

First Contact

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Traditionally, windows, from the architectural to the televisual, mark the boundary between public and private. As Thomas Keenan has argued, behind a window, in the privacy of one's home or office, subjects look onto a public framed by the window's rectangle. In front of the window, on the street for instance, subjects assume public rights and responsibilities. They appear, act, intervene in the sphere they share with other subjects.

All windows, however, are not equal and television—the family's window onto the world—has been portrayed as an immobilizing one. It seems to imprison common folk inside and celebrities outside: most of us will never appear on commercial television—unless we own a video camera—and most celebrities will never be free from public scrutiny.

The computer screen, however, seems to compensate for television's inadequacies. The story goes like this: if mass media has reduced individual citizens to listeners instead of speakers, to couch potatoes instead of Martin Luthers, the Internet allows individual citizens once more to publish their ideas as scholars before the literate world. The Internet renews the process of enlightening a la Kant and enables a return to pre-industrial modes of communication on a global scale. Whereas the television induces zoning out and passivity, the Internet demands active mouse clicking and literacy. Whereas the television limits choice and offers everyone the same schedule, the internet offers its content 24/7 a week and one searches for sites rather than reads a guide. Whereas television offers information that disappears upon contact, the Internet erases

the difference between viewing and storing information. It turns information from something ephemeral to something concrete, saveable and exchangeable. If television has focussed around the conceit of live-ness yet at the same time covering death, the Internet focusses around second-comings, around resusitating and keeping alive the expendible, partly in hopes of covering over its own expendibility. Whereas television is organized around time, the Internet is organized around memory.

Fiber optic networks, however, cannot be reduced to a benign antidote or supplement to television. Windows, as Keenan has argued, breach, as well as establish, the boundary between the private and public. What, after all, comes through a window? What breaks with yonder light? If the computer screen opens the television, it also opens the home; it threatens to leave you with no interiority, no privacy, no space. The breach introduced by the computer seems irreparable and unpluggable. Not only can everyone now speak in public, they can also be consumed in public, the public can now consume you. If the television animated the living or family room, the Internet potentially destroys communal private space by animating the bedroom or the study. It would seem to compromise the disciplinary power of the family, since children can engage in online activities that their parents often cannot control or understand.

To understand this increasing publicity, I want to analyze a series of illustrations taken from *Time's* July 1995 *Cyberporn* issue. This issue, used as evidence during the Congressional debate over the *Communications Decency Act*, initiated heated debates, on and off line, over the prevalence of online pornography and the necessity for government regulation. Although the feature article rests with the banal suggestion that parents

should discipline their children at home, so that the Internet can remain free, the illustrations reveal the inadequacy of this neat separation.

The cover of this edition enacts first contact. The glare of the computer screen, in 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 wide open and his tiny hands lifted off the computer screen in horror or surprise: the images emanating from his monitor open and immobilize his facial orifices. The roundness of his open mouth evokes the image of vagina-mouthed inflatable dolls. The screen's glare exposes wrinkles under the little boy's eyes that signal a premature aging—a loss of innocence that belies his tiny hands and two front teeth. He is alone in front of the computer screen and the room's dim lighting suggests 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 own.

The full-page illustration 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 represents the only source of light in the room, a move to hide this act from public scrutiny, and this bright light shines through his translucent body. If the cover emphasized the innocence of the boy, this image represents the possible ramifications of first contact: the desire to be touched and penetrate/be penetrated. 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 contact.

Further complicating this “obscene” and risky scenario, the illustration on the table of contents page reverses the gaze. Although the caption reads “People are looking at pictures of *what* on the Internet?” an eye peers from the monitor to the viewer. 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. The monitor monitors: someone could be watching.

These evocative images, which completely ignore the role of software in mediating contact, drawn at a time when the WWW was littered with amateur homepages, introduced Americans to the obverse of Al Gore’s sunny Information Superhighway. They revealed and provoked anxiety over the open-ness of Internet communications amongst Internet virgins. These images also show how concerns over “risky” interchanges—over the public nature of the Internet—have been as expressed as concerns over pornography and cyber-sexuality. The existence of pornography on the Internet—something that most users had been aware of for many years—became a pressing issue because it encapsulated fears over online contact. It’s no accident that opposition to the bill that led to the massive de-regulation of the telecommunications industry focused on the tiny section called the Communications Decency Act. The initial drive to regulate the Internet started from the conceit that good and bad contact on the

Internet could be neatly cordoned off—that the dangers represented by the Internet lay in pornographic content rather than in the structure of easily accessible electronic communications.

The danger, however, stems from the fact that the Internet functions as a looking glass that enables two-way viewing. The danger stems from the fact that the Internet itself is structurally pornographic, if we understand pornographic structures, as Judith Butler does, as enabling the dissemination of our representations without our consent, but not for that reason against it. Often, the fiber optic window is mistaken for a mirror, for a safe-reflective space that is hidden and limited to our office or bedroom. The risk of exposure, however, 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.

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] pornography, 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.

Mackinnon, referring to Marty Rimm's dubious study/undergraduate thesis on the prevalence of pornography on the Internet, argues this new light that cyberspace provides enables a more accurate "world picture" and claims that:

The greatest achievement of the Carnegie Mellon study lies in simply noticing what is there. ... 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 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 the glare of the computer screen, the incalculable—such as human sexuality—seems to be become trackable and enumerable. Everything becomes reduced to information, as though data never needs to be interpreted, as though information zooms off a web page or email and then parks itself in your brain.

Referring to the technology that made Rimm's report possible, MacKinnon also comments that:

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)

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.

Indeed the notion of surviving the light is one of the key ways that the Internet challenges both disciplinary and regulatory power and fiber optic networks—not pornography—inaugurate an unprecedented re-mapping of public and private spaces. The sheer number of websites, the multiple fiber optic paths, and the rapidity with which sites are altered, built, destroyed and mirrored, makes real-time censorship practically impossible: one cannot “bring down” a website irrevocably or adequately survey and categorize digital information. At the same time, however, digital trails and local memory caching make prosecution easier: one can track visits to a certain website or the sending location of emails. This affront to regulatory power makes many people turn to visibility as a means to discipline Internet users. But the multiplicity of websites and the suspension of the normal relationship between a text’s pervasiveness and extent hampers the efficacy of public standards. Theoretically, one website could reach the entire web-surfing population: the accessibility of materials, which would normally be restricted to the back corners of shops or libraries, shifts the definition of publicly appropriate materials. The idea of the Internet as a clean well-lighted space, protected by new encryption algorithms, has done wonders in terms of consumer confidence, but little else. Lastly, the illusion of privacy—the illusion that what one does in front of one’s computer in one’s own home is—troubles the disciplinary effectiveness of visibility, since, in order for it to work, one must see the central tower, one must believe that one may be watched.

To be clear, fiber optic interactions are not always so dramatic. Most, such as web-surfing and email, seem banal and functional. However, sheer banality of these interactions does not mean they are safe. Indeed, the repudiation of the sexiness of the Internet can be seen as an epitomizing the success of virtuality as sexiness. If “normal”

people go on the Internet, thinking that they—unlike those computer-crazed otakus—can use it properly, they have shown that sex does sell. Moreover, these banal transactions still produce a digital trail—and it seems key here to realize that fiber optic networks transform the panopticon through a time shift. It is not that someone could be looking, but that—at any point in the future—someone *could* look. This means that no one is ever structurally outside the gaze—one's misdemeanors can go un-noticed in the present, but this does not mean that they always will do so. This uncertainty has engendered a paranoia best summarized by the nerd-cool phrase “only the paranoid survive,” which treats possibility as fact. However, whether or not someone will or can access your files is fundamentally uncertain and depends on software. Glossing over this uncertainty gives the Internet a permancy that belies the ephemerality of information, and makes the ways that software structures our interactions seem inevitable, natural and invisible.

Narratives of the Internet as public sphere, pornographic badlands, or big brother all seek to understand and manage the unprecedented publicity enabled by the Internet, and they all seek to interpellate users. The gaze, however, cannot be simply relegated to one side of the window or the other. Fiber optic networks represent a democratization of representation and surveillance that verges out of control. They represent uncontrollable representation by accelerating 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 representation.’ Thus a subject is defined as ‘what can or believes it can offer itself representations,’ that is, as something formed by the imperative to be an image, in order to receive images” (140). What fiber optic networks threaten is an infinite open

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—invade 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. Fiber optic networks extend and transform the window beyond recognition. They extend it so there is no longer an outside to be viewed, so that the windows are elongated fibers outside that do not allow for vision “outside,” for these glass fibers do not enable end users to “see” each other transparently. 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 soft light. The Internet literalizes, and thus explodes, the tenets and goals of enlightenment, such as rational discourse. Consider, for instance the electronic interchanges surrounding the Clinton impeachment trial. On the one hand, sites such as moveon.com and forwarded email messages enabled more citizens to contact their representatives than ever before. On the other hand, the sheer number of these emails ensured that individual email messages were not read and the automated reply—if such a message was sent given that these emails quite often crashed servers—emphasized the fact that these written interchanges did not register within a marketplace of ideas. This, however, does not mean that they did not convey their message—if only through subject headers and electronic downtime. And activist groups,

such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre use the physical limitations of web server software and hardware to stage virtual sit-ins.

I want to conclude, by underscoring the importance of mediation and ideology to fiber optic networks. We do not simply connect to fibers and see the light: like all windows, it is sustained by technology that seeks to elide its own presence. We cannot access networks or hardware without software. Operating systems interpellate users and structure their interactions. For instance, each major operating system seeks to create a certain type of user: UNIX users are nerd-cool shareware power geeks, Mac users think different and Windows users are function mainstream types. Each operating system also limits a user's options. Neither Windows nor mac offer the user multiple desktops—something that UNIX does. Moreover, operating systems do not offer users a simple representation of the real—rather, they offer representations of their imaginary relationship to their real conditions. They offer briefcases, desktops and of course windows—virtual objects that allow users to interact with their computer in prescribed ways. As well, many of the surveilling and democractic aspects of the Internet are *not* natural, but rather produced by software in conjunction with hardware. Thus, the imaginary envelopes fiber optic networks from popular narratives in the media to every-day interactions. They produce spaces that must be narrativized and identified before the bytes can bind.

Thank You.