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## The value of print, the value of porn

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## The value of print, the value of porn

As the distribution of pornography has shifted online, the markets of DVDs and print magazines have drastically shrunk. At the same time, a range of independent and artistic magazines on pornography and sexual cultures has appeared, operating primarily on paper. By focusing on *Ménage à trois* (Mà3), a Finnish queer-feminist porn magazine (est. 2012) and *Phile*, a Toronto-based magazine on ‘sexual curiosity’ (est. 2017), this article inquires after the affordances, appeal, and value of physical print artefacts in a cultural context dominated by the imperatives of digital affordances. Through interviews with editors and designers, we ask how these magazines position themselves vis-à-vis the denominator of pornography in the content they publish and in the uses that they see the magazines as entering. They make it possible to consider both the issue of regional and language-specific reach in independent publishing and the different value that the editorial teams associate with pornography.

Keywords: postporn; print; materiality; value; mainstream; trash

### Introduction

As the distribution of pornography has shifted online since the 1990s, the markets of print magazines have drastically shrunk: in some instances, they have simply disappeared. At the same time, a range of independent and artistic magazines on pornography and sexual cultures have appeared, and continue to operate primarily on paper. While these magazines have websites and social media accounts, they publish little original content online, pushing instead for the much more limited, often linguistically and regionally bound circulation enabled by print. Like other low-circulation independent print magazines, they ‘are made for sale, they may occasionally make money, and a few eventually develop into commercially successful enterprises,

but profit seems not to be the initial or primary aim' (Masurier 2012, 384). The magazines we analyse here follow this trend: not aimed at mass distribution, they make enough money to cover their production and distribution costs, thus allowing for the survivability of the projects themselves.

By focusing on *Ménage à trois* (*Mà3*), a Finnish queer-feminist porn magazine (est. 2012) and *Phile*, a Toronto-based magazine on 'sexual curiosity' (est. 2017), this article inquires after the affordances, appeal, and value of physical print artefacts in a cultural context dominated by the imperatives of digital distribution and sharing. We set out to understand how, and through which cultural referents, the editorial teams affirm the importance and value of their work, as well as the role that they see these magazines as playing in sexual representation more broadly. As contemporary porn consumption has become virtually identified with format of an online video clip, the resurgence of analogue print projects may seem anachronistic. By analysing *Mà3* and *Phile*, it is possible to better understand what pornography currently signifies, what cultural frames it becomes embedded in, and how its overall significance is perceived. In other words, our investigation into the value of print has to do with both material commodities and with the different ways that pornography is valued as cultural objects, as a media genre, and as a field of cultural production. *Mà3* and *Phile* illustrate different facets of this trend in that they share similar interests yet articulate their aims, goals and foci in distinct ways. As independent magazines, they operate on niche markets that run parallel to drastically transformed, or even atrophied, markets of commercial print porn. Three years after the launch of *Mà3*, the publisher of all remaining men's magazines in Finland went bankrupt. In other countries such as Canada, the dozens of titles once available have given way to select few with broad enough a circulation to be financially

viable. For its part, the iconic *Playboy* moved from monthly to quarterly publication in 2019 due to financial reasons.

Through interviews with editors and designers of these two magazines, we ask how they position themselves vis-à-vis the denominator of pornography in the content they publish and in the social uses that they see their publications as entering. The two magazines make it possible to consider the issue of regional and language-specific reach, as well as the very rationale of making magazines. Within the obvious limits of our two examples, we set out to grasp the rationale of independent magazines on sexual cultures, the total number of which internationally is impossible to chart due to their local reach, irregular publishing schedules, and a preference for visibility within certain social circles instead of maximized commercial outreach.

As our interests lie in how the editorial teams articulate the value and identity of their publications, our analysis does not extend to the editorial content of *Mà3* and *Phile* at any depth. Value, as deployed here, refers to importance, usefulness, and worth beyond any strictly economic definitions. Like independent magazines more broadly, these projects are not primarily driven by the quest for monetary gain. Rather, their overall value taps into subcultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2010) – that is, the ways in which social agents attach worthiness and value to objects, ideas, and symbols, and the ways in which these grant importance to the people who mobilize them in return.

In order to understand the production and distribution of value at play, we contextualise the two magazines through the framework of post-pornography – a cultural field encompassing festivals, film projects, and publications that both attach themselves to, and take distance from the denominator of pornography by seeking to subvert, and possibly to parody, the format and language of mainstream productions

(Bourcier 2014; Pinto, Nogueira, & Oliveira 2010; Preciado 2011; Prozorov 2011).

Post-porn involves self-referential play with normalized assumptions of sexual representation and can, to a degree, be understood as a reparative approach to pornography (Albury 2009). The meanings of post-pornography range from a historical periodization of ‘porn after porn’ (see Biais, Maina, and Zecca 2014) to a periodized transformation in the relationship between the ‘artistic’ and the ‘pornographic’ (as mutually exclusive categories) since the 1970s (Kendrick, 1997), and to a specific aesthetic – “a form of art-house pornography” (Creed, 2004, p. 74)– distinct from how the genre has been conventionally perceived. Across such definitions, post-porn signifies a reflexive stance towards pornography and its mainstream manifestations in particular. In asking how the editorial teams of *Mà3* and *Phile* make sense of the denominator of pornography, we are then also asking what the magazines are proposed as being alternatives to. Post-porn operates here as a cultural context and an analytical point of entrance for understanding the value placed on print media and sexual content alike.

### **Physical objects**

*Mà3* and *Phile* share stylistic features in their overall aesthetic feel, drawing on contributions from graphic artists and photographers and combining artistic expression with editorial content. As physical objects, they are nevertheless clearly distinct, their overall aims and scope remaining similarly separate. Defined as a queer feminist porn magazine, *Mà3* is explicitly connected with ‘a current transnational wave of interest in pornography as a potentially vital vehicle for queer, feminist and lesbian activist struggles for sexual, cultural and political empowerment’ (Ryberg 2012, 14). Queer pornography, as defined here, entails oppositionality towards heterosexism,

heteronormativity, and misogyny, and as alternative to identitary regimes of understanding subjectivity. *Mà3* features photo-shoots, comics, drawings, essays, short stories, and occasional comments and contributions from readers, with a strong focus on artistic content. Subtitled ‘The International Journal of Desire and Curiosity’, *Phile* is defined as ‘exploring sexual subcultures, trends, and communities both obscure and well known from an overarching sociological point of view’. Lavishly illustrated with photographs and graphics, some of them sexually explicit, *Phile* builds on written contributions from journalists, scholars, and practitioners.

As a physical object, *Mà3* is an A5-sized full-colour magazine printed on fairly thick, semi-glossy paper, varying between 32 and 50 pages in length. Until 2018, all issues were published partly in Finnish and partly in Estonian, and priced differently (at 6 and 4 EUR, respectively) for sales in the two countries. In 2018, *Mà3* published one issue in English as a means of amplifying its overall reach. *Phile* is an oversized magazine printed on high-quality matt paper, the first issue spanning 130 pages, and priced at 20USD and 18EUR, respectively: as the pricing suggests, the magazine is not, despite being Toronto-based, primarily aimed at a Canadian market. At the time of this writing, *Phile* had published four, and *Mà3* ten issues. *Mà3* is markedly local in its intended reach marked out through its chosen language(s) whereas the English-speaking *Phile* aims for much less linguistically or geographically bound international circulation.

In order to understand how the makers of the magazines perceived their aims, goals, and sources of inspiration, we conducted semi-structured interviews with *Mà3*’s founding and current editor in order to cover transformations that the magazine has gone through since its inception. From *Phile*, we interviewed the editor and the design editor who had recently published the magazine’s first issue. For the interviews, we

drew up a script that focused on several dimensions of the process behind the magazines, including the history of their birth, their influences, production and distribution processes, but equally the values, objectives, and ideals underlying their production. In doing so, we outlined some of the main themes and topics to be pursued: these included the editorial identity and aesthetics of the magazine, its self-perceived role within the broader media ecosystem of pornography, and its policy on sexual depiction.

The interviews were conducted in September 2018 in English, both via Skype and face-to-face due to both physical distance and privacy concerns. The first was a three-way conference call over Skype with the staff from *Phile*, Erin Reznick (editor-in-chief) and Michael (Mike) Feswick (chief designer). The second was a Skype call with Lilith, the current editor-in-chief of *Mà3*, and the third was conducted face-to-face with Iida Rauma, a founding editor of *Mà3*. Audio recordings of the interviews were made with permission and stored on an institutional cloud. The interviewees are referred to with the names that they have used in the magazines they have created – both full names and pseudonyms.

### **Key influences**

First and foremost, the perceived value of the magazines is connected to the influences and inspirations that their editors build and, in doing so, situate their work within the field of cultural production. Feswick identified two key inspirations for *Phile*: *Eros* and *RE/Search*. The first of these was a high-priced, high-end erotica quarterly established in 1962 that only run four issues before being shut down for offending U.S. obscenity laws. Published by Ralph Ginzburg, and best remembered for a late nude shoot of Marilyn Monroe, *Eros* was a large-format magazine once billed ‘the most expensive



magazine in the world' that drew on high-profile authors and approximated the layout of art book design (Corliss 2006; also Dyson 1966). *RE/Search*, again, is a San Francisco based underground publisher that self-defines as punk and publishes titles ranging from zines to piercings and the Arse Elektronika anthologies resulting from a sex and technology festival organized since 2007, and incorporating contributions from practitioners and scholars.

These contextual connections position *Phile* as both artistically ambitious and subcultural in its orientation. Rather than identifying any contemporary magazines or other projects as inspiration, Feswick considered 'underground subcultures' to be *Phile's* main frame of reference while also pointing out that a focus on diversity and the representation of kink and fetish communities comprise its leading thematic framing. In defining *Phile's* main characteristics, Reznick mapped it out its content and *ethos* in relation to a broader context:

I think that people respond well to the fact that it's not a fashion magazine, or an arts and culture magazine, that it's something totally different. [...] I think that what separates us from them is that we do treat sexuality as a subject, that we are looking into issues and people and investigating it, and taking it in, but we definitely do reference a lot of these old school sex publications, especially from the seventies, but mostly through visual material. I think that *Phile* is different from any other erotic publication that's out, right now, because it does kind of live in this in between space, and we do try to shy away from fashion and the kinds of formats and publications that are popular today.

In separating *Phile* from other contemporary print projects, both Feswick and Reznick pointed out differences in contributors, interests, and profiles. The magazine was at this

point in the process of defining itself after the launch of its very first issue. As Reznick suggests, its uniqueness is both connected to, and expressed through its physicality:

It was important for us to make an object and we always saw it as a collectible, which is why we made it so big, and with the type of paper that we have. We didn't want it to be like a *New Yorker* that you can fold and put in your pocket and then throw away or recycle, we wanted it to seem like an art object, like a coffee table book.

The object qualities frame *Phile* as a valuable commodity that is too massive – and possibly also too expensive – to be simply discarded or folded away after reading. Reznick sees the magazine as something to be browsed repeatedly, and over the years, similarly as a coffee table book. This articulation of value can be understood through Michael Thompson's (2017) 'rubbish theory' that examines oscillations in the value placed on objects according to their perceived role and function, their durability and transience. The editors situate *Phile* as a durable object to be stored for safekeeping, the value of which does not decrease similarly to transient objects that, once purchased, soon lose their allure and risk becoming trash (that is, void of value). In comparing *Phile* to *New Yorker* as a durable rather than transient object, Reznick positions the two publications as similar in their cultural status and ambition, yet dissimilar in their physical makeup and assumed lifespans. Here, physical size and weight translate as cultural gravity and durability of the kind that remains inaccessible to projects operating only online in the transient attention economy of likes, clicks, and shares. The magazine has been able to manage economically by positioning itself as a durable object that accrues value. While not expensive to own as such, it is sold mostly in higher-end venues and has low circulation, relying partially on volunteer collaborations from

people who, for instance, offer up editorial pieces.

For Rauma, the original editor of *Mà3*, inspiration for the magazine came from the Berlin queer activist scene of the early 2010s, particularly the *Bend Over* magazine exploring feminism, sexuality, and queer art, published from 2008 to 2014. Berlin has been a main European hub in the promotion of alternative perspectives on porn especially through the Porn Film Festival Berlin which has, since 2006, focused mostly on independent productions. Evoking *Bend Over* to signal the origins of *Mà3*, Rauma nevertheless noted that ‘it didn’t have any pornographic content’. This differentiation of content operates culturally and narratively in the same way as the one made by the editors of *Phile* – that is, it creates a separation between past and present, between other projects and the magazine at hand. This separation then adds value to their respective projects, one that is further amplified through the material dimensions of the magazines themselves.

### **The importance of materiality**

Rauma shared Reznick’s view on the importance of the magazine’s physical qualities: ‘We wanted to make a beautiful object, something that would look nice on a table; and we wanted to make a queer feminist porn magazine which looks different to conventional porn magazines’. This magazine is produced in a much more DIY vein than *Phile*, and its physicality is also connected to being a desirable platform for the work published: ‘The contributors are artists, so it makes sense to make the pictures look more expensive’. The physicality of *Mà3* is a means of marking it apart from the familiar generic markers of porn magazines: their size, paper quality, layout, and representational conventions. This DIY aspect means that the magazine has relatively low production costs and because it relies on much voluntary work, the economic aim

of each issue is to cover the costs of producing the next one, and ensuring that contributors are compensated whenever possible. Just as with *Phile*, *Mà3*'s editors did not complain of any financial hardships, but neither did they accrued any significant earnings, or even aimed to.

In addition to allowing for contributions to be presented with higher production values matching and possibly elevating artistic aims, the chosen medium of print also guarantees authorial control over the circulation and potential repurposing of published content. Rauma pointed out that '[with digital art] the artists lose some control on how the material is used, and that's the main problem, it's about controlling the distribution and the rights of the artists [...] and the models, so that their image would not spread without control'. The limited circulation of print then involves an ethical choice connected to intellectual property and privacy concerns alike: it becomes a tactic for the management of potential vulnerability and risk. In addition, it enforces a culture of material scarcity – or at least one of limited availability – that feeds the status of each magazine as a potentially valuable cultural object.

The two editors of *Mà3* interviewed nevertheless had different perceptions as to why and how the medium of print matters. These were connected to diverging views on the magazine's cultural function, more than on its cultural value. For Rauma, similarly to the makers of *Phile*, it was important that people would 'read it more than once and not just throw it away'. The materiality of the magazine itself, independent of its weight or physical proportions, was seen as affording it with the quality as a durable object stored for safekeeping and further visiting. For Lilith, it was equally important that *Mà3* exists 'as a physical object [...] that you can stack up'. The reasons for this were however clearly distinct from those proposed by Rauma. Rather than framing the magazine as a durable object of permanent or increasing value, Lilith saw print as

allowing for a broader social and material circulation by the virtue of the magazine becoming transformed from commodity to trash that can be recycled, and that can then enter novel social encounters and acquire value for novel people. Reminiscing her earlier experiences of scavenging recycling piles in order to find porn, she hoped that *Mà3* would allow for similarly serendipitous encounters.

Perceived in this vein, the value of print magazines oscillates from treasures to trash, and back again, as they move from homes to recycling bins and the hands of new owners, as if illustrating Thompson's (2017) conceptualization of rubbish as the point where objects have lost their transient value but that may result in their repositioning as durable objects valued as collectibles. This chain of value where pornographic magazines are discarded as rubbish soon after their acquisition to be then discovered and treasured by others, is familiar in histories of Finnish porn consumption where people describe searching for magazines in recycling bins, trash bins, woods, and dumps and then incorporating them into their own collections and stashes (Anonymized). The treasuring of these objects can operate on an erotic, artistic, or identitarian level (or in any combination thereof) and each of these vectors can be imbued with or divested of value.

In particular, Lilith hoped that the discarded and then discovered copies of *Mà3* would end up in the hands of people who have previously been unfamiliar with the aesthetics and politics of feminist and queer pornography, hence expanding their understanding of bodies, sexual desires, and representations. Online platforms, rife as they are with pornographic content in all kinds of niches and hues – and where many post-porn and queer projects live from beginning to end – were, interestingly and somewhat anachronistically, absent from this scene of exploration and potential learning. This may indicate that, for these editors, online spaces are saturated and

permeated by a heterosexualized pornography to the degree of drowning out other forms of representation of expression, even if many other alternatives do share the same space. Alternatively, it may indicate a detachment from, or even disinterest towards feminist and queer pornography published online in ways that speaks of boundary work between print and online platforms – despite the fact that *Mà3*, like *Phile*, also operates on social media.

Lilith said that she kind of liked ‘the idea of taking that format [print] back to us, like, we have our own magazines’. In doing so, she positioned *Mà3* as a queer alternative to, and continuum of, Finnish print publishing that has, despite the inclusion of gay content, been overwhelmingly heterosexual in orientation; her usage of the word ‘queer’ throughout the interview marking a clear political position. The magazine’s physicality, translating as durability, then makes it possible for it to contribute to a different kind of quotidian sexual archive that those afforded by discarded men’s magazines. For Jack Halberstam (2005), a queer archive is not merely a repository but also does the work of constructing identity through memory, recollection, and the physical marking of what is culturally produced in and by queer(ness). The archivability of tangible objects operates as a marker of existence and recognition as way to shore up the certainty about the lived experiences of queer bodies. As minoritarian as independent queer magazines are, they go, in Lilith’s account, against the erasing pressure of normativity, the high-intensity circulation of which in both media images and everyday experiences overwhelms the archive and, simultaneously, makes it necessary.

### **Pornography and value**

The strategic choice of print driving both magazine projects goes clearly against the

grain of contemporary media publishing centered on online platforms. Since the late 1990s, many independent feminist and LGBTQ+ zines operating in print self-fashioned themselves into online e-zines in search of more inexpensive production, broader distribution, and public presence (e.g., Pfeffer 2014). The new wave of print magazines this author alludes to, in contrast, finds appeal in physical commodities and the sense of control they afford. At the same time, they are equally enabled by developments in digital media in the form of digital photography, editing and design software, and inexpensive printing that necessitates no large financial investment. Megan Le Masurier (2012, 385) points out that these developments also extend to the marketing and distribution possibilities of independent magazines ('indies') on online platforms. Both magazines promote themselves through social media and sell their copies through their websites. *Phile*, which came into being through crowd funding, is further exemplary of how 'online marketing, distribution and social networking have allowed the indies to develop what could be called a "global niche" of readers whose specialized interests are not limited by location but connect horizontally across national borders' (Masurier 2012, 391).

While neither of the two magazines could exist without digital media, our interviewees were unanimous on the non-digital nature of their projects, and perceived the digital through negative difference as something 'less than'. For the editors of *Mà3*, the digital platforms used – namely their website, Facebook and Instagram accounts – were entirely secondary, and did not allow for displaying the kinds of materials that they found most relevant. Online presence served only to drum up interest in and the visibility of the magazine, and to allow for communication with first-time readers and potential contributors. For the editors of *Phile*, which operates a website and an Instagram account, online presence was more central and a potential avenue for further

developing the brand by publishing original content in digital format, yet the print magazine remained their main focus of interest.

In contrast with *Mà3* being defined as a queer feminist porn magazine, the editors of *Phile* positioned pornography as distinct from that which they do. They mentioned specifically that ‘we present erotic contents but it’s not just for the sake of consumption or sexual enjoyment, we present it for our readers to understand where it’s coming from and why’. The notion of pornography, as deployed here, was seen as distinct from erotica, and as having to do with ‘immediate consumption connected with masturbation’. This boundary work echoes very familiar divisions between porn and erotica where the former is defined through its perceived lack of value and the singularity of its intentions, resembling the famous 1973 Miller vs. California ruling by the United State Supreme Court that saw pornography, as obscenity, as being ‘utterly without socially redeeming value’ and lacking ‘serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value’ as mere masturbation fodder (see Glass 2006).

The foregrounding of sexual titillation and masturbatory intent would, for the editors of *Phile*, eat away at the reflexivity and depth that they invite their readers to undertake: this is also evident in how the magazine partially positions itself as an academic journal. This definition of purpose of use is explicitly connected to notions of cultural and social value: the marker of pornography stands for fast use, immediate gratification, and quick transition from transient commodity to trash whereas an academic journal or a coffee table book has much more durability. As such, pornographic encounters are ultimately deemed as being less meaningful in their transience and fast fading intensities of attraction and allure. This is in stark contrast to *Mà3*, the theme of the very first issue of which was ‘jerking off’. In their editorial to the issue, Begemot and Saija Nojonen introduced the publication’s focus as follows:



You have just grabbed a new queer feminist porn magazine. Congratulations on the good choice! Our magazine includes works from gifted artists from different fields and all material has been produced ethically near you. The magazine's keywords are porn, queer, and feminism: With porn, we mean that readers can use the magazine as jerk-off material. With porn, we do not mean that the magazine shouldn't include anything to stimulate the mind. (translation by author)

Here, no value hierarchy is created between masturbation and the consumption of artistic content: rather, different approaches to, and experiences of the magazine are introduced as similarly important, welcome, and interconnected. This makes *Mà3* much less 'meta' in its approach to pornography than *Phile*, which addresses porn without wanting to identify with the genre as such. Unlike the makers of *Phile*, *Mà3*'s editors do not separate their magazine from the category of pornography by, for example, contrasting it with erotica. Both Rauma and Lilith stress that this is, in fact, a porn magazine, Rauma mentioning that they explicitly did not want any journalistic content as it can be published in other places. In this framing, feminist and queer pornography is seen as socially and culturally valuable, and potentially complex in itself. With its sociological angle, *Phile* as if looks at the sexual cultures from the outside in, offering readers analyses and examples of kink and fetish practices, yet without assuming any affinity with them. As a self-identified queer-feminist porn magazine, *Mà3* operates from the inside, reaching both inwards and outwards from the sexual cultures it addresses. The magazine is made for the feminist queer community that generates its content, yet also involves the desire to resonate more broadly, as in educating people in what pornography can be, or do.

In spite of their mutual differences, both magazines frame themselves as accruing in value. As seen above, the editors of both *Mà3* and *Phile* are very clear in stressing the artistic value of their publications, their relevance, creativity, and uniqueness. When *Mà3* defines itself as pornographic, it does not cede the conceptual ground of value but rather positions porn as its main rationale of existence. It is not the case, though, that *Mà3* derives its value merely from being pornography. Rather, the magazine places itself against other modes of visual representation, and thus continues to politically contest and reassert the boundaries between what can and cannot be included within the category of art. To this effect, both *Phile* and *Mà3* (but, we would argue, especially the latter), mobilize several ambivalent distinctions through which value is re-inscribed.

### **The ambiguous mainstream**

In defining *Mà3*, Rauma points out that ‘there are no other porn magazines in Finland besides ours’. This is not technically true, for while *Mà3*, along with the similarly artistic *RIVO* (‘Obscene’, est. 2015), were the only two porn magazines published in the country in 2015–2016, the situation had changed by the time of the interview. *Mà3* can be ordered online and it is on sale in select venues, which are distinct from the newsagents through which pornographic magazines are otherwise distributed in Finland; neither does *Mà3* intend or plan to use such distribution channels. This means that *Mà3* is not sold on the same shelves with commercial pornography, and that it may largely fail to be categorized as such by its distributors and consumers alike. This detachment expands to the different ways in which magazines are classified for archival purposes.

The Finnish national library database classifies *Mà3* as both a sex magazine and an opinion magazine ('mielipidelehti') connoting independent cultural production and, in fact, doubling for the classification of an independent magazine. *Mà3* is indexed in the fields of ethics, morals and practical philosophy, gender research, cultural sociology, cultural and social anthropology. Its themes are further listed as ranging from feminism to pornography, sexuality, sexual minorities, and sexual fantasies. This contextual metadata then frames *Mà3* as post-pornography in the sense that it deals with yet is not limited to being pornography.

Since she fails to acknowledge them, Rauma did not situate *Mà3* as alternative to other print porn publications in the country. Rather, she focused her critique on 'media in general, and what kind of people are shown to be sexual and beautiful', and proposed *Mà3* as providing alternatives to their narrow depictions of bodies and sexual desires. When inquired as to *Mà3*'s relation to *RIVO*, a directly competing magazine classified in the national library database as an art magazine focused on gender research pornography, erotica, and photographic art, Rauma argued that it is not 'either feminist or queer, because the people represented, and the sexualities represented in the magazine are conventional, they are pretty, thin, white women'. In this sense, *RIVO*, despite its artistic and experimental style, was positioned as part of, or as an extension of the mainstream. For Rauma, queerness was key to that which makes *Mà3* distinct:

I tried to watch quite a lot of feminist porn, and I wasn't happy with that, I felt that it was too correct, a bit boring to me, and I didn't like the idea that if you have, for instance, porn for lesbians, it always represents lesbian sex, because that's not how people's fantasies work like, and that's why I wanted to make something different [...] not too [politically correct] stuff.

As the current editor, Lilith similarly addressed the types of bodies and sexualities represented as a way of distinguishing *Mà3* both from any other similar projects in the country, and from mainstream pornography in general. Unlike Rauma, she also took up the issue of race as a marker of a continued friction and identified the lack of ethnic diversity as the magazine's feature ever since its launch. Rather than being an aesthetic or political choice, the whiteness of *Mà3* emerged as a limitation and shortcoming connected to the fairly homogeneous social makeup of the people contributing to its production. This, in turn, can be traced back to the scope limitation that publishing in Finnish and within queer-feminist social circles involves – a context distinctly different from that of *Phile*, which sources its content from contributors internationally. The locus of queerness in *Mà3* is therefore simultaneously affirmed and questioned as manifesting difference yet not quite *enough* of a difference, or not all the difference that there could be, thus maintaining a complex and strained continuity with what is framed as 'mainstream'.

As Masurier (2012, 386) points out, the mainstream 'is a vague and contentious term and, with the increasing tendency of consumer magazine publishing towards niche titles, it becomes even less clear'. This issue is further amplified in the context of pornography where the mainstream is, on the one hand, popular shorthand for certain kinds of body aesthetics, politics, ethics, and economies, and a highly elusive point of reference, on the other, given the diversity of production practices and professional roles that contemporary porn entails. In any definitions of alternative pornography, the mainstream operates as something of an ephemeral signifier that is both necessary as a point of opposition and something either left undefined or defined in highly simplified terms (Anonymized). Further considering the difficulty of precisely pinning down the denominator of either mainstream or alternative porn, distinctions between the two

easily become matters of value and taste, whereby the authenticity, creativity, smartness, and radicalness of the alternative becomes drawn against the assumed predictability, triteness, superficiality and tastelessness connoted by the mainstream in a firmly simplistic, binary vein (see Attwood 2007).

It was therefore not surprising that while the magazines studied are positioned as standing out from, as disconnected from, and as alternatives to mainstream pornography, this remained an ephemeral point of reference. As questions were posed probing the connections or differentiations between the two magazines and ‘mainstream pornography’, or that which people might associate with the term, the editors had some difficulty understanding what was being asked. However, when *Playboy* was mentioned as a stand-in for ‘mainstream pornography’ in the realm of print, the interviewees grasped the point of the questions asked. *Playboy* was evoked for two key reasons: due to its international, instant recognizability as a perennial print brand, and due to its specific profile as a high production value ‘lifestyle’ publication combining journalistic and artistic content with heterosexual soft-core erotica (Kipnis 1996; Saarenmaa 2017).

In distinguishing *Mâ3* from other print porn projects, Lilith identified the magazine’s depiction of body aesthetics, sexual desires, fantasies, and scenarios, as well as its overall principles of photography as being distinct:

The people in the photos are different, they wouldn’t put any of our models on *Playboy*, they wouldn’t take them because they don’t fall under the aesthetics of the straight male; those people are doing different kinds of stuff, they aren’t doing heterosex, there might not be any penetration at all – wow, sex without penetration, what a concept! [*laughs*] – and then in many of the photos the enjoyment of the participants is more important than getting a perfect angle, so the photo just documents that good sex is happening; [...] I know the people in the photos and I

believe they are having a good time with the people they chose to have a good time with.

For Lilith, the models' body aesthetics, sexual scenarios, and the motivation of pleasure all marked a difference to *Playboy* and its economy of straight male desire. Given that *Playboy* has never featured penetrative sex, being a soft-core magazine with clear limits to sexual explicitness, this boundary work nevertheless fell partly short. For Feswick, the difference was less distinct:

I'd say we are definitely breaking away from publications like *Playboy*. Again, it's something we might reference in our articles or our design, but I think that it is very different from *Phile*. We will never be too similar to that.

As a signifier for the mainstream, *Playboy* allowed for the interviewees to reassert their magazines' ethical and aesthetic specificities. These differences involved the diversity of experiences and subject positions depicted, as well as an emphasis on artistic, less regular or normalized imagery: both of these were seen to make the magazines culturally and socially valuable – and interesting. As a mainstream icon, *Playboy* functioned as representative of the non-diverse, in contrast with the diversity on which both *Phile* and *Mà3* were premised.

### **Print matters**

*Playboy*'s circulation is down to less than one tenth from its mid-1970 heyday of 5,6 copies million and while the brand makes money through licensed products, the magazine is, as of 2019, a quarterly (Guaglione 2018). Using the frame of post-porn in a literal manner for periodization, *Phile* and *Mà3* are that which follow the golden era of

print porn. The editorial teams of both *Phile* and *Mà3* anchored the physicality of print in the very rationale of their magazines and their reason to exist. This physicality was key to the discursive construction of the two magazines as spaces of difference both in relation to other print publications and the evasive denominator of mainstream pornography (its current online manifestations included). In other words, the editors marked their magazines apart as *print* products: this physical existence was identified as particularly meaningful in a media context dominated by digital distribution and consumption.

In articulating the purpose and value of their projects, the four editors and designers we interviewed highlighted the very same aspects that Masurier (2012, 394) identifies as key elements of print magazines in contrast with online publishing: ‘the quality and tactility of the paper, format (size, shape, binding), the integration of words, images and space as an expression of graphic design specific to print, and the life and function of the magazine as a material object. All are untransferable elements in the experience of both making and reading a magazine.’ This affords the magazines with the status of collectibles, which, through their relative permanence, can contribute to archives on queer and kink sexual cultures.

In different ways, both publications assert their value in connection with the materiality of print as that which makes visual representations seem more artistic, high-end, and professional. With *Phile*, materiality is a means to make the magazine a valued collectible in itself. For *Mà3*, it affords the plasticity necessary for the magazine to go through the rubbish cycle of value, as outlined by Thompson. Value is further articulated through the magazines’ differentiation from the mainstream, as embodied by *Playboy*. In contrast to *Mà3*, which embraces its pornographic nature, *Phile* distances its

content from the denominator of pornography, preferring erotica instead – both magazines articulating their cultural value differently in the process.

Importantly, both magazines reassert their authenticity. *Phile*'s editor and designer talked about how they work with 'people from the communities', such as kinky/fetish groups, with an attempt to portray these groups in a politically authentic way. Meanwhile, *Mà3*'s editors stressed the pleasure taken by the queer feminists participating in its production, indicating the authenticity of the content produced. The physicality of both magazines was seen as a commitment to present that authenticity in a way that helps to accrue value: materiality became a demonstration of investment and care towards sexual communities. Both magazines declared their work to be unique and original, *Mà3* creating further differentiation by pointing out *RIVO* as attempting to differ from the mainstream, yet failing to come across as sufficiently different, its normative tendencies being in tension with in how it frames itself as alternative, as belonging to the 'obscene', and thus breaking boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

To show what was secret was long a mainstay of pornography's promised titillation and representational content (Williams 1989), yet the breadth and range of currently available sexual representations and their seeming ubiquity serve to disinvest the idea of unveiling what is hidden as the main cultural labor of porn. As the dichotomy between the hidden and the shown, the 'obscene' and the 'on-scene' (Attwood 2009) has become reorganized, other modes of accruing and donning value have grown ever more explicit. The return to print examined in this article does not involve an attempt to somehow bring back the power of the 'secret' as that which has been revealed in porn centerfolds and glossy image spreads. In fact, even the idea, discussed above, of materiality as



connected to copyright and the image rights of the performers portrayed, shows that secrecy is not the main issue: rather, it is the artistry and the validation of the value that these objects accrue by the fact of being physical objects. Trash theory helps to see differences in how *Phile* seeks to escape the trash cycle by remaining a durable object while *Mà3* embraces its potential in extending the magazine's social life.

A series of dichotomies – such as those separating the mainstream from the queer, the commercial from the authentic, or the pornographic from the erotic – nevertheless remain in use when explaining the value of the magazines. These dichotomies hold rhetorical appeal and potency in drawing boundaries between different fields of cultural production and sexual representation. At the same time, these remain rife with tension, drawing attention away from the fundamental instability of the very categories deployed.

*Phile* and *Mà3* both witness a shift from secrecy to authenticity as a linchpin of value: they do not merely promise to show the previously unseen, but to offer authentic and real depictions of sexual desires and pleasures. This thrust can be seen as key to alternative, queer, and feminist porn movements (Young 2014), and it remains manifest in the popularity of amateur content (even when professionally produced). The trope of authenticity is nevertheless fraught with perils in that it naturalizes and reproduces the very same thing that it intends to fight against (Doorn 2010). In other words, pornographies deemed authentic resort to, and play with the very 'inauthentic' or 'deceptive' modes of representing sexual pleasure that they set out to critique.

For the makers of *Phile* and *Mà3*, authenticity does not merely refer to authentic sexual pleasure, or to an authentic body. Rather, a new regime of authenticity configures post-pornography as a realm of politically authentic, or 'true' representations of sexual communities. Marie-Hélène Bourcier (2014) identifies this as a 'bodily and

political sexuality’ that has less to do with ‘resignifying social status to take away the stigma’ and more with presenting different forms of sexual doing and being. These modes of sexuality are seen to stem from a place of authenticity – a stance equally taken by the editors and the content of both *Phile* and *Mà3*. Understood in this vein, the post-pornographic is that which supersedes so-called mainstream pornography as a different mode appealing to a politics of authenticity and value associated with different bodies and communities. To this end, the materiality of the magazines helps to anchor and amplify their artistic value and potential while their ethos of production signifies their authenticity.

There is however an additional element that interplays with both materiality and authenticity, namely the value placed on *diversity*. With both *Phile* and *Mà3*, it is not just authentic or artistic material, or the materiality of the magazines as a counterpoint to the disposable culture of the digital, that are at stake. The issue is, first and foremost, one concerning authentic, material representation of diversity pertaining to sexual practices, bodies, identities, communities, and socially disadvantaged groups.

Within a framework where diversity is both a value in itself and that which lends value to the magazines published, the mainstream stands for the non-diverse, the unauthentic, and the non-artistic. Meanwhile, the general genre marker of pornography continues to be associated with the mainstream in ways that necessitate classifiers pointing to alternative interests, aesthetics, orientations, and values – as in *Mà3*’s denominator of ‘queer feminist porn’ or in *Phile*’s ‘erotic contents’ indicative of investigations and presentations of the alternative, the othered, the not-represented. In this boundary work concerning cultural value and social worth, the mainstream is construed as representationally poor while the post-pornographic, the queer, and the investigative bestow value on sexual diversity through the materiality of printed, glossy,

pages. Both the low circulation of *Mà3* and *Phile* and their grounding in sexual communities involve a *praxis* of authenticity that helps to maintain a rhetorical separation towards the mainstream markets of porn. This, in turn, generates cultural and social value, and helps in profiling the magazines as novelties with a transgressive, resistant edge.

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