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PORNOGRAPHY IN SMALL PLACES AND OTHER SPACES

This article investigates pornographic web-based media at a time when commercial pornography has flooded the Internet and pockets of sex activism are budding alongside the porn boom. Pornography moving freely across borders is foremost a capitalist vision, but the web's sexual potency is equally defined by web users and artists who visit and maintain peer-to-peer networks for producing and sharing sexually explicit materials. Revisiting Foucault's notion of space as 'heterotopia', networked sexual communication and pornography are shown to permeate physical places and other spaces. Web users cultivate attachments to everyday places and spaces other than the ones they routinely inhabit. Networked sexual agency materializes desire far beyond the confines of community rituals and commodity industries. Besides the fact that porn industries expand their markets and diversify products, sex communities emerge alongside these markets and play a vital role in negotiating sexuality. The article shows how the Internet's decentralized mechanisms of power and communication, including debating societies and playgrounds, have entered the realm of online porn and sexuality. Developing a theoretical notion of space as other spaces, the article unfolds the sexual web as exuberant, dispersed in bodies and cultures, yet forcefully regulated by global corporations and nation-state governments.

Keywords Internet pornography; censorship; globalization; heterotopia

Internet pornography and censorship

Internet pornography is increasingly produced and consumed as a transnational commodity-culture by web users who live in a variety of cultures and places. The primary commercial agents of porn in the USA are product distributors who work with porn companies to produce videos and web content for global distribution. As a result of this trend, hotel chains such as Marriot and Westin are garnering easy benefits from the porn boom. In return for offering in-room x-rated movies (distributed by Lodgenet and On Command), hotel chains receive a profit percentage and become primary benefactors of the porn industry. Next, there are cable and satellite companies such as AT&T and General Motors

(DirectTV) who channel porn into millions of homes and take a huge share of the profit or money spent by consumers. Besides a corporate streamlining of content, there is an up-march of independently owned business such as Danni's Hard Drive, a popular softcore porn site owned by former porn star Danni Ashe, who now employs 45 people and made a profit of 6.5 million in 2001.

Bill Asher, president of Vivid Entertainment Group, one of the largest adult-video production companies in the USA, describes the porn industry's expansionist goals:

We really have only scratched the surface right now. If you look at how many television homes there are in this world, or will there be, how many total homes there are, versus how many can get adult, we're still a very, very small percentage. The Internet has really obviously increased that, but again, the Internet is not the true experience of adult (. . .) Right now domestically in this industry it is \$4 billion to \$10 billion. Where would it be worldwide 10 years from now?

(Asher 2001)

This article argues that the Internet is indeed an ultimate play zone for adult entertainment as it creates a new channels for corporate and small-scale pornography, artists and amateurs, to produce, distribute and consume products. Frederick's Lane study of porn entrepreneurialism – *Obscene Profits. The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age* – observes that the porn industry is indeed incorporating new patterns of production and consumption. He cites a new culture of women-owned web sites as a significant trend:

The ability of women to participate in the pornography industry without the intervention of a (typically male) magazine editor or video producers has profound implications for the industry as a whole (. . .) The Internet has the effect of suddenly making any woman who chooses to set up her own nude Web site the head of her own *Playboy*-like channel or publisher of her own *Penthouse*-like magazine. Admittedly, the established players in the pornography industry have enormous technical, financial, and editorial resources (. . .) But amateur Web site operators have their own enormous draw: the very realness of the images they offer and the inherent voyeurism of looking at them.

(Lane 2000, p. 113)

Megastars such as Danni Ashe and small-scale producers have started to build web sites in order to distribute their works and create a different environment for their consumers.

How are these emerging porn environments being reinforced or restricted by nation-state governments? In an attempt to monitor web-based exchanges of

illegal types of porn, federal governments in countries as diverse as the USA, Australia, the UK and France have started to issue stringent censorship laws. The fear that the Internet kindles the growth of porn that is violent, harmful and exploitative to children produces haphazard policy-making by legislators and corporations in their desire to control electronic information. For instance, in March 2003, US Congress initiated a crackdown on file-sharing programs or 'p2p networks' because of their distribution of illegal types of porn. The General Accounting Office and The House Government Reform Committee came out with reports to prove that 'Child Pornography Is Readily Accessible Over Peer-to-Peer Networks' (GAO-03-537T). They carried out surveillance tests on the networked computers of individuals, on student communities in 'Ivy League institutions', and concluded that web users are at significant risk: 'Juvenile users of peer-to-peer networks face a significant risk of inadvertent exposure to pornography when searching or downloading images' (GAO-03-537T, p. 11). To document the risk of inadvertent exposure to pornography, the GAO collaborated with the Customs Cybersmuggling Center of the US Department of Homeland Security, to perform searches on KaZaA and found indeed that child porn was being traded. The GAO's 'Child Pornography Is Readily Accessible over Peer-to-Peer Networks' report also mentions that the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the fiscal year of 2002 allocated \$38.2 million and 228 agents to an 'Innocent Images Unit' and wants to visit the peer-to-peer companies to solicit their co-operation in dealing with the issue of child pornography (GAO-03-537, p. 13).

Under US constitution, it is legal for adults to own and distribute most types of porn. However, since the 2002 Supreme Court ruling over COPA (Child Online Protection Act), the US government has made serious efforts to monitor and put restrictions on Internet porn traffic by arguing that juveniles or minors (18 years or less) are automatically exposed to and harmed by pornographic images. A similar example of government surveillance in the UK would be Operation Ore, a piece of legislation that currently enables the police to monitor and arrest web users engaged in acts of 'child pornography' without investigating the social or ethical codes of conduct developed by online correspondents.

John Perry Barlow of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) in his online article 'Censorship 2000' predicts a large networked anti-porn effort in the USA and Europe, as nation-states and international organs such as the G8 (Group of Eight Industrial Nations) start pressuring Internet service providers (ISPs) to act as legislators of the Internet (Barlow 2000). Internet service providers in several countries are now forced by law to report illegal traffic to the police. The UK-based Internet Watch Foundation, made up of Internet industries, government and consumer representatives, also encourages web users themselves to report on illegal traffic. The Internet Watch Foundation prides itself on encouraging citizens to interact with government policies and become governing bodies using a centralized and user-friendly website. The foundation works in partnership

with ISPs, telcos, mobile operators, software providers, police and government. The goal is to minimize the availability of illegal Internet content, particularly child abuse images. As they write: 'Our Internet Hotline can deal with reports of potentially illegal Internet content, such as websites, newsgroups and online groups that contain images of child abuse anywhere in the world; adult material that potentially breaches the Obscene Publications Act in the UK; or criminally racist material in the UK'. Self-government and surveillance of citizens are presented as civil duties that lead to results, as the foundations proudly reports: '2,450 notifications sent to the police in 2001' (Internet Watch Foundation).

Barlow believes that alliances between nation-state governments and Internet industries may easily result in the political suppression of marginal groups, as it creates a tide of intolerance: 'Within narrower contexts, suppressing the expression of gays, women, heretics, traitors, and troublemakers is politically popular' (Barlow 2000). Government bodies such as the Internet Watch Foundation may lead to moral hysterias and a mainstreaming of sexual politics, rather than an understanding of decentralized sexual communication. An example would be the recent censorship and removal of online sexual communities by commercial portals. This has been particularly the case for commercial host portals such as Egroups, Yahoo, Excite and Visto who have disabled legal adult websites for gay communities where materials deemed to be 'obscene', such as pictures of urinating boys, were exchanged. Since those sites were hosted by corporate host portals as free services, the portals were 'free' to set any terms of service (TOS) they chose. For instance, the *Visto.com* TOS reads: 'We reserve the right to terminate any subscriber, without disclosure of specific reason for said termination, at our own discretion, if we deem that such termination is in the best interest of Visto Corp.' (Visto 2002). It is important to note that such control on adult sites is indeed damaging the educational and social functions they perform. Some of the moderators of censored sites have maintained extensive discussions about nudity between children and non-parental adults in order to resist a generalized representation of this taboo area of sexuality.¹

While depictions of nude minors within gay and lesbian networks spur moral outrage in the USA, these depictions may also be tolerated in other cultures such as Japan. Mark McLelland (2000) notes, for instance, that scatological references may appear obscene to western audiences, but they are more commonplace in Japanese media. Discussing the website *Saki's Room* and illustrations with urination and masturbation themes, McLelland suggests that 'the most troubling illustrations for a western viewer involve scenes depicting interplay between male minors' (pp. 283–284). McLelland's research shows that areas of censorship and taboo in one particular culture are often ignored in another culture.

The future of global porn, as Barlow points out, may indeed be chilling censorship measures and scenes of conflict between web users and ISPs that are

forced by local governments to apply the most stringent measures of censorship legislation. Examples of local measures against global technologies would be the Western Australian Censorship Act of 1996, an ad-hoc state law intended to forego the mechanisms of the Australian Federal Government. The Western Australian Censorship Act came about to protect local state territory from the influx of 'edgy' pornographic materials over the Internet.² South Australia's Internet Censorship Bill of 2002 criminalizes any content 'unsuitable for children online' even if the content is clearly targeted towards adult groups. This bill is very intrusive to adult industries and free speech practices, as it enables the police to evaluate and arrest individuals who post information deemed offensive to children. In Massachusetts, USA, a similar bill has passed that makes it illegal to upload or download images containing the nudity of a person under 18, even if the images are not considered 'pornographic'.

In May 2002, the US Federal Court struck down the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) a bill that argued that the Internet automatically exposes children to pornographic materials. As stated by Senator N. Haynes: 'If adults and children are mutually given unfettered access to adult and obscene materials via the Internet, a child's computer is essentially converted into an adult bookstore' (Supreme Court Debates 2002, p. 61). The debate between US Attorney General John Ashcroft and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is still going on today and questions if community standards of decency can be transferred from place to place. Whereas the ACLU argues that a federal censorship law for the Internet would result in applying the most conservative community standards to the entire nation, Ashcroft replies that community standards for minors are different from adults and likely to be 'reasonably constant' throughout the nation. Even if different cultures have different ways of digesting pornographic materials, there is no difference in how Internet porn affects children globally. The most compelling arguments against Ashcroft have come from researchers within the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality and the Institute for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, who have found that there is no sufficient evidence that children are harmed by exposure to sexually explicit words or images (Supreme Court Debates 2002, p. 60). Moreover, these researchers have also found that the category of 'minors' (18 years or less in the USA) is too broad upon which to apply a measure of child psychology.

In response to the 1998 *Child Internet Protection Act* (CIPA), an act that requires public libraries to filter their computers if they want to retain federal funding, Judith Krug of the American Library Association finds that most current filtering software is still flawed. She adds that 'it would be better to educate children and teenagers about the various uses of the Internet rather than rely on software to help them navigate' (Loviglio 2002). In her controversial book *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*, Judith Levine argues that the 'harmful to minors' obscenity standard, operational in the USA since 1968, is currently being revamped by government to phase out sexuality debates

rather than promote tolerance and media education. Like Krug, Levine argues that children should be schooled in media literacy and moral intelligence rather than be exposed to censored versions of the Internet: 'to give children a fighting chance in navigating the sexual worlds, adults need to saturate it with accurate, realistic information and abundant, varied images of love and sex'.³ Educational programmes towards Internet literacy and sexual politics in high schools and higher education would be needed to close the gap between top-down government measures and decentralized online communities.

Off the beaten path: dallying and coiling with porn

Electronic networks continue to feed the porn boom and facilitate new methods for consumers to interact with sexual content as 'porn'. With a shift in porn consumption comes a new way of thinking about sexuality, as web users of different backgrounds start networking in their search for partners and porn. Rana Dasgupta (2002) argues that porn browsing aims at closing the gap between the desiring body and the dispersed organs of sight, hearing and information processing. The dream comes to fruition with the development of cybersex messaging and peer-to-peer online databases, where confessions of sexual desires are embedded in distributed social rules, ethical codes and fantasies. Dasgupta believes that a mental and bodily attachment of web users to such distributed sexuality can no longer be separated from 'porn' consumption habits: 'In actual fact, the market exists in great part because of the intense libidinal attachment it cultivates in consumers. It cannot be selective as to which parts of that attachment it will acknowledge as its own creation' (Dasgupta 2002). Online correspondents are multitaskers who move between activities such as socializing, buying commodities and searching information.

While cyberculture theorists have investigated the socio-cultural impact of web-based sex communication for more than a decade, governments are hesitant to support web-based research methods to gather alternative practices and consumer responses to the porn boom. Governments and cultural establishment alike are caught up in mass media frenzies and unwilling to investigate the subtle influences of mediascapes on porn consumers, their sexual desires, codes of ethics and movement towards decentralized communication, role-play and debate. This is no surprise to the history of pornographic media.⁴ Two studies on the origins of pornography in modern culture – Walter Kendrick's *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (1996) and Lynn Hunt's *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (1997) – show that attempts to restrict the distribution of porn have historically been part of a larger objective to limit access to public spaces. Porn emerged within male elite groups, or 'male domains', who thoroughly feared the democratization of culture and protected secret collections from the lower classes and women's communities.

Over the last few decades, porn has undergone a shift towards decentralization and heterogeneity, as a wider variety of producers and consumers participate in the making of globalized markets. A contemporary notion of porn should capture such networked sexual agency and politics. This view would be in accordance with a sexually exuberant climate, as small places such as homes, bedrooms and cybercafes become sites for networked activity. Rather than viewing home-spaces as distinctly contained spaces, or sites of 'patriarchal' or 'matriarchal' identity politics, home spaces can be seen as networked nodes where individuals negotiate complex social and ethical codes. The ability to seek out and share sexual practice in response to online commodities and communities arguably creates new public freedoms (Duncan 1996, pp. 136–137).

An insightful theoretical model to contextualize pornography could be Foucault's early definition of space as networked agency. In his essay 'Of Other Spaces' (1986, originally published in 1967), Foucault purports that we live in an epoch of space, where space is not a delineated entity but one which constantly fragments and dissolves, reforming as other spaces. With modernity, the medieval concept of space as emplacement is replaced by that of 'heterotopia', a disembodied notion of space whose fixed nature and location is constantly disrupted by transience and ever-shifting relations between places. Foucault was particularly interested in spaces that are linked to 'other' sites and which *differ from* the sites they reflect and speak about. According to Foucault, heterotopias are capable of taking several sites that are incompatible or 'foreign to one another' and juxtaposing them within a single space (1986, p. 25). Similarly, online consumers practice a pluralistic moral consciousness as they endlessly move between sites and/or long to visit *other* spaces. Sex sites are effectively linked to 'other' sites, encouraging consumers to satisfy diverse urges and move between activities such as shopping, chatting, peeping, cruising, masturbating and maintaining friendships. Foucault uses the example of festivals and fairgrounds, but one could also make examples of porn spaces as consumers mix and match diverse cultures and types of agency. Daniel Defert explains that Foucault's concept of space meant to introduce a carnivalesque order of existence:

These spatio-temporal units, these space-times, shared the fact of being places where I am and yet I am not, as in the mirror or the cemetery, or where I am another, as in the brothel, the vacation resort, or the festival: carnival transformations of ordinary existence, which ritualize splits, thresholds, and deviations, and localize them as well.

(Defert 1997, p. 275)

'Heterotopia' is Foucault's characterization of disorder and chaos in spatio-temporal units, and how they enabled intricate and multiple, often conflicting, workings of thought and gestures. Heterotopia was first defined by Foucault as

'a disorder in which fragments of large number of possible orders glitter' (Defert 1997, p. 275).

Foucault is perhaps a foreteller of electronic agency in defining space as ephemeral and disorderly networks, though a newer reading of his concept would include the disorder of bodies and spaces of actual correspondents. Porn heterotopias cannot be seen as purely disembodied spaces, but rather as mediated spaces where porn users explore phenomena and intersect with each other's mental, physical and emotional journeys. In order to discuss modern sexuality as 'journeying', one could make use of Michel de Certeau's concept of 'space', which he contrasts to the concept of 'place'. Whereas places are distinct locations and imply an indication of stability, spaces are constituted through movements and operations of bodies and minds: 'Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities' (Roberson 2001, p. 90). We are 'spacing' when we explore operations of contact, its waves and obstacles, changing methods of communication invading the home-spaces we occupy, the cultures we visit, the fantasy-spaces we construct around bodies and journeys. De Certeau's 'spacing' allows us to conceptualize complex attachments and reflect on networked agency.

Web-based artists such as Francesca da Rimini have in recent years developed erotic and pornographic tales as meditations on time and space. Da Rimini's website documents a libidinal search for love as 'journeying', showing how sex and fantasies are built, expanded, ruined and refurbished over time. The site demonstrates web life as journeys into multiple nodes of uncanny sexuality emanating from web-based correspondents: for example, her character 'doll yoko' is a character who 'swims up from a crater mud pond of dead girls as her pale hands perform gentle inquisitions upon your fleshform as she haunts your imagination'. Doll yoko is a character rooted in Japanese folklore and exotic fetishism who embodies da Rimini's personal memories, constructed language and images. Da Rimini invented doll yoko in a small place near Kyoto, a place where she was on holiday and where according to local legends, Japanese baby-girls had been drowned at birth. The legend of this place entered doll yoko's journey and linked her to other characters such as 'gashgirl', a cynical vampire who rips into fleshforms, or the dominant and self-absorbed 'puppet mistress' who sees the web as a 'global freak show'. Da Rimini explains that these alter-ego personas had a profound impact on her own everyday body and sexuality:

During the 3–4 years that I was most intensely reconfiguring myself as an online erotic intelligence, as GashGirl and later as doll yoko, a period of my life that was particularly marked by obsession, an addictive relationship to going online, euphoria, wild oscillations of emotions, relentless creative output, I was experiencing my body in new ways, far more sexualized,

responsive to suggestion and physically sensitive than it had been before. This went hand in hand with a driving need to write, to write daily, hourly, to never leave the screen, to record the psychic and emotional development of the characters I was inhabiting, and the passages of the relationships they were forming with other minds played out within the liquid space of the nets.

(da Rimini 2001)

Online sex journeys dissolve the borders between everyday places and other spaces, enabling complex relationships between web users and creative fictions to emerge.

Sexual journeys and pornography as gift

Theorists have started to investigate how web users construct virtual and actual journeys and engage in a variety of informal economies. The mailing list Nettime has had extensive discussions on informal economies destabilizing the objectives of consumerist capitalism. As Keith Hart argues:

Even if the Internet is a creature of capitalism, there have always been strategies for ordinary people to claw back something of the value of what they produce. When such practices are identified as ‘the informal economy’ (again a misleading expression, if it implies the absence of dialectical relations to the dominant forms), we can only note that what was taken in the 70s to be an insignificant sector of the total economy is today recognized to be very large in scope at all levels including the global. So it is possible for practices which are objectively minor to provide a site in which alternatives to the currently dominant economic form are developed.

(Hart 2000)

In *Time and Commodity Culture* (1997), John Frow posits gift exchange as a way to think through informal economies within late capitalism’s commodity culture. Gift exchange supplements commodity exchange in that it aims to construct a mechanism of social cohesion rather than economic utility or profit. Frow’s theory of the gift borrows insights from Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida and Annette Weiner’s anthropological study on ‘inalienable’ possessions in Oceanian and Aboriginal Australian cultures. Weiner’s study of the gift shows that inalienable possessions go beyond a law of reciprocity, as they are the object of most intense desire (Frow 1997, p. 129). In Maori cultures, for instance, women’s production of cloth becomes uniquely important because it is imbued with a procreative power and requires a specific type of guardianship which turns difference into rank (Weiner 1992, p. 18).

Porn users transfer data informally alongside their quest for pornographic commodities as they share and distribute sexuality. Such exchanges may become part of web users 'special collection' even though commodities are still available to a wider market economy through the Internet. When consumers withdraw products from 'pure' market relations and reserve them for other purposes, the logic of the commodity form becomes, in Frow's suggestion, enabling and productive instead of limiting and destructive.

Frow's analysis is inspired by the ideas of Georges Bataille (1991), who questions how the determination of excess energy circulating in the biosphere is altered by human activity. He juxtaposes secular economy with general economy, postulating that the latter has less restrictive ways of channelling or utilizing excess energy. Whereas modern economies are founded on a pietist moral code that condemns idleness and luxury and affirms the value of enterprise, general economy is based on the notion of excessive gift that can only be consumed in a different manner. The gift enhances a performed consumerism and leads to a process of self-consciousness, or ritualized enactment of a culture's high point of exuberance, ecstasy or intensity. Such awareness of a culture's 'accursed share' is absent in capitalist economies that channel excessive energy by other means, such as war.

In capitalist societies, full membership of the public has traditionally been tied to the ability to partake in commodity exchange. To refuse to partake in such a system is to forego the status that comes with citizenship. In pre-capitalist societies, other types of exchange secured forms of social cohesion between individuals. It is important in this context to note that sex journeys on the Internet revolve around offers of commodities, gifts or 'teasers' to Internet consumers. It was reported in May 2002 that the golden age of online porn-trade was going in decline, precisely because it would be harder for businesses to convert viewers into subscribers (O'Brien 2002). The Internet has created porn markets as well as a 'general economy' where different forms of economic exchange are practiced.

An example of porn consumers 'clawing back' from consumerist activities would be women's communities sharing and modifying Japanese 'dolls' or popular pornographic cartoon characters. A peculiar 'doll' network has emerged through the World KiSS Project, a project which attracts web users in both Japan and internationally to explore the viral life of commodity forms by exchanging transformed versions of the dolls. As Anne-Marie Schleiner (2000) observes: 'The process of creativity employed by KiSS artists is a form of cultural sampling, hacking, and appropriation, a form of play from which new configurations emerge'. Schleiner adds that the international responses to World KiSS are creating an interactive culture open to fantasies that deviate from the sexual norms: 'As an open source strip doll player, the World KiSS Project allows its users to insert their own erotic fantasies into the mix rather than relying on a particular industry to feed its users pre-packaged sexiness . . . allowing queer,

hetero, female-friendly, fetish, Goth, Japanese bondage, anime tingles, . . . and other fantasies to be distributed and exchanged’.

Cross-cultural romance and gift-giving are vital operations established between web users. Francesca da Rimini, for instance, often exchanges products (writings, images) with correspondents willing to enter her ‘free trade’ zone and write out their fantasies. As she explains:

From the outset I was blown away by the trust and the commitment to the game, the contract, the obligations, that my playmates offered me. The gift was theirs, and also mine, it was a field of reciprocal exchange, a free trade zone. I felt free to use the gifts I had been given as source material for both my book *FleshMeat*, and online projects such as ‘dollspace’ and ‘princess valium’. The contracts I established with my playmates allowed me to use transcripts of our correspondences and online interactions in whichever way I chose, and it was understood that I had an editorial power, but not the right to alter their words. I had no interest in making a direct financial profit from these gifts, it wasn’t part of the deal.

(da Rimini 2001)

A number of women pornographers have equally started to build independent websites to have control over the exchange with their clients and create community-friendly commodity environment. Nakkidnerds.com, maintained by Cloei, a 24 year old woman from Cambridge, MA, is a web-based network requiring paid membership. Cloei describes herself as ‘a shy woman who has a fetish for nerds’. Cloei first worked as a model for commercial porn sites and then started to build her own company and web communities. Nakkidnerds.com encourages ‘nerdy’ girls such as web designers and art students to showcase their bodies and to communicate with viewers through chatrooms and messageboards. Cloei created the company in order to give a more versatile picture of porn stars and set up a less exploitative network and work ethic for camgirls. As she writes in her homepage greeting:

I am sick and tired of searching through the net looking at page after page of tall blonde cookie cutter girls that you KNOW are NOT true amateurs. These days searching for ‘adult material’ is just site after site of the same girls with a few rare exceptions, and frankly it is giving us wild web chicks a bad name. And that’s not fair now is it. So I decided to do something about it. I wanted to capture the girl you see in the back of the class sitting there reading her book not paying attention to anybody. The girl you see on the street walking to work, or the girl who sits in the cube next to you day in/day out coding her little heart out. Girls who have much more than a pretty smile to offer, but also an amazing mind . . .

(Nakkidnerds 2002)

Cloei was one of the first camgirls to gain national acclaim among the webcam community. Her site is an immediate departure from commercial porn in that she does not hire professional models but generally works with amateur-models, friends and acquaintances. In an area called 'geekgurls', Cloei introduces her models and what kind of relationships she has with each of them. Viewers are encouraged to interact with the network and comment on issues through chat rooms and message boards. They can either talk to girls who are online, or post questions and ideas about sexuality in an online forum.

Ssspread.com, a site set up by Barbara DeGenevieve from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, wants to 'serve the queer community with a kind of pornography that is underrepresented on the web' (ssspread.com 2002). The collective intends to make the porn site 'an exception to every rule' by making it 'truly interactive'. Just like nakkidnerds.com, ssspread.com is a pay-site where members get access to images through a monthly membership. On 10 May, a story called 'the plumber' showed a domestic housewife being seduced and fucked by a transgender plumber. The ssspread community gives feedback to the stories by writing messages on a messageboard. Ssspread.com works with non-professional models who are happy to be showcased, are paid a nominal amount of money for each film shoot and do not necessarily conform to beauty norms. Ssspread.com also builds community by giving out members information so that they may be able to contact each other. The site contains links to pornographic stories in the 'Story Lounge' area. The 'Articles and Interviews' area contains interviews with activist pornographers and scholars such as Shannon Bell and Annie Sprinkle.

Maria Beatty is a lesbian fetish and s/m porn producer who in 1997 founded Bleuproductions.com, an online video distribution site. Beatty set out to introduce a new type of 'playfulness and eroticism' in her videos, presenting lesbian s/m in a more 'elegant, sensual, feminine film style', as she felt that the adult video market was still too much 'focused on easy, gratuitous and or blatant, raw sex-scenes' (Beatty 2000). Beatty believes that independent producers benefit from Internet distribution as it enables them to sell works at retail value, have more control over publicity and easy access to international consumers and distributors.

Beatty's debut film *The Elegant Spanking* (1995) was initially primarily shown at lesbian and gay film festivals, both domestic and international, and to a limited whole-sale market through the distributor Outspoken Productions. Now that *The Elegant Spanking* is distributed through Bleuproductions, sales have quadrupled and audiences have come to include male and female heterosexual viewers. While Beatty was primarily categorized as a 'lesbian filmmaker' catering to queer communities in the independent festival circuit, she is now considered to be an 'underground classic art filmmaker' and has started to cater her movies to mixed gay/lesbian and straight audiences. Even though her most popular videos, *The Sassy Schoolgirl* (an underage-looking schoolgirl and female schoolteacher who

role-play corporal punishment, 1998), *The Boiler Room* (a very explicit lesbian s/m video with enema and cavity exploration, 1999), and *Doctor's Orders* (nurse-patient medical scenarios, 1999) cater to 'mainstream' fantasies, fetishes and demands, Bleuproductions has enabled Beatty to work independently and work out a more personal and experimental film style. Moreover, through her website and e-mail correspondence, Beatty receives feedback to her videos from consumers across the world. She believes that Internet distribution allows citizens from more restrictive countries to buy tapes from offshore.

In all of the discussed porn sites, a new type of economy and agency is being constituted around the exchange between 'pornographers' and their consumers. Sex consumers are 'spacing' or travelling between sites, actual and virtual places, multi-tasking activities and complicating the commercial thrust of Internet porn sites.

How can we view such agency in light of capitalism's tendency to control ownership, consolidate 'edgy' content and maintain class divisions between cultures? One website that has traditionally helped to legitimate gay and lesbian-produced pornography is the activist site PopcornQ.⁵ Even though PopcornQ is rooted in efforts at free communication and lesbian/gay activism, the formation of community politics happens alongside commodity exchange such as the consumption of movies and products. However, the site recently merged with a much larger lesbian/gay site, Planetout.com, which in its own time merged with Gay.com. While the early producers of PopcornQ invited local communities to order movies and create sites of local entertainment and activism, Planetout.com and Gay.com clearly target 'worldwide' sexual communities as consumers of products and services. As CEO Lowell Selvin of Online Partners, the parent company of Gay.com, explained in a press release that announced the Gay.com and PlanetOut merger:

The gay and lesbian community will be the winner in this merger because, for the first time, the LGBT market becomes a true economic force. Never before could any organization bring together this many gays and lesbians to command the attention of businesses worldwide. This merger will create a company that reaches more than 3.5 million people around the world each month and that combined reach is sure to attract even more leading mainstream advertisers and business partners.

(Selvin 2000)

Megan Smith, CEO of PlanetOut, explains that the merger will serve a 'diversity' of global gay and lesbian communities: 'With the two largest brands under one umbrella, we can aggregate resources and serve our customers even more effectively, providing the range of media, community, entertainment, products and services that reflects and addresses the diversity of LGBT people'. Critical Internet studies – such as Wyatt *et al.*'s (2000) *Technology and In/Equality*:

Questioning the Information Society, and Kolko *et al.*'s (2000) *Race in Cyberspace* – would argue that the net has become a homogeneous environment that reproduces unequal conditions for access and participation. *Technology and In/Equality* criticizes new online information architectures such as the 'portal' model for pampering and pacifying rather than educating and stimulating consumers: 'The portal model, and the heavy presence of traditional media organizations, gives impetus to the idea of "pushing" content – including advertising – at customers rather than waiting for them to pull it down' (Wyatt *et al.* 2000, p. 37). They explain that the portal model is an important stage in streamlining Internet content so as to emphasize its commercial function. They believe that the portal model will exacerbate the 'digital divide' between web users, based on national-origin, race and gender.

Conclusion

The future of uncanny cyber sexuality is sparkling yet gloomy as online consumers are increasingly monitored and moderated by stricter agreements between nation-state governments and web industries. Moreover, Frederick Lane (2000) believes that porn consolidation will go hand in hand with visions of corporate ownership and technological determinism: 'The Internet corollary of a tony address, vast distribution networks and economy of scale will be the ability to engage in ubiquitous advertising and to develop and implement the latest technological improvements' (Lane 2000, p. 235). Technological sophistication may become a necessary evil in exploring sex journeys, causing stronger reactions in mainstream populations and governments. This article shows that despite current porn and sex booms, the Internet creates consumers, artists and activist who are eager to operate the viewing contexts of porn spaces. Porn consumers are citizens of small places and 'other spaces', engaged in multiple lines of communication. Sexual adventures and amateur porn exchanges create complex social and ethical communication codes alongside the profit-oriented goals of the porn industry. Using theories of space and the gift, the article envisions cyberspace as amorphous spaces and bodies eager to consume sex as encounters with non-mainstream and non-commercial communities, individuals and types of agency.

Notes

- 1 Information gathered from diverse anonymous sources, correspondences between moderators and members of porn sites hosted by Egroups and Visto In a paper delivered at the 2003 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference – 'Making Brad and Ryan Heterosexual Again: The Struggle Between Gay Fans and the Hollywood Machine to Control Star Discourse,

Male Bodies and Gossip on the Web' – Ronald Gregg explores how the Web recently challenged Hollywood's control of star discourse by allowing gay fans, for instance, to post illicit gossip, pornographic images and homoerotic fantasies concerning male stars that were as accessible as official star websites. Hollywood's efforts to rein in this unauthorized star discourse helped fuel recent efforts to regulate web content.

- 2 The Western Australian Censorship Act of 1996 stipulates that 'objectionable' articles are those that 'contain child pornography, or depict in an offensive manner crime, violence, torture and pornographic imagery such as necrophilia, sadomasochism, golden showers and bestiality' (Western Australian Censorship Act 1996).
- 3 For a level-headed discussion of political thinking on Internet filters, see Levine (2002, pp. 15–17).
- 4 Following Arjun Appadurai's definition of mediascapes, pornography can be imagined as amorphous network spaces, where consumers browse through diverse sites and are able to apply forms of connectivity or cynical agency such as resistance, irony and selectivity. Consumer agency is a crucial component to the life of mediascapes as it opens a space for the imagination and enriching cross-cultural encounters (Appadurai 1996, p. 35).
- 5 PopcornQ is a San Francisco-based network that has sponsored gay and lesbian filmmaking internationally for more than a decade. PopcornQ first functioned as the addendum to a book publication, *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (Olson 1996), a comprehensive anthology of gay and lesbian films and videos, including porn and erotica, with descriptions, pictures and distribution information. The book also explained in a step-by-step approach how to organize a film screening and create a unique programme around audience, genre, sexual orientation or taste.

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