of the grotesque her challenge to the ‘compulsory heteronormativity’ (Rich, quoted in Rubin 1994, 66) that saturates hardcore.

### Rollergirl versus bad boys

Filmed in Switzerland during her promotional tour of 2014, *Rollergirl 1* (Ryan, dir. 2014) opens with Rotten entering a tattoo studio on roller skates. She is filmed receiving a tattoo on the inside of her left forearm; her facial muscles responding involuntarily to the pain caused by the piece. The subtle evocation of pain here evidences a visual clue reminiscent of Linda Williams’ notion of the ‘involuntary truth’ that guides hardcore porn, suggesting the play with ‘mask and masquerade’ in the consequent narrative, as the film stages various visual enactments of the ‘frenzied search’ for Rotten’s ‘involuntary’ bodily response (Williams 1989, 48).

Having been ‘inked’, Rotten then takes to the streets, much to the bemusement of passers-by. Arriving at her rendezvous, she strikes a pose outside an erotic cinema; as Rotten is pictured drinking a beer, a muted electro soundtrack plays out in the non-diegetic space of the scene. Turning, Rotten pushes through the doors, proceeding to skate along a corridor of erotic video cabins, before entering a screening room. One of her own blowjob scenes plays on the film screen, as she tentatively enters the theatre, establishing eye contact with her co-partner Mike Angelo; Angelo, with penis already engorged, notices Rotten as she approaches and sits in the row in front of him. The scene then plays out along the following lines: Angelo stimulates his protruding penis; reaching over and grabbing Rotten, she responds vigorously by forcing his fingers into her throat. The pair spit into each other’s mouths. Rotten engages in a series of acrobatic postures, in which she is bent over rows of seats and reverse ‘pile-driven’. The camera emphasizes Rotten’s anus as central to these sexual positions. Occasionally, alongside her distinctive ‘squirting’ display and passionate verbal exclamations, there is a brief glance of Rotten on-screen, fragmenting or perhaps multiplying the dynamics of the gaze through visual excess.

Throughout, the movie theatre’s all-male audience provide a spectrum of different reactions to Rotten’s performance(s): the young man closest to the action appears flushed and embarrassed: another divides his attention between the screen and stealing glances at Rotten and Angelo; while a man in the background appears generally indifferent to the action. For the finale of their scene, Rotten and Angelo occupy the space in front of the cinema screen as if the collective gaze is now fixed on their activity rather than the screen. Despite the rigour of the shoot, there are humorous moments in the scene and Rotten gives no indication that she is not a willing participant in the performance. Rotten confirms her own agential capacity during the scene; for example, when Angelo implores Rotten to squirt once more, she pauses the action and laughs ‘no more’.

Certainly, the sequence is an example of the hardcore tropes of 'extreme anal' observed by Enrico Biasin and Federico Zecca (2009): the hyperbolic expression of the 'frenzy of the visible' (Williams 1989, 36). In his discussion of 'extreme anal' star Rocco Siffredi, cultural studies scholar Steven Maddison sees this 'new' mode as 'characterised by fetishistic practices that were once synonymous with gonzo genres, but which can now be found across most porn styles' (2012, 88). Noting the influence of Siffredi, 'Buttman' John Stagliano, and Max Hardcore, Maddison also identifies 'double-penetration, ass-to-mouth, cum swapping, anal gaping and violent ass fucking' (2012, 88) as elements of extreme anal presented through the infliction of pain, coded as bodily transmogrification, and the phallogocentric 'destruction' of the anus (Waldby, quoted in Maddison 2012, 87).

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

Rotten manages to ejaculate four times in the scene, but not satisfied with the trace of Rotten's 'viscous fluids' already produced, Angelo takes to stretching her anus, imploring to her 'push it out baby'. The dynamics of control and agency are distributed and weighted towards Angelo as the male performer, and as Kristeva reminds us, 'at the same time that immersion gives him the full power of possessing, if not being, the bad object that inhabits the maternal body' (1980, 54). Rotten laughs off Angelo's requests for her to cum even more, and he laughs in turn – the spontaneous eruption of laughter brings a level of Brechtian self-consciousness to the scene, temporarily suspending the frenzied action to highlight its absurdity. Yet laughter on-screen jars somewhat with the duress visibly encoded upon Rotten's body.

As an example of 'grotesque degradation', the scene might offer a 'compensatory fantasy for a male viewer' (Maina 2014, 101). Various males look at Rotten in this scene such that the threat of Rotten's performative excess is redrawn and compensated for. As I outlined earlier, we see multiple gazes at work, suggesting the excess of Rotten's 'spectacularity'. Some of the intradiegetic audience look at Rotten distractedly, their gaze flitting between the sexual activity happening in front of them and the hardcore scene playing on the cinema screen. As Angelo obsessively pursues Rotten's squirting response, those attempts at revealing Rotten's 'indiscreet jewels' become a process of control over her body – for the male audience, the threat of the abject is displaced onto the 'contained' cinema screen – the demands upon the performer produce a hyperbolic performance while constantly demanding more.

While in Germany on her world tour, Rotten filmed several outdoor scenes for PublicBang. Filmed in the Kreuzberg area of Berlin, *Bonnie Rotten Squirts in Public* (PublicBang, 2014) features a POV Blowjob scene followed by a hardcore sequence. Approaching the apartment complex, Rotten is seen in short skirt, leather jacket, and boots, while her co-star is dressed more casually, in loose jeans and a hoodie. Rotten plays to her 'bad girl' persona, greeting him with 'I wanna' fuck', to which the cameraman responds with 'shut the fuck up'. Rotten and her co-star Alberto Blanco have sex in the apartment stairwell, and the camera pans to show a group of three males watching from the staircase below. Once again the cameraman reprimands Rotten, telling her to quieten down as she is penetrated. She spits back at her co-star from a 'doggy style' position, and, appearing to orgasm, douses her male partner in ejaculate. The scene culminates with Rotten in a POV position on a balcony in one of the apartments; she stands up and squirts in the direction of her co-star. The idealized porn consumer – the young male subject – is literally re-presented on-screen, as a conduit through which the Rotten's 'hyperreality' can be received as 'real'.

Rotten's squirting performance operates uniquely here – as she ejaculates, she stands up and projects her discharge into the face of the male performer. This practice can be commonplace in pornographic subgenres such as femdom (female domination), but it is much rarer to see female performers squirting at their male partner in heteronormative hardcore. Rotten's squirting performance in this scene is more than a reversal of power dynamics and their visual manifestation through ejaculation. The sheer volume of her ejaculate neutralizes the established erotic sequence of penetration. As Rotten gleefully expresses her approval and arousal, the co-star and cameraman promptly erupt into hysterics – recalling Kristeva's assertion that 'laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection' (1980, 8). However, more than this, the excess that characterizes Rotten's performance suggests a 'hyperreal' strategy of 'sign' oversaturation, and the 'truth' is performed to hyperbolic excess; yet this encounter with the 'truth' of Rotten's sexual pleasure becomes a 'sign' of disavowal.

There are skills underpinning Rotten's squirting performance – forms of corporeal knowledge and physical labour – which parody the masculine logics of the 'money-shot', hardcore's ritualistic ejaculation regime. Rotten's excessive display outdoes the 'spectacular' masculine 'cumshot' ('rubbing his face in it', so to speak) – and doing it four times! However, returning to Williams' psychoanalytic reading of hardcore, this 'excess' can be read as demanded by a masculine need for compensation against 'castration'. Neoliberal porn paradigms privilege excess and extremity as central markers of novelty and visibility, and Rotten's 'regulated' body performs its very abjection through excess; yet in doing so, it speaks to the inherent nature of artifice in the neoliberal order, as her abjection becomes 'surface' alterity. Rotten's 'squirting' is no more a statement of her 'truth', that is her 'involuntary jewels', than any other representation of women's pleasure articulated within the hardcore genre.

Rotten's performance seems to subvert the usual coding of bodily abjection according to the conventions of hardcore. Rather than present her genital area as the passive receptacle of male domination and passive penetration, she ejects forcefully in a hyperbolic display of female excess. Perhaps, then, the clip's ambiguous balance on the threshold of porn and parody suggests a divergent sub-trend

within hardcore, appealing to the demographic of the young urban male who co-stars with Rotten; the neoliberal 'flexi-worker' who seeks pornography characterized by outbursts of laughter as opposed to the simulated torture of 'extreme anal' productions. Taking Williams' analogy of the speaking 'eroto-genital' complex to its logical ends, Rotten's display can be seen as a bodily rejection of the phallic-power paradigm.

The recurring presence of a gang of male onlookers that populate the clips surveyed here recalls the dynamics of the 'freak show'; a thematic that permeates the structural 'paratexts' of Rotten's porn persona. Rotten's own corporeal bricolage is presented as an embodied source of 'grotesque realism', which demands a crowd of perversely fascinated young males within the diegetic frame; amounting to a visual excess of masculinity, in combination with the compulsory male co-star. The relative anonymity of the males on-screen opens up a complex dynamic, suggesting the literal embodiment on-scene of the 'male gaze'.

## Conclusion

The films discussed in this article take pleasure in fetishizing Rotten's deviant persona: the alterity of her 'alt' status manifests within her performances, expressed by her spitting, gagging, and squirting. The abject is continued through the staging of Rotten in a diegetic *mise-en-scène* placing her within settings that analogizes this 'alt' imaginary: having sex in stairwells, car parks, and other liminal 'non-spaces' (Augé 2009) of the post-industrial landscape. The prevalence of her placement within these spheres mobilizes Rotten as a means to explore and make sense of the urban landscape. But more than this, these stagings can be seen as an allegory of the precarity of labour for the contemporary porn starlet; she is portrayed as an individualized subject, reduced to her brand, who has to navigate the physical urban environment seeking 'casual' sex in precarious conditions. Rather than foreground her as a star, these films undermine her star presence and the connotations of celebrity persona, to index a certain level of authenticity. Yet Rotten is far from a passive agent here; resistance comes from her bodily excess, which parodies the power-plays of extreme hardcore. She instigates the pornographic action, thinks nothing of dousing her male co-star, and thereby subjects him to the 'money shot' and the 'ritual humiliations' (Maddison 2012) of gonzo pornography, in subversion of the gendered power dynamics typical of hardcore.

Rotten's visual performance coheres with Mark Fisher's (2009) analysis of 'capitalist realism', and the impossible demands placed on the subject for creative labour it entails. The performance can be read as a means of disciplining the deviant 'grotesque body', which both provokes a gaze as 'spectacle' but is also the subject of disavowal in respect of its 'abjection'. As I have highlighted here, Rotten's performance is structured by masculine anxiety: her stagings a symbolic 'spectacle' which plays out this 'containment anxiety'. Thus, her performances are not to be understood as transgressive, but as a 'sign' of the successful regulation of the female body. Yet, in another light, Rotten's 'spectacular' bodily excess occurs on her own terms, a catalyst for the temporary suspension of power dynamics, subjecting the male performer to a ritualistic dousing. From this perspective, the inversion of some representational tropes might signal a shift away from the 'simulated' 'biopower' inscribed upon the body in earlier hardcore trends.

## Notes

1. At 21 years old, earning the award marked a highpoint of Rotten's early career. Rotten entered the adult industry at age 18 years, 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.
2. Rotten has worked for some of the major mainstream porn production companies, beginning her career with shoots for New Sensations. Following her retirement from the industry in 2015, she briefly returned to porn in 2018 with a series of films in partnership with Brazzers. Her success in these 'straight' productions has meant Rotten has been credited as paving the way for tattooed girls to appear in mainstream porn.
3. Although beyond the scope of this short article, 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.

## Disclosure statement

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