SPERM

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WHY SHOULD WE care about sperm? For some radical feminists, the answer to this question seems rather straightforward: semen is a stand in for male dominance and patriarchy. They see the centrality of the so-called money-shot in mainstream pornography – the moment of male ejaculation – as a reproduction of what Laura Mulvey (1975) termed the male gaze, a pervasive societal and cultural trope that objectifies women. Yet what may seem straightforward to some might actually turn out to be messier – both in material as well is in symbolic terms – than originally thought. While a cum shot in mainstream pornography might certainly be read as a reification of patriarchy, cis-normativity, and heterosexual normalcy, in contexts of queer porn sperm can take on many different meanings. As Murat Aydemir (2007) argues, even though ejaculating semen may be seen as an inherently male characteristic,

> that neither automatically means that it is also self-evidently and comprehensively masculine, nor that representations of and reflections on it should always tell the same story, partake of the same imagination, or conform to the same ideology. (Aydemir 2007, xxv)

For example, the sheer plethora of terms used to refer to semen such as sperm, cum, jizz, spunk, man-juice, seed, and many others as well as the variety of sexual practices involving sperm (e.g. barebacking, seeding, breeding, pozzing, cum dumping, cum control, bugchasing, giftgiving)

suggest that semen cannot easily be contained within just one normative framework. Rather, how sperm comes to matter depends very much on the context in which it figures. Following Sara Ahmed's (2006) notion of disorientation, I am thus offering a reading of semen as a disorientation device, a queer materiality that holds the potential to disorient us from the straight lines of cis- and heteronormativity.

A queer reading of sperm might start with its materiality. Semen is often referred to as a fluid or a substance, yet actually consists of many different parts and hence is not just one matter. Thus while a proscriptive reading of sperm as a reification of patriarchy tries to contain semen as one, sperm's materiality is actually that of many and thus could be said to reflect what Karen Barad (2012) refers to as nature's queer performativity. Semen is made up of sperm cells and a range of different fluids stemming from the seminal vesicles (glands near the bladder), the prostate, and the bulbourethral gland (a gland close to the prostate that produces what is known as pre-cum) amongst others. Sperm cells themselves are furthermore never just sperm cells, as we know them. Rather, they are in a continuous state of becoming, never staying the same during the process of what andrology and reproductive biology have termed spermatogenesis (the development of sperm cells in the testis). In addition, sperm's texture and odor can be very different depending on the individual who ejaculates it and depending on dimensions such as that individual's state of arousal, their diet, and their lifestyle. What is more, semen changes rather swiftly after ejaculation. While sperm will clot once ejaculated, this clotting (also referred to as coagulation) disappears after some time making semen into a rather runny (and some would say messy) liquid. With its ever-changing materiality and its gel-like, viscous, and sticky but also liquid and runny texture, sperm thus defies the solidity and stability often ascribed to masculinity, male domination, and patriarchy as Luce Irigaray (1985, 113–4) argues. Semen might therefore also be thought of as an abject in Julia Kristeva's (1982) sense, something that escapes or resists the normative frameworks of signification and hence something that disorients heteronormativity and cisnormalcy.

But sperm might also be said to queer cis- and heteronormativity as regulatory and spatial dimensions of everyday life. Since semen is never just one, it might provoke lust or disgust and thereby crosses over normative boundaries of gender and sexuality. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998, 562) argue, while heteronormativity rests on the shielding of the sex act as private and on public regulatory and institutional infrastructure, queer counterintimacies, as they call them, rely on forms of "affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of [being] accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity." Gay men's cruising culture could be said to constitute such queer counterintimacy with sperm figuring centrally as part of it. Here, semen becomes a lustful fluid that helps build spaces of queer desire in a heteronormative time and space while at the same time also building a form of queer sociality that defies heteronormative forms of kinship and family making as Judith Stacy (2004) argues. What is more, sperm also figures as ambivalent in gay cruising culture itself, symbolizing lust and desire as well as fear and death. While for some gay men semen is desirable and fetishized precisely because it has the infective potential of HIV, for others this potential serves as the ever-present reminder of queer vulnerability and death (Dean 2009). Hence, sperm serves as a queer disorientation both in terms of masculinity and in terms of biopolitics since it defies traditional notions of (homonormative) male subjectivity, as well as notions of the responsible subject, bringing about queer utopias (Robinson 2013).

Yet the queer performativity of semen is not only limited to intracorporal processes such as spermatogenesis or to intimate encounters between people. Sperm also queers what is usually termed traditional kinship and reproduction. While certainly never intended as such, semen's role in reproductive donation and donor insemination was central to the enablement of lesbian and single women parenthood. Against all attempts by members of the medical establishment around the globe to bar lesbian couples and single women from accessing donor insemination, semen from sperm donors is now central to queer reproduction (Nordqvist 2013). Furthermore, sperm queers the clinical space of the laboratory in which

it is handled, prepared, and stored for assisted reproduction. Carrying the potential to matter both as a reproductive as well as a sexual fluid, semen may at all times disturb biomedical logics at the lab through literal spillovers thereby re-establishing its meaningfulness as an intimate and sexual fluid rather than only figuring as a reproductive one (Mohr 2016). What is more, sperm also holds the potential to do away with binary gender as we know it, through the development of so-called in-vitro sperm (sperm cells developed in the lab out of stem cells). If, potentially, anyone can produce sperm cells by ways of using stem cells (cells that everyone possesses) than a central ordering device of cis-and heteronormativity – binary gender – would disappear (Mohr and Hoeyer 2018). Semen is thus also in its biomedical form, something that Sarah Franklin (2006) refers to as transbiology, a queer disorientation that cannot be contained in the proscriptive framework of the heterosexual matrix.

Taking these different ways of sperm's mattering into account, semen thus may be said to serve as the symbolic as well as material reminder of the frailty of cis-normativity and heterosexual normalcy. Sperm disorients such normalcy through its queer mattering, especially in its biomedical and biotechnological transformations, taking both (bio)sociality and (biomedical) scholarship into yet unknown queer futures. While some might try to contain semen as just one matter – the patriarchal money-shot, solid masculinity, reproductivity, sexual lust – sperm does not stick to such straightforward significations. Rather, semen disorients the arrangements of normative (bio)sociality by spilling over and crossing boundaries of gendered and sexualed subjectivation, and as such, how sperm comes to matter depends on the contexts in which it is made meaningful, always carrying with it the uncanniness of queer.

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