

*The final frontier?*

# BARE— BACK— ING

Is it time for us all to prevent a super strain of the HIV virus by always using protection? Should we throw caution to the wind, “embrace nature” and have sex “*as god intended*”? Or are we replacing sex with hugs? *Daniel Scheffler* looks into the sexual crystal ball

WORDS DANIEL SCHEFFLER



Takashi Murakami's "My Lonesome Cowboy" (1998), an anime-inspired sculpture of a masturbating boy, sold for \$13.5 million at Sotheby's.

**S**EX IS ALWAYS CHANGING, but what will remain constant is that it exists and will continue to exist. Sex's reproduction function may be less important to the gays but this means sex can be much more about pleasure and, of course, romance. After all, nobody wants to be restricted, let alone by a sheath of latex. Porn shows us how to have sex without a condom, the boy you're meeting on *DudesNude* wants to penetrate you without one – so what's the big deal? AIDS and HIV kill fewer gay men every year. In fact, barebacking has always been around; our ancestors invented it, not the homosexuals. So is it time to embrace nature, or time to prevent a super strain of the HIV virus?

The film *Brokeback Mountain*, with its famous, condom-less cowboy scene may have more to reveal than just a passionate romp in the mountains. The term “barebacking”, as we know it now, could have stemmed from one such bout - perhaps not with *Heath Ledger* and *Jake Gyllenhaal*, but certainly with similar men. A deliberate abandonment of protection could be considered a revolt against the plastic, as well as a very specific subcultural practice. But since the term barebacking refers to riding a horse without a saddle, the cowboy image is ever so appropriate.

Activist and anthropologist *Gayle Rubin*'s principle of “benign sexual variation” says that different cultural organizations of sexuality should be understood non-hierarchically and that no single consensual erotic practice is preferable over any other. Put simply, this means there is no best way to have sex. Of course, the feeling of being uninhibited is certainly appealing, if not mightily arousing for most people, regardless of their gender and sexuality. In *Bold*, a recent talk in New York by Dutch trend forecaster *Li Edelkoort*, she tells us, “Mankind is desperate to connect, to feel and to be intimate.” Could this mean that man, or rather gay men, will go to any lengths to avoid separation and to feel connected, even if that means forgoing a thin layer of latex?

In *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*, the author *Tim Dean* talks about the act of barebacking and how, without prejudice, it can be assessed as a true final frontier of gay culture, and forms part of the history we are currently creating. Bareback sex needs to be assessed from various perspectives: the ethnography of a subculture, the anthropology of kinship, the cultural studies of pornography, and the philosophy of the stranger, technological developments in medicine and electronic communication.

In Dan Savage's new book *American Savage: Insights, Sights and Fights on Faith, Sex, Love and Politics*, published last month, he explains that research has shown that semen is a natural antidepressant. So what better way to get that kick than by having sex without a condom? If we see barebacking as only between lovers, or partners, we can view it as the difference between just fucking or experiencing trusting lovemaking. But barebacking has a slightly different connotation for the most part: it is seen as risky, often experienced with strangers, and a way to really get down and dirty. Which takes us back to *Tim Dean* – is barebacking truly the final frontier of gay culture? After all, marriage equality won't be the hot topic for much longer. So, does this mean barebacking is a middle finger to AIDS (and HIV) or simply a way of going back to a more natural time?

Naturally, gay men semi-invented (and then coined) the term “barebacking”, not as a “misguided return to what gay sex was before AIDS”, as *Dean* says it has been called by some, but rather as a true self-expression. The philosopher *Michel Foucault*, in various contexts and many of his books, said that “regulatory systems create what disturbs us”. Taking this into account, suddenly barebacking can be seen from that perspective all too clearly: the system tells gay men to slap on a condom against disease, but the very real fear of an Orwell-style “Big Brother” control then propels the subjects to a rebellion of

the disturbia.

For quite a long time, gays haven't wanted to be told how to have sex. It stands to reason that as such, they also wanted to remove the “barrier” between a sexual partner and themselves. Skin on skin, cock in ass. But with the fear of HIV and disease wrapped up in penises across the world (starting with large urban centers like Manhattan, Paris and San Francisco), the cultural imperative was to avoid risk, in particular health risk, despite the forfeiture of ecstasy.

But these days, things look very different. The term “barebacking” barely existed prior to 1997, although it is now part of queer vernacular as a very distinct preference. It has taken over hook-up sites like *Adam4Adam* and *Grindr* and although these sites frequently encourage condom use, site users are quick to state their real preference, which is often to bareback. In the 1980s, AIDS (the big unknown) was killing off the tribe, but with the development of drug therapies and anti-retrovirals, the number of AIDS-related deaths in gay urban communities gradually declined to the current (2013) rates – virtually zero. It makes sense that a survey by *New York's Community Healthcare Network* found that almost 47 percent of men who use apps to find partners also admitted to barebacking “always, often or sometimes.”

In his book, *Tim Dean* refers to barebacking as “post-subcultural” as he tries to define the social phenomenon as not exclusive to homosexuals, but as a real desire to connect, get closer, flesh in flesh. In 1999, in an article for *POZ magazine*, author *Michael Scarce* wrote, “Barebacking represents a conscious, firm decision to forgo condoms and, despite the dangers, unapologetically revel in the pleasure of doing it raw.” He believes that barebackers define the act as premeditated, eroticized, unprotected anal sex, and so it has become a “new sexual identity”. Barebackers often think about transmitting the virus - especially the idea that deliberately sharing it establishes a new network

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of kinship among the infected. According to Dean, this intimacy makes us vulnerable, exposes us to emotional risk, and forces us to drop our psychological barriers. Along with an orgasm, that is what most (read: all) men really crave and will go to any measure to find it.

Typically, as Dean says, bareback culture has been viewed as a case of pathological self-destructiveness or gross irresponsibility. From a more intellectual approach he argues that barebacking may be a way for gay men to not only connect physically but also become open to new ways of doing things – a certain kind of creativity.

Condoms, according to Dean, feel “anachronistic to many gay men now” and so risky sex has become a subculture. Like any culture it comes with its own intricacies, including language, rituals, icons and coding. Barebacking, he explains, is over-determined behavior - by which he means that there is no single causal explanation for it. Many things may account for its popularity, and reasons that come up in research and online blogs include the availability of anti-retroviral medications, and the popularity of illegal drugs such as crystal meth. But this doesn't explain all of it. So maybe it really is a way to take back control of something so utterly primal?

Pre-condom, the use of barebacking in film was standard in the 1970s and early 1980s, when (as now) companies often suggested bareback porn for studs in relationships only. But now, companies like *Hot Desert Knights* just use “sero-sorting”, a process which matches HIV-positive performers with other HIV-positive performers, and negative with negative (which may not prevent the development of a multi-strain super virus). So it makes

sense that the porn house du jour *Bel Ami* now proudly states on their websites: “All our performers are regularly tested for the presence of HIV or other communicable diseases”.

But Dean strongly believes that barebacking porn cannot be legitimately blamed for causing any kind of behavior. Furthermore he goes on to say that barebacking porn emerged in order to “document a set of practices that were already quite well established.” Bareback porn appeals not to the standard rationale of fantasy for its justification, but to the opposite - documentary realism. Case in point is that historically, most porn types have been obsessed with screening the male orgasm, and barebacking porn conflicts with the subculture's commitment to internal ejaculation. So Dean argues that barebacking should not be looked at as a folly, for entertainment, but rather as a “specific experiment in thinking.”

The website bareback.com not only provides opportunities to connect with other men for barebacking but also, as Dean notes, for buying bareback porn and a t-shirt emblazoned with *bareback.com* in bright red, like a scarlet letter. He argues that this markets the wearer as a biological weapon because it brings to the fore the fears of HIV-negative people, and at the same time attracts fellow barebackers. This T-shirt is perhaps counter intuitive as barebacking (which is often cruised for online and is not necessarily discussed with friends over the dinner table on a Friday night), is now out in the open for all to see. Is this a sense of pride, part of the identity creation or just a shock tactic?

Gay men are, like everyone else (although for this article we speak specifically about the gay man), constantly searching for an

identity that they can project to the world. We are not born with a sense of self that we can necessarily express and therefore we spend years (some more than others) creating and curating the perfect identification of the self. So, this may mean that wearing a T-shirt with bareback.com on it might help the wearer to find his sense of self more easily. If it revolts some but attracts others, it all acts as part of finding the real self.

Barebacking porn also seems to have taken on a new slant. If the porn can “guarantee” that the stars, or actors, are a real-life couple then it somehow means that barebacking is no longer a problem. It is celebrated as an act of closeness. However, many other websites have enforced a “strictly no barebacking” policy, with this stamp of endorsement so visible that it is almost a brand.

But then there is Josh, the author and keeper of the website, *Confessions of a Bareback Sauna Slut*, who proudly uses his motto “No Condoms. No Fear. No Regrets” as his emblem of strength. The third part implies that he is doing something that could be risky, and therefore could cause regret. It seems to be the statement of the day. The risks may have been limited, thank you anti-retrovirals, but the risk factor still remains.

So is Josh acting out of rebellion, as a member of a subculture, or does he want to rebel against society as a kind of bareback suicide bomber? Josh states on his website that “the risk is well worth it”; he believes condom sex is unsatisfactory and as the risk is mitigated with post-HIV drugs, he would rather have what he believes to be great sex with the risk, rather than not. “A life half-lived, is no life at all” could perhaps be a great slogan for him.

So this is part of the resurgence of barebacking in current culture? I can't help but ask myself – but to what end?

Mark S. King, author and blogger at *MyFabulousDisease.com*, sees barebacking as "men behaving naturally," or as an evolution of the times. Some say men no longer fear AIDS because anti-retrovirals, protease inhibitors and other drugs have changed the perception of HIV and AIDS forever. AIDS used to be seen as a death wish, but these days it seems to be considered more similar to diabetes or some other manageable malady. According to *Rick Sowadsky*, in *The Body's* May 1999 issue, gay men are tired of hearing about HIV and AIDS, so have decided to just ignore the whole issue. Of course, drugs and alcohol may have aided in this ignoring or forgetting of the issue at hand.

But it is the online presence of bareback sex, both for sale or rent or other solicitation, which has really urged the resurgence. Of course some gay men celebrate the naturalness of it. In the trailer for *Raw Rods 2* from *Rockafellaz Entertainment*, the caption next to two men barebacking reads "We do it like God intended us to." In 1998, two renegade companies were formed with the aim of exclusively making bareback videos: Hot Desert Knights and *Treasure Island Media*. And then with *Dawson's 20 Load Weekend*, gone were the days where gay porn showed a man ejaculating on another's back, face or chest. The ejaculation happened inside.

In contrast, earlier this year Assemblyman *Isadore Hall* (D-Los Angeles, U.S.) introduced legislation to require condom use in all adult films made in California, and the *AIDS Healthcare Foundation* (AHF) is backing the bill.

*Jay Laudato*, Executive Director at *Callen Lorde Community Health Center* in New York, believes that "every day is testing day at Callen Lorde." The organization provides rapid HIV tests with all of their sexual health services, and Laudato believes "the sooner you know your status, the more you can be in control of your health." So many are barebacking, de-

spite being HIV-positive, because they believe they have nothing to lose as they already have the virus. Worryingly, that belief is a misconception with potentially tragic implications: reinfection with a more virulent strain of the virus could possibly lead to a much faster death.

Barebacking isn't just about Russian roulette sex, where you play a game with death. But with HIV still on the cards, death could certainly play a big role in barebacking, so it is worth mentioning that from a legal perspective, a "deliberate transmission of HIV counts as a felony" in the U.S. In short, barebacking can be seen as reckless and immoral, as opposed to macho or liberating.

With thrills so easily available (online and steam rooms) perhaps nothing truly excites us anymore - maybe the most exciting way is simply to be safe, which is what makes you a considerate human being in the same way that consciousness, whether spiritually, politically or economically, is part of the biggest trend right now. As you can have everything you want sexually, anytime or anywhere, something that is more difficult to attain, like hugging, will start to play a bigger role in our lives, *Li Edelkoort* informs us.

Researchers can't decide whether barebackers watch a lot of bareback porn or whether bareback porn makes people barebackers. As with most things in life, the idea of it is much more of a thrill than actually doing it. With so much disease floating around, and with so much virus mutation happening, doesn't it just make more sense to buckle up, put on a rubber and let that become the new fantasy? ❖

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