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Contents

The Capitalization of the Self. The Face Between Seduction and Monetization

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Abstract

This article aims to explore webcamming – a digital activity in which many individuals have begun using webcams for live sex performances – a sector that offers spectators the opportunity to interact in real-time. The study examines how digital self-representations transition from "seductive models of meaning communication" (Soro 2021), with a particular focus on the capitalization of intimacy, the new criteria of self-exposure in digitalized environments, and how bodies are perceived and evaluated. The paper seeks to present an additional monetizable configuration of identity that tends toward a networked self, analyzing cam sites and paid platforms in relation to case studies from the worlds of cinema and contemporary art. This scenario has also influenced contemporary relationships, now increasingly based on a "contractual relationship" (Benasayag and Schmit 2018), shaping a society that, by virtue of its hypervisibility, is defined as "pornographic" (Han 2014). All of this is facilitated by the ubiquity enabled by new media devices, which operate in an ongoing "on" mode, as summarized by the slogan 24/7 (Crary 2015). The smartphone, in this context, becomes the prosthesis of desire that ensures continuity between body, image, and commodity.

Keywords

Webcam Body Face
Pornography OnlyFans

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New Images, New Values

A semiotic approach to images related to the self, the body, and intimacy can be developed through what may be described as a turning point introduced by new generations of semioticians. This shift consists in an interest not only in properly artistic images but also in those belonging to a different "status", the social domain and the institutional framework through which images are produced. The study of images related to the self allows for an ever-expanding discussion on how digital environments shape and redefine sexual experiences, pornography, and identities; at the same time, amateur images open up unexpected scenarios for new modes of communication. In Jean-François Bordron's studies (2016, 227–239), the term status is understood as the "economy" of images, an economy that not only designates their potential circulation but also the system that establishes the possibility of values, enabling us to question the global order in which they are inscribed. It is precisely this possibility of (new) values that this study seeks to investigate, the ways in which they are constructed and transformed on social networks, starting from an observational methodology focused on images produced by "ordinary users", or what we might call the amateur category. Equipped with new technological tools and the web, these users enact a media-driven transfiguration of reality through environmental images, which demand an increasingly active exploration by a viewer who is ever more engaged and involved in the experience.

The analysis of the statuses of amateur images – such as those found on social media profiles and cam sites like Peekshows and LiveJasmin – helps us understand this reconfiguration of sexuality through technology. These images, as Plasseraud (2018, 135) argues, "allow us to measure the degree of internalization of the processes developed throughout the history of images that represent the body."

In recent years, we have witnessed a momentous shift: new digital communication technologies have

supplanted the diverse expressive forms of previous cultural paradigms. It can be argued that the creative and aesthetic forms of the digital era are shaped by concepts such as remediation and re-enunciation, characterized by a loss of distance, rejected, as ubiquity has become "the regulative idea that drives the desires of the masses" (Cacciari 2014, xvi). This ubiquity is embodied by money, which fulfills the masses' need to be everywhere in real time. Such a demand has transformed society, beginning with visual perception and subsequently extending to the realms of intimacy and identity, rewriting them under the sign of continuous exposure.

Through explorations into the realms of Cinema and Art, this study will seek to analyze the management of identities through the dissemination and sharing of intimate images. The aim is to hypothesize the underlying causes of their production, ultimately leading to their "monetizable" version.

New Bodies, New Desires

I have an incessant need for validation from the outside world, and strangers on the internet always lend me a hand [...]. I don't care what others think. I keep going my own way. Even my therapist thinks I'm right [...]. A few days ago, I posted a picture and covered my nipples with a flower emoji. A man messaged me: how many retweets to remove the emojis? I replied, '100 dollars via PayPal' (Isador 2017).

The tendency to become *performers of oneself* has involved the webcam – and the photographic medium more broadly – in a communicative process that has redefined its uses and functions, bringing the revolution sparked by the *Digital Turn* into a ritual of transparency.

In April 1996, a nineteen-year-old student at Dickinson College, Jennifer Ringley, connected a webcam to her computer and began streaming her dorm room live to the Internet — an experiment later known as *Jennicam*

(Visco 2014). She soon became the first "cam-girl" celebrity online. Since then, webcamming has evolved into a popular digital practice, with users performing erotic acts for viewers or paying to access others' live streams (Gregory 2018).

The story of Kendra Sunderland (McCormack 2015; Fig. 1) – the cam girl known as *Library Girl*, for filming and streaming a semi-secret sex tape filmed inside the Oregon State University library in 2015 – testifies to how the process of self-management of one's intimacy has broken with the traditional dimensions between public and private and that the prohibition regulating the sexual sphere is constantly transgressed, confirming how the "migration of pornography within other media contexts or forms" (Pompa 2020, 12) has transformed the act of self-exposure into a cultural and mainstream event.

Fig. 1. Kendra Sunderland, 2015, still from video.

Unlike traditional pornography, the camming industry offers viewers the opportunity to interact in real time with the person they are watching. Footage captured with low-resolution webcams, featuring grainy images, creates a representation that conveys a strong sense of intimacy, contrasting sharply with the vivid and polished visuals of professional pornography.

Amateur porn trades in an abolition of the spectacular: it shows real bodies experiencing real pleasures. Unlike the professional performer, the amateur girl loses control and this guarantees the

realness of the sex. The viewer sees something more than the performance of sex; something the girl does not intend to reveal; something as involuntary as the viewer's own response. Moreover, the viewer is able to interact with the girl and to be directly addressed by her, and it is this purchased intimacy that is a large part of what is being sold. Of course, the viewer is ultimately aware that the relationship is not real, but he disavows this knowledge in order to derive greater pleasure from the experience (Hardy 2009, 12).

In 2016, OnlyFans was launched as a platform in the adult entertainment sector, experiencing a surge in performers since the first lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic (Rubattu et al. 2023, 4). These tools provide a lens through which to analyze the key dynamics underlying the posting of thirst trap images, provocative photos shared on social media with the aim of eliciting expressions of attraction from others. The objective is to seek external validation, enhancing self-esteem through desirability and, potentially, securing financial gain.

Although a commercial gesture does not necessarily equate to a purchase – it may simply correspond to remaining within certain environments (such as a social network) – the success of the OnlyFans platform demonstrates that many attempt to capitalize on their own image, fully aware that they must go through infrastructures that will appropriate those images. This suggests that the defining compromise of our time is the willingness to share our data and privacy in exchange for something in return: in the case of FaceApp, it was the playful amusement of seeing oneself aged or with a different gender; today, data (face, identity, intimacy) is exchanged for money.

Technology extends beyond the realm of media representations to encompass the broader field of mediated human experiences. If its significance is filtered through media and measured by visibility, then the value of the projected self would confirm the "contractual relationship" (Benasayag and Schmit 2018, 26) that defines contemporary interactions – an economy of commercial seduction in which intimacy itself is marketed and displayed as a commodity.

The voyeuristic thrill and excitement that accompany the contemporary gaze operate through increasingly fluid contrasts: public and private, exclusive and purchasable, economical and expensive, accessible and inaccessible.

The smartphone, "a *meta-medium* that has incorporated two optical media, the camera and the screen" (Pompa 2020, 59), which enables an ever more immediate interaction with intimate life, further dissolves these boundaries, bringing what is distant closer while keeping what is near at a mediated remove. This multifunctional device has fostered the rapid and democratic production of images, promoting a photographic experience that has become mobile. The incorporation of the camera into the device, along with other technical features, has facilitated self-management on the web: based on *one-to-one* communication while also being connected to the world, the smartphone has become a *self-media* capable of managing the narrative of one's mediated self as a protagonist.

This represented a radical change accelerated by new devices and Web 2.0 that allowed the user to evolve into a content producer, into a performer capable of self-producing. Suspended between the roles of producer and consumer, it leads to a radical transformation in the narration of everyday life, resulting in an expansion of the visible. A crucial aspect of this process is the setting from which contact with the network is initiated, and it is precisely the fact of being in a private space that legitimizes a "disinhibition effect" (Pompa 2020, 64) created in digital environments due to the lack of direct interpersonal contact, allowing for greater freedom of expression.

This obscene frenzy, with a pornographic undertone "due to its being identical to real life, at a 1:1 scale with it" (Pompa 2020, 62), has realized that "brothel without walls" (McLuhan 2002, 201 –202) catering to humanity's desire to prostitute itself through images.

In images where the subject presents themselves

to the viewer with their back turned or without showing their face – paradoxically withdrawing from the shot – they stage an initial inaccessibility of the figure, an articulated negation, a gradual unveiling of their presence. Starting from these contrasts, observing the chromatic and eidetic categories of an advertisement taken from Tumblr (Fig. 2), one could discern a semi-symbolism, the association of a plastic opposition with a semantic opposition: the bare interiors next to a price list would correspond to the association of opposing categories such as cheap/expensive, accessible/inaccessible. By modulating the degree of self-exposure, the producer of the image seems to impose obstacles that, rather than hindrances, appear necessary to the process of capitalization. To fully grasp these modes of negation, one must consider the entire enunciative structure.

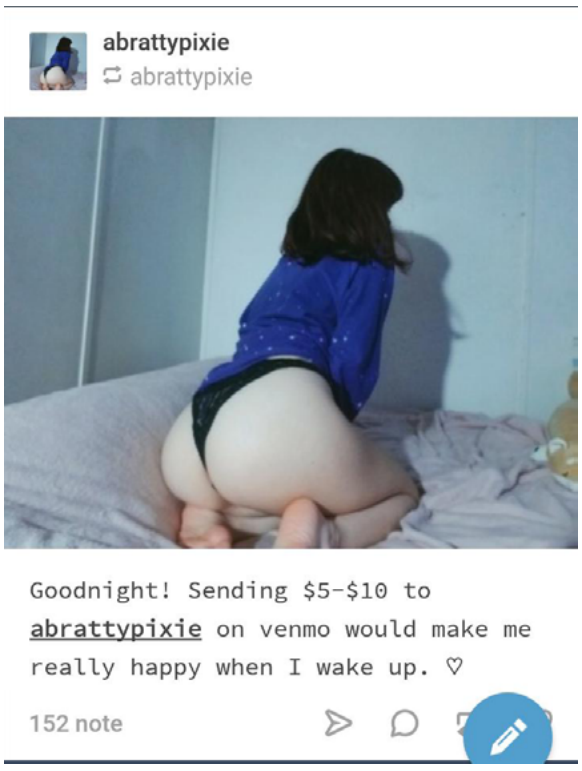

Fig. 2. Still from Tumblr.

Since likes, followers and shares constitute semiotic acts linked to a fundamental aesthetic reaction – what semiotics defines as a "thymic category" (D'Armenio 2021, 310) – they give rise to an economy based on attention and gift exchange, where value can be monetized even without a formal subscription. Content is appraised through simple acts of appreciation but is managed by algorithmic intelligence that automatically regulates its socialization (friends

on Facebook, preferences on Netflix, likes on Tinder), effectively externalizing identity management. The appreciation expressed by followers thus becomes the metric for conversion into other forms of value, where the author's physical and social identity merges into a narrative that – much like dating app interfaces – generating a "simulacrum of familiarity with the recipient" (Soro 2021, 330).

"The affective circuit is triggered between the subject and the prosthesis of their desire – the nonhuman actor smartphone – with which the user engages in a continuous intercorporeal interaction" (Soro 2015, 73).

Fig. 3. Ryan Patrick and Alexey Kiselev, *Fantasy*, 2012, still from video.

Music videos such as *Fantasy* by Tesla Boy (Fig. 3) and *Pay Off* by KARMA SHE (Fig. 4) serve as examples of digital aesthetics that also permeate contemporary art, which enacts a mediated transfiguration of reality and has further contributed to the discourse on media-driven self-exposure. In *Tediousphilia*, artist Laia Abril invites us to reflect on this form of self-exposure: her photographs (Fig. 5) are sourced from websites where couples sell access to their performances to viewers willing to pay for them. Where do these bodies exist? They are present in our gaze, yet their presence is contingent on the screen in which they appear, competing for the only possible form of existence.

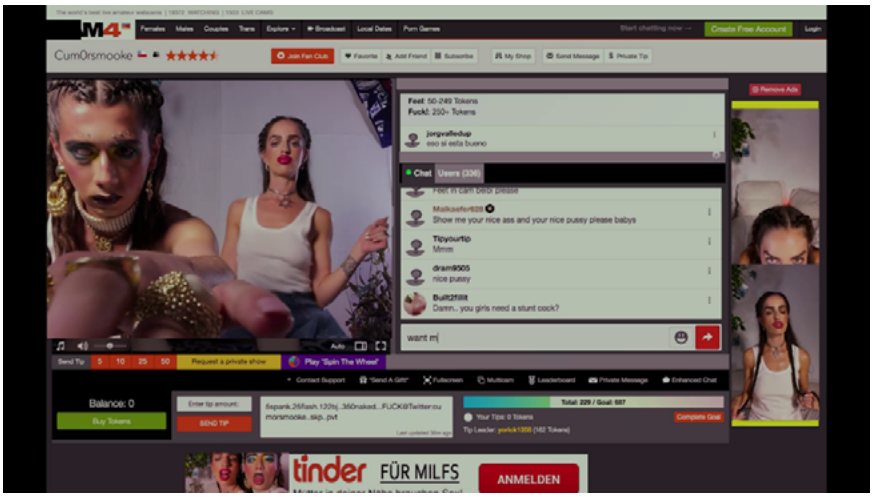

Fig. 4. KARMA SHE, Catalin Jugravu, *Pay Off*, 2019, still from video.

Fig. 5. Laia Abril, Tediousphilia, 2014 http://www.laiaabril.com/project/tediousphilia/, accessed March 15, 2025.

Apps, dating sites, and subscription-based platforms enable an analysis of yet another monetizable configuration of identity, one that aligns with the concept of the networked self, which describes the contemporary modes of sociality in digital spaces. A striking example of this phenomenon is the NSFW appropriation of the Zoom platform (Yalcinkaya 2020) during the lockdown, a case of *détournement* that illustrates the relentless demand for image consumption and self-narratives intertwined with commodities and electronic media. This process, already underway, was significantly accelerated by the 2020 pandemic.

Subcutaneous Voyeurism

Contemporary cinema – being an expression of contemporary relations of production – is systematically permeated by the presence of bodies that achieve a fusion of the biological and the artificial, "simulacra that do not erase the human, but rework it into new forms and mechanisms, integrated with technology and digital media" (Bertetto 2005, 88).

It reflects the progressive escalation of visual brutality, which can be linked to a gradual expansion of the threshold of the visible (and the representable). This process stems from a new configuration of the sensible that shapes our society and is continuously updated by it. This continuous shift extends beyond cinema to other forms of

communication, including video games, visual arts, comics, and television.

In the mid-2000s, two subgenres of horror cinema emerged: *body horror* and *torture porn*, two labels that summarize a substitute form of the film genre, united by "brutal violence and maniacal cruelty toward the human body" (Marineo 2014, 121). The definition is attributed to American critic David Edelstein (Edelstein 2006), used to describe a series of films released between 2004 and 2005.

These were the years[1] in which the terrible photographs of Abu Ghraib were published: given their popularity, these images reveal an aspect of the digital revolution, namely the speed with which they circulate, to the point of remaining etched in the collective imagination through a spectacularizing promoted by the web, whose easy and free access has the advantage of freeing individuals from their moral constraints and obligations.

These dynamics evoke the aesthetic and representational logic of pornography: this trend manifests itself in an overflow of the gaze, with visual codes borrowed from genre cinema, as a means of exploring alternative narratives. The reasons for this progressive escalation of visual brutality are certainly linked to "a progressive raising of the threshold of the visible (and the showable), determined by a new configuration of the senses that shapes our society" (Marineo 2014, 121). The viewing of these extreme films is mediated by a more articulated voyeurism, which reflects a new positioning of our gaze, defining our position within the representational strategies employed by the genre.

A paradigmatic example is *The Passion of the Christ* (M. Gibson, 2004), to which we may add films such as *Hostel* (E. Roth, 2005), *À l'intérieur* (Bustillo and Maury 2007), *A Serbian Film* (Spasojević 2010), *Crimes of the Future* (Cronenberg 2022) and *The Shrouds* (Cronenberg 2024) all of which employ a brutal aesthetic and a relentless

1 To highlight the convergence of different fields on the theme of self-exposure, in 2004, Linda Williams in *Porn Studies* used the term *On/scenity* to define discussions and representations of sex that were once hidden but which, with digital technology, appear insistently in the new public/private realms of home video and the Internet.

focus on the body that mirrors, with deliberate excess, the logic of pornography, the merging of the body with technology and the intersection between desire and machine.

The theme of webcams has also been used in cinema to represent the cultural changes discussed so far: from the found footage subgenre of *Unfriend* (Gabriadze 2014) to the pursuit of popularity and self-particularization as in *Cam* (Goldhaber 2018; Fig. 6) and, during the height of the pandemic, films shot entirely via videoconferencing, such as *Quarantine Lesbian Circle Jerk* (Sartre 2020; Turner 2020), followed by a single-scene sequel titled *Sex Addiction in the Viral Age – A Coronavirus Film* (Rowntree 2020;[2] Fig. 7).

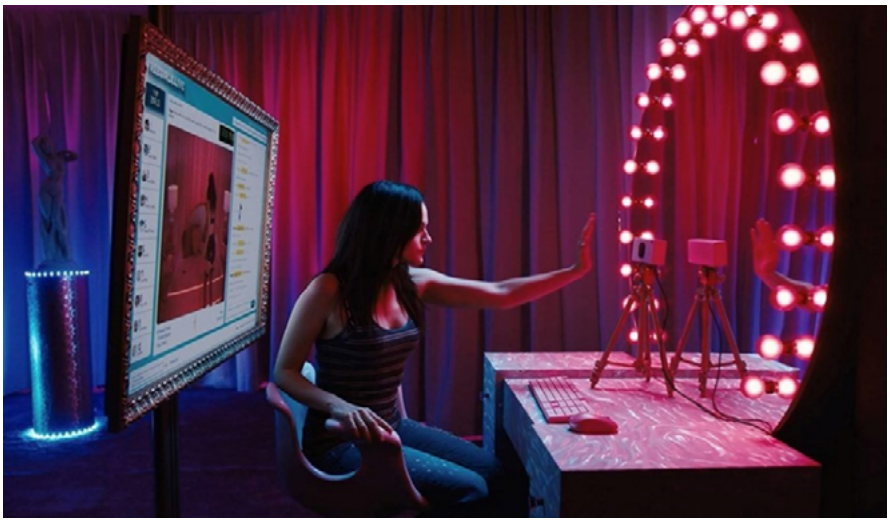

Fig. 6. Daniel Goldhaber, *Cam*, 2018, still from film.

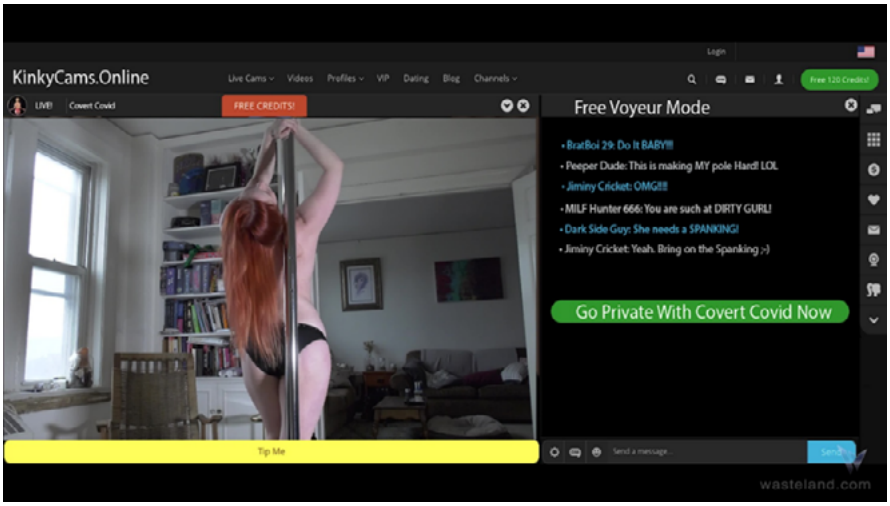

Fig. 7. Colin Rowntree, *Sex addiction in the viral age*, 2020, still from film.

The recent *The Substance* (Fargeat 2024) offers a critical reflection on the exploitation of the female

2 https://www.adultempire.com/2801342/sex-addiction-in-the-viral-age-porn-videos.html accessed march 14, 2025.

body in media, exposing the demand for perpetual youth and performance as a prerequisite for continued success. The story tells of the deep-rooted view that women should be eternally young and smiling, placing no value on their maturity: a famous fitness program presenter is told that she will be replaced as host of her program. The woman decides to join an experimental protocol called *The Substance*, which promises to restore a better, more beautiful and perfect version of herself.

These examples illustrate how the film industry has also addressed the emergence of *subcutaneous voyeurism* and how a multifaceted analytical approach is essential to understanding the evolving nature of identity performances in the digital realm. At the same time, they confirm how the entertainment industry reflects a post-Abu Ghraib society, through which a constant "control of our fear mechanisms" (Marineo 2014, 110) is certified and a reactivation of the gaze that must chase itself in a continuous game of rivalry.

The Society of Exposure: Faces, Commodities, and Hypervisibility

In a society defined by the cult of the body and the obsession with aging – markers of a narcissism that emerges as "the characteristic structure of a society that has lost interest in the future" (Lasch 1981, 233) – processes of identification take shape through self-representation adapted to the multiple functional roles imposed by the economic apparatus. In the era of the globalized market, identity finds expression in an individual's ability to "take control of the organization of the roles they perform" (Galimberti 2009, 264).

24/7 market systems have long been a reality, fostering boundless forms of production and consumption. As Jonathan Crary notes (Crary 2015, 7), the only remaining interruption in this cycle is the hours dedicated to sleep. The slogan 24/7 thus represents a program designed to reject human limitations and temporal rhythms, leading to

the erasure of personal and social identity in favor of an uninterrupted cycle of production and consumption. The aim of this program is to align human activity with the relentless operations of global markets and digital networks.

At first glance, a 24/7 environment may resemble a fully functioning society; in reality, it reveals itself as "a non-social model of automatic performances and a suspension of existence that conceals the human costs required to sustain its functioning" (Crary 2015, 11). Bodies are subjected to incessant flows of services and images, and sleep itself becomes an act of resistance against the voracious consumption of time by contemporary capitalism. Unlike other fundamental human needs – such as eating or sexual desire, which have been commodified – sleep remains one of the last frontiers beyond market control, as it temporarily withdraws individuals from the cycle of consumption.

Modern technological devices, even when in a temporary standby mode, do not fully power down but instead operate in a reduced state, positioned between "on" and "off". This reconfigures life into a state of perpetual "on", where there is no moment, place, or situation in which consumption is not possible, facilitated by wireless technologies. A new model of life emerges, structured around constant exposure and adaptation to the market: in the absence of a dedicated space or time for privacy, the singularity of the self has little room to flourish.

It could be argued that, today, there are no circumstances that cannot be recorded or archived in the form of digital images or information. Digital conversion is not merely a technical phenomenon but a cultural one, representing a transformation of practices, customs, and rituals in a society that has shifted from communication, understood as the dissemination of content, to a society centered on recording. Since the 2000s, with the reversal of digital logic where recording now takes precedence over dissemination, everything is automatically documented, creating the impression that everything is archivable. It is the act of archiving itself that assigns value to preserved

content: No longer is something stored because it is important; rather, its very preservation allows it to become important. At the same time, however, the digital medium remains the most fragile support: demagnetization, transfer failure, and human error are just some of the risks inherent in the digital conversion of memory.

An epochal transformation has taken place in which new digital communication technologies have replaced previous forms of interaction (analog/digital, live broadcast/podcast), impacting even the nature of relationships. Initially mediated by television, where public and private life were filtered through "collective simulacra of media staging" (Abruzzese 2001, 29), communication has since transitioned through mobile telephony, digital networks, interactivity, and the proliferating duplication of images, culminating in a convergence where the body and its representations intersect through machines. In the self-narration of one's life, the dominant thread is increasingly linked "to commodities and electronic media, through which all experience has been filtered, recorded, or constructed" (Crary 2015, 63).

With the disappearance of lifelong employment, the most enduring form of labor appears to be "the management of one's relationship with electronic devices" (Crary 2015, 63), where privacy becomes increasingly unattainable, and individuals are transformed into perpetually available portals. Among the emerging forms of labor, self-exposure and monetization on platforms such as OnlyFans represent a growing practice – one that aligns with the historical moment and reflects the broader condition of a society of exposure.

Byung-Chul Han describes our era in terms of a condition of *post-privacy* (Han 2014, 12), characteristic of a society founded on the principle of transparency, in which distance and modesty are expelled from the circuits of capital and information. It is a society in which reality appears constantly revealed and exposed to a regime of hyper-visibility, presenting itself as an eminently positive society, nourished by the "hyperreality of commodities"

(Baudrillard 1994, 71).

Baudrillard, defining hyperreality as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 1994, 2), highlighted the replacement of reality itself with signs of reality, the creation of its "operational double" (1994, 3). This process gives rise to the pleasure of simulation, which also affects the field of pornography (1994, 36). This ideology of visibility and transparency, Baudrillard emphasizes, "is now, virtually, that of all social relations" (1994, 64, 107).

Today's visibility "is a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness" (Kipnis 1988, 158). In its becoming *hypervisibility* takes the form of

> a kind of obscenity of accuracy that abolishes the distinctions between permission and prohibition, presence and absence. No shadows, no ghosts. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for our consumption (Gordon 2008, 16).

In this context, the webcam represents the paradigmatic device of the postmodern condition: it testifies to the possibility of seeking emotions through the simulation and imitation of an ephemeral simulacrum of reality, rather than through interaction with a "real" reality. This highlights the logic of a widespread and seductive spectacle, in which subjects produce and inhabit unreal worlds to experiment with new regimes of visibility and media affectivity.[3]

Images themselves become transparent when they are emptied of meaning, which is why Chul-Han refers to contemporary society as a pornographic society, since "pornography is the immediate contact between im-

3 "These new technologies just get us there with maximum efficiency. Meeting a new person is thrilling, in a primal way – your attention focuses completely, if only for a nanosecond, to see if the creature in front of you has the power to change your life for better or worse" (Anderson 2010).

age and eye" (Chul-Han 2014, 10). This definition operates by virtue of the hypervisibility and ubiquity enabled by new *wireless* devices, which are continuously switched *on* 24/7. The pornographic transformation of society is a process that is radicalized by capitalism, as a result of the fact that everything is displayed as a commodity.

According to this view, today›s media images are nearly all pornographic due to their purely pleasurable nature, devoid of semiotic intensity, as everything in them is turned outward and exposed.

The logic of exposure defines contemporary society: things must be displayed, as they have become nothing more than commodities. Their significance does not reside in use or exchange value but rather in their ability to generate interest. Regarding the human face, platforms such as Facebook and image-editing tools like Photoshop transform it into a face that dissolves into its function of exposure. The *face*, more transparent than the visage, requires no development in digital photography because it is pure positivity, intolerant of any drama; in this sense, every subject becomes the advertising object of themselves. It is a *pornographic face* because it is entirely turned outward, illuminated to excess.

Conclusions

Through data analysis and figurative references – from the world of camgirls to music videos, from contemporary art to cinema – this research has sought to apply a semiotic approach to the study of amateur image corpora. It has examined how digital self-representations evolve through "seductive models of meaning-making communication" and how online platforms function as "unstable texts that reveal a collective exchange of gazes" (Soro 2021, 327).

The study has highlighted several key aspects: how pornography can be used to address questions concerning "the social compact and the price of repression, questions about what men are (and aren't), what women are (and aren't), questions about how sexuality and gender

roles are performed, about class, aesthetics, Utopia, rebellion, power, desire, and commodification" (Kipnis 1999, viii); the increasing agency in the management of one's mediated self, an overview of webcam usage, the proliferation of online sexual service platforms, and the emergence of new digital sex performers – especially in the aftermath of the pandemic – who have capitalized not only on their own image but also on the loneliness of their clients, exacerbated by forced isolation.

Furthermore, through examples from contemporary art, the research has underscored how such self-exposure practices intersect with the domain of art through *détournement*, a deviation achieved by repurposing existing elements in a way that generates new processes of resignification.

The pornographic transformation of society is a process that intensifies under capitalism, where everything is exhibited as a commodity and where capitalism itself recognizes no other uses for sexuality. This phenomenon coincides with the erosion of distance in visual perception, leading to a semantic void caused by the proximity of these images to advertising and the acceleration of informational, communicative, and productive circuits. Social media platforms, by fostering spaces of proximity that prioritize what is liked (notably, without a dislike option), replace the public sphere with an advertising-like presentation of the self.

In attempting to define the notion of the *dispositif*, Giorgio Agamben argues that the extreme phase of contemporary capitalist development manifests as an immense proliferation of *dispositifs*; this exponential growth corresponds to an equally vast proliferation of processes of subjectivation. He thus defines a *dispositif* as:

> A heterogeneous assemblage that virtually includes everything [...]. The *dispositif* itself is the network that is established among these elements [...] anything that, in some way, has the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, shape, control, and secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, and discourses of living beings (Agamben 2006, 7, 22–23).

From the texts analyzed, it emerges that this process finds a pivotal moment in the crisis of the labor market, which has driven individuals toward self-management of their roles. This is evident in platforms like OnlyFans, where the individual becomes an entrepreneur of the self while simultaneously functioning as both exploiter and exploited. The performing subject adapts to a self-imposed constraint, relinquishing the private sphere in favor of the imperative to expose oneself.

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