

CHAPTER ONE:

FIRST CONTACT

Sex and sexuality dominate descriptions and analyses of networked contact. In terms of hardware, male-to-female connectors configure all electronic information exchange as electrifying heterosexual intercourse (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). In terms of software, computer viruses spread like sexually transmitted diseases, contaminating and reproducing uncontrollably. In terms of operating systems, the UNIX “finger” command retrieves information about someone’s online activities. In terms of content, pornography is supposedly “all over the Internet,” saturating the digital landscape and ranking amongst the most popular recreational uses of the Internet.¹ In terms of technology development, sex drives progress and popularizes new devices: pornography is the “killer application,” that convinces consumers to invest in new hardware.² New technology is a “carrier”—a new Trojan horse—for pornography, “sex a virus which infects new technology first.”³

¹Pornography as “saturating the digital landscape” was first popularized by Marty Rimm’s “Marketing Pornography on the Information Superhighway.” Although this report has been discredited, the notion that pornography is all over the Internet has become a truism. See, for instance, Alex Chadwick’s interview with Esther Dyson on online communities in which he begins by declaring that “sex is all over the Internet.”

² In *Escape Velocity*, Mark Dery offers the following overview of the belief that sex drives technology development and popularizes new technology:

Some believe that the demand for adults-only titles will [like the VCR] drive the interactive multimedia technologies destined to succeed the VCR. *New York Times* computer columnist Peter H. Lewis reported that X-rated CD-ROMs “drew the biggest crowds” at the fall 1993 Comdex, a computer industry trade show, and quoted one dealer as saying that “pornography may be the long-awaited ‘killer’ application that will spur the sale of CD-ROM drives.” Tierney takes a macroscopic perspective: “In the history of communications technology, sex seems to be the most enduring killer ap. . . . Sometimes the erotic has been a force driving technological innovation; virtually always, from Stone Age sculpture to computer bulletin boards, it has been one of the first

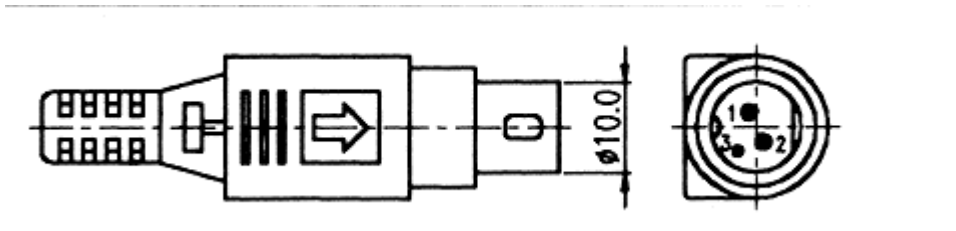


Figure 1.1: Male Connector

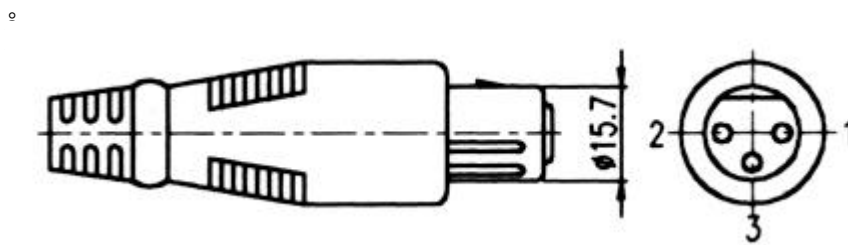


Figure 1.2: Female Connector

uses for a new medium.”... “Lust,” says Mike Saenz, “motivates technology. The first personal robots, let’s face it, are not going to be bought to bring people drinks.” Gerard Van Der Leun maintains that “sex . . . is . . . a virus that almost always infects new technology first.” (218)

³ See Catherine MacKinnon. “Vindication and Resistance: A Response to the Carnegie Mellon Study of Pornography in Cyberspace.”

Sexuality serves as the linchpin for strategies as diverse as entrepreneurial capitalism, censorship and surveillance. A *CNN/Time Impact* special report on cyberporn merged sexuality with commerce, cyberporn with profitability. Noting that cyberporn/sex sites are the only profitable ventures on the World Wide Web (WWW), CNN featured an expert who argued that cyberpornographers acclimate and expose their users and “the rest of society” to the possibilities of online financial and personal transactions. Cyberporn sites apparently have proven to corporate America that users are willing to submit their credit card number over the WWW and have proven to users that transmitting their credit card does not guarantee catastrophe—thus building the critical mass of believers needed to make the WWW potentially profitable. This report also traced a more direct influence of cyberporn/sex sites on corporate America’s digital ventures: secret consultations between corporate web designers and cyberporn web mistresses/masters, in which profit-making strategies are sold and web sites improved. This implies that corporations like IBM could offer others strategies to “work the web” only after a private detour through cyberporn/sex. Perhaps it is no accident that the name of one of the most popular websites—and *the* website to which academics first submit their credit card numbers—amazon.com could easily be that of a porn site.

To account for the success of cyberporn/sex sites, the CNN report glibly declares that “sex sells.” Inadequate as this cliché may be, sex does work as an explanation for exposure. It “accounts for an unknown by means of a known, and, at the same time, it verifies that known by means of the unknown” (Heidegger 50). That is, sex makes legible online contact and exposure, at the same time that sex is reinforced as *the* explanation for contact and risky consumer practices. Thus, if sex does spread with new

technology it does so through this apparatus of explanation, rather than because technology is inherently a Trojan Horse for pornography.⁴

In terms of censorship and surveillance, sexuality both encapsulates and sequesters the risk of being on-line: anxiety over or desire for contact is configured as anxiety over or desire for sexual exposure. Alarmist articles on cyber-stalking, cyber-rape, and cyber-abduction accompany enticing articles on the joys of cyber-dating and tele-commuting, which respectively represent bad and good contact in public discourse about the net. Calls to censor the Internet are made without fail in the name of children who must be protected from the “seamier sides of human sexuality” (Elmer-Dewitt 40). These calls, aimed at restraining children’s access to “perverse” pornography and “perverse” persons’ access to children, reduce interpretation of the First Amendment to a debate over the legality of pornography. Pornography centers the legal debate over regulating and mapping the Internet. That far more children have been abducted on the street or in the home than on the net does not matter, just as the fact that nuclear energy has caused far fewer casualties than any other widely-used form of energy does not. In the face of the looming possibility of catastrophic, unrestrained and unrestrainable contact, we are called to place ourselves under surveillance.

This explosion of discourses about sex, sexuality and the Internet is a response to the remapping of power and global capital enabled by computer networks. It is a response to the increasing privatization of networks, public services and public space, which have paradoxically effected an increasing encroachment of publicity into everyday life. It is a response to the increasing mediatization of everyday life, to the fact that we

⁴ See MacKinnon’s “Vindication and Resistance.”

are increasingly becoming media representations and spectacles. The deregulation of the communications industry, the commodification of personal information and the development of new technologies that allow us to post our words and images on a global network are experienced as sexuality, or mapped in terms of sexuality. This is not simply a displaced reaction, nor is it accidental. “Experiencing” or responding to power, as Foucault has argued, is not limited to interactions within the public sphere, since often one experiences power attenuation in the realm of sexuality. Sexuality is a dense transfer point for relations of power “between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity” (*History* vol. 1, 103). Sexuality is “not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies” (*History* vol. 1, 103). In the rest of this chapter, then, I explore the ways in which sexuality is produced and managed, and the ways in which fiber optic networks work as a Panopticon that focus and intensify the body.

EXPOSED, OR THE HOME CANNOT HOLD

Philip Elmer-Dewitt, in his controversial and influential *Time* article, “On a Screen Near You: Cyberporn,” both cites and perpetuates public alarm over cyberporn.⁵ According

⁵ This article was submitted as evidence of the need for government legislation of the Internet during congressional debate over revisions to the CDA. It also prompted extensive online debate over the legitimacy of its source, Marty Rimm’s “Marketing Pornography on the Information Superhighway.” For a collection of these responses, visit <http://129.59.210.73/cyberporn.debate.cgi>.

to Elmer-Dewitt, public furor over cyberporn exposes a peculiar paradox: “sex is everywhere” and yet “something about the combination of sex and computers seems to make otherwise worldly-wise adults a little crazy” (38). Specifically, “most Americans have become so inured to the open display of eroticism—and the arguments for why it enjoys special status under the First Amendment—that they hardly notice it’s there,” yet online pornography, which most Americans have never viewed, has become hyper-visible (38). In fact, the public furor over cyberporn would seem to be caused by rumors, commentaries, or second hand viewings. Elmer-Dewitt’s analysis of the Exon bill (which later became the revised *Communications Decency Act* [CDA]) underscores this point:

The Exon bill had been written off for dead only a few weeks ago. . . . That was before Exon showed up with his “blue book.” Exon had asked a friend to download some of the rawer images available online. “I know it was bad,” he says. “But then when I got on there, it made *Playboy* and *Hustler* look like Sunday-school stuff.” He had the images printed out, stuffed them in a blue folder and invited his colleagues to stop by his desk on the Senate floor to view them. At the end of the debate—which was carried live on C-SPAN—few Senators wanted to cast a nationally televised vote that might be later characterized as pro-pornography. The bill passed 84 to 16. (42)

Exon aptly refers to *Playboy* and *Hustler* as Sunday-school material. These magazines focus on pornography that pre- and post-pubescent boys share—stuffed between the pages of their three-ring binders—in the schoolyard, if not the churchyard. Perusing these magazines is also often dismissed as a natural rite-of-passage, or as a necessary “fall.” The images disseminated by Exon’s senatorial show-and-tell, however, went beyond naked women. These deliberately selected images exceeded Exon’s hunch that conditions online were bad and, according to Elmer-Dewitt, caused senators, under the glare of C-SPAN cameras, to take notice. Exon’s blue binder, with which he poses in the article (carefully covering up *Hustler Online*’s model’s genitalia with his hand—

presumably the other images were too offensive to be shown, covered over or not), evidences the “deviance” of online pornography. Although Exon does not offer us the specifics, the *Time* article lists for us materials available on the Internet “that can’t be found in the average magazine rack: pedophilia (nude pictures of children), hebephilia (youths) and what the researchers call paraphilia—a grab bag of ‘deviant’ material that includes images of bondage, sadomasochism, urination, defecation, and sex acts with a barnyard full of animals” (40). As the persuasiveness of Exon’s blue book shows, the

Rimm's "research," argues that cyberpornography reveals fundamental truths to us about "ourselves" (38). Addressing his readers as potential cyberporn consumers, Elmer-

Dewitt argues that the difference in "our" demand lies in "our" ambient conditions:

pornography is different on the computer networks. You can obtain it in the privacy of your own home—without having to walk into a seedy bookstore or movie house. You can download only those things that turn you on, rather than buy an entire magazine or video. You can explore different aspects of your sexuality without exposing yourself to communicable diseases or public ridicule. (Unless, of course, someone gets hold of the computer files tracking your online activities, as happened earlier this year to a couple dozen crimson-faced Harvard students.) (40)⁶

The difference then lies in context, rather than in content. Online, *you* can explore hidden parts of *your* sexuality, while still keeping them hidden from others and while still avoiding contamination from "seedy" bookstores or AIDS-infected partners. This promise of privacy—the ability not to be exposed while exposing oneself—presumably allows one to step beyond the boundaries of the normal and indulge in alternative "displays of eroticism." This, presumably, is the "truth" that *Marketing Pornography* tells us about ourselves. In private, without fear of contamination or exposure, without shame, sexuality veers towards the deviant.

And yet this privacy is not complete. The risk of exposure lurks behind every transaction, since the possibility of someone getting "hold of the computer files tracking your online activities" is constitutive of, rather than accidental to, this medium. By not

⁶ Or, as one crimson-faced former Dean of Harvard's Divinity School, Ronald F. Thiemann, found. He was forced to resign because pornography of the banal "naked women" sort was found on his hard drive. For more details and the controversy surrounding the dismissal, see Jeffrey L. Segler's "The Right Thing," and Fox Butterfield's "Pornography Cited in Ouster at Harvard."

leaving the comfort of one's home, one leaves one's home exposed. Further, one's seemingly private actions generate valuable information nuggets:

the new research is a gold mine for psychologists, social scientists, computer marketers and anybody with an interest in human sexual behavior. Every time computer users logged on to one of these bulletin boards, they left a digital trail of their transactions, allowing the pornographers to compile data bases about their buying habits and sexual tastes. The more sophisticated operators were able to adjust their inventory and their descriptions to match consumer demand. (42-3)

By purchasing or downloading pornography, one produces a digital trail that becomes a gold mine for both researchers and pornography providers (if the two are separate). On the one hand, one's digital trail allows *scientia sexualis* to better categorize human sexuality and thus allows "us" to better understand "ourselves." Rimm confidently asserts that "we now know what the consumers of computer pornography really look at in the privacy of their homes" (38). The study of pornography moves from a subjective to an objective science, since it no longer relies on first-person testimony about pornographic consumption. Instead, it has numbers and data, uncontaminated by lying and/or shame-faced users. As a result, the Rimm study offers new categories for pornography, such as inter-racial.⁷ On the other hand, one's digital trail allows pornographers to organize their databases more efficiently. Unlike other media, market research is built into the medium itself.

This parenthetical yet enriching risk of exposure that marks sexuality in the age of fiber optics, however, is not what Elmer-Dewitt sees as driving "otherwise worldly-wise adults a little crazy." Rather, protecting children from "the seamier side of human

⁷ Rimm's report adds introduces the eighteen new categories for pornography: incest, "amazing," pedo/hebephile, dogstyle, swing, whore, sixty-nine, hair color, obese, muscular, shower, outdoor, petting, panties, asian, inter-racial, portraits, famous models, emotions.

sexuality,” while protecting adults’ rights to explore these hidden elements of themselves poses the serious problem (serious because the question translates to: “Can we protect our kids—and free speech?”). Whereas adults explore pornography, children—who have yet to develop this inner self—experience pornography as an intrusion:

Ten-year-old Anders Urmacher, a student at the Dalton School in New York City who likes to hang out with other kids in the Treehouse chat room on America Online got E-mail from a stranger that contained a mysterious file with instructions for how to download it. He followed the instructions, and then he called his mom. When Linda Mann-Urmacher opened the file, the computer screen filled with 10 thumbnail-size pictures showing couples engaged in various acts of sodomy, heterosexual intercourse and lesbian sex. “I was not aware that this stuff was online,” says a shocked Mann-Urmacher. “Children should not be subjected to these images.” (40)

Online pornography intrudes into the home, subjecting children and threatening to create deviant subjects.⁸ These images interfere with parental control over the subjectivization of their children. Anders Urmacher fortuitously called his mother to help him; however, given that “we face a unique, disturbing and urgent circumstance, because . . . children . . . are the computer experts in our nation’s families” (40), this fortuitous event is not guaranteed:

This [Anders Urmacher’s exposure to cyberporn] is the flip side of Vice President Al Gore’s vision of an information superhighway linking every school and library in the land. When kids are plugged in, will they be exposed to the seamiest sides of human sexuality? Will they fall prey to child molesters hanging out in electronic chat rooms? It is precisely these fears that have stopped Bonnie Fell of Skokie, Illinois, from signing up for the Internet access her three boys say they desperately need. “They could get bombarded with X-rated porn, and I wouldn’t have any idea,” she says. Mary Veed, a mother of three from nearby Hinsdale, makes a point of trying to keep up with her computer-literate 12-year-old, but

⁸ This construction assumes that children are not subjected to pornography outside the Internet. It ignores the fact that many ten-year-old children are exposed to pornography either through perusing their fathers’ or their friends’ fathers’ pornography magazines/videos, or by perusing magazine stands, or even through “legitimate” lingerie magazines or Sears catalogs.

sometimes has to settle for monitoring his phone bill. “Once they get to be a certain age, boys don’t always tell Mom what they do,” she says. (40)

The Internet, which gives marketers unprecedented access to their customers’ habits, would also seem to hinder mothers’ access to their boys’ actions. Since their sons are the computer experts within the family, mothers generally lack the literacy needed to adequately survey their sons’ surfing. Further, these files allow mothers access to their sons’ actions only after the fact: Mary Veed can monitor her son’s phone bill, but cannot prevent him from accessing these sites, nor can she guarantee that he will report his online activities to her.

This aberration in the family’s normal power structure makes necessary new means to strengthen the walls of the home, especially since “child molesters hanging out in electronic chat rooms” can reach their children through this breach. Moving without explanation from online pornography to child molestation, supporters of the Exon bill cite “high-profile cases” of child abduction/seduction as reasons for revising the CDA so that the Internet would be regulated in the same manner as its precedent, television (40-2).⁹ This call for legislators to plaster over the breach in the home, however, is far from universally accepted or constitutionally sound. According to Elmer-Dewitt, we need a

⁹ For a provocative case regarding the relationship between Internet regulation, surveillance, and pornography, see Laura Kipnis’ analysis of *United States v. Daniel Depew* (“Chapter One: Fantasy in America”). In this case, two men (one a pedophile and the other a “top” in S/M) were contacted over the Internet by an undercover San Jose police officer who suggested they make a snuff film. Although no child was ever kidnapped or killed, although DePew himself withdrew from the project and although the lines between fantasy and intent were extremely difficult to draw, Depew was sentenced to thirty years in prison for intent to kidnap, in part due to videotapes of his S/M encounters with willing partners that were violent and potentially life-threatening (hanging, electrocution, etc.).

variety of methods to control this breach in order to ensure the balance between regulatory power and civil liberties:

The appearance of material like this on a public network accessible to men, women and children around the world raises issues too important to ignore—or to oversimplify. Parents have legitimate concerns about what their kids are being exposed to, and conversely, what those children might miss if their access to the Internet was cut off. Lawmakers must balance public safety with their obligation to preserve essential civil liberties. Men and women have to come to terms with what draws them to such images. And computer programmers have to come up with more enlightened ways to give users control over a network that is, by design, largely out of control. (40)

According to Elmer-Dewitt, questions posed by cyberporn cannot be left to legislators, since these questions raise universal concerns, which have little to do with cyberporn itself. Rather, we are told, these transcendental concerns pertain to the fundamental nature of human sexuality; they pertain to fundamental tensions between raising children and preserving democracy, and between regulatory and disciplinary power.

Elmer-Dewitt himself leans toward the need for better discipline. He argues that cyberporn calls for men and women—not children—to throw harsh light on their attraction to pornography in order to get at the root of the matter, which is, not unexpectedly, desire itself. He implies that, although parents have legitimate concerns over their children's exposure to unseemly material, turning off the light is not the answer. Rather, if unlimited exposure is a valid fear, dimming controls must be built so that the Internet enlightens rather than exposes children—the structure of the Internet must be overhauled. Ultimately however, this breach must be stopped by the family's disciplinary power, rather than the state's regulatory power:

Pornography is powerful stuff, and as long as there is demand for it, there will always be a supply. Better software tools may help check the worst abuses, but there will never be a switch that will cut it off entirely—not without destroying the unbridled expression that is the source of the Internet's (and democracy's)

greatest strength. The hard truth, says John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the EFF and father of three young daughters, is that the burden ultimately falls where it always has: on the parents. “If you don’t want your children fixating on filth,” he says, “better step up to the tough task of raising them to find it as distasteful as you do yourself.” (45)

The hard truth behind cyberporn, then, is simple: parents need to carefully discipline their children in order to produce discriminating children. Given that pornography will thrive as long as there is demand for it, parents must work to ensure that filth does not attract their children: to protect home base, you must step up to bat. In the end, the family must produce rational subjects capable of discerning and abhorring filth.

The delegation of censorship and discipline to the family is a familiar argument. Advocates against television censorship have consistently argued that, if parents are concerned about violence on television, they should watch television with their children, rather than using it as a cheap substitute for babysitting. This assumes a clear demarcation between public and private, display and consumption, government and family. This also assumes that consumption drives the production of pornography, and that the family is responsible for regulating and producing sexual desire. The problem that cyberporn poses, then, is a private one. The popularity of “deviant” pornography points to familial failures, or to intimate truths about “ourselves.” In order for the Internet to be a public space in which one may make public use of one’s reason, it must be treated as a free marketplace (not unlimited sphere) of ideas. In order for the Internet to remain democratic—in order for the Internet to represent democracy—the possibility to say anything must remain structurally open.

In this sense, Elmer-Dewitt's argument harkens back to Kant's thesis in "On Enlightenment." Arguing for public enlightenment (and for protection from censorship for scholars such as himself), Kant argues that:

the public use of one's reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; the private use of reason, however, may often be narrowly restricted without the progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered. I understand, however, under the public use of his own reason, that use which anyone makes of it as a scholar before the entire public of the reading world. The private use I designate as that use which one makes of his reason in a certain civil post or office which is entrusted to him. (59-60)

On the one hand, Elmer-Dewitt assumes that the Internet is a public sphere and that the public use of one's reason is essential to democratic freedom. On the other hand, because we are not yet enlightened, the private use of one's reason—here restricted to the home—may be regulated and censored. More pointedly, Elmer-Dewitt seems to be arguing that the private use of one's reason must be narrowly restricted for the sake of public enlightenment, that private freedoms must be sacrificed for the sake of public ones. This neat separation between public and private, however, does not alleviate anxiety.

Although the article ends by limiting censorship to the home, the images that "illustrate" it undercut this reassurance by emphasizing the computer connection as breach.¹⁰ These illustrations do not represent pornography, but rather play on the tension between exposure and enlightenment. They argue that, if there is something about the Internet that drives worldly-wise adults a little crazy if not paranoid, it is the fear of too much light, of exposure and of uncontrollable contact. Further, the illustrations argue that this

¹⁰ Arguably these images, rather than the use of Marty Rimm's questionable report, infuriated opponents of the CDA and fueled the cyberporn debate that followed the publication of this article.

fear cannot be quelled by a neat separation into private and public spheres, because the computer makes such separation impossible.

The cover of *Time*'s cyberporn special issue (Figure 1.3) enacts first contact. The glare of the computer screen, in stark contrast to the darkened room, simultaneously lights up and casts shadows over the startled blond boy's face, literalizing his enlightenment/over-exposure. His eyes and mouth are open and his tiny hands are lifted off the keyboard in horror or in surprise: the images emanating from his monitor open and immobilize his facial orifices, making him vulnerable to penetration. The roundness of his open mouth evokes the image of vagina-mouthed inflatable dolls. Further, the screen's glare exposes wrinkles under the little boy's eyes: signs of a premature aging, of a loss of innocence that bely his tiny hands and two front teeth. His solitude in front of the computer screen and the room's dim lighting suggest secrecy. Instead of basking in the cozy light of his family home, he is immobilized by *us* watching him, since we—the readers—are in the position of the intruding pornographic image. Or else he serves as our mirror-image, and his surprise and invasion mirrors our invasion.

The full-page illustration (figure 1.4) that introduces this article features the screen's glare more prominently. An anonymous naked form, presumably male, wraps his arms and legs tightly around the bright computer monitor, his bottom resting gingerly atop the lighted keyboard. Again, the computer screen serves as the only source of light in the room, presumably in a deliberate move on his part to hide this act from public scrutiny, and this bright light shines through his translucent body. If the cover emphasized the innocence of the little boy, this image represents the possible ramifications of first contact: the desire to be touched and penetrate/be penetrated.



Figure 1.3



Figure 1.4

Further, the object of desire has become confused. Rather than desiring the images on the screen, or more properly the object represented by these images, this anonymous man seems to desire the computer itself, pointing to another “perversity” or “obscenity” associated with online pornography. This image seems to mirror Jean Baudrillard’s complaint that “the obscenity of our culture resides in the confusion of desire and its equivalent materialized in the image; not only for sexual desire, but in desire for knowledge and its equivalent materialized in ‘information’” (35). Or, as Mark Dery (quoting McLuhan) puts it, “recent years have seen a proliferation of imagery that gives vent to the desire to ‘possess machines in a sexually gratifying way’” (192). Desire seems to detour through the transportation medium, posing the following questions: does the viewer of cyberporn desire the computer, or the image, or the image’s referent, if such a referent exists? Can these objects of desire be separated?

Further complicating this “obscene” and risky scenario, the illustration on *Time*’s table of contents page reverses the gaze (Figure 1.5). Although the caption reads “People are looking at pictures of *what* on the Internet?” an eye peers from the monitor to the viewer. Analogous to Elmer-Dewitt’s use of “you,” the open monitor places *Time*’s reader in the position of the viewer, suggesting that everyone in front of a computer screen is at risk. Once more, the screen provides the only light source and the eye appears wrinkled, indicating an aged other, pre-maturely so or not. The computer screen becomes a window through which this other looks at and exposes us. Rather than an interface, the screen becomes an intra-face: a moment of face-to-face contact with this mature eye. It illustrates the fear of exposure, whether to on-line pornography marketers or child molesters, alluded to in the article. The monitor monitors: someone could be



Cover: People are looking at pictures of *what* on the Internet?

Figure 1.5

watching. Whether or not someone actually is watching does not matter. Rather, like the Panopticon, the possibility of surveillance is key.

Time's other illustrations draw out what the article alludes to: heterosexual vaginal intercourse—safe contact—is not the issue. In the one illustration that is clearly an “artist’s conception,” a man, hiding behind a computer screen, lures a little child with a bright red lollipop (Figure 1.6). The lollipop rather unsubtly represents the man’s penis, which the young boy is in danger of licking. Not only does this scenario allude to oral sex or homosexual contact, it also plays on one of society’s hyper-visible fears: young boys being lured by older men (presumably, this scenario is so dangerous that it could only be rendered as a drawing, rather than as a clearly altered photograph). Although discussed in terms of abduction, the fear is of the “birth” of homosexuality and other deviant sexualities; the fear is of recruitment and vulnerability. The closing image also portrays oral sex, with the man’s shaved head sucking the computer screen (Figure 1.7). The woman’s painted hand presumably positions the man’s head at her clitoris. He gives pleasure to the machine, drawn by his desire to perform this unnatural act. By merging his face with the monitor, this image further develops notion of perverse desire: not only does he desire the machine, but he also wishes to merge with the machine, either through phallic penetration (in which case his “head” gets re-mapped), or by being enveloped by the machine. It is as though he wishes to return to the womb of the computer, and to obliterate boundaries between self and other, where the other is either the machine itself or the “woman” at the other end.¹¹

¹¹ For more on the relationship between wombs and computers, see Margaret Morse’s “What Do Cyborgs Eat? Oral Logic in an Information Society”



Digital Illustration for TIME by Matt Mahurin

Figure 1.6



Figure 1.7

These pictures illustrate the dangers lurking behind cyberporn: over-exposure, intrusion, surveillance, and the birth of perverse desires. What makes otherwise worldly-wise adults a little crazy, I argue, is this threat of uncontrollable contact. By this, I do not mean to imply that people are not really concerned about cyberporn, nor that there is no need for concern. What I am arguing is that anxieties over cyberporn, or perhaps representations of this anxiety, exceed simple worry over present conditions and possibilities. In order to understand cyberporn's ramifications, we are called to imagine a catastrophic future of unbearable and uncontrollable contact. This call assumes that catastrophe could be avoided if this medium were simply to purge itself of cyberporn. However, this medium not only informs, it also serves as a means by which the other contacts, disrupts and possibly overwhelms us. A subject is never fully in control while viewing any representation. Rather, s/he is also exposed, since a subject is never simply reaching out to touch him/herself. Sexuality in the age of fiber optics, then, is one manifestation of this loss of control, of this over-exposure endemic to the medium, as the focus on the role of the Internet in the Columbine shootings, the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, and the Atlanta massacre have shown. In media analyses of these events, the Internet itself becomes pornographic. It is not simply that the Internet purveys pornography that threatens to contaminate its users, but also that the Internet as pornographic intrusion exposes users and enables them to reveal their "darker" sides. It invades the home, making familial disciplinary control almost impossible. And thus, as I argue in more detail later, it is through legislation designed to limit pornography on the Internet that the U.S. Congress seeks to regulate the Internet in ways not limited to

regulating pornographic content. Using pornography as its “featured” case, Congress and private corporations seek to re-map, categorize and make “well-lighted” the Internet.¹²

PARANOIA, OR THE ESPIONAGE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

These calls for government intervention and censorship in the name of sexuality confirm and extend Foucault’s analysis of the coupling of surveillance and sexuality that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century:

It was during the same period . . . and for reasons that will have to be determined, that there emerged a completely new technology of sex; new in that for the most part it escaped the ecclesiastical institution without being truly independent of the thematics of sin. Through pedagogy, medicine, and economics, it made sex not only a secular concern but a concern of the state as well; to be more exact, sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance. (Foucault *History* vol. 1, 116)

The combination of surveillance (data trails), online pornography, and chat rooms have literally created a new technology of sex. According to supporters of the failed revisions to the CDA, this new technology of sex is not adequately controlled by existing governmental regulations. Specifically, they argue that cyberspace has democratized the once-elite perversion of pornography, accessing and contaminating the people at alarming speed (MacKinnon, “Vindication,” 1959). Those opposing government regulations, but apparently balking at the prospect of appearing soft on child pornography, argue for self-surveillance. Faced with the prospect of Congress producing new, constitutionally-sound legislation, industry leaders have developed and promoted

¹² For instance, various kinds of filtering software were built and installed in schools as a direct response to debates over cyberpornography. However, these filters can easily be altered so that they screen “how to build a bomb” sites, gun sellers’ sites, and so forth.

new software which would filter “naughty” bits, thus making it possible for parents to regulate their children’s surfing without physically surveying them. As well, the W3C organization has developed a PICS specification that would put content labels within the actual HTML coding. Meanwhile, anti-censorship critics of industry proposals point out that these “voluntary” changes to web page coding and software filters alter cyberspace far more radically than unenforceable government regulations. These coding changes superimpose a regulatory structure onto the WWW, destroying the chaotic democracy that these proposals are supposedly protecting. As Bruce Handy cynically points out, “the commerce-minded don’t want government regulation of cyberspace any more than the ACLU does, but they realize that the only way to turn the Internet into a genuine mass medium and make a real pile of money is to convince the public that it is a clean and well-lighted place” (75). Again, the fight over regulating the Internet gets framed as a debate over cyberporn. This complicates politics around free speech, since, given the scope and impact of filtering software on public spaces such as libraries and schools, private choices can no longer be dismissed as outside the domain of pro-free speech advocates. Floyd Abrams, a First Amendment lawyer, remarked in an article on vigilantes on the Information Highway that “the only problem with private filters . . . is to make sure they don’t become public filters” (Harmon 1). That is, “in cyberspace, Big Brother is not the main enemy of free speech” (Harmon 1). The ACLU (as well as other First Amendment supporters) thus “finds itself in unfamiliar territory: fighting private choices about speech” and finds its coalition with industry against the government breaking down (Harmon 6). That is, like Foucault before them, the ACLU and others

find using disciplinary against regulatory power inadequate to the task of preserving the possibility of free speech.

Ironically, those pointing out the inadequacy of replacing public with private regulation also find themselves repeating arguments about the “dangers” of online contact, but here the Trojan horse is corporate and governmental surveillance rather than cyberporn. The advent of electronic databases in conjunction with obsessive back-ups by system operators have produced comprehensive digital trails. On-line transactions (whether connecting to the Internet or using a credit card) can be tracked and analyzed by advertisers, marketers, website owners and law enforcement officials. If once only politicians, celebrities, criminals and other public figures were targets of in-depth analysis and surveillance, cyberspace has made everyone the possible target of a Watergate-esque conspiracy, turning espionage from an expensive high-risk adventure into an everyday activity and turning private citizens into public figures. Information about our financial transactions as well as privacy itself have become valuable commodities.¹³ In response, those decrying censorship advocates as paranoid themselves warn of a coming apocalypse, complete with centralized government databases, retinal scans, and other unprecedented intrusions into civilian privacy. Those opposing key escrow often refer to FBI proposals as Big Brother initiatives and call for constant vigilance against both overt and purportedly covert surveillance techniques. Thus calls for robust encryption that conflate privacy with secrecy. Thus email alerts

¹³One proposal for regulating access to private records and transactions envisions different levels of privacy which would be maintained for varying costs. See Andrew L. Shapiro’s “Privacy For Sale: Peddling Data on the Internet.”

warning people about new national databases and global positioning technologies for automobiles that not only allow for better and more efficient navigation, but also allow one to be pinpointed at any given time. Thus computer conspiracy theory movies such as *Hackers*, *The Net*, and *Enemy of the State* that warn of our vulnerability to, and the devastating possibilities of, computer-based crimes. And thus conservative opposition to conservative changes in immigration law because these changes include proposals to establish a national database of all eligible workers. Again, the separation between the state and corporations, public and private breaks down, since although “it was once too expensive for anyone but the government to collect, store and coordinate data, . . . the creeping ubiquity of digital computer technology has ushered in a major industry of high-tech data pushers who are dedicated to gathering and selling personal information about practically everyone” (Shapiro 12). Private databases are of equal concern as government databases and, as evidenced by the flood of emails warning people of Lexis-Nexis’s P-trak databases and the barrage of phone calls made by concerned people requesting that they be removed from the P-trak database, possibilities speak louder than facts and they travel at the speed of light.¹⁴

The seeming willingness to believe anything, to value possibility over fact, is best summed up by the title of Intel president Andy Grove’s best-selling autobiography *Only the Paranoid Survive*. To survive the net (and here the difference between thriving and surviving disappears), one must always over-read; one must always imagine oneself watched and persecuted; one must always imagine oneself the victim of a conspiracy. The Qualcomm advertisement for secure cellular communications warns us that, without

¹⁴ See Tom Abate’s “Rumors move fast on Net’s info superhighway,” B1.

proper protection/encryption, we wear the combination to our safe as a billboard in public. According to an advertisement for *Guard Dog*, virus protection is not enough, since our online transactions expose us to unscrupulous marketers or to criminals. Due to technology such as “cookies,” surfing the Internet is “*like having a video camera following you everywhere you go on the Net*.” And you don’t know who’s looking at the information—or what they’ll do with it!” One must protect oneself from all types of contact. Only those who believe that power is in constant pursuit and who are vigilant in tracking this power will survive.

In other words, only those who believe that fiber optic networks are a Panopticon will survive. I do not make this connection to Bentham’s Panopticon lightly. Fiber optic networks are, in many ways, the perfect encapsulation of Bentham’s vision of a cost-effective and humane prison/factory/boarding school: a well lighted inhabitation/surveillance system/public sphere that leaves no room for privacy. Like fiber optic networks, Panopticons were to be economically viable enterprises. According to Bentham’s plans, the Panopticon was to consist of a central tower or Inspector’s Lodge surrounded by a circular building containing cells with windows on the outer circumference and iron grating along the inner (Bentham 5-6). Thus, the inhabitants could always be viewed by the central tower, but, since the windows of the central tower were to be covered by blinds (except during chapel service), they could never be certain when they were being watched. Further, the central tower was to be designed in such a manner that the guards themselves could not know when they were being watched from above by other guards. As a final precaution, the Panopticon was to be open to the public—the doors never closed—so that the franchise owner of the Panopticon could be

inspected at any time. Constant publicity, then, was to keep things orderly. The benefits that Bentham claimed for the Panopticon were immense: “morals reformed—health preserved—industry invigorated—instruction diffused—public burdens lightened—Economy seated as it were upon a rock—the Gordian knot of the Poor-Laws not cut but united—all by a simple idea in Architecture” (I). The Panopticon was to untie the ropes (or cables) that had defied other disciplinary systems by creating a well-lighted network.

This simple idea in architecture, as Foucault notes, was “an apparatus of total and circulating mistrust, because there is no absolute point. The perfected form of surveillance consists in a summation of *malveillance*” (“Eye” 158). This summation of *malveillance* relies on light not only to enable physical surveillance, but also, as Thomas Keenan argues, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). The Panopticon works, if it does, by causing the inmate/worker/student to recreate his or her world, to internalize the light and become light. Not accidentally, this process of re-creation parallels the process of paranoid recovery. As “the paranoiac builds [the world] again, not more splendid, it is true, but at least so that he can once more live in it,” the inmate/student/worker is called to re-build his or her own interior world. If the paranoiac “builds [his/her world] up by the work of his delusions,” the inmate/student/worker rebuilds his or her world by work of the delusion of constant surveillance. As with the paranoiac, “*the delusion-formation, which we take to be a pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process*

of reconstruction” (Freud, “Paranoia,” 147). Rehabilitation becomes paranoid reconstruction.¹⁵

At the same time, those resisting this rehabilitation call for constant paranoid vigilance as well. If the Panopticon works via the principle of “seeing without being seen” (Bentham 23), their strategy is both to pierce through the blinds that protect the central tower and to build opaque spaces. If Bentham believed that the *possibility* of permanent visibility would automatically create self-regulating subjects, those resisting self-regulation treat possibility as fact in hopes of tracking the eye. They fall into a seductive game of hide-and-go-seek with governments and corporations. In the process, evasion becomes a source of pleasure. Together, pursuer and pursued enter into a perpetual spiral of power and pleasure similar to those which Foucault argued emerged in the nineteenth century.

The medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls may have the over-all and apparent objective of saying no to all wayward or unproductive sexualities, but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. Capture and seduction, confrontation and mutual reinforcement; parents and children, adults and adolescents, educator and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysteric and his perverts, all have played this game continually since the nineteenth century. These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*. (*History* vol. 1, 45).

¹⁵ As though sensing the connection between psycho-pathology and his system, Bentham revises his plans in his appendices: rather than being in solitary confinement, the inmates were to co-habitate in the cells.

The twin gazes fighting over the direction of the search light trace perpetual spirals of power and pleasure around the virtual body: the legislator and the hacker, the market researcher and the consumer advocate attract and evade each other, with each side warning, “every move you make, every breath you take, I’ll be watching you.” As Foucault argues, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). The response to the possibility of unprecedented contact and proximity is The Police’s paranoid and paranoia-inducing love ballad.

YOU LIGHT UP MY LIFE

These twin gazes—as well as the act of watching itself—depend on light. If, as Foucault argues, visibility is a trap, it would seem to be a necessary one. As Keenan argues, “the philosophical history of the subject or the human is that of a light and a look, of the privilege of seeing and the light that makes it possible” (127). And key to this history of the subject, to the operation of the Panopticon, and to the separation between private and public are windows:

The window implies a theory of the human subject as a theory of politics, and the subject’s variable status as public or private individual is defined by its position relative to this window. Behind it, in the privacy of home or office, the subject observes that public framed for it by the window’s rectangle, looks out and understands prior to passing across the line it marks—the window is this possibility of permeability—into the public. Behind it, the individual is a knowing—that is, seeing, theorizing—subject. In front of it, on the street for instance, the subject assumes public rights and responsibilities, appears, acts, intervenes in the sphere it shares with other subjects. The window defines the place and the possibilities of the subject and contains a theory of politics within a theory of this subject. (Keenan 132)

The computer screen represents a new window for the subject. It represents a new window that seems to allow for the easy movement between public and private, as opposed to mass media such as television that seems to imprison common folk inside and celebrities outside. On the Internet, we can easily disseminate our representations. More ominously, on the Internet, our words and representations can be traced.

This window of opportunity is taken up by Catherine MacKinnon and others seeking to censor cyberporn. MacKinnon, who argues that the Internet has “democratiz[ed] what had been a more elite possession and obsession, spreading the sexual abuse required for its making and promoted through its use,” also argues that “as new technologies open new avenues for exploitation, they can also open new avenues for resistance. As pornography comes ever more into the open, crossing new boundaries, opening new markets and pioneering new harms, it also opens itself to new scrutiny” (“Vindication” 1959). Referring to the case of Jake Baker, a Michigan undergraduate who posted abduction/murder fantasies about another undergraduate to a newsgroup, MacKinnon notes that “with its estimated 270,000 consumers, he had, for a pornographer manqué, unprecedented access to spreading his harm. And the FBI had unprecedented access to him” (“Vindication” 1961). The obverse of pornography, then, would seem to be surveillance. Referring to the technology that made Rimm’s report possible, MacKinnon comments that:

Access to the users using pornography was made possible by the same expanded access to pornography itself that computer networks provide. As pornography invades offices, homes, and schools through upscale computer technology, and the age of the average consumer potentially drops below its already dropping level, Carnegie Mellon’s study signals that the possibilities for exposing pornography are keeping pace with its takeover of public and private spaces. The pornographers are clearly betting that they can survive the light. (“Vindication” 1960)

As pornography invades, the ability to expose it also increases. Publicity is inseparable from pornography. However, if Bentham assumed that publicity was enough to guarantee reformation, MacKinnon takes a more cynical position, realizing that one can survive the light. Simple exposure is not enough, even if it is the starting point for resistance.

The new light that cyberspace provides enables a more accurate “world picture.” Arguing against Rimm’s conclusion that computer networks “market unusually abusive materials and thus ‘redefin[e] the pornographic landscape,’” MacKinnon claims that “electronic communication makes more visible to scrutiny a reality that was already pervasive” (“Vindication” 1964-5). By the harsh light of the computer screen, by the transformation of information into light, the study of pornography moves from the humanities to the exact sciences:

The greatest achievement of the Carnegie Mellon study lies in simply noticing what is there. Apparently the shift in frame from books and videos to cyberspace has had the effect of revealing to simple empirical documentation that what is done to women in pornography is not a fact of nature or an act of liberation or a private peccadillo to be respectfully skirted but an on-going social atrocity. The significance of this recognition, implicit in the entire study, cannot be overstated. Simply treating the content of pornography as a serious database for detailed empirical measurement is almost unprecedented. The refusal to back off from the findings represented by the study’s use of at least some concrete descriptive categories and many illustrative quotations is equally remarkable. The political epistemology of this moment is that cyberspace seems to have made possible a clarity of perspective, a reframing of this form of violence against women, a getting out of society in order to get into it, that no mental trip to Mars and back has previously accomplished. (“Vindication” 1964-5)

If, as Martin Heidegger argues, this is the age of the world picture, cyberspace would seem to enable others to “get the picture” regarding the true nature of pornography by moving the study of human desire from the inexact sciences to the exact. By the glare of

the computer screen, the incalculable—such as human sexuality—seems to be become trackable and enumerable. What cyberspace offers, then, would be better light for more accurate reflection and representation via increased surveillance and access. We can ferret out the dark places where pornography and its consumers previously were allowed to hide.

However, this light does not only come in to illuminate, but also overpowers. After all, “what comes *through* a window? For if the window is the opening in the wall constitutive of the distinction between public and private, it is also the breaching of that distinction itself” (Keenan 132). In this sense, MacKinnon’s celebration of the possibilities of surveying pornography are a little too optimistic. The Panopticon cannot so easily be controlled:

One doesn’t have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It’s a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised. . . . Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. (“Eye” 156)

It is precisely this inability to control the machine that represents both the promise and terror of the fiber optic networks. Fiber optic networks represent a democratization that verges out of control. In short, they represent uncontrollable representation. They accelerate the process by which subjects are forced to be images. According to Richard Dienst, “caught in the act of representing themselves to themselves, ‘modern subjects’ place themselves in the ‘open circle of the representable,’ in a ‘shared and public

circle of the representable—they threaten to break the glass so that nothing screens the subject from the circulation of images. Instead of only celebrities being caught the glare of publicity, the average citizen finds him or herself blinded and harassed. Others' words, transported as light—indeed translated into light and shooting through glass tubes—invalidate us. And the computer window does not seem to come with dimming controls. Rather it engages all acts enlightening—all types of light streaming from a window—from the relentless light of surveillance, to the blinding light of harassment, to the artificial light needed for self-contemplation or self-reflection. Rather than marking an end of the enlightenment in either sense of the word 'end,' the internet asks us re-think enlightenment so that the act of enlightening is not limited to rational discourse or to soft light. Fiber optic networks, then, literalize enlightenment.

Not only do fiber optic networks literalize enlightenment and extend the window, these networks transform them both beyond recognition. In effect, they extend the window so that there is no longer an outside to be viewed, so that the windows are elongated fibers outside that do not allow for vision "outside." Everything becomes caught in the pane of light—the emphasis is not on the scenery outside, or on the contemplation inside, but rather on what happens within the pane-ful glass. These glass fibers make the window malleable, flexible, and unrecognizable, while at the same time still connecting those at either end of the cable. In terms of enlightenment, rather than allowing for "rational" discussion in public, fiber optic networks expand the public so that irrational discussion too is allowed and provoked. The light is spread so that the private sphere cannot safely be demarcated from the public; the light is spread so that

pornography cannot be separated from “good” information. That is, the light is spread so that we are always in public.

This project wagers that publicity is experienced as sexuality in fiber optic networks. Rather than being inadequate because they do not allow for “real” contact, fiber optic networks allow for too much proximity. The intimacy, the searching light—information as light—coursing through these networks produces a paranoid survival reaction, much like Daniel Paul Schreber’s paranoid reaction when he believed that God was communicating to him via rays of light. In order to maintain this contact, which at the beginning was thought to be malign but turns out to be benign, Schreber had to think voluptuous thoughts. Eric Santner, looking at Schreber’s case, argues that Schreber’s paranoia results from a breakdown in his symbolic function, caused by his failure in German politics and caused by the pressure placed upon him as senatespresident of the supreme court in Dresden. Santner argues that such a symbolic breakdown can be experienced as sexuality:

one of the central lessons of the Schreber case is precisely that a generalized attenuation of symbolic power and authority can be experienced as the collapse of social space and the rites of institution into the most intimate core of one’s being. The feelings generated thereby are, as we shall see, anxieties not of absence and loss but of overproximity, loss of distance to some obscene and malevolent presence that appears to have a hold on one’s inner parts. (xii)

The collapse of social space, then, rather than only being experienced in social space, can also be experienced as sexuality, as a violation into one’s inner parts. This overproximity of the Other—caused from the shift in power from regulatory (or monarchial) to disciplinary leads to an intensification of the body:

Certainly Foucault's most "Schreberian" insight is that exposure to this excess of knowledge that characterizes the disciplines produces a new kind of "intensified" body, one that, in a certain sense, recollects and travesties the sublime body of the king. And for Schreber as well as for Foucault, such an intensification of the body is first and foremost a *sexualization*.

Foucault's central thesis in *The History of Sexuality* is that sexuality, understood in its modern sense as defining an essential feature of human existence, as the locus of one's core identity, the expression of which comes to be seen as a form of *self-expression* considered to be crucial for one's mental and physical well-being—that sexuality in this sense is largely a product of a panoptical attentiveness focussed on the body and its sensations. (87)

This panoptical attentiveness to the body, first begun by disciplinary practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, seems to have accelerated to an almost unbearable searching light in the age of fiber optics. However, unlike Schreber, "our" paranoid reactions are not considered pathological, but rather necessary (again, *Only the Paranoid Survive*). Further, rather than an attenuation in social space causing a reaction in a private realm, the distance between these two spaces is compromised. It is not only that sexuality in the age of fiber optics is a response to public crisis, but also that sexuality in the age of fiber optics puts the public in crisis.

Rather than shutting down resistance, however, sexuality/publicity also opens up resistance. Pushing Foucault's analysis further, sexuality is not only a dense transfer point, but also the point of failure or noise within transfers of power. According to

Foucault:

the project of a science of the subject has gravitated, in ever narrowing circles, around the question of sex. Causality in the subject, the unconscious of the subject, the truth of the subject in the other who knows, the knowledge he holds unbeknown to him, all this found an opportunity to deploy itself in the discourse of sex. Not, however, by reason of some natural property inherent in sex itself, but by virtue of the tactics of power immanent in this discourse. (*History* vol. 1, 69-70).

If Foucault linked the question of sex to causality of the subject by virtue of the tactics of power, I am linking it to the failure of causality. If Foucault shifted his last project from a history of sexuality to a study of “how, for centuries, Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire,” I am arguing that sexuality exceeds this recognition, exceeds this auto-eroticism (*History* vol. 2, 6). In this Panopticon, no one can ever fully know and failures in technologies of the self are experienced as sexuality. What the self cannot control is what is at stake in the rhetorical deployments of sexuality, with its constant linking to diseases, contamination and loss of control. Discourses of sexuality are all about limits to the self and how these are managed or not. In other words, technologies of the self fail in interesting and important ways and it is this failure that characterizes fascination with sexuality, or more precisely, is constitutive of the