

Exploring the embodiment of female sexuality in cyberpornography

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Abstract: In this article, we attempt to map out (female) cyberpornography, based on the assumption that the human body is fundamental in defining the modern subject. Cyberspace thus resembles a public laboratory of recording and studying contemporary attitudes towards the body (including its social shaping and sexual utilization). The scope of this concise study pertains to a careful analysis of characteristic webpages of pornographic content, where the female sexual body is implicitly re-produced as an image and practice. Through survey methodology, we aim to record, present and discuss how the female body is depicted, segmented, embellished and worshipped in pornsites. We also refer to the various ways pornography is expressed on the Internet – for instance, user’s personal pages, camera girls and MySpace. Our main conclusion is that, on the one hand, cyberporn reproduces central notions of modern Western societies, where the female body becomes an instrument (or an object/commodity), and, on the other hand, it can sometimes critically operate as a mechanism of resistance, against the logic of commercialization.

Key words: cyberpornography; websites; body; sexuality; embodiment

Introduction

It is rather obvious that the ideal body type, or the ideal sexual body, is not static; instead, it is *constantly and dynamically* evolving – in the same sense that human societies themselves evolve. The sexual body signifies the mainstream rationale of consumerism, on which capitalist societies are structured, and appears as a “thing” distributed and consumed in the free market (Lasch, 1991).

Cosmetic surgeries, Botox, fitness, healthy diet, and so on, render the body as each individual’s personal “project under construction” (Shilling, 1993). It does not matter if someone is wrinkled, or suffers from hair loss; new

technologies can fix the problem and make anyone look younger. In the light of new advances in medical knowledge and technology, the body is socially re-created, and becomes so easily modified as to fulfill our desires. In this sense, sexuality can be theoretically treated not as a given category (a biological precondition), but as something energetically *achieved* within contemporary consumer culture. It is then transformed into a contingent and mutable product, as well as into a *commodity*, which can be sold and purchased (Glassner, 1995; Shilling, 2002).

In this particular frame of reference, we aim to portray the image of the female sexual body as found in porn websites. Internet's rapid proliferation and high accessibility (by an ever increasing global audience) have significantly elevated these sites to a standardized mechanism of disseminating the dominant sexuality patterns of our times (Griffin-Shelley, 2003).

The vast popularity of porn websites renders them as symbolic sites where the socially sanctioned meanings of the "sexual" (and its limits) are publicly contested and articulated (Cooper et al., 2001; Lane, 2000). In addition, they play a crucial role in "shaping" the sexuality of the female body in Western societies. Hence, we will proceed to record and analyse some of the most characteristic websites of this genre, in order to understand the way in which the female sexual body is produced and projected *as a consumer good* (Cooper et al. 2001, Lane 2000).

The Commercialization of Sexuality and the Body

Modern sex discourses neither abolish nor suppress desire, passion and pleasure; instead, these are brought to the surface in order to get controlled *through surveillance* (including self-surveillance). Sexuality, as an object of the medical discourse based on the rationale of homogenization and normalization, implicitly constitutes a powerful mechanism through which human bodies and sexual choices and behaviours are controlled (Foucault, 1988, 1990a). In the last instance, sexuality is transformed from a forbidden good to a commercial commodity sold in the marketplace. The liberalization of sexual ethics is associated to even more surveillance and social control.

Consumer society produces its own norms for the "ideal" female body, thus promoting body-related products and services (Featherstone et al., 1991). In addition, consumer culture effectively utilizes new technologies in order to construct and sell the image of a "jigsaw-puzzle body" comprised of different pieces, each of which needs care, pampering and optimization (Featherstone et al., 1991). The breasts, the hair, the skin, buttocks, or thighs, are viewed by the

plastic surgeon as management problems. The surgeon can intervene on each part and offer it an idealized look (e.g. breast and hair implants, Botox for the skin, liposuction, etc).

In this manner, the body is constantly being “under construction” (Shilling, 1993). It is also viewed as a socially and biologically incomplete entity, which must be “chiselled” and integrated. Most importantly, the female body is being defined as potentially problematic. It needs to get “repaired” in order to transform itself to an ultimate sexual object. The female body is then called to signify the popular standards of sexuality, thus reproducing the mechanistic rationale of modern consumerism (Fournier, 2002; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). In Sandra Bartky’s words:

Normative femininity is focussing more and more on the woman’s body and not her duties and obligations but its sensuality and its supposed heterosexuality and appearance. (Bartky, 1998: 81)

Idealized female sexuality is expressed by the so-called “plastic body”, re-shaped with the help of silicone implants and hormones. An entire cosmetics industry is now structured around body-care, smartly recruiting innumerable management and control mechanisms. Beauty salons, nail care centres, liposuction medical centres, lip enhancements, and so on, cultivate an overwhelming sense of dominance over one’s body. In cosmetic surgery, the body is segmented and cut-up in such a manner that it becomes a visual medium in its own right (Balsamo, 1992, 1995; Davis, 1995; Sarwer & Crerand, 2004). New technologies increasingly render the human body as a mutable object open to constant imaginative experimentation (see: <http://bork.hampshire.edu/~azar/cyber/bodymod.html>).

Interestingly, the human body in porn websites often appears as flawless or fake; it is a “plastic body” remunerated by exposing itself in the windows of Internet love-shops as a kind of merchandise. Barbie is the most famous exemplification of the plastic body: she is the ultimate model of the sexy female body type. Barbie is the contemporary symbol of how bodies defy predefined limitations, imposed on them by nature. She perfectly embodies today’s consumerism, according to which our bodies can become whatever we want them to be as long as we devote enough money and time. The testimony of Mark, a 40-year-old American man, is typical:

Perfect hair, shapely legs. Faultless breasts. An hour hourglass torso. For many years this was how I perceived what an ideal woman was supposed to look like. This spurious notion was implanted in my

schema at an early age, probably five or six years old. That was when I got my first glimpse of a fully unclothed Barbie doll. (Rogers, 1999: 17)

In the same line, Springer argues that all these representations of flawless bodies, male or female, have successfully resulted in replacing the image we actually had for human bodies in public imagination (Springer, 1996). In this regard, it is customary to believe that female bodies must look like Barbie and have her proportions, as well as the plasticity of statues; in any other case, they are incompatible to our expectations.

In these (idealized) bodies, Jean Baudrillard (1981) sees the emergence of a fetish beauty, an aspect of the *semantics of the self*, in which deception is transformed to our object of desire. Beauty as an object of desire, Baudrillard's fetish beauty, broadens the love of technology that Springer interprets as "modernity's passionate celebration for all technology products which constitute objects of desire" (Springer, 1996).

In this context, the female body is transformed into an idealized object of desire, which produces new forms of sexuality embodiment – that is, new ways of perceiving the body and evaluating reality. These plastic bodies refer to a special kind of embodiment, which is comprised of desire, imagination, and technology. The plastic female sexual body is just a piece of flesh, fragmented into specific dimensions and covered with a provocative wrapping (a glossy commodity).

However, the body can also surprisingly function as a means of protest and resistance to the normative beauty standards. It can potentially adopt an anti-conformist and counter-aesthetic stance, thus expressing a revolt against its massive consumption (see Pitts, 1998). Moreover, Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term "grotesque" as a conceptual tool for the understanding of the modified, anti-conformist female body:

The grotesque is a body in the making. It is never completed, never whole; constantly under construction and being manufactured, it builds and fabricates a different body (...) Eating, drinking, defecating, as well as other procedures involving excretions or discharges as intercourse, pregnancy, mutilation, and swallowing by another body can be considered procedures of rebirth and connection with a new body within the context of grotesque's composition. (Bakhtin, 1984)

Also, the body bearing piercings or tattoos (not only those reproducing the concept of sexuality) is a *grotesque body* (Young, 1993: 20), often considered as a culturally marginalized body, constituting "a potential area of subversive

action and destabilization of discipline and normality" (Davis, 1997: 33; Jeffreys, 2000).

Methods

The purpose of our research is to carefully record the way in which on-line female sexuality is re-produced. In this context, various types of explicit sexual content websites, considered as inductive to the re-production of the dominant views on the sensual female body, were systematically investigated. We strategically focused on websites where the image of the *female* (and not of the male) sexual body is articulated.

Web pornography hosts a wide range of forms and activities, from professional subscription sites (of heterosexual content or not) to Thumbnail Amateur Galleries offered for free. Various less commercial sites show a tendency to present more marginalized or deviating aspects when compared to the mainstream definition of sexuality. Of course, the total volume of data and the whole variety of available webpages could not have been recorded in the present study (conducted during 2010 by the three authors of this paper).

Given that no recorded classification of the porn webpages exists (within the current literature), our work had also an investigatory character, in the sense that we searched and recorded the various ways in which on-line sexuality is expressed (see also Binik, 2001). In any case, this recording does not aspire to be extensive and exhaustive, since the notion of sexuality is in itself dynamical (changing from society to society) and the Web itself is alive and constantly produces new forms of expression. Ambitiously, the present study aims at stimulating a fruitful debate, rather than constituting a full index of all types of on-line sexuality.

In order to highlight the most popular websites of explicit sexual content, www.thebestporn.com was chosen, given the fact that it ranks highest in the users' preferences and concentrates the largest percentage of hits (visits) according to the yahoo.com evaluation and ranking. Best Porn is a database of pornsites with commercial content, which carries out their assessment and comparison, while at the same time rates and classifies them on the basis of content, prices, available subscriptions, quality of video and photo shooting, renewal, etc.

Furthermore, it has an extensive volume and variety of offered material. Through Best Porn, one can browse a plenitude of other sites, while it is updated daily, displaying many other features, such as indicators of which sites offer limited or total access, their exact price list, and so on. Sites included in

www.thebestporn.com are professional and the porn-stars are professional actors, while videotaping and photo shooting is carried out by professional photographers and cameramen; www.thebestporn.com also incorporates sites of the market that stand out for their high aesthetic value and include networks of affiliated websites and their categories and products – the so-called affiliate sites. In essence, it constitutes a classification library of almost all the abundant in content subscription commercial porn websites; thus, it was utilized in order to easily find and visit numerous webpages of pornographic content.

Despite the fact that these websites are the most popular and well-spread, our investigation went a step further and, after many hours of thorough web-browsing and search in forum groups, as well as of exchanging views and information with more experienced users, we eventually recorded different forms female sexuality demonstrated, less known to the wider public. After collecting data from the necessary webpages, we reached the stage of analyzing the way in which the female body is presented in on-line pornography, according to specific classification categories. These are the following: a) commercial sites, b) private-personal, and c) alternative pornography. That means there is no uniformity or homogeneity in the Internet (or the Cyberspace); although the commercialized form is the dominant one, there can be found many other types and representations of the female body.

1. Commercial Sites

The dominant form of on-line female sexuality is that of the commercialization of the body. We notice that, in any given website, we find women who fit to the Western stereotype, with flawless bodies and fake names. In the last instance, we know nothing about these girls apart from their nicknames. The commodity that they usually sell is their body type, their long blonde hair, and their voluptuous breasts.

In fact, these websites are “factories” in which the (female) body toils and is chiselled to be subsequently admired by thousands of web visitors (mostly anonymous). These girls “are” their body and become fully identified with it. All these “soulless” virtual bodies have been instructed through the spectrum of control to harness their emotions. By carefully observing their facial expressions, we discover that the only thing imprinted on them is an almost “petrified” lust.

The management of passion and emotions secures the control of people and societies, placing on the sole individual the burden of moral responsibility; the individual is regarded as being in charge of exercising control and discipline

on her own body. The body suppresses any spontaneous manifestation of desire or protest, and is limited in a dictated and predictable foundation of supervised action. The pornsites girls are professionals, constantly willing and smiling, always in the mood for sex and, most importantly, their body never says no.

By continuing the analysis, we see that in the classifications of the website pornotribune.com, a huge popular database containing over 10,000 websites (encountered after searching www.thebestporn.com), the presentation of female sexuality takes place according to specific categories: "boobs, butts, feet, tits, cunts" and so on. The female body is coldly "fragmented" into categories named by its parts, which are wrapped in sexual significance.

The body is offered in pieces of flesh, mostly close and isolated shots of genitals, breasts, etc. These are the so-called cam-shots and close-ups, which are nothing less than close shots of selected body parts. The body is "cut up" as if it was a spiritless piece of meat, bearing all the marks of segmentation on a level of colour, age, size, and so on.

Specifically, if carefully we analyze the category "butts", which is reported as "anal, ass, big ass, black ass", we observe that the same bodily part is reproduced in relation to its colour and size. The female body is segmented in partial areas and each one of them acquires a significantly sexual connotation. Pace the old Cartesian "mechanistic materialism", the body is "on sale", as a whole or in pieces. Sexuality is therefore re-constructed through the relentless promotion and showcasing of particular body parts, which are often being fetish-ized.

The bodies are plastic, "perfect", and statue-like, re-producing the ideal pattern of the female sensual body. The utilization of plastic surgery and especially of silicone implants is often very obvious. In a broader conceptualization of the transformation that the body of the sex-workers undergoes, we can confidently conclude that a certain degree of exhibitionism is always present. The cyber-pornstars themselves, having undergone various changes on their body, under the influence of anaesthetics, are suddenly transformed to "aesthetic fabrications" seeking admiration as they are displayed in the eyes of their audience.

Loic Wacquant (1995) perceptively speaks of a bodily involvement and performance during the act of sex, as far as the sex-workers are concerned, in the same sense that athletes' bodies "perform" and are involved during a contest. The group of sex-workers expresses a form of embodiment according to which self-awareness is invested on the body. It can therefore be said that every injury, illness, chronic disease, and so on, constitutes for the sex-worker's individuality, a disruption, if not a rupture, with her being (Turner & Wainwright, 2003).

Under the spectrum of Panopticism and the relevant Foucauldian analysis, the body can be analyzed as the basic element of production, or as a "subordinate instrument" (a tool), the plasticity of which reproduces a specific perception of the instrumentality of the female body: the ultimate sexual commodity of attraction (Bartky, 1998; Butler, 1990). As Susan Bordo (1993) rightly mentions, the female body also obeys to last-minute orders to re-adjust, offering absolute freedom to the authority mechanisms to manipulate it as they wish. It is therefore the ultimate submissive and controlled sexual commodity/object.

2. Private-Personal Sites

The second category is that of private sites, which produce and reproduce a different attitude towards female sexuality, through another form of embodiment. These websites host a totally different aesthetic and showcase various representations of the sexually active and laborious female body.

Here, we observe that personal sites are more interactive, since they incorporate all possible interactive applications, such as FAQs, blog, webcam, calendar, forum, etc. For instance, one can chat with Cassandra (www.cassandracalogera.com) and ask her intimate questions, or read her personal diary and blog, see her photos, watch a live on-camera sex show, get to know her, listen to the music she has chosen for her private website, or reveal secrets to her.

Analogously, in Francine's website (www.francinedee.com/index.php), one can "enter" her house and watch her through the cameras installed in all its rooms. Francine reveals significantly less personal data, but she provides a much more complete system to monitor her private life, with 3 cameras, in her living room, bathroom, and bedroom, operating 24/7, offering live chat, sms messaging and ringtones delivered to the user's mobile, a blog, as well as an on-line journal, in which she fills-in her latest news.

The relationship, thus, established between the user and the webpage is more complex and more interactive, and clearly goes beyond the exhibition of a plastic sexual body. In these webpages, bodies seem more like those at the next door, and sexuality breaks free from a mere image, in order to proceed in establishing further relations. The female's body sexuality escapes the direct consumption of beautiful images and promisingly goes on to create a sort of personal relationship. It is therefore enriched with words, texts, thoughts, secrets, private moments, and guilt. The embodiment of sexuality in these

pornsites significantly goes beyond the one-sided, impersonal consumption of the female body, including emotions and thoughts as well.

According to Arlie Hochschild's approach (Hochschild, 1983), the body can also be tuned emotionally and taught groups of positions, model movements, and subjective emotional-cognitive situations, which may potentially transform it to a professional expert. All the aforementioned, when combined with the testimony references in Adam Arvidsson's article (2005), introduce a new form of sexuality, which brings fantasy at the heart of the buying audience:

What clients want from us nowadays is emotional, intellectual sex (...) It's the most important part of our profession. My real job with the clients I have is not performed so much with the body but with the brain ... Us, who work on-line sell an idea. On the streets, they sell pieces of meat... (Lucrezia, owner of a personal site)

In Colombia, people have more sex. So do the prostitutes who use the Internet. Here, (in Europe) men seem to get it off with the thought of sex rather than actually doing it. (Luciana, owner of a camera site)

For these girls, the most important elements of their job are intellectual stimulation and fantasies (Dal Lago & Quadrelli, 2003: 208-209). It is exactly their ability to act and perform, as well as to invent situations that efficiently responds to the sexual fantasies of their clients who, according to Luciana, now refrain from the meat-market of the typical pornographic websites. These girls can deliberately "break" their images; they have nothing in common with the soulless Barbies of the regular porn sites.

We are referring to the next-door girls, who do not merely reproduce a coldly impersonal image by exposing their body, but they also reveal and exhibit, at the same time, a part of their personal identity. Such an identity is perhaps a trained and subjective one, but it is certainly lined up with the pretence of a sincere (or just simple) communication between two individuals. Here, we will neither witness plastic bodies, nor blonde, tall, and white-skinned women. In this context, the Western stereotype is somehow subverted and what eventually prevails is a mass of verbalized confessions about sex.

We could also incorporate amateur porn in this large category of private webpages (even though amateur models have likely streamed fewer videos than someone with their own webpage). Let's take for example MySpace, which is a web community offering free webhosting, utilized to present sexual messages. In a large extent, the indisputable success of the internet porn-

industry can certainly be attributed to the appearance and dissemination of the innovative trend of “amateur” or “alternative” pornography.

Amateur porn mostly came about and exploded in the mid 80s, with videos usually recorded from the participants’ bedroom (with a hint of voyeurism). The handy cam ruled, focusing not upon “fake, artificial” silicone bodies, but upon the totally familiar, amorous adventures of next-door people (with whom the spectators become fully identified). Furthermore, the fact that the spectators decide what to watch or experience, based on their secret desires and fantasies, perhaps ensures an illusion of authority or control, a false feeling that they can determine their libidinal selves.

3. Alternative Porn

The third way by which on-line female pornography is presented pertains to alternative porn. A close look at fetish websites brings to mind the contexts within which the notion of sexuality was formed in the cultures of the East. Websites with a fetishist content and Kama Sutra practices vividly revive the atmosphere of erotic rituals, by imaginatively utilising various accessories, chains, sex toys, costumes, and bondage techniques.

The body that resists Western pornography eventually found its ultimate expression in a “community” or “brotherhood” of users who gathered and created a new trend pertaining to the particular way they manifest their sexuality. These users often view their body as a vehicle to express their radical concerns and disagreements against anything mainstream.

For the “alternative” collective of the Web, the body is mostly an element which bears all the constituent features of the individual’s identity and personality. It is the shell of the self, covering the spiritual existence of the acting subject, imaginatively coloured and embellished like a canvas, thus using artistic expression, as an “angel of mediation”, for the allegedly radical messages. This is the community of alternative porn activists. The terms “alt-porn” or “altporn” (or “alternaporn” or just “alt”) are all abbreviations for “*alternative pornography*”.

People involved in alternative porn usually belong to subculture movements, such as gothic, punk, or rave. This sort of porn is often produced by small-scale independent sites, or cinematographers, photographers, etc. Frequently, the body of alternative pornography’s models is clearly distinguishable by the existence of tattoos, piercings, scarifications, body modifications, or temporary modifications, such as intense hair colours. The term “indie-porn” is also used by various search engines, or in regular

descriptions of community members, independently of the existence or not of a subculture and a specific aesthetic related to it.

The first site explicitly dedicated to “subcultural erotica” was Blue Blood, a magazine issued in 1992, which hosted the original models of a gothic or cyberpunk aesthetic. The most massive alt-porn market, however, is the Internet. Apart from a few short-lived personal websites, www.GothicSluts.com is a famous alt porn domain, launched in the beginning of 1999. Subsequently, it was followed (in July of the same year) by www.Raverporn.net, recently renamed to www.EroticBPM.com, and later on, in December 1999, by www.NakkidNerds.com. Also, www.Supercult.com was launched in 2000, followed by www.SuicideGirls.com, at the end of 2001, which is now becoming the most popular and prolific independent porn domain. After the success of [SuicideGirls](http://www.SuicideGirls.com), the number of alternative porn domains has surged since 2002. Apart from the aforementioned domains, other well-known alt-porn websites are www.BurningAngel.com and www.GodsGirls.com, launched in September 2008.

The most typical porn websites of this nature are apt to use models dealt with by their anonymous visitors as impersonal beings. In these sites, the sexual female body constitutes a form of resistance against its Western commercialized aspect and is considered to be a medium to convey “alternative” or “radical” messages. Thus, the sexual female body is here a means to resist modern Western culture. Of course, we must keep in mind that if this form acquires a massive character, it will probably be commercialized as well. Nevertheless, it is important that it constitutes an alternative form of female sexuality’s embodiment, which could potentially function as a counterweight against dominant discourses.

Conclusions

A central notion in summing up this concise study is “perception” (Fisher & Barak, 2001), as a fundamental physical experience which does not however constitute an internal representation of the outside world. Perception is an important derivative of the senses. It consists of their configurations. And these senses belong to the body which both feels and perceives.

Within this analytical context, the body is two-sided: it is simultaneously sentient and sensible. It sees and can be seen, listens and can be heard, touches and can be touched. These aspects are not separated from each other. The human body is a living organism, which can be heard but also listen, and

consequently experiences the world with its physical presence (Crossley, 1995; Ahmed & Stacey, 2000).

Our brief journey throughout the Internet leads to the conclusion that mapping out sexuality, especially female sexuality, in a fluid and ever changing realm (such as the cyberspace), is rather a difficult endeavour. Porn industry produces the female sexual body as a commodity for consumption, from a voracious and insatiable male standpoint. The stereotyped female sexuality reproduces the imagery of society's widely accepted beauty standards.

The woman is fabricated as the ultimate sexual object to be conquered or viewed by the dominating male. Of course, due to the Internet's social dynamics, this attitude (albeit mainstream) is not the only one; other types of female sexual bodies are also recorded next to it, which in their turn generate different social attitudes. The body plays a crucial role in shaping and managing female sexuality, thus showcasing alternative embodiment forms of on-line sexuality.

The Internet offers the creative possibility to this commercialized logic to acquire a new impetus and dynamics, since it allows the transition from the strictly private to the public, as well as the reassessment of what we perceive as personal or confidential, exposing *both* the external image of ourselves and our bodies *and* our inner world (sexual desires). Sexuality is segmented, reconstructed, reproduced, sought out and consumed, day after day, by the users. Search engines "fragment" the female body using key words, thus reproducing the Cartesian concept of the body.

The Internet was purposefully chosen as a field/environment of study, in order to chart the various ways of representation of the female sexuality, *both* in specific porn sites *and* in users' personal pages. The theoretical notions used, originating from the field of the Sociology of the Body (emphasizing upon embodiment), offered us the capacity to better understand how the Internet, due to its high accessibility and pervasiveness, creates new global patterns of on-line female sexuality. These patterns are implicitly based on the rationale of embodiment.

The investigation of pornographic websites helps us realize that the ever expanding world of on-line sex operates as an assimilation of a society which is sexually hungry. It also helps us grasp the on-going commercialization of sex and the new sexuality produced by us, the consumers, through our daily choices. Interestingly, this new sexuality is offered in an extremely wide (almost unlimited) range of available commodities.

Under this spectrum, new ways to conceptualize sexuality are *continually and spontaneously* emerging, according to which sex is far from being static and soulless (an old attitude conventionally reproduced by magazines

and photos). In the contemporary “digital” era, sex is being promoted as the essential structural unit to consolidate the interactive relationships between Internet users. In the innovative Social Web, also known as Web 2.0, the emerging trend of users (consumers/producers) to easily *up-load and share* their own content (such as images, videos, comments, information, etc) signifies a new radical culture of *engagement and participation*.

The so-called *amateur porn* is a vivid example of this emergent culture, as it potentially offers the users the unique capacity to actively create, reshape or even dynamically negotiate the (fragile) image and status of contemporary pornography on the Internet. The female sexuality, just as the Internet itself, constitutes an intrinsic aspect of an unpredictably developing virtual society, which demiurgically re-articulates human relationships and bodies. In turn, both physical and virtual bodies unceasingly give rise to an adaptable, colourful and imaginative on-line universe (for better or for worse).

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