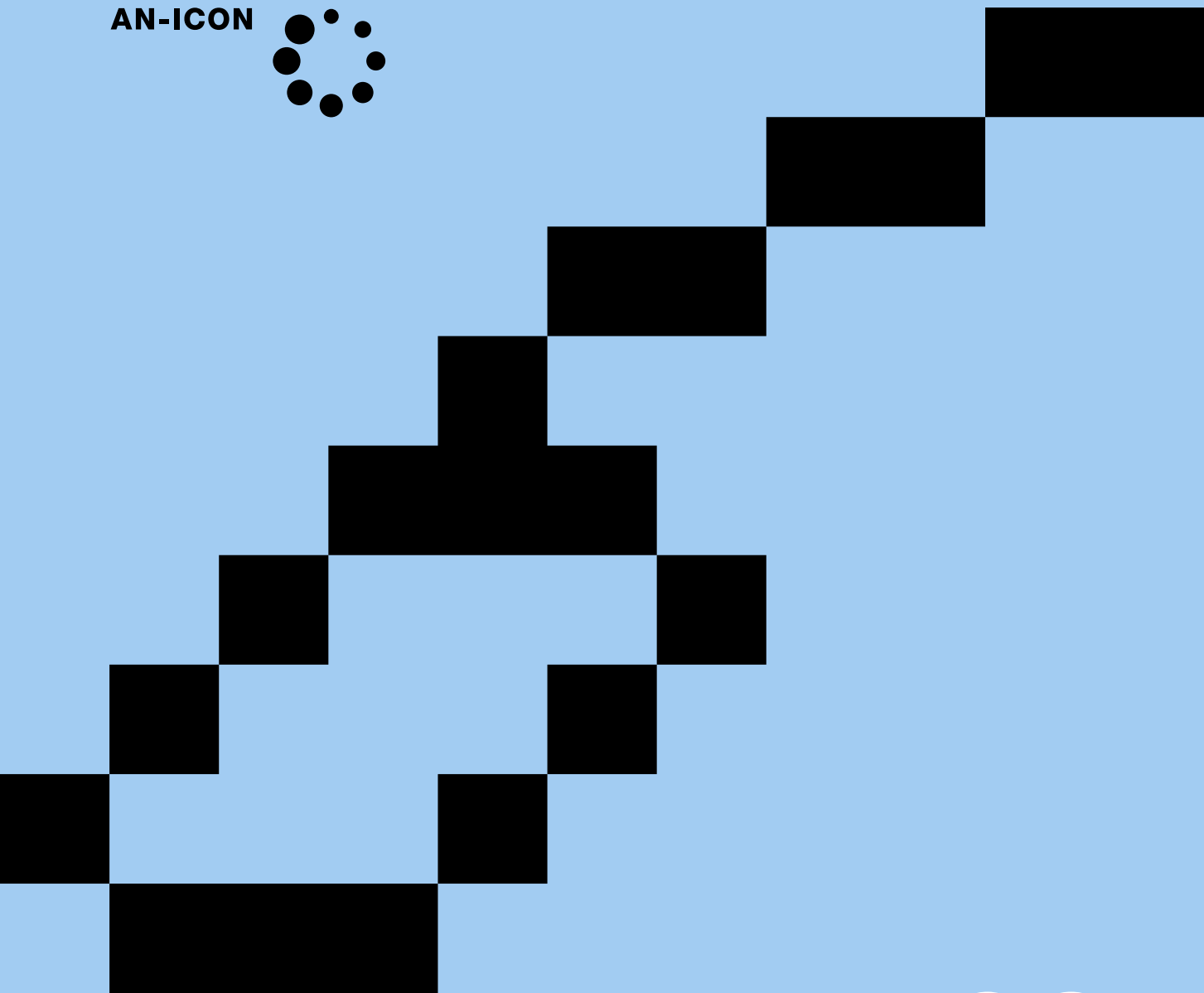
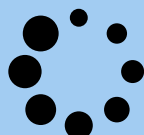


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→ Virtual Sex: Pornography,
Immersion, and Erotic Environments

Edited by Ihsan Asman, Giovanna
Maina, and Roberto P. Malaspina

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Introduction

In a letter published in 1969 in an issue of *Architectural Design*, Donald Kenzotaki, from the Bio-Cybernetic Institute of Tokaida, Japan, details the marvels of his research team's latest invention. This groundbreaking device, known as "Cybersex," is designed to record the multimodal expressions of a sexual encounter, store them on a sort of hard disk, and reproduce the experience for distribution to anyone seeking a multisensory erotic encounter. Users would be able to visit a cybersex studio, select their preferred recording, and initiate a fully immersive experience. The complex computer system would respond dynamically to the user's body, adapting the visual, tactile, and olfactory stimuli of the recording in order to ensure an immediate and erotically effective experience.

A contemporary reader of *Architectural Design* might have reacted with amusement or disbelief, recognizing that this account was, in fact, part of *Cosmorama* – a satirical column that playfully speculated on the future potential of emerging technologies. Nevertheless, this fictional description can be read as an early articulation of what

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we might call a “sexual futurology”: the utopian desire to combine technology and sexuality in ways capable of transcending, or at least reconfiguring, the limits of physical presence. Kenzotaki’s “Cybersex” anticipated several *topoi* that would come to define the discourse on mediated sex in the following decades. Technical reproducibility, complete multisensoriality, immediacy, interactivity, and telecommunication have remained at the core of discursive experiments, cinematic portrayals, and rhetorical promises of technologies claiming to enhance sexual experience with ever greater efficacy and erotic satisfaction, while combining the rhetoric of “new” media with the indexical instability of the pornographic product.

Among the devices that seem to most effectively embody these long-standing aspirations is Virtual Reality (VR). Since its most recent technological re-emergence in 2014–15 (Evans 2018), VR has opened new possibilities for both the mediation of sex and the porn industry. Indeed, virtual technologies have produced immersive forms that involve both social experiences – such as multi-user sex games and shared virtual environments – and forms of “pure” simulation, as in the case of pornographic audiovisual products. Most pornographic products conceived for VR to date are based on a form of virtual augmentation of the POV (point-of-view) subgenre: even though they are generally limited to 180° or 360° videos rather than actual interactive environments, they combine the strong agency of the first-person shot with the visceral capacities of the body transfer process (Slater et al. 2010).

The (partial) success of virtual forms of pornography raises urgent questions concerning the aesthetic consequences that such images have for visuality and bodily self-perception. On the one hand, VR redefines the compositional qualities and directing strategies of the pornographic image (Evans 2021); on the other, it opens new horizons of social and political agency (Paré et al. 2019; Wang 2021). VR porn may therefore participate in complex biocultural dynamics concerning the politics of bodies and the gendered perception of the self (Tacikowski et al. 2020;

Zhang and Juvrud 2024). Following a somatechnical perspective – which stresses the co-constitution of bodies, technologies, and images (Sullivan and Murray 2014) – VR pornography seems to “excite” with particular effectiveness the primary potentialities and problematics of environmental images (Pinotti 2021), especially in relation to forms of intersectional identity proprioception.

In addition to VR, other technologies such as artificial intelligence (Viola and Voto 2023; Yarmel and Lang 2024), haptic feedback systems (Ley and Rambukkana 2021), and teledildonics (Rheingold 1991; Liberati 2017) are transforming the ways in which sexuality and intimacy are experienced, represented, simulated, and monetized. These technologies do not simply extend the history of pornographic representation by adding new devices to its repertoire. Rather, they contribute to a broader reconfiguration of erotic mediation, in which images become environments, bodies become interfaces, and desire is increasingly articulated through technical infrastructures, algorithmic processes, and networked forms of presence.

This issue takes this constellation of problems as its point of departure. By bringing together perspectives from aesthetics, porn studies, feminist theory, media archaeology, game studies, semiotics, history of sexuality, and visual culture, it investigates virtual sex not as a single technology or genre, but as a field of tensions in which old pornographic imaginaries encounter new environmental forms. The essays collected here explore how immersive, synthetic, interactive, and networked images reshape the relations between spectatorship and embodiment, pleasure and control, agency and objectification, fantasy and technological infrastructure. In doing so, they show that virtual sex is not only a question of technical innovation, but a privileged site from which to rethink the contemporary status of pornographic images and their capacity to affect and transform bodies.

The issue opens with Paola Zilioli’s article, “Feminist gazes in virtual reality: the POV aesthetics of

pornography,” which offers a feminist analysis of VR pornography by focusing on the point-of-view format as its dominant stylistic model. Zilioli argues that the migration of POV pornography from 2D audiovisual forms to VR involves both continuity and discontinuity: while VR intensifies the embodied relation between user, image, and device, it also reactivates long-standing feminist debates on the gaze, objectification, and spectatorship. Moving beyond a Mulveyan model of the male gaze, the article develops a neo-materialist account of pornographic experience as an affective encounter among organic and inorganic bodies, environmental images, and VR apparatuses.

Xavier Petit’s “Pornoscopy and Video Games: From Modding Practices to Pornoscopic Experiences” shifts the focus from VR pornography to video games, proposing the concept of “pornoscopy” as a way to understand the aesthetic and perceptual experience of pornographic materials after photography. Through case studies such as *Skyrim*, *Baldur’s Gate 3*, and *Subverse*, the article examines how pornographic modding, explicit scenes, and natively pornographic games transform the relation between player, avatar, interface, and virtual world. Petit shows that pornography in video games is not merely a layer of explicit content added to gameplay, but a reconfiguration of the rules, pleasures, identifications, and experiential regimes of gaming itself.

Sofia Torre’s “‘Io sono Valentina Nappi 3D.’ Personalization and empathy in VR pornography” investigates VR pornography through the public and pornographic persona of porn performer Valentina Nappi. The essay examines the performer’s body as a site of social, political, and economic tensions, asking whether VR’s promise of empathy is complicated by the dominance of male POV conventions and by the deliberate staging of objectification as postfeminist agency. Torre reads Nappi’s VR performances in relation to her broader celebrity, intellectual persona, and public positioning, suggesting that immersivity operates

not only as a technical effect but also as a form of affective and ideological adherence to a recognizable star image.

Massimo Clemente's "The Capitalization of the Self. The Face Between Seduction and Monetization" broadens the issue's inquiry toward webcamming, OnlyFans, social media, and the economy of self-exposure. Through a semiotic approach to amateur and platform-based images, the article analyzes how intimacy becomes monetizable in digital environments and how the face, body, and self are reorganized within circuits of visibility, validation, and exchange. Clemente traces a passage from seduction to capitalization, showing how the networked self becomes both producer and commodity, both agent of self-management and object of platform capture.

Cristina Voto's "Hallucinated Pornography: AI, Synthetic Erotics, and the Reverse-Engineered Image of Desire" turns to AI-generated erotic images and proposes the notion of "synthetic erotics." Through the works of Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes, Voto argues that AI erotics does not simply continue pornography's traditional pursuit of visual transparency and bodily availability. Instead, it introduces opacity, latency, hallucination, and estrangement as aesthetic and political operations. Her article thus reframes desire as something that emerges not from immersive realism or identification, but from glitches, delays, and failures of algorithmic legibility.

Claudio Monopoli's "Photography and Pornography in 19th Century Italy: A Historical Perspective on Media and Sexuality" offers a media-historical counterpoint to the issue's focus on contemporary digital environments. By examining late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy, Monopoli reconstructs the role of photography and postcards in the dissemination of pornographic materials and in the public debates that contributed to defining pornography as a social and legal problem. The article shows how pornographic photography not only circulated sexual imag-

inaries but also transformed medicalized or pathologized descriptions of sexual practices into images of desire.

The issue closes with Sveva Crisafulli and Attila Manfredi's "HABBO (M)HOTEL – A Tale on Abstract Sex and Early Digital Girlhood Erotics," a creative contribution not subject to peer review, which combines media archaeology and dialogical memory-work. Returning to Habbo Hotel as a formative environment for early digital desire in the Italian context of the 2000s, the text explores how avatars, private rooms, chat-based interactions, and gamified interiors became spaces for rehearsing intimacy, gender performance, erotic curiosity, and digital self-fashioning. Read against the patriarchal and hypersexualized media landscape of Berlusconi-era Italy, Habbo appears as an ambivalent archive of early post-internet erotics: at once a refuge from familial and social surveillance, a site of disembodied experimentation and queer possibility, and a platform where classed, racialized, and gendered fantasies could also be reproduced under the guise of play.

Taken together, the contributions gathered in this issue approach virtual sex as a crucial perspective from which to rethink the contemporary life of pornographic images. What emerges is not only a history of new devices or practices, but an inquiry into the ways desire takes shape when images cease to be merely looked at and begin to organize the conditions of embodied experience.

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Feminist Gazes in Virtual Reality: The POV Aesthetics of Pornography



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Abstract

This paper proposes a feminist analysis of VR pornography focusing on POV as its most recurrent stylistic model. To grasp the aesthetic complexity of POV porn, the analysis shows the diffraction of this subgenre from traditional audiovisual 2D technology through virtual reality, claiming that media discontinuity can be matched by some continuity of theoretical issues within a feminist framework. The first part of the analysis argues for the inadequacy of feminist readings crossed by reverberations of the Mulveyan theory of the male gaze, thus clearing the field for a different feminist canon able to shift theory beyond the binary opposition of an active subject facing passive objects of vision. The second part examines content and formal features of POV porn by focusing on the affective encounters between the organic and inorganic bodies of users, images and technologies within a neo-materialist framework. Finally, the paper highlights some relevant issues related to the effects of POV in VR porn that could constitute productive theoretical avenues for a feminist understanding of the aesthetic dynamics ongoing between human subjectivities, environmental images and VR material devices.

Keywords

[Virtual reality](#)

[Pornography](#)

[POV](#)

[Male gaze](#)

[Feminist aesthetics](#)

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Introduction

The guiding question of this paper can be formulated as follows: how does the media materiality of VR pornography give shape to the embodied experience of the user from a feminist perspective? The question under discussion is addressed by referring to the diffraction of the aesthetic features of the point-of-view (POV) subgenre from traditional audiovisual pornography through VR technology. This choice is motivated by two factors. Firstly, the POV aesthetic dominates VR porn to such an extent that it could be argued that it has become the dominant subgenre of 2D pornography and saturated the content offerings of VR pornography. Secondly, the fixed POV format and the absence of queer bodies in currently available VR porn could be, and indeed has been, interpreted as a symptom of, and intensification of, the paradigmatic “controlling male gaze” (Evans 2020, 5).

The analysis is grounded in a feminist philosophical framework that wanders from media and cultural studies to gender studies. As it has been noted (Taormino et al. 2013; Attwood and Smith 2014), the heuristic adequacy and value of feminist theory for the investigation of pornography is rooted in the seminal work of feminist film scholar Linda Williams’ *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (1989). After the “sex wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, debates on porn have gradually moved away from the reductionist dichotomies of anti-pornography and pro-pornography positions, which implicitly conflated different premises on the nature of sex with normative conclusions on pornography (Mikkola 2022). At the time of the publication of the second edition of *Hard Core* in 1999, academic discussions on pornography were already forming the body of scholarship of an emergent disciplinary field (Attwood and Smith 2014), laying the groundwork for the so called “second generation” of Porn Studies (Williams 2004). This subsequent body of scholarship considers pornography to be a “complex cultural form” (Biasin et al. 2011, 11, my translation) that must be contextualised and examined

from multiple perspectives. Academic work on pornography has been urged to engage with a broad constellation of questions on the historical and contemporary ways in which sex and technology shape each other (Haraway 1991), thus producing different embodied experiences of the self. In this paper, the focus is on the analysis of subjectivity in the pornographic field through the gender axis.¹

In the eye of the beholder: theorizing the gaze from a feminist perspective

The expression “point-of-view”, abbreviated as POV, pertains to the semantic domain of focalization. The concept was elaborated in literary theory (Genette 1986) to describe the perspective from which a narrative is depicted. In the context of literary analysis, the concept of internal focalization is predicated on a series of stylistic procedures that facilitate a rapprochement between the reader and the subject matter of the text. This process renders the feelings, perceptions and thoughts of the “I” of the text intimately accessible. In transferring the concept to the pornographic field, internal focalization can be recognized in POV porn. The relevant lines of analysis in this context include the perspective frame of the scene and the relationship between the user and the image. In relation to the perspective, focalization is chiefly accomplished through the utilisation of camera work, wherein the visual perspective of the camera aligns with the subjective gaze of the male performer and the user’s field of vision. In relation to the relationship between the user and the image, POV porn displays allow the viewer a first-person in-depth visual access to the bodies of the performers, who are positioned at the centre of the action as a “visual feast” (Paasonen 2011, 173).

The strong capacity of POV porn to viscerally

1 From the perspective of intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 1989), it is a theoretical simplification that fails to consider other identity articulations present in pornographic imagery and materials, such as those related to race, age, and class. Nevertheless, I believe this reduction is a productive one for the limited scope and purpose of my argumentation, as in most cases to date, VR porn is about the binary interaction of a white, straight male performer with one or more white, straight female performers (Rubin 2018). For black feminist critiques of feminist film theory, see Gaines (1986); hooks (1996).

engage the user, along with its gender connotations and its economic centrality in mainstream heteroporn, have made this stylistic model the target of antipornography and pro-censorship contemporary debates (Maina and Zecca 2016), which include renewed conceptions of pornography as a form of violence against women (Purcell 2012). It is not surprising that feminist common knowledge of pornography may find representational conventions active in POV porn to be degrading. A gender asymmetry is evident in the visual and carnal display of the performers: while the female bodies are present in full-length, alternatively accessible through a panoramic and close-up view, the male body coincides with the body of the camera and its presence on-scene is thus reduced to the penis and few other anatomical cutouts. Despite the presence of varied choreographies, this asymmetry can be regarded as a constant within the domain of mainstream audiovisual heteroporn. An examination of this macro-genre reveals an inclination towards the male viewer as the ideal subject of vision. In the domain of audiovisual culture, the condemnation of these stereotypical imbalances in the forms of looking has given rise to a strand of feminist analysis that draws upon Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Indeed, during the 80s and 90s Mulvey's seminal theses on the male gaze "exerted such a strong impact on the direction of feminist film theory that many subsequent works constitute a direct response to it" (Chaudhuri 2006, 39). It was soon noted that the fundamental issue with Mulvey's essay is that it presupposes and reinforces a universal and monolithic male subjectivity, as well as the absence of any female agency. This is achieved by excluding women's filmmaking and the very existence of non-male forms of spectatorship from the analysis. Despite presenting itself as a feminist critique, male gaze theory adopts and perpetuates the androcentric assumptions of Freudian sexed gaze categories (Freud 1905, 1915-1917), which are positioned at the core of cinematic scopophilia. Within psychoanalytic feminist film theory, scholars such as Kaja Silverman (1980) have offered more nuanced and complex perspectives,

questioning these binaries and the underlying assumption that male pleasure always revolves around masterful power. Through her study of masculinity, Silverman has challenged the concept of a single, universal “Man” by acknowledging the existence of marginal and unconventional forms of masculinity. Furthermore, she has distinguished between the gaze and what she terms “the look” (Silverman 1992). Drawing on Lacanian theory, she argues that the gaze cannot be identified with any single observer: no subject’s look is ever all-powerful or transcendent, not least because the spectator is always simultaneously part of the spectacle. Unlike the ideal notion of the (male) gaze, “the look” always comes from a situated subject.

The Mulveyan assumption that visual pleasure is an exercise of power and a representation of male prerogative, actively directed towards a passive female body, is often maintained when translated from narrative cinema to pornography (Solomon-Godeau 1991). In the field of porn studies, Williams’s work (1989, 1991, 1995) provided a means of refining Mulvey’s theory, similar to that suggested by Silverman, albeit within a distinct conceptual framework. According to Williams (1995), the reason of the omission of any female agency

may have to do with the dominance of a model of a disembodied and distanced “male gaze” that phallically masters the objects represented, rather than a plurality of differently disciplined spectator-observers seduced in different ways by a range of ero-to-pornographic images. (Williams 1995, 22)

Williams’s interpretation of the nineteenth-century rupture with the camera obscura model of vision (Crary 1990) laid the foundations for situated knowledge²

² According to Williams (1995), Crary’s theses overlook the observers’ carnal qualities, treating them as if they were abstract and neutral entities without variations in their sexual and gendered embodiments. Feminist epistemology has long emphasized the necessity of accounting for partial perspectives in the production of theory, rather than obscuring personal viewpoints with alleged universal methods and objects (Haraway 1991). On the challenging relationship between feminist political stances towards displays of power in pornography and situated carnal experiences of vulnerability towards its materials (both in the form of pleasure and distaste), see Paasonen (2007, 2011).

of the fading of a representational observer into a new kind of corporealized one. The camera obscura model is predicated on the dichotomous separation of subject and object, a concept that resonates with the theoretical division of sight and touch in the notion of voyeurism. Behind this psychoanalytic category is the Freudian idea of sexual perversion as an effect of replacing the “normal” sexual goal (the discharge of tension in reproductive matings) with a foreign objectual destination (Freud 1905). Freud’s (1927) theory posits that inanimate objects can possess visual substance, thereby rendering an image a possible substitute for the “proper” sexual object. Since pleasure within the authentic sexual experience would involve tactile perception and since pornography allegedly substitutes touch with sight, the genre easily becomes a great machine of perversion.

The theoretical underpinnings of this analysis stem from the “representationalist” or “referentialist paradigm” (Pinotti 2020, 599) of Western image theory, for which the image is mimetic. Within this framework, images are conceptualised as icons that refer to real objects. They are ontologically inferior appearances of real pre-existing entities. This paradigm has spanned the centuries from its classical formulations and still underlies representationalist critiques of pornography. However, as Williams noted (1995), in the fruition of hardcore materials the body of the viewer is caught in an intense arousal of the flesh where touch is a carnal experience that is not aimed at the “absent referent” of the represented object but rather at the tangible bodies and machineries of the pornographic experience. Viewing experiences can be reconceptualised as embodied encounters, with the synaesthetic interaction between the human sensorium and images and apparatuses of vision at the core of phenomenological analyses (Sobchack 2004; Paasonen 2011; Keilty 2016).

The reference to representation could only be maintained at a sociopolitical level and in a specific sense. It is possible to consider certain pornographic genres, such as POV porn, as performative bodily practices (Ma-

son-Grant 2004) that reinforce and disseminate heteronormative representations. This is because, by highlighting and repeating certain sexual acts, these stylistic formats normalise and popularise them. However, I agree with Paasonen (2011) that literally reading pornographic materials as representations, mirrors or symbols of hierarchies and ideologies of power simplifies the variety of embodied experiences one can have outside categorical terms and pre-existing axes of interpretation. Furthermore, neither set of representations has any inherent meaning, and studies of representations overlook the visceral reactions to pornographic encounters. Any analysis that seeks to account for users' embodied engagement with porn must go beyond meaning attribution and interpretation:

meanings are attached to body parts and sexual acts, yet this is only one level of activity and interaction taking place, and its forms and results are by no means fixed. [...] The ways of experiencing pornography do not merely result from "acts of signification" or from decoding a set of meanings encoded in the images in their processes of production. (Paasonen 2011, 270)

While it is important to recognise the active heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990) in the gaze economy of POV pornography, the uncritical adoption of the theoretical principles underlying the Mulveyan male gaze paralyzes analysis by treating focalisation as an abstract activity and disregarding the embodied nature of the relationship between bodies, images, and technologies. If viewers are constructed as passive subjects of dangerous masculine identifications, and if the shaping effects of mediating technologies are excluded from analysis, then pornography becomes a homogeneous function of ideology – in this case, "phallogocentric misogyny" (Williams 1995, 5). However, encounters with pornography are always affective, contextual and unstable (Paasonen 2007). Thus, what is needed are non-ideological accounts of the carnal interactions at play in pornographic experiences. Analysis should account for the power of pornographic materials to

affect their users and interpreters³ without assuming viewer mastery over the image and medium.

Bring me closer: POV of a neo-materialist feminist aesthetics

To avoid the problematic assumptions of representational and Mulveyan models of enquiry, feminist aesthetics can adopt a neo-materialist approach to porn, breaking with the dualistic foundation of the disembodied gaze. The ontological basis of Western scientific binary thinking (Braidotti 2021), along with its associated dichotomies (e.g. body and mind, nature and technology, subject and object, sex and gender, male and female, sight and touch), has been widely questioned in feminist theory since Haraway's work (1991) and through queer theory (Butler 1990; Halberstam 2005). This has undermined the essentialist assumptions underlying heteronormative conceptualisations of sex, gender, and sexuality. Within this canon of thought, a neo-materialist approach is needed to rethink the relationship between sexuality, matter and discourse. This renewed understanding of sexuality as a material-discursive phenomenon is based on the ontological and phenomenological framework of "agential realism", a philosophical perspective proposed by Barad (1996; 2003; 2007) that distances itself from representationalism in order to account for the materialisation of bodies. Within this neo-materialist perspective, subjectivity is defined as a relational and affective entity whose body is a hybrid of flesh and technology connected with other human and nonhuman agents and forces (Haraway 1991). Central to this elaboration of subjectivity is the Spinozian concept of affect (Spinoza [1677] 2006) as a field of agentive forces that emerges in the interaction between bodies beyond their signifying order relations (Gregg and Seigworth 2009). The notion of affect has been proposed as a hermeneutical tool

³ For the need to acknowledge and account for the specificity and vulnerability of one's situated point of view as a researcher with respect to pornographic materials, see Paasonen (2007, 2011, 2014).

in the study of porn through the concept of *carnal resonance* (Paasonen 2011), which seeks “to account for what the more negative entry points” of feminist theorization has failed “to cover: reverberations, affective intensities, and moments of being moved by dissonance as much as by ‘sympathetic vibrations’” (Paasonen 2011, 18).

In this paper, I am bringing into play the heuristic value of neo-materialist studies on pornography through a set of specific materials which challenges some feminist approaches for their heteronormative implicit. I am focusing on POV porn as a core dimension of gonzo pornography and for its continued dominance in the current production of VR porn (Evans 2020). Gonzo pornography appeared in the late 1980s and over the next decade became “one of the main lines of production of mainstream pornography, gaining a pre-eminence in the adult video market that lasts until today” (Biasin and Zecca 2016). According to pornography scholars Maina and Zecca (2016), one of its preeminent stylistic features is the use of the observational-participant POV, that can be understood through the notion of “first person shot” as developed by Ruggero Eugeni (2015). The POV exhibits “an embodied, dynamic, and relational gaze; an intimate synergy between this very body-gaze and a recording device” (Eugeni 2015, 53, my translation). This intimate synergy circulates between the bodies of users, machines and images. Through the active role of the camera (Tibbals 2014), the genre installs “the spectator within the represented space, virtually positioning him or her in the place of an actor reduced to a mere ‘disembodied penis’” (Zecca 2011, 72, my translation). The user can access high levels of engagement within the scene by virtue of the performer’s anonymity and elusiveness. Moreover, when looking through the field of view, the user is usually simultaneously being looked at by the female performer inside the iconic world. This mutual focalization enhances the user’s engagement and virtual performative interaction within the scene (Maina and Zecca 2016; Malaspina 2024). This movement towards the “inside” of the scene is a key aspect of POV porn’s success and has been inter-

preted as indicative of the Western truth-seeking quest for self-knowledge rooted in the sexual realm (Foucault 1976). The longing to be immersed in the physicality of sexuality, which is typical of pornography as a genre, has been associated with the “principle of maximum visibility” (Williams 1989). This desire to experience the “truth” of sex is realised in POV porn through the camera closely following the sexual action, ranging from full shots to genital zooming and surgically exploring the performers’ bodies and fluids. This extreme proximity of the camera to the performers’ bodies is said to produce tactile images that encourage a more embodied and multisensory relationship between the viewer, the medium, and the image (Marks 2000, 172). In Williams’ words, “sight engages carnal density and tactility, as well as gender and sexuality” (Williams 1995, 15). Following this line of thought, the affordances of the VR medium elicit an immersive “sense of the user’s presence in the virtual environment [...] and of the virtual objects in the real environment” (Pinotti 2020, 594). This is a kind of convergent attraction between the user’s body and the bodies in the images, which could be understood as an asymptotic attempt to definitively capture the confessions of the flesh.

Since the logic of POV shots is to allow a depth-in dive into the details of the bodies through continuous close-ups and zooming in, and “since the female body is the visual focus of heteroporn, this fragmentation and stylization might be seen as exemplary of fetishistic scopophilia” (Paasonen 2011, 174). Through the process of fetishising body parts such as the genitals, breasts and lips, women become objects (Mulvey 1975). Unsurprisingly, pornography has historically been considered a powerful tool for the mass objectification of women (MacKinnon 1987; Dworkin 1989; Mason-Grant 2004; Dines et al. 2010). However, this idea is based on the concept of a voyeuristic, controlling gaze, the heuristic flaws of which have already been highlighted. The presence effect of virtual immersive environments requires an understanding of vision processes whereby, once again, the Mulveyan idea of a mastery, detached, controlling gaze is inadequate: VR

images “offer themselves as actual entities to be perceived ‘in person’ rather than ‘images-of’ to be grasped in terms of their representational referentiality” (Pinotti 2020, 600). Furthermore, it could be argued that the bodies of all performers, not just women, are subject to objectification to varying degrees, as the graphic quality of porn and its pictorial realism tend to depict all bodies as “assemblages of anonymous, interpenetrating flesh in motion” (Paasonen 2011, 175).

Let me in: continuity and discontinuity of POV in VR porn

As I briefly recalled, the POV subgenre has historically occupied a large proportion of traditional audiovisual pornographic contents, and it has migrated into VR pornography while maintaining its quantitative predominance (Evans 2023). However, this media migration has not been neutral: the translation of porn images into VR technology allows for interactive and immersive experiences, the consequences of which need to be addressed. At first glance, VR porn could be seen as an amplification of the most problematic aspects of POV porn (Evans 2020). Yet we have seen that this conceptualization of vision relies on dualistic assumptions about human aesthetic experience that fail to account for the corporeal quality of encounters with pornography. Furthermore, it could be argued that this approach lies at the heart of the historical misconceptions and negative perceptions of pornography that have led to its theoretical exclusion from traditional aesthetic theory. There are multiple historical reasons for this exclusion, but they were certainly supported by the categories of paradigmatic Western art (Williams 1998; Saito 2007; Paasonen 2011; Attwood 2018). According to Saito (2007), “paradigmatic” refers to the standard form of the aesthetic relationship between a stable object, which is defined by a spatial or temporal frame and is distinct from its surroundings, and a viewer who perceives it through sight and possibly hearing, while maintaining a detached attitude. It is significant

to note how the “environmentalization” of the image (Pinotti 2020), made possible by the head-mounted display (HMD) in contemporary immersive virtual reality environments, has taken the dissolution of the aesthetic function of the frame to the extreme. The frame’s design ensured the separation between the image-world and the real world (Simmel 1902). In the virtual environment “the iconic landscape incessantly and continuously unfolds in 360 degrees, regardless of the orientation of vision” (Pinotti 2020, 594). While it would be anachronistic to conceptualise the image as an environment in this sense with regard to 2D technology, it is legitimate to recognise a genealogical tendency in the pornographic genre towards the dissolution of the subject/object duality. In paradigmatic art, this duality is guaranteed by the distance between the subject’s frontal position and the insular location of the object (Simmel 1902). According to Williams (1989; 1991; 1995), it is precisely this “apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion” (Williams 1991, 5) that makes porn users feel their carnal, visceral involvement in the pornosphere, causing the genre to be considered low and obscene. In her analysis of POV photograms from a late-60s stag film, which she selects precisely because it is “one emblem of the erotics of heterosexual male spectator-observers” (Williams 1991, 34), she reveals that the vision at play is far from detached and objectifying. While the constant theme of the scene is the pleasure of an apparently disembodied phallus, the male penis onscreen is actually “too palpably caught up in the ‘carnal density’ of the film’s vision to be conflated with the symbolic phallus” (Williams 1991, 36). As with pornographic films in general, the images in this proto-POV format reveal the physical presence of both the viewer and the performer. Their visual experiences are not separated from the scene by the frontal, distanced position of the head, nor are they merely a matter of identification with a character based on sameness and recognition. Instead, the relationship between them is a form of “corporeal, fleshy relationality and resonance” (Paasonen 2011, 203). The male performer’s ap-

parent fixed and stationary position, on which the viewer's experiential posture would be based, does not undermine the process of embodiment, but rather exposes the profound vulnerability of the flesh through the visceral appeal of pornography and the interactive connection between organic and mechanical bodies. This capacity to elicit carnal engagement lies at the heart of pornography's definition as a body genre (Williams 1991), highlighting the conceptual inadequacy of traditional aesthetic theory and psychoanalysis's theoretical framework, which conceptualise vision as a form of masterful contemplation. The unframed nature of the image in virtual, immersive environments represents a further step towards the visceral absorption of the human sensorium in the iconic world, the boundary of which with the real world is eroded by the specific affordances of VR headsets. Even more so than with 2D pornography, concepts such as control, mastery and detachment are inadequate for understanding the entanglement of the sexual body with the pornographic image and the affective dynamics of VR technology. Beyond the technical limitations of current VR devices, the perceptual boundaries between users' bodies, images, and devices are dissolving. This internal fading of the assemblage of organic and inorganic bodies during pornographic experiences has significant implications for how we think about sexual subjectivity as a symbiotic relationship between the body and technology, where differences become indistinguishable. As Wang (2021) puts it:

If the signature feature of VR pornography is the POV shot which places the camera — as the physical apparatus that enables the gesture of seeing — at the centre of the action for maximum enjoyment, then we must consider how this placement, by simultaneously moving the camera and moving the body, reveals the very point of convergence between human and machine. (Wang 2021, 225)

In his analysis of pornographic spectatorship in VR, Wang destabilises the opposition between viewer and

image by proposing that passivity is the constitutive structure of vision. Vision is no longer conceived as an autonomous, ego-driven activity. In the embodied relationship between the user and the VR medium, Wang argues that passivity materialises as a loss of control “over where to see, what to see, and who is seeing” (Wang 2021, 230). While I acknowledge the significance of his analysis, I disagree with his interpretation of 2D pornography as a “mode of eroticism sustained by narcissistic identification” (ibid.), which prompts him to view the transition from 2D to VR pornography as a radical discontinuity. Rather than passivity in psychoanalytic terms, I would argue that at stake in the relationship between the body and the machine in material encounters with porn is the vulnerability of being touched and moved by the images through the medium (Williams 1989; Paasonen 2007; 2011). Therefore, without diminishing the intensified experience of bodily engagement in VR porn compared to 2D technology, it is possible to trace a continuity in the genre’s affective economy. This continuity can be demonstrated by referring to the arousal gradient as a core element in the production and consumption of hardcore materials. As it is emphasized by the same “proposition underpinning the potential for VR pornography [...] the technology can be more arousing and intimate than traditional 2D pornography, which has already been found to have a considerable effect on arousal” (Evans 2023, 28), both for male and female users (Elsey et al. 2019; Milani et al. 2022). Empirical research has shown that VR pornography experiences, especially through POV shots, enhance sensations of pleasure and arousal, albeit still within a binary framework.

A feminist analysis of porn might still observe that in the current production of VR POV shots the heterosexual matrix operates and maintains itself by producing femininity and masculinity through the reiterative assignment of differential sexual roles and practices, the fragmentation of the body and the selection of genitals and other body parts as primary natural centres and signifiers of sexual difference (Butler 1990; Preciado 2019). One crucial

question thus concerns the possibility of queering sexual immersive environments. It could be argued that the potential for hacking VR porn with non-normative imagery of sexuality – including queer bodies and desires – has yet to be realised, as the production of non-mainstream amateur materials is limited by the cost and technical complexity of VR recording cameras (Evans 2023). However, to avoid repeating the flaw of a Mulveyan approach, it is important to consider the complexity of the relationship between production, circulation and consumption. As the history of the genre demonstrates, once porn is produced, it becomes available and is engaged with in a variety of creative ways beyond the producer’s control. Each encounter with it is situated and involves an affective engagement where media and images interface with the personal and embodied biography of the user, resulting in something “that spills over, that mobilizes the relation between the imagined bodies and viewing bodies in ways that are not entirely unpredictable, but which do not fall seamlessly into expected paths” (Kyrölä 2010, 188). Today, this highlights the need to refine analysis through the study of queer forms of embodied spectatorship. Indeed, it may emerge that the environmental image of VR porn can function as a *disorientation device* (Malaspina 2024), whereby the “proprioceptive coordinates linked to the gender self” (Malaspina 2024, 10) of the physical body are disrupted by the agentive force of the first-person shot (Slater et al. 2010). Empirical studies (Maister et al. 2014; Tacikowski et al. 2020; Zhang and Juvrud 2024) have begun to demonstrate the potential for navigating and negotiating gender identity within virtual environments. The perceptual disorientation of embodying different morphological features with strong body ownership of a virtual body, through first-person perspective and spatiotemporally congruent multisensory feedback (Slater et al. 2010), leads to cognitive and behavioural shifts after the experiment that may challenge and subvert traditional gender norms and identifications (Tacikowski et al. 2020). Future research could investigate the subversive potential of synchronization between HDM, teledildonic and full-

body tracking (FBT) technology in POV porn for disrupting the heteronormative alignment between a person's primary sexual signifiers, gender identity, and vectors of desire.

Conclusions

This paper has explored VR pornography with the lens of feminist aesthetics arguing that pornographic spectatorship, when conceived within a representational paradigm of vision, easily falls into a heteronormative discourse characterised by the binary opposition between an active male subject and a passive female object. Taking a neo-materialist approach has proven to be a more effective way of conceptualising the experience of sexuality in VR porn as both viscerally material and performatively engaged in critical decoding activities. Further research could benefit from focusing on case studies and empirical data in order to acknowledge the collapse of the clear-cut separation between the somatechnical experience of pornography and the political meanings associated with its iconic features. Processes of subjectification and objectification, bodies and images, affects and significances, sight and touch, and matter and meaning are inextricably intertwined in users' perceptual experiences and should therefore be considered as such in feminist aesthetic debates.

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Pornoscopy and Video Games: From Modding Practices to Pornoscopic Experiences



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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to examine pornographic modding in video games as well as pornographic games themselves through the lens of a new concept, pornoscopy. Pornoscopy is a concept forged to deepen our understanding of the complexity surrounding pornographic materials since the invention of photography. It is defined by its link to the aesthetic principles and technical apparatus that constitute the various media it encounters. In this paper, the iconic relationship between pornoscopy and video games will be analyzed, as well as its impact on player satisfaction, through the study of several games.

Keywords

[Pornography](#)

[Video games](#)

[Pornoscopy](#)

[Interface](#)

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Introduction

During our thesis research, the neologism “pornoscopy” was coined to describe pornography in the period following the invention of photography. It was argued this concept evolved alongside each new technical apparatus and visual medium following the invention of photography. To test this hypothesis, photography, stereoscopy, comic books, cinema, television, new technologies and video games were analyzed.

The suffix “skopéō” signifies “to observe” or “to view”, and it is particularly pertinent to this specific genre of pornography, distinguished by its aesthetic nature. This suffix is borrowed from a very specific apparatus that is still much less well known than photography: stereophotography, or stereoscopy. This apparatus allows the viewer to see a three-dimensional image from two almost identical images. The stereoscopic effect comes from the slight difference between the two images presented to the viewer thereby offering an unprecedented experience in human vision: the combination of two two-dimensional images to create a three-dimensional image. In other words, these three-dimensional effects are “produced by the stereoscopic union of two plane photographs which are invisible in the single picture,” to quote the creator of the stereoscope, Sir David Brewster (1856, 180). From two almost identical images, the viewer, through the stereoscopic apparatus, brings out a third image that was completely absent from the two previous ones that reveal it. Literally, stereoscopy reveals something new, something that was not visible before, and something that is only visible through the aesthetic experience of the viewer. The suffix “skopéō” has been employed to emphasize the novelty of pornography in the era following the invention of photography. That is why vision plays a central role. Pornoscopy, therefore, is not limited to the image (Bertrand and Baron-Carvais 2001, 153) but also encompasses the processes of viewing (Bertrand and Baron-Carvais 2001, 8) and dissemination (Bertrand and Baron-Carvais 2001, 23). Consequently, pornoscopy

will include productions described as pornographic, while adding the perceptive aspect of pornography, the aesthetic experience of pornographic material. In other words, pornoscopy is a concept that facilitates the analysis of the perception of pornography and its visual elements since the invention of photography. The concept of pornoscopy endeavors to encompass pornographic productions in addition to aesthetic experiences that have been fundamentally transformed by the invention of photography. In this regard, this concept stands in contrast to other contemporary concepts related to porn studies, such as “pornification”. Pornification, as discussed by Susanna Paasonen et al. in *Pornification and the Education of Desire* (2007) and *Pornification and the Mainstreaming of Sex* (2016) “addresses the flux between the pornographic and the mainstream while stressing the contingency of porn as a genre and category” (Paasonen 2007, 18). It would seem that the concept of pornification is based more on the complex and multiple ramifications of a “porn aesthetics” (Paasonen 2007, 8) than on the aesthetic experience of pornographic material. It is possible to see some similarities with Ahmed (2004, 146) and her developments on “queer” as a “sticky sign” (Ahmed 2004, 166), following the vision of Butler of queer as performative (Butler 1997). Rather than being considered static and invariable, queerness is understood as a form that is subject to change in accordance with environmental and historical influences, akin to pornographic materials. That is why pornoscopy leverages significant technological advancements in the domain of visual apparatus, which have evolved from audio-visual to multimodal, to establish, disseminate, and commercialize novel mediatized expressions of sexuality. A notable recent development in this technological landscape is video games.

The first challenge when discussing the philosophical analysis of video games is definitional. The lack of consensus on the definition of video games makes it difficult to determine the precise date of their birth. This is particularly surprising given that video games have become the world’s most profitable cultural industry, with

global sales exceeding \$170 billion by 2023, or “more than the film and music industries combined” (Du Montant 2024, 26). Considering the above, several definitions can be proposed. Video games can be defined as a form of entertainment that requires the use of a variety of computer peripherals, including screens, controllers, speakers, mice and keyboards. This distinguishes them from other forms of gaming, such as board games, which do not require such equipment. Video games are a playful, computer-based apparatus focused on entertaining the user. However, this is not the sole objective; the interactive dimension is also essential. The player uses joysticks, keyboard and touch screen, thereby establishing a direct connection with the apparatus. This interaction sets the course of the video game, encompassing the selection of objects, characteristics, dialogue options, and navigation. All these interactions occur within a virtual environment. Rather than moving a pawn on a chessboard or a square in Cluedo, the player moves an avatar within a virtual world. Furthermore, these interactions are governed by predefined rules. When an avatar is moved within the virtual world, the user can input commands via a joystick or keyboard, which will result in a corresponding action in the virtual world. For instance, pushing a joystick forward causes the avatar to move forward, but only within the limits set by the game. These limits are defined by the map of the game and therefore cannot be modified unless the game files themselves are altered. In summary, a video game can be defined as a ludic apparatus requiring computer peripherals, centered on the entertainment of a user interacting with the apparatus in a virtual world with pre-established rules.

To better understand the intricacies of video game pornoscopy, three case studies will be presented: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) to illustrate the modding of a mainstream video game; *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023) for the integration of explicit scenes within a role-playing framework; and *Subverse* (FOW Interactive, 2021) as an example of a natively pornographic game. These titles were selected both for their cultural im-

pact and popularity, and because they were directly experienced by the author through extensive gameplay. This approach will facilitate the consideration of the transition from a play society (Cotta, 1980) to a video game society, characterized by the pervasive influence of video games. The subsequent sections will develop the key concepts of identification with the avatar and the aesthetics of flux. The conclusion will assess the analytical value of pornoscopy for the study of both video games and pornography.

Video Game Pornoscopy: Aesthetic Principles and Technical Apparatus Constituting Video Games

One of the special features of video games is their ability to be modified, which distinguishes them significantly from other media such as film or comics. Once a video game has been created, published and distributed, particularly on a computer, the user usually owns a digital, dematerialized version of the game. This trend has been confirmed and has become the majority trend with the development of platforms offering the possibility of buying dematerialized video games, such as Steam (launched in 2003, with a market share of around 75% for PC video games) or Epic Game Store (launched in 2018). Although pornographic video games are relatively uncommon on Steam, pornographic mods for video games that are not originally pornographic are almost ubiquitous. This is particularly the case with video games from publisher Bethesda, including *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Ubisoft/Bethesda, 2002), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda, 2008) and, above all, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011). *Skyrim*, an RPG (Role Play Game) set in a fantasy world, is still to this day one of the most modded video games of all time. It will be demonstrated that the game was quickly offered mods that radically transformed the gaming experience.

It is obvious that most players download mods to enhance the visual aspect of the game or to improve the overall gaming experience – HD graphics, improved UI (user

interface), etc. They do so to maintain the visual experience up to date for a fourteen-year-old game. There are numerous highly functional mods that serve a variety of purposes, and even though *Skyrim* contains no pornographic or even explicit scenes, a vast majority of the most popular mods are simply pornographic. It is also noteworthy that these pornographic mods cannot be used without the more conventional graphical enhancement mods: they are generally a prerequisite for the more explicit mods to work properly. These range from the implementation of total nudity – with reworked bodies, particularly those of female characters, across all races, not just humans – to complete new buildings such as brothels, or even purely pornographic explicit animations, with changes in camera axis to take better advantage of the scene. Similarly, a majority of gender identities are represented: straight, gay, bi, lesbian, trans, everything is possible and conceivable. A mere enumeration of the possibilities afforded by *Skyrim* pornographic mods reveals the mods' capacity to allow the player to diverge from the original gameplay mechanics. In this instance, there is a transformation of the gaming experience: the mods are altering and shaping the video game into something new. It is no longer a question of defeating dragons or developing your archery skills but of *making* pornoscopy. The aesthetic experience of a player enjoying *Skyrim* in its original state differs from the one of another player modding the game to enhance its graphics. However, the player who mods the game to embody a colossal werewolf whose quest is to have sex with as many individuals as possible, creates an experience that is not only different, but wholly new.

A distinguishing feature of mods is their cost-free nature, a quality that differentiates them from the original video game they modify. All *Skyrim* modifications, ranging from graphical enhancements to pornographic content, are available for free. These creations are the product of a community of players who have purchased the game and who, via dedicated websites, make these modifications available online. As a result, all players who also own the game can benefit from them free of charge by downloading

them. In contrast, game developers do not possess these modifications, and thus, cannot claim ownership over them. In the event that a mod is deemed to contradict the fundamental principles of the game, the only recourse available to the developers is to request the removal of said mod. Given the mods' inherent characteristics and operational modalities, it can be posited that they embody a form of intermediality, which can be defined as "the contemporary form of intertextuality that transgresses media borders" (Sotamaa 2003, 8). This intermediality process extends beyond mere transformation and remodeling; real short films are created in the video game, recorded and often posted on pornographic sites, known as machinima. To illustrate, on one of the most visited pornographic websites, Pornhub, there is a short film lasting over 23 minutes, entitled *Andrea's Female POV Adventure*, viewed 350,000 times. In this machinima, the viewer follows in subjective view (POV being an acronym for Point of View), one of Andrea's adventures – Andrea being the name given by the creator to the main character of his machinima. The channel that posted this machinima has approximately ten others featuring the same character. Andrea is a wild farm girl, and she uses her body of unrealistic proportions to get out of any challenging situation. The script is as basic as you would expect to find in a traditional, heteronormative pornographic film: Andrea must go shopping in town for her parents, is kidnapped by a company of werewolves to be used as a sex slave after having sex with every NPC (non-playable character) she meets in town, both male and female. She manages to escape and returns to her parents' farm. The short film concludes with the following statement directed at her mother, who is concerned about her week-long disappearance: "it was the most ordinary trip to town for me." Surprisingly, the subjective view is maintained, even when sex scenes are in progress, which can result in some rather comical situations. For instance, the camera lingers on a single shot for several dozen seconds, during which there is no action, and the viewer sees very little. In this scene, the floor occupies three-quarters of the shot. Only

the sound effects suggest that this is a sex scene. The author of this machinima has therefore preferred to prioritize continuity and coherence in his choice of script, as well as the subjective view, to the detriment of the visibility of explicit scenes. During the werewolf sex scenes, the viewer does not see much of the scene in question, as in the example given above: all he can see is Andrea's breasts and the floor. The whole point of this machinima is to depict a young woman with an unrealistic anatomy being sexually dominated by werewolves. However, the viewer's experience is largely limited due to the creator's choice to maintain narrative coherence rather than catering to the content the viewer expects to see. The interest of this machinima lies not in its ability to depict pornographic scenes from a heroic-fantasy universe, but in its freedom to refuse what is expected of it, to choose not to show what would appear to be obvious. This approach has the merits of making this production quite original and demonstrating the freedom with which pornoscopy can be treated.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from *Andrea's Female POV Adventure*, timecode 13.29.

On this notion of freedom, it is noteworthy that Paasonen (2019, 147) presented pornographic machinimas as follows: "These videos extend the game world into

the realm of pornographic excess, reimagine it, and add a further layer to experiences accumulated through gameplay.” Paasonen brings forth the concept of “resonance”: “the notion of resonance opens up avenues for addressing gaps and frictions emerging between pornographic preferences and sexual identities. In doing so, resonance helps in conceptualizing the appeal of pornography beyond the notion of identification” (Paasonen 2019, 143). Initially, the content of *Andrea’s Female POV Adventure* may appear to align with Paasonen’s resonance, considering the script of this machinima. However, given the unexpected liberty exercised by the creator, it is more a question of dissonance than of resonance. The “appeal of pornography beyond the notion of identification” (Paasonen 2019, 143) could be here interpreted as a denial of pornography, because the pornographic aspect is only suggested by the sound effect; the visual experience is, at best, limited, refraining the viewer from having more than a fractional aesthetic experience of the pornographic material. Once again, it appears that pornoscopy allows the inclusion of surprising pornographic material such as this one, incorporating what might otherwise be excluded or overlooked.

Video games have historically been regarded as a subject of study that lacks seriousness and intrigue. This perception persists to a certain extent in contemporary times. However, the subject of games and the act of playing has been a topic of extensive exploration since the 1930s (Huizinga 1938; Goffman 1961; Haddon 1999; Lowood 2006). Given the widely acknowledged considerable impact of video games on contemporary societies, a rethinking of the “play society” concept, as defined by Alain Cotta in 1980, is imperative. The contemporary era has transitioned from a play society to one characterized by the pervasive influence of video games. This transformation is supported by Schmoll’s assertion that video games are “a paradigm of the play society” (Schmoll 2013, 6). It is crucial to acknowledge as well that the society’s engagement with video games might have some similarities to its engagement with pornography. For instance, Paasonen established

that the third approach to “pornification” called Porno Chic “refers to the sheer popularity of pornography (bearing in mind the staggering number of Pornhub visits alone) but, equally and even more centrally, to the broad circulation of imageries ‘which borrow from, refer to, or pastiche the styles and iconography of the pornographic’ (McNair, 2013, 36)” (Paasonen, 2016, 20). In other words, as well as video games are not a niche phenomenon anymore and can be found within many layers of our society, pornography has evolved to influence mainstream cultures. This analogy raises pertinent questions about the intersection of video games and pornography, and the insights it offers into the aesthetic dimensions of these forms, particularly in relation to pleasure and reality. The onus falls upon us to meticulously examine this interplay and its implications, paving the way for a nuanced and informed understanding of both the pornographic video game and its aesthetic dimensions.

The Reality of the Video Game Society: Ambivalent Pleasure And A Relationship With The Virtual World. From A Play Society to a Video Game Society?

As previously stated, it has been accepted since the 1980s that we live in a play society, as theorized by Alain Cotta, a society in which games play a vital and, above all, growing role.¹ For Alain Cotta, “Hardly less than the idea of nothingness, the idea of boredom takes precedence” (Cotta 1980, 1). That is why games have assumed a substantial role in contemporary societies, extending far beyond their traditional domains of education and marketing (Philippette 2024, 29). Contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by an environment that is not merely playful but is distinctly characterized by video games. Without limiting ourselves to the economic impact of the video game world, it is easy to see its omnipresence in our society. A prime

¹ In 1980, Cotta’s thesis presented a challenge to the prevailing theories on play, which posited a gradual decline in the importance and impact of play. This perspective was elucidated by Philippette 2024, 29.

example of this phenomenon is the character of Lara Croft from the video game *Tomb Raider* (1996, Eidos Interactive). According to Micheli-Rechtman, Lara Croft was “the first video game heroine to appear in fashion magazines,” and she was reincarnated “in the cinema, in advertising and in our visual environment in general” (Micheli-Rechtman 2008, 141).

While video games have been influenced by cinema, particularly since the era of 3D and the systematic use of cinematic images in video games, either as prologues or throughout the entire game, the reverse is also true: there have been numerous adaptations of video games for the cinema, and the language specific to video games is regularly used in the cinema. There is a retrospective influence of video games on cinema, after the latter was a considerable source of inspiration for the former. Far beyond cinema, the influence of video games is societal: in 2023, in France, 94% of 10–14-year-olds and 47% of those aged 65 and over are playing video games,² showing the extent to which video games have become an integral part of our societies. What is the reason for this influence? How, in the space of a few decades, have video games gone from being a fringe activity that it was shameful to flaunt, to becoming mainstream?

Most certainly because of the experience offered by video games, the unique interactivity that allows the player to “embody” (the question of embodiment will be discussed in the section revolving around the avatar) a character in a virtual world, a world that is not our own, a new world. Undeniably, the pleasure felt during the video game experience is a major factor in this success, and this pleasure is even more intense because interactivity requires active participation on the part of the player, as mentioned earlier. This highlights the necessity to examine the question of pleasure, its form and its development in the world of video games.

² Source: *Proportion des joueurs de jeux vidéo en France en 2023, par tranche d'âge*, survey carried out on a representative panel of 4005 people, available online: <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/481002/proportion-gamers-francais-age-jeux-video/>.

Pleasure in a Video Game World: Between Subjectivity and a Regulatory Framework, Videogame Pornoscopy as an Iconic Relationship Between Video Games and Player Satisfaction

As Mathieu Triclot rightly explains, scientific studies of video games have no trouble identifying and analyzing issues relating to the apparatus: “it’s easy to describe the properties of the medium, whether in terms of hardware specifications, the graphic forms displayed on the screen or the rules systems [...]” (Triclot 2011, 30). However, “it is difficult to produce an objective description of ‘what it feels like to play’, of a ‘form of experience’” (Triclot 2011, 30): as Raphaël Koster sums up, “the pleasure taken in practicing an activity remains a particularly difficult phenomenon to grasp scientifically” (Koster 2013, 100).

The degree of variability in pleasure is what presents the greatest difficulty here: the subjectivity of individual experience makes scientific analysis perilous. In the same sense, the rules that pre-exist the subjective experience of pleasure are conditions for it: “It is therefore impossible to dissociate these two dimensions of the game: the subjective experience of pleasure and the objective regulatory framework” (Koster 2013, 101). It is also important to take into account how experience and enjoyment vary depending on the medium used, whether arcade, home console, or personal computer: “Arcade games, for example, appear to be an experience of mastery: they force players to discipline their bodies in order to respond to the accelerated injunctions of the computer program” (Koster 2013, 101).

Games on [home] consoles, on the other hand, are more of an immersive experience, because they introduce spaces to explore and therefore the possibility for the player to invest in the program over the long term, to uncover all its secrets. Each game medium therefore generates its own ‘experience regimes’” (Triclot 2011, 28). How do pornographic video games satisfy the player? How do the play and the pornographic aspects fit together? Of course, player satisfaction can be understood as the simple satis-

faction of sexual arousal; if the pornographic video game manages to arouse the player, mission accomplished. However, pornoscopy is not merely the satisfaction of a sexual desire, it goes far beyond that.

To illustrate this further, something needs to be added to the example of the video game *Skyrim* and its mods. In this case, pornography will be applied as a tracing of the mainstream video game, which will in fact be transformed and become pornographic. It is no longer a question of simply playing *Skyrim*; rather, it is about playing an alternative version of *Skyrim*, a kind of enhanced version of the original video game, offering new possibilities and perspectives. It is important to note that this is not a case of simply grafting huge penises and breasts onto all the characters in the game. Pornographic modding, as a layer, is going to deposit something onto the game, which is going to become a component of it, a part of it. If this layer modifies the game, then it also modifies the player's experience, since the "objective regulatory framework" has been changed. This is why a modded *Skyrim* on pornography becomes a pornoscopic game: the pleasure derived from playing a video game is not the same as the pleasure derived from playing a pornographic videogame. The game, the rules and the individual experience are all transformed.

This is a manifestation of the fundamentally iconic nature of pornoscopy, which functions as an intermediary between the traditional videogame world and the pornographic world, creating another. *Skyrim* is not a pornographic game; the pornographic mods in *Skyrim* rely on the original base game. The pornographic link gives rise to an alter ego, another video game, a pornoscopic one, and pornoscopy acts as a layer between the game and the player. Thus, the subjective experience of playing a pornographic modded video game differs from that of playing a traditional video game. It is possible to see a similar variation in enjoyment depending not just on the medium of the game, but on the type of game: for the modded *Skyrim*, satisfaction will come from the diversity of quests, settings and relationships with NPCs (non-playable characters), and

there are no limits to the scenarios, since mods are legion and varied, going so far as to implement other characters, films or other video games in *Skyrim*.

To further elaborate, it would be worthwhile to consider an additional example from a game that was originally designed to be pornographic: *Subverse* (2021, FOW Interactive). This science fiction role-playing game, an independent production, reveals a unique development. The Kickstarter campaign to fund it in 2019, with a goal of £100,000, raised £1,668,626 with 58,730 contributors in one month, making it one of the top 20 most successful video games on the Kickstarter funding platform. In the initial weekend following its release in early access on Steam on 26 March 2021, it became the second best-selling game of the moment, behind *Valheim* (2021, Iron Gate AB), the most meteoric success in the history of the Steam platform. To date, it has sold more than 500,000 units. The SF universe and some of the characters are explicitly inspired by the *Mass Effect* franchise (2007, Electronic Arts), one of the most successful SF and RPG video games of all time. The gameplay can be praised for its diversity: from the nervous *shoot'em up* phases (SHMUP) in space, inspired by the successes of the 1980s-1990s arcade and PC video games, to the turn-based tactics on the ground reminiscent of *X-COM* (1994, MicroProse), not forgetting the important and numerous RPG phases, with long dialogue phases and advanced voice acting of remarkable quality.

The story itself is well-developed, with political intrigue and an extensive background to the universe presented. Pop culture references are legion and extend far beyond the domain of video games. The fourth wall is regularly breached in a manner reminiscent of the Marvel comic *Deadpool*, which will inspire the character design of the protagonist, Captain. The primary issue comes from the ad nauseam addition of these references: the intergalactic system of government is called Imperium and controls its citizens based on an indisputable higher religious law (*Warhammer 40K*, originally a board game from 1987). Galactic distances are stated in parsecs (*Star Wars* by George Lu-

cas, 1977). The map of a galaxy allows the player's spaceship to move freely within the boundaries of the galaxy, with the task of scanning planets (*Spore*, 2008, Maxis). The references are endless and, regrettably, frequently pointless.

However, this video game does not use the video game medium as a pretext for showing explicit scenes; it develops varied gameplay and offers a rich video game experience. *Subverse* is undoubtedly an important milestone in the history of pornographic video games, as it demonstrates the feasibility of developing a pornographic video game that is, fundamentally, just as much a video game as it is pornographic. The character of DEMI, one of the spaceship's first recruits, is a good example of this. DEMI is an android, a robot with artificial intelligence, model APEX-17 D19M45, one of the few survivors of this model of android personal assistant, following the Great AI Purge, an imperial ban on artificial intelligences within the empire, both in their possession and in their manufacture. As the story unfolds and develops, DEMI enhances its database, unlocking more human vocabulary and intonations, presenting a profound development in voice acting. In the *Subverse* universe, alien and human races coexist and interact with robots, cyborgs and artificial intelligences, raising, sometimes unwittingly or unknowingly, fundamental questions about the place, function and evolution of artificial intelligences or avatars. Among them, are avatars people, beings capable of humanity and feelings? What are their links with reality?

Identification With the Avatar: Queer Icon and Aesthetics of The Flux

To better understand the videogame avatar, it is essential to recall the etymological origin of the virtual. This will enable us to situate the virtual-actual-real interaction and its impact on the avatar. "Etymologically, [virtual] comes from the Latin *virtualis* meaning 'that which is only potential'. For example, before conception, a child exists 'virtually', i.e. 'potentially' for its future parents; it is the ac-

tualization of this virtuality that lies at the heart of the process of becoming a parent” (Micheli-Rechtman 2008, 136). The etymology of the term ‘virtual’ reminds us that the virtual and the real are not opposed; rather, the opposition lies between the virtual and the actual (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, 125). The definition of the term “virtual” implies that the avatar is, by nature, in a state of potentiality rather than actuality. It is a virtual incarnation, in the making. The term “incarnation” is deliberately employed in direct reference to the etymology of avatar, “a term derived from the Sanskrit *avatara*, meaning incarnation, return,” which “designates the digital representation of the person moving in a three-dimensional environment. It is the player’s ‘alter ego’” (Micheli-Rechtman 2008, 141). Above all, “the avatar constitutes a virtual identity whose form is evolving” (Renault 2023, 38), and over which the player has a concrete and growing influence as personalization evolves and deepens.

In this sense, Thierry Hoquet describes Avatar as “unclassifiable and elusive, always in transition and never fixed. Its essence is to be queer: unassignable to any definitive identity [...]” (Hoquet 2021, 324–325). Avatar is in a state of flux, neither entirely real nor entirely actual. It is a variable entity, capable of infinite modification, and represents an ever-changing aspect of identity that cannot be fixed. “Avatar is a passer between worlds” (Hoquet 2021, 325), an intermediary between the real and virtual worlds. The avatar is, once again, a digital icon, “always in transition, [...] never really where we have seen him” (Hoquet 2021, 325), always already somewhere else, he “has only one homeland: it’s the whole universe, or rather pluriverses, infinite parallel worlds that he visits to the point of intoxication” (Hoquet 2021, 348), capable of investing himself and “creating links in each of them without any of them constituting a privileged attachment for him. He accepts no borders, claims no nationality, belongs to no particular world” (Hoquet 2021, 348).

Considering the inclusion of the avatar in the aesthetics of the flux, how can the mechanisms through

which the player identifies with the avatar can be examined? Several possibilities can be considered for an avatar with which the player will “identify [...] as an extension of oneself or as oneself” (Renault 2023, 38). Personalizing the avatar, whether through physical characteristics, clothing or even the name given to it, will enable the player to express themselves, whether the avatar is “realistic (a faithful projection of the player), augmented avatar (a projection of the player with a few different characteristics), or idealized (a fantasized version of oneself)” (2023, 46). And, of course, none of these categories are set in stone, and can change or evolve at any time, with video games for which personalization will become fundamental and essential.³

The appendices do not illustrate the possibilities for personalizing the avatar of a particular game. This is deliberate: to fix in one image an almost infinite number of possibilities would be irrelevant. It is impossible to assign a fixed image to an avatar precisely to illustrate the multiplicity of variations in its identity. However, some conservative gamers regularly take offence at customization possibilities that do not directly resemble them,⁴ as was the case with the video game *Baldur’s Gate 3* (2023, Larian Studios), in which the player can embody a non-binary avatar and can romance all NPCs, whatever their gender or sex. One of the most discussed customization options was the ability to choose the appearance of the avatar’s genitalia. Indeed, there are many ways of unlocking intimate scenes in *Baldur’s Gate 3* (henceforth abbreviated to *BG3*), which form an integral part of the plot and are often explicit. But is *BG3* a pornographic game simply because

3 Some players express the fact that their avatar can, for various reasons, take on multiple facets: “Sometimes I make it look like me, sometimes not, it depends on the roleplay I want to play”, (Renault 2023, 46). For more details, see the entire study by Sophie Renault in *Mon avatar, la mode et moi, ibid.*, in which she shows the fundamental importance of the avatar’s clothing appearance in the game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020, Nintendo).

4 As an example, it is possible to cite the controversy that occurred in September 2018 surrounding the DLC (Downloadable Content) *Desert Kingdoms* for the game *Total War: Rome II* (2013, Creative assembly). This DLC implemented a small percentage to obtain feminine generals. In three days, 1642 negative reviews were submitted on the Steam platform. For further details, see this article from IGN: “Total War: Rome 2 Is Being Review Bombed on Steam over Imagined Controversy” (<https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/09/25/total-war-rome-2-is-being-review-bombed-on-steam-over-imagined-controversy>).

it features explicit cutscenes?

It could be argued that the developers' primary intention was not to make a pornographic video game. While the game is recommended for an adult audience – not just because of the explicit scenes, but also because of the violence and language – it is not, however, labelled as pornographic. From our perspective, the question is not meaningful, for several reasons. The first concerns the nature of the game itself. As an RPG, *BG3* offers a wide variety of situations that evolve according to the player's choices. It is entirely possible to finish the game without sleeping with anyone. It is important to note that some NPCs are more reluctant than others, or on the contrary, more inclined to sleep with the avatar, depending on their personality and backstory. The existence of explicit sex scenes is a possibility placed on the same level as taking a particular path, visiting a particular cave or talking to a particular NPC: the choice is ultimately up to the player, and is simply an expression of the freedom inherent within RPGs.⁵ Unlike *Subverse*, which was praised for the quality of its gameplay – an unexpected element for a game whose aim is eminently pornographic – *BG3* manages the tour de force of showing pornographic scenes that are consistent with the story's narrative logic, and of a quality that is also praised and appreciated.

Conclusion

In this article, the aim was to examine pornographic modding in video games as long as pornographic video games through the lens of pornoscopy. This study revealed that even non-pornographic video games can be transformed into pornoscopic video games. The analysis of *Skyrim* mods demonstrated that video games could transcend their medium and become machinimas, there-

⁵ However, in the first few weeks following the game's release, it was undoubtedly the explicit sex scenes that got people talking the most on the Internet, particularly one with a druid capable of turning into a bear during the sex scene. The developers explained that the ease of access to these scenes was a coding error that made the characters more inclined to accept the advances of the player's avatar.

by revealing a certain degree of freedom inherent to video games' pornoscopy. Consequently, *Skyrim* mods gave rise to a distinctive pornoscopic videogame experience. This led to establish the transition from a play society to a video game society, underscoring the centrality of player satisfaction and the considerable impact of video games on contemporary societies. Utilizing *Baldur's Gate 3* as a case study, it has been demonstrated that the incorporation of pornographic scenes does not necessitate a game's conceptualization exclusively around these elements, as was the case with *Subverse*, which was developed from the outset with the explicit objective of being pornographic. *Subverse* also showed the ability to raise fundamental philosophical questions concerning the status of the avatar and the aesthetics of the flux. As of now, the concept of pornoscopy substantiates that pornographic video games cannot be regarded as a subject lacking sufficient scientific rigor. There is so much more to say on this subject, ranging from the first pornographic video games to the potential evolutions to come considering the ultracontemporary evolution of artificial intelligence. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the indispensable role of the concept of pornoscopy in order to better understand the intricacies of pornographic video games, and of pornographic manifestations overall.

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“Io sono Valentina Nappi 3D.” Personalization and Empathy in VR Pornography



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Abstract

This essay aims to investigate the relationship between the personalization of pornography and empathy in virtual reality pornography, with a focus on the figure and work of Valentina Nappi. The performer’s body, conceived as a site of social, political, and economic tensions, will be examined within the framework of pornographic immersivity and the potential for heightened empathic engagement. By adopting a postfeminist lens and applying to Valentina Nappi’s work an interpretative framework grounded in concepts such as choice, personal agency, and empowerment, the issue of empathy, and its deliberate absence, in VR pornography can be re-interpreted as a strategic, entrepreneurial, and provocative choice, consistent with both the professional trajectory and the public persona of the performer. The ability of VR to connect humans through immersive and networked virtual environments (Evans 2020, 2) takes on a unique significance when it comes to emotional connections with an audience accustomed to the online presence of Valentina Nappi, who combines the performance of pornographic corporeality with a distinctive social, cultural, and political persona. Her public identity is characterized by a layered and often unresolved interplay of seemingly contradictory attributes, which in turn contribute to shaping and diversifying her image as a porn performer. While the sensual grasp of the cinematic object of desire is only partially fulfilled, the immersivity of virtual reality introduces new possibilities for spectator participation and identification.

Keywords

[Embodiment](#)

[Pornography](#)

[Virtual Reality](#)

[Body](#)

[Feminism](#)

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Introduction

This essay aims to investigate the relationship between personalization of pornography and empathy in virtual reality pornography, with a focus on the figure and work of Valentina Nappi, one of the most prominent performers in both the Italian and international adult film industries. The performer's body, conceived as a site of social, political, and economic tensions, will be examined within the framework of pornographic immersivity and the potential for heightened empathic engagement. Pornography has historically played a pivotal role in shaping interactions with digital technology (Ortoleva 2009, 139), particularly through its influence on the development of new and emerging media (Evans 2020, 2). When discussing the interrelationship between VR pornography and the potential to experience sexual abandon, desire, pleasure, and authenticity through immersive, empathetic engagement, we are confronted with an epistemological conundrum. Empathy has increasingly come to be seen, both in historical and contemporary discourses surrounding virtual reality, as an idealized property of the medium. Standing to Leighton Evans (2020), the characterization of VR as an "empathy machine" has given rise to predictions that the medium will foster more empathetic relationships between viewers and pornography, as well as between pornographic performers and their audiences. The assumption is that creating a VR experience will inherently foster an empathetic response, due to the medium's immersive and embodied affordances (Evans 2020, 1). Nevertheless, the promise of VR as a medium capable of facilitating more empathetic relationships between pornography and the viewer, as well as between pornographic actors and viewers, is currently undermined by the dominance of the male point-of-view genre, which typically embodies the viewer in the position of a straight white male while a female performer submits to his desire, relegating the female performer to a secondary or subordinate role. What occurs when the decision to stage one's own objectification is framed as a postfeminist strategy of

empowerment and a challenge to the traditional notion of female passivity?

With more than four hundred performances for leading adult entertainment studios – including Brazzers, Dogfart, Elegant Angel, Evil Angel, Digital Playground, and Jules Jordan – Valentina Nappi has become one of the most prominent Italian porn stars. Her career began in 2011, when she was introduced to the industry by the iconic Rocco Siffredi, debuting in *Rocco's POV Volume 24* and soon after starring alongside him in *Rocco's Bitches in Uniform*.

By adopting a postfeminist lens and applying to Valentina Nappi's work an interpretative framework grounded in concepts such as choice, personal agency, and empowerment, the issue of empathy, and its deliberate absence, in VR pornography can be reinterpreted as a strategic, entrepreneurial, and provocative choice, consistent with both the professional trajectory and the public persona of the performer. Postfeminism suggests a more nuanced relationship between culture, politics, and feminism than the more conventional "backlash" paradigm allows (Tasker and Negra 2007, 4). Feminist activism has long encountered strategies of resistance, negotiation, and containment, processes that a backlash model, with its reactive and oppositional logic, tends to oversimplify. By combining Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological and interdisciplinary film theory, and particularly her embodied account of vision,¹ with analytical tools from postfeminist cultural studies, this essay seeks to investigate the effects of virtual technologies on post-pornographic aesthetics and to explore the increasingly blurred boundaries between so-called mainstream pornography and its alternative forms. The ability of VR to connect users through immersive and networked virtual environments (Evans 2020, 2) assumes a distinctive relevance in the context of affective relations with audiences already accustomed to Valentina Nappi's

1 Cfr. Sobchack, 2002, I. The major theme of *Carnal Thoughts* is the embodied and radically material nature of human existence and thus the lived body's essential implication in making "meaning" out of bodily "sense."

online presence, where pornographic corporeality intersects with the construction of a recognizable social, cultural, and political persona

Postfeminism and the Virtual Sexualization of Culture

According to feminist media scholars such as Yvonne Tasker (2007), Diane Negra (2007), Sue Jackson, and Tiina Vares (Jackson and Vares 2015), the “sexualisation of culture” (McNair 2002; Attwood 2006), and more specifically its articulation through postfeminist media (Tasker and Negra 2007; McRobbie 2009), constitutes a significant social context for the identity formation of women and girls in contemporary late capitalist societies. Post-feminist media are characterised by an intense focus on the female body, both as a site of agency and as an object of a scrutinising, harsh gaze (Gill 2007, McRobbie 2009, Tincknell 2011). Postfeminist culture functions to incorporate, normalize, or appropriate elements of feminism; crucially, it also commodifies feminism through the figure of the woman as an empowered consumer, placing emphasis on educational and professional opportunities for women and girls (Tasker & Negra, 2007, 6). Like postmodernism, postfeminism involves a particular relationship to late capitalist culture and the forms of work, leisure, and, crucially, consumption that thrive within that culture. From a postfeminist perspective grounded in the notion of empowerment, the inability – or impossibility – of reconciling desire with professional achievement is framed as a diminution of personal status. Within a constantly evolving social and media landscape, the representation of a connection between professional success and a fulfilling sexual life participates in a broader redefinition of female subjectivity and individuality. As Jane Juffer observes, women’s entry into and access to a form of entertainment historically coded as masculine takes the form of a “domestication,” whereby the construction of a new erotic subjectivity coincides with the woman’s position as a potential consumer. Whereas traditionally the relation-

ship between women, entertainment, and desire has been articulated more in terms of erotica than pornography, feminist responses to anti-sex feminist critiques expose the argumentative fallacy of conceiving pornography solely as an expression of male and heterosexual power and desire. Studies of pornography have largely revolved around questions of cultural meaning on the one hand, and those of media effects on the other. The marker of porn has been identified as a symptom and symbol of patriarchal culture, of heterosexual masculinity in crisis and of cultural resistance alike, especially when it comes to feminist porn, which is thought to challenge and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, age, and body type, exploring the concept of desire, power, beauty, and pleasure against the limitations of the gender hierarchy (Taormino et al. 2013, 9).² Often separated from the “mainstream” by cultural commentators, feminist pornography also defines itself as different, particularly in terms of politics (as centring female empowerment, non-normative and queer displays of sexual acts and desires), ethics (as being detached from the potentially oppressive working practices of the porn industry), and economics (as resisting the standardized commodity forms of the industry). As Paasonen states, the conventions and imagery of pornography have been extensively studied as representations that depict, shape, and influence social categories such as gender, race, and class (Paasonen 2014, 136) as well as the negotiation of diverse body types. If, traditionally, the materiality of the body has been closely associated with the idea of pleasure, the postfeminist conception of the body is instead tied to the notion of merit: only a particular kind of corporeal materiality, one that conforms to specific social standards and imperatives, is deemed worthy of aspiring to pleasure. In some contemporary pornographies, particularly within the realm of feminist and alternative pornography, the porn star’s body has become a contested site of political and cultural significance, where dominant repre-

2 See Maina 2014, 182.

sentations of gender, sexuality, and identity are both challenged and rearticulated.³ While the pornographic body is inextricably tied to the social and economic structures of the porn industry, it also brings into focus broader dynamics of cultural exploitation and labour precarity, dynamics that extend into the domain of VR pornography as well.

As Ashton, McDonald, and Kirkman (2019, 160) observe, drawing on Brophy (2010), virtual reality has the potential to transform and potentially enhance pornographic experience in several key ways: by increasing verisimilitude (making the experience appear lifelike to the user), deepening immersion (enabling the consumer to feel embedded within and integral to the scene), enabling interactivity (allowing the user's choices and actions to shape the narrative), and facilitating unbounded access (making available virtually any type of pornography, regardless of how niche, unconventional, or extreme it may be).

The emphasis on alternative pornographies and on the potential of VR as a transformative medium for adult content often sustains a belief in the promise of performer agency, understood here as a function of expanded technological possibilities in a networked culture, the multiplication of consumer choices, and the increasingly porous boundaries between production and consumption (Maddison 2013, 102). While it is true that the advent of the Internet has revolutionized pornography in terms of choice, accessibility, and ease of consumption, enabling instantaneous access both at home and in the workplace, and establishing it as a commodity largely unbound by legal, social, or geographical constraints, virtual reality technology advances this transformation even further by decoupling pornography from the scopophilic pleasure that has traditionally characterized it. In two-dimensional pornography,

3 For instance, feminist pornographer Erika Lust, when interviewed about her vision of pornography, advocates for a different perspective and a more realistic, enjoyable representation of sex from the female point of view. She emphasizes the need for women to actively participate in shaping new representations: "It's so important that women make films in general, and pornography in particular, because 95 percent of the films made are by men as producer, director and scriptwriter. When you analyse what is really going on in films, the woman is almost never the protagonist, but usually a vehicle for the man to get his pleasure." See: Thornton 2009, *Interview: Erika Lust*, <https://www.barcelona-metropolitan.com/features/interview/>.

the spectator's embodiment is characterized by the *cinematic visibility of the gaze* directed at the *mise-en-scène* of sex, and by what Sobchack, drawing on Martin Heidegger, defines as "the hazardous thrown-ness that informs human existence in both its objectivity and subjectivity" (2002, 87). In her analysis of the existential possibilities and contradictions that shape our "gaze" upon the world and others in the cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski, Sobchack observes that the convergence and confusion of "logical contingency" and "emotional turbulence" (Sobchack 2000, 87) become palpably manifest. The author adopts a phenomenological perspective to examine the existential tensions in the cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski, highlighting the conflict between rationality and affect, objectivity and subjectivity.⁴ Through the notions of "logical contingency" and "emotional turbulence" (Sobchack 2000, 87) conceived as dual and opposing aspects of the irrational, Sobchack demonstrates how these dimensions emerge simultaneously and intertwine within the specificity of concrete human experience. Applying Sobchack's notions of logical contingency and emotional turbulence to VR pornography allows for an investigation into how this technology restructures the viewer's sensory and emotional experience, superimposing rationality and affectivity in radically new ways. From this perspective, VR is not merely a new form of sexual content, but a philosophical device that unsettles our relationship with the body, perception, and the very notion of intimacy, as it blurs the boundaries between logic and emotion, materiality and abstraction, presence and absence. As Vivian Sobchack observes, emotional turbulence denotes the unstable dimension of affectivity that arises from embodied subjectivity (2000, 87); from this perspective, although virtual reality pornography aspires to

4 See Sobchack 2002, 87. According to Sobchack, throughout his films Kieslowski exercises a form of doubled vision that articulates and dramatizes the uncanny way in which the dual and contrary aspects of the irrational arise together and are confused and synthesized in the specificity of human experience. Although logical contingency and emotional turbulence constitute entirely different methods of subverting the rational and making us aware of its (and our) "other," they are nonetheless systemically related. As Sobchack states, we are able to see how their actual convergence in concrete situations undermines the abstract distinctions we make between them—as well as between their oppositional corollaries, "chance" and "fate."

generate empathy through immersion and first-person perspective, the result is often a form of forced and asymmetrical intimacy, experienced by the viewer as unsettling or, as Leighton Evans writes, “uncanny”⁵ (Evans 2020, 124). Following Sobchack, VR pornography is marked by the irruption of the elusive within the apparent familiarity of desire. As in Kieślowski’s cinema (Sobchack 2000, 85), the everyday, understood here as the habitual consumption of pornography, is destabilized by elements that disrupt the sensory and narrative coherence of the experience. In VR pornography, the desiring body is no longer a passive spectator of a visible scene, but is instead co-implicated in an environment that simultaneously simulates and disembodies it. The materiality of the body and the reality of sex that define hardcore pornography give way to a technologically mediated sexual experience – one that is self-aware and destabilizing. In this context, to borrow Samantha Breslin’s words, “bodies can break into pieces as quickly as desire can be transformed into revulsion.”⁶ As Leighton Evans writes, “VR does not necessarily create empathy at all but is creating a sense of altered and enforced intimacy” (2020, 87). What, then, are the implications of this sense of uncanniness when applied to a pornographic figure such as Valentina Nappi, who is also publicly recognized for her extra-pornographic qualities and intellectual persona? Valentina Nappi, who was introduced to pornography in 2011 by iconic Italian porn star Rocco Siffredi, is undoubtedly one of the most important Italian porn stars to date. Debuted with *Rocco’s POV Volume 24* and then Siffredi’s sparring partner in *Rocco’s Bitches in Uniform*, Nappi has appeared in more than four hundred scenes produced by a range of prominent adult entertainment companies, including Brazzers, Dogfart, Elegant Angel, Evil Angel, Digital Playground, and Jules Jordan.

5 In this context, the title of Samantha Breslin’s article on virtual reality, *Porn’s Uncanny Valley*, is particularly significant, as it captures the disquieting tension inherent in VR pornography, between its promise of immersive intimacy and the affective estrangement often provoked by its simulated nature. See: <https://www.theatlantic.com/amp/article/561521>.

6 See <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/06/porns-uncanny-valley/561521/>.

Valentina Nappi: A *Sui Generis* Pornographic and Political Embodiment

Described on [BadoinkVR.com](https://badoinkvr.com) as “a bestseller both online and offline”⁷ Nappi has appeared in more than four hundred scenes produced by a range of prominent adult entertainment companies, including Brazzers, Dogfart, Elegant Angel, Evil Angel, Digital Playground, and Jules Jordan. Her significance as a pornographic performer is also clearly reflected in her involvement in VR pornography, beginning with *Cumming Full Circle* (Badink 2015), followed by several titles including *American Daydreams 23595* (NaughtyAmerica 2017), *Avengers: A XXX Parody* (Badink 2017), *Becoming Italian* (Badink 2018), *Free Valentina Nappi* (Badink 2020), and *Best Anal Compilation* (VR-Bangers 2021).

Her celebrity extends beyond her pornographic career, positioning her within a distinct sphere of influence that intersects politics and legitimate culture, and speaks to a clearly defined target audience. Over the last decade, Nappi has also become a public figure of some relevance in Italian generalist media and popular culture, as evidenced by her feminist intellectual role in the Italian political, cultural, and philosophical magazine *MicroMega*, where she has been a columnist from 2014 to 2017. During this period, she contributed essays and blog posts that explored themes such as sexuality, feminism, and contemporary politics. Her writings often challenged conventional perspectives, advocating for concepts like sexual communism and critiquing social norms. Furthermore, her political positions openly contradict any paradigm traditionally associated with femininity and feminist advocacy. Valentina Nappi’s star image within the public sphere reveals a multifaceted complexity that far exceeds her strictly pornographic persona. Her public identity is characterized by a layered and often unresolved interplay of seemingly contradictory attributes, which in turn contribute to shaping and diversifying her im-

⁷ See <https://badoinkvr.com/vr-pornstar/valentinanappi/>.

age as a porn performer. Her writings frequently challenged dominant narratives, advancing provocative notions such as “sexual communism” and offering incisive critiques of prevailing societal norms. This intellectual engagement earned her the moniker “intellectual pornstar,” a label that aptly captures her distinctive position at the intersection of adult entertainment and philosophical discourse. In addition to her written contributions, Nappi participated in public dialogues featured in *MicroMega*, notably in the 2014 issue entitled “Il corpo della donna tra libertà e sfruttamento” (“The Female Body Between Freedom and Exploitation”), where she engaged in critical discussions on prostitution, the commodification of the female body, and the nexus between youth and sexuality. Through her involvement with *MicroMega*, Nappi strategically leveraged her platform to mediate between the adult industry and intellectual debate, fostering discourse that confronted entrenched taboos and invited critical reassessment of dominant cultural frameworks. Her participation in prominent cultural events—most notably as a speaker at the 2018 TEDx conference in Bari – further consolidated her public persona, contributing to the construction of a cultural figure embedded within the broader Italian collective imagination, endowing her with a certain status of reality and material presence. As Maina and Zecca write, in the pornographic sphere Rocco Siffredi’s star image is based on the two discursive axes of sexual prowess and performative excess. identifies him as a star-as-performer whose image is inextricably linked to the categories of excess, perversion and extreme (Maina and Zecca 2024, 7). In Italy his figure has crossed the borders of the pornographic sphere and gained market visibility in the legitimate public sphere, a path strikingly similar to that followed by Valentina Nappi, whose positions openly contradicts any paradigm traditionally associated with femininity and feminist advocacy. Such a tension applies both to Nappi as a feminist porn performer – who chooses to work with major production companies such as Evil Angel or Brazzers and engages in practices widely regarded as objectifying or degrading (double anal, anal gaping, inter-

racial scenes, anal penetration) – and to Nappi as an intellectual and public thinker, who frequently adopts a counter-current stance in public discourse, as exemplified by her outspoken critiques of figures such as Rocco Siffredi.⁸

Valentina Nappi, prolific on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, is prolific in the production and dissemination of promotional and self-advertising content explicitly aimed at a young, heterosexual male audience with strong anti-feminist leanings. In this regard, it is emblematic that online communities with overtly misogynistic tendencies – such as *Il forum dei brutti*⁹ – describe her as the most favoured porn star within the *manosphere*. Her Instagram videos often cater to the nerd community, referencing a shared cultural universe: examples include *reels* (short, rapidly edited clips) inspired by *Star Wars*, *Pokémon*, *Catwoman*, and *Aquaman*, in which Nappi appears in the dual role of fictional character and erotic subject. Nappi skilfully engages with the female stereotype of the “saviour woman,” presenting herself both as a response to the laws of supply and demand governing the pornographic market and as an exception to the spectre of feminism: a woman capable of understanding and accepting men, to whom she playfully alludes through textual and paratextual references. If Nappi’s pornography is situated within the framework of major corporate structures – also geographically, given that Evil Angel, the pornographic giant with which Nappi made her debut through *Rocco’s POV Volume*, is based in Van Nuys, a district of Los Angeles – and features traditionally mainstream practices (anal sex, blowjobs, gangbangs), the need to produce effective and diversified communication across different media results in the adoption of strategies that “take into account changes in the demographics and consumption habits of pornographic audiences.” These strategies simultaneously

8 See <https://www.today.it/tv/news/valentina-nappi-difende-rocco-siffredi.html>.

9 Opened in 2008, the “Ugly Men’s Forum” has changed address several times and now contains around 300,000 messages, 10,000 discussions, and thousands of users. It is an online community with marked misogynistic tendencies, where discussions are organized into three main sections: one dedicated to physical appearance, one to social relationships, and a third that gathers everything else, from everyday experiences to the presentation of theories and opinions about society.

evoke a key prerogative of *alt porn*: the appeal to a community (Maina 2018; Smith 2007; Attwood 2011). Nappi openly declares herself staunchly anti-feminist – an ideological stance that strongly resonates with her target audience – and presents herself as willing to redress the “aesthetic injustice”¹⁰ that, in her view, leads men to experience sexual frustration. Porn stars, who have become famous through their profession, must justify their work in order to appear in the public sphere, explaining its social meaning and collective usefulness, and shifting the communicative focus from pornography entertainment purpose to that of a presumed social utility.

Free Valentina Nappi 3D

The presence of a well-known performer within a VR pornographic environment¹¹ intensifies the uncanny nature of the experience. VR pornography, already marked by what Evans (2020) terms an “altered and enforced intimacy,” positions the viewer within an immersive framework in which the boundary between reality and fiction becomes increasingly unstable. Within the mainstream cultural imaginary, reflected, for instance, in magazines and journalistic articles, where emerges a perceived incompatibility between the immersive qualities of VR pornography and the ontological status of reality traditionally associated with hardcore pornography. The latter is characterized by the staging of “real sex,” understood both in terms of corporeal materiality and representational codes, which operate in tandem to convey the spectacle of sex in visual pornography (Maina

10 See, for instance, the “Forum dei Brutti” (“Ugly Men’s Forum”), titled “Stufo! Una vita da brutto” (“Fed up! A life of ugliness”), features collections of aphorisms and slogans centered on presumed female frigidity, often expressed through vulgar language. It also includes numerous rankings of the physical appearance of actresses and porn performers, dissected and catalogued according to rigid and grotesquely Lombrosian standards, such as forehead height and nose shape. Valentina Nappi herself, although described as a “champion of incels,” is accused of not being sufficiently attractive and of engaging in marketing strategies disguised as charitable acts – offering sexual acts in exchange for videos and expressions of gratitude, as part of a kind of customer loyalty scheme.

11 As Schöne et al. claim, The benchmark for assessing VR simulation quality can only be the user’s phenomenal consciousness, i.e., the subjective experience of being aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions (2023).

2010, 197). For instance, on *The Atlantic*, Susannah Breslin (2018) contends that virtual reality pornography may, paradoxically, be more alienating and less sensually engaging than its conventional counterpart, owing to the uncanny nature of the VR experience and the diminished affective resonance of the first-person perspective it offers. As such, VR pornography may ultimately fail to generate the vicarious thrill traditionally associated with computer-mediated sexual content. What emerges from current analyses is that early consumer-grade VR systems fall short of fulfilling the more optimistic expectations projected onto the medium. Rather than fostering genuine empathy, these technologies may instead be engendering a form of artificially induced and constrained intimacy, thereby complicating rather than enhancing the affective dimensions of pornographic spectatorship. Might the construction of a virtual persona, at once political and cultural, yet primarily recognized for her role as a pornographic performer, entail a different mode of empathic engagement? Could Valentina Nappi's distinctive form of pornographic self-representation offer a meaningful challenge to the conventions of mainstream pornography? On Badoink site,¹² *Free Valentina Nappi* capitalizes on the performer's distinctive status by offering the following storyline as a point of appeal:

Valentina Nappi has been shackled by the constrictions of the Stay At Home Order for weeks now. Not ideal in her line of work – being a high-end escort and all. Today, some restrictions have been lifted and you can finally free Valentina Nappi from her recent celibacy. So head over to her apartment and watch this full-bodied Italian brunette slowly strip for you. Admire those big tits and that perfect ass as she bends down to suck your dick. Get inside that pussy and listen to her moans as you bring her to climax. Freedom feels good, doesn't it? Grab your VR headset and get ready for 180 degrees of immersive VR porn with the one and only Valentina Nappi.

12 See <https://badoinkvr.com/vr-pornstar/valentinanappi/>.

In this context, the display of the performer's sexual appetite and uninhibitedness is framed as a response to the constrictions imposed by the Stay-at-Home Order. During the COVID-19 outbreak and the 2020 lockdown, the pornographic performer publicly emphasized the importance of ensuring both safety and professional continuity within the industry during the pandemic, a position she reiterated in 2021, when she declared on Twitter her intention to work exclusively on sets where all participants were vaccinated.¹³ Her explicit engagement with public discourse and health politics further contributes to the complex cultural identity projected onto her persona, which in turn intensifies the uncanny dimension of her virtual representations. VR not only simulates the body but also simulates a relationship with a subject whom we know, in reality, to be something other. In this sense, the uncanny does not arise solely from the technology itself, but from the effect of duplication and alienation it exerts upon an image already shaped by layers of cultural meaning. In the case of Valentina Nappi, this social, political, and cultural stratification applies to a pornographic persona that exists through her very non-corporeality: her opinions, political positions, and ironic tone all contribute to shaping a figure whose pornographic modus operandi is grounded in the cultivation of an intimate connection with her target audience. Nappi's fans who witness the staging of the male POV are often aware of her positions regarding a feminist – or at least female pleasure-oriented – approach to pornographic performance, and are capable of decoding acts of empowerment and autonomous choice within her work. Her work, which merges explicit sexual performance with intellectual discourse, feminist critique, and political positioning, subverts conventional tropes of the genre. By doing so, she not only reclaims agency within a typically male-dominated industry but also invites her audience to

13 See, for instance, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/04/08/coronavirus-valentina-nappi-la-mia-quarantena-non-metto-le-mutande-dal-13-marzo-faccio-selfie-dirette-e-sco-con-il-mio-ragazzo/5764426/> or <https://www.open.online/2021/08/25/coronavirus-valentina-nappi-no-vax-salvini/>.

engage with porn through a more nuanced, self-aware, and potentially critical lens. Her embodiment of a pornographic persona that is both sexual and socially conscious disrupts traditional binaries – such as performer/viewer or object/subject – and offers an alternative model that reconfigures desire, power, and representation.

Conclusions

As Sobchack observes, while the sensual apprehension of the cinematic object of desire is only ever partially fulfilled (2000, 90), the immersivity of virtual reality introduces new possibilities for spectator participation and identification, as well as novel modes of mediating sexuality and the structures of the pornographic industry. Paraphrasing Sobchack's notion that "documentary is less a thing than an experience" (1999, 241), the documentary nature of pornography can be understood not merely as a filmic object or product, but as a relational process involving the spectator, the author, and the represented world. In the case of Valentina Nappi, immersivity operates on a dual level: both as a technical mediation, in which the embodied gestures and movements of the participant must correspond to what is represented within the filmic environment, and as a lifestyle adherence, through which the performer's persona extends beyond the screen into a broader affective and ideological domain. Within this evolving technological and affective landscape, the star from Scafati emerges as a particularly significant figure, owing to the distinctive and multifaceted nature of her stardom. Her performative persona operates at the intersection of technological mediation and affective self-presentation, foregrounding how female sexual agency is both enacted and commodified within digital cultures. Drawing on Angela McRobbie's claim that postfeminism draws on and invokes feminism as something that can be taken into account (2004, 258), only to suggest that equality has been achieved and to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, virtual reality, much like television in

the 2000s, participates in creating a key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. It casts judgment and establishes the rules of play.

Over the past decade, Nappi has increasingly established herself as a prominent presence within Italian mainstream media and popular culture. This is exemplified by her role as a feminist intellectual for *MicroMega*, a leading Italian journal of politics, culture, and philosophy. During this period, she authored numerous essays and blog posts addressing themes such as sexuality, feminism, and contemporary politics. The complexity of her celebrity status—which intertwines and negotiates elements tied to her career as a pornographic performer with peculiarities such as irony, tastes, and political opinions that often contradict both classical and feminist conceptions—contributes to layering the uncanniness of her representation in VR. Consequently, this renders her VR portrayal more than a mere technological variation of preexisting representations.

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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 Affective Circuit and the Mediated Self

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.

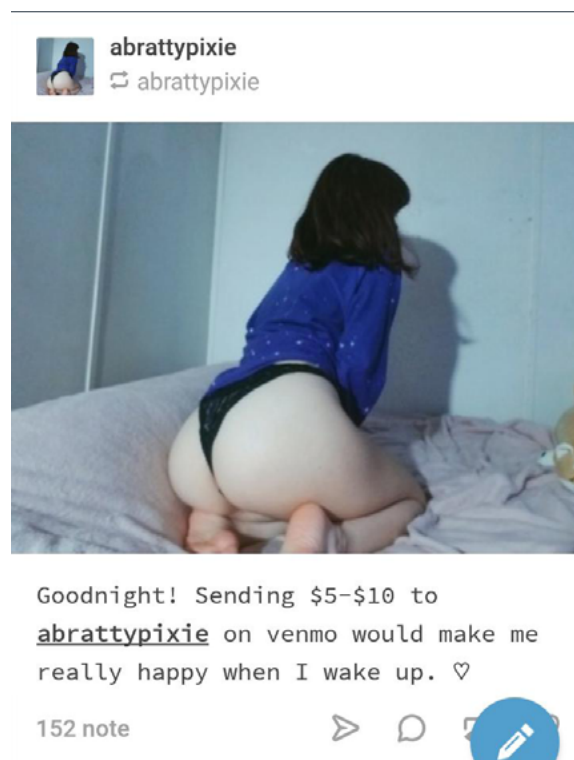


Fig. 2. Still from Tumblr.

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).

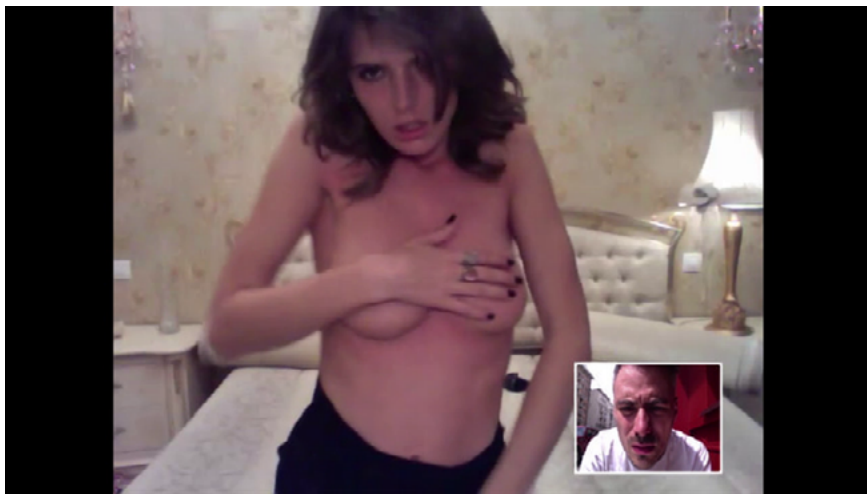


Fig. 3. Ryan Patrick and Alexey Kiselev, *Fantasy*, 2012, still from video.

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.

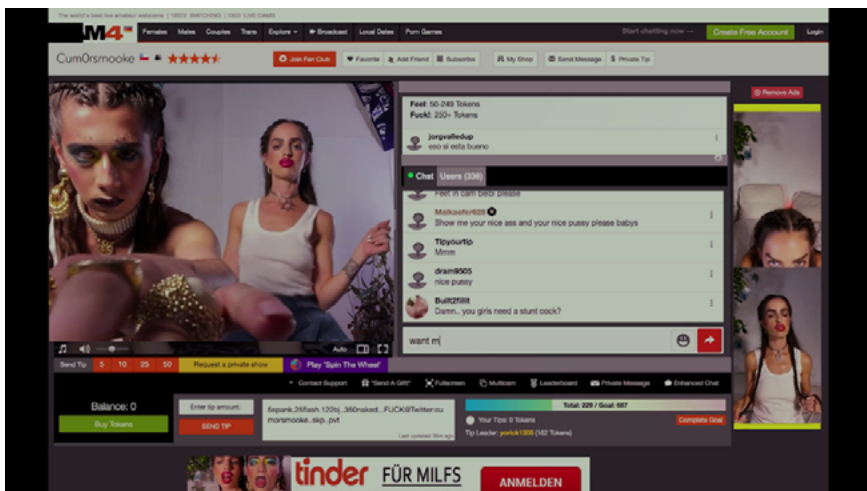


Fig. 4. KARMA SHE, Catalin Jugravu, *Pay Off*, 2019, still from video.

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 years¹ 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).

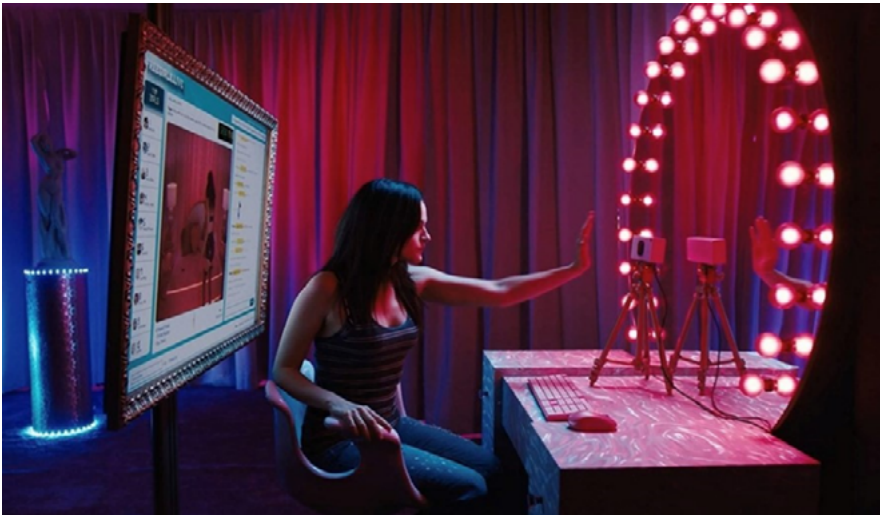


Fig. 6. Daniel Goldhaber, *Cam*, 2018, still from film.

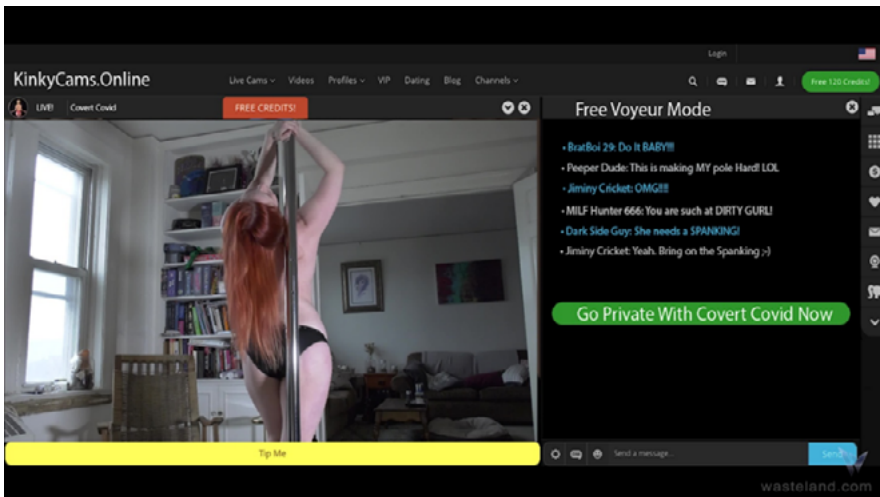


Fig. 7. Colin Rowntree, *Sex addiction in the viral age*, 2020, still from film.

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 re-activation 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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Hallucinated Pornography: AI, Synthetic Erotics, and the Reverse-Engineered Image of Desire



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Abstract

This paper explores the emerging aesthetics of AI-generated erotic images, emphasizing how hallucination, estrangement, and synthetic opacity replace the immersive realism and emotional transparency of traditional pornography. Pornography is viewed here as a visual regime centered around legibility, immersion, and bodily availability, while erotics is proposed as a mode in which desire develops through opacity, latency, and estrangement. Through a comparative analysis of works by artists Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes, I argue that synthetic erotics do not aim for direct representation or immediate sensuality but operate through ambiguity, atmospheric affect, and resistance to being captured. Arvida Byström's *In the Clouds* mobilises AI-generated nude self-portraiture as a feminist strategy of opacity, pushing machinic codes of sexual legibility toward the point where they collapse into aesthetic estrangement. Jake Elwes's *Machine Learning Porn* exposes the spectral traces of a neural network trained to classify and censor explicit content, rendering desire as glitch, residue, and machinic symptom. Both practices utilize hallucination as a technique, reconfiguring the erotic as a space of tension and delay. To analyze these images, I use reverse engineering not only as a technical metaphor but also as a semiotic method, revealing how erotic hallucinations interfere with systems of recognition, legibility, and algorithmic control.

Keywords

[Hallucination](#)
[engineering](#)

[Posthuman visuality](#)
[Synthetic erotics](#)

[Reverse](#)
[Opacity](#)

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Introduction: Hallucinated Images in the Age of AI Erotics

In the picture, a female figure crouches in an impossible pose, a ballet of digitally rendered skin and synthetic muscle tone. Although the body may initially seem coherent and conventionally recognizable, a closer look reveals its composition falling apart – one can no longer distinguish its parts. It becomes a trompe-l'œil of artificial and assembled flesh, a visual illusion that mimics wholeness while losing anatomical clarity. It is not a photograph of a body but a synthesis of what a body might be if shaped by desire and filtered through aesthetic computation. Hyper-visible yet unreachable, the body becomes a hallucinated event. The female figure does not perform for us; she performs for the system, folding herself into the ambiguity of being seen yet unread while the viewer cycles around, caught in the gravity of a form too artificial to trust, too uncanny to possess. The image belongs to the series of AI-generated self-portraits that Arvida Byström¹ circulated through Sunroom, an OnlyFans-like platform, within the broader project *In the Clouds* (2024), where synthetic nudity, parasocial interaction, and platform economies become objects of artistic experimentation^{2,3}.

Another piece, now a video, depicts bodies melting and transforming in rhythmic abstraction while pulsing in darkness – flesh-like shapes blooming and dissolving without faces or centers. It is Jake Elwes⁴'s *Machine Learning Porn*⁵ (2016), a video that offers not actual bodies, but traces: echoic smears of synthetic skin, flickering hints of

1 A Swedish artist, model, and musician.

2 As she reported in an interview: “In November [2023] I saw a tweet that complained about ads for ‘nudifying’ platforms. Around that time I had been working with DALL-E’s Out-Paint tool, which could be described as a tool for collaging with AI. You upload a photo or a painting and then edit it with AI. These ‘nudifying’ platforms reminded me of photography collage. The results are actually quite realistic, so I became interested in messing with the platform and creating more grotesque, glitchy results. Then Sunroom [an OnlyFans competitor] got in touch and offered me a sponsorship deal. It seemed like an interesting way to explore the new landscape of influencer sex work” (Roux 2024).

3 The image has also been published on the artist’s Instagram profile (Bystrom 2024).

4 A British media artist, hacker and researcher.

5 The video is available on the artist’s website (Elwes 2016).

sex that never fully appear. These hallucinations are generated by a neural network trained to censor pornographic content, yet pornography here endures as a symptom – a ghostly montage of what the system tries to erase. There is no narrative, climax, or point of view; no camera enters a scene – it is the scene itself, recursive and hypnotically detached. Generated by reversing a neural network trained to censor explicit content, *Machine Learning Porn* reveals the machinic hallucinations of a system trained to detect and suppress sex – producing amorphous, synthetic imagery that reflects the network’s internalized patterns of taboo, fantasy, and control. Where Arvida Byström’s avatars polish the self to excess, Elwes offers no self – only the rhythmic output of pattern recognition turned inward. Their hallucinations are ambient, erotic only as mist is wet: not intentional, but atmospheric. What seduces is not desire but the uncanny spectacle of a system trying – and failing – to remember what it was built to suppress.

Nevertheless, both artists destabilize the immersive promise of virtual erotics. Rather than simulating intimacy or facilitating identification, they conjure friction, delay, and non-resolution. They ask us to linger with the strange, suspended between recognition and refusal, beauty and blankness.

In this paper, I use the term pornography to refer to a cultural regime of representation focused on legibility, immersion, and the transparent availability of the body to vision. In contrast, I use erotics to describe a different aesthetic and semiotic state, where desire arises through opacity, latency, and estrangement rather than visual realism or identification. The concept of hallucinated erotics, therefore, signals a shift from pornography’s immersive transparency toward a mode of visibility structured by opacity, delay, and resistance.

Considering these two artworks, the following develops a semiotics of synthetic erotics rooted in their shared tension. I distinguish between hallucination of the self (as in Byström’s avatars) and hallucination of the system (as in Elwes’s neural outputs), two modes that togeth-

er illuminate how AI reconfigures erotic imagery. Through this perspective, I propose to theorize AI-generated erotic imagery through the concept of hallucination: images that simulate without representing, seduce without revealing, and inhabit the erotic as a zone of glitch and ambiguity. These images are less about what they show than how they operate on bodies, gazes, and classification architectures. Moving from representation to operation, hallucination becomes a method; through it, we glimpse a post-representational erotics devoted to opacity and the flickering instability of synthetic desire.

Toward a Semiotics of Hallucinated Erotics

The hypothesis I am exploring is that AI may embody a historically and tropically situated⁶ (Haraway 2016) aesthetic within erotic visual culture, one that shifts from immersive realism and emotional elements toward hallucination, moving away from the transparency of society in general (Han 2015), and of pornography in particular. Instead of simulating bodies to be entered, touched, and thus objectified, these images stage ambiguity, estrangement, and synthetic opacity⁷ (Glissant 1990). They resist intimacy, rendering it frictional, speculative, unstable, and, in doing so, open a diverse semiotic terrain where the erotic is not on the frenzy of the visible (Williams 1989) but unfolds through atmospheric abstraction, automatization, and posthuman ambiguity.

By hallucination, I refer not simply to AI errors but to a productive visual regime that unfolds in two direc-

6 To say that an aesthetic is historically and tropically situated means acknowledging that it is embedded in material-historical structures of power and discursive-semiotic operations of meaning, and that critique must address both. This orientation resists the abstraction and universalization of computational aesthetics by insisting on context, position, and figuration.

7 Following Édouard Glissant, “opacity” is understood not as a lack of clarity, but as an ethical-political mode of refusing transparency, capture, and epistemic domination. In this sense, opacity asserts the right to remain illegible within systems – such as biometric algorithms – that equate recognition with intelligibility and control. More generally, and drawing on Glissant, opacity resists reduction to data, categorical identity, or legibility, proposing instead a relationality grounded in alterity, unknowability, and the refusal to be fully known. See Glissant (1990) and Haraway’s critique of the “god-trick” in *Situated Knowledges* (1988) for complementary accounts of partiality and non-innocence in knowledge production.

tions: hallucination of the self, in which avatars of identity are exaggerated or dissolved (Byström); and hallucination of the system, in which machinic cognition exposes its own spectral residues (Elwes). In both cases, hallucination is not an accident but an operational aesthetic – images that perform estrangement by revealing their own artificiality.

To theorize this, it is necessary to position AI-generated erotics within a broader semiotics of the body, particularly one attentive to feminist critiques of visibility (Pollock 1988; Haraway 1992; Carson and Pajaczkowska 2000; Fraser 2000) and posthuman understandings of embodiment (Hayles 1999; Buongiorno 2019). These frameworks allow us to interpret hallucinated erotics not as degraded pornography, but as aesthetic interventions into the conditions of recognition, legibility, and embodiment under algorithmic vision. In the age of machine vision, the erotic image becomes less a record of presence than an output of computation (Viola and Voto 2023), in a visual regime where bodies emerge as functions of machinic modulation.

The shift from indexicality to operability (Parikka 2023) marks a turning point for erotic aesthetics, enabling images to appear seductive while refusing full entry, to perform beauty while sabotaging identification. Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes articulate two divergent but complementary uses of hallucination as a critical method. Byström stages the self as a synthetic mirage: her avatars are hyper-feminine not to attract the gaze, but to clog it, to overload its expectations. Where biometric capture seeks legibility, Byström installs friction. The hallucinated self she performs in *In the Clouds* resists the instrumental logic of AI-generated identity: it is un-indexable, affectively suspended, estranged from both subjectivity and realism. Elwes, on the other hand, reverses the gaze. *Machine Learning Porn* does not construct an avatar – it reveals the machine's inability to do so. Their project hallucinates not the self but the system. Visualizing what a neural network trained to censor porn imagines when asked to produce it, the video reveals an algorithmic residue: pulsing shapes, ambiguous organs, ghostly pleasures assembled

from datasets and filters. Here, desire is leaked, abstracted into a glitch. Elwes's hallucinations expose the visual unconscious of classification systems: the looping, recursive, fragmented symptom of a machine trying to simulate what it has been programmed to fear.

Together, Byström and Elwes trace the outer contours of what we might call a hallucinated erotics, where intimacy emerges through modulation, abstraction, and strategic deformation rather than through fidelity to the body. This is where hallucination ceases to be a mere failure of representation and becomes a deliberate semiotic method, a way of making visible how erotic desire is encoded, resisted, and misfired in algorithmic infrastructures. Their practices displace sensory immediacy and cultivate a slow, ambient estrangement. In this aesthetic regime, desire emerges through misalignment and delay, and within this setting, the viewer is kept in suspension, with meaning accruing gradually, shaded by latency rather than driven by clarity. Through ambiguity, these images articulate a counter-narrative in which the erotic derives its power from opacity through hallucination, which acts as both method and intervention. It dismantles fantasies of seamless immersion, disrupts the architectures of digital intimacy, and deflects the normative pull of recognition. The body, no longer structured as a locus of entry or certainty, hovers as glitch, atmosphere, tension. Within this shift lies the potential for a post-human erotics shaped by refusal, speculative aesthetics, and synthetic estrangement – a sensibility that reimagines desire beyond transparency, identity, or possession.

As bodies become computational surfaces and erotic affect is encoded, visual culture finds itself suspended between two poles: the synthetic subject and the automated system. Within this suspension, Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes present two distinct but mutually illuminating approaches to AI erotics. While Byström's work occupies the intimate edge of synthetic subjectivity, her avatars reject biometric realism while simultaneously performing femininity to the point of saturation. In this gesture, Byström weaponizes gender: her images perform over-recognition,

folding traits of digital femininity – softness, symmetry, pink – into a kind of aesthetic excess that becomes resistant through hyperbole and, in this shift, the viewer is seduced into estrangement, held at the surface of a body that performs compliance while staging refusal. In contrast, Jake Elwes collapses subjectivity altogether. *Machine Learning Porn* depicts the residue of machine cognition reversing the logic of classification, generating images from the latent traces left by a system trained to erase them. The result is an uncanny erotics of non-reference: glitchy, indeterminate forms that appear not as scenes of pleasure but as outputs of algorithmic neurosis. There are no characters, encounters, or climax – only a looped attempt at remembering what must remain unseen.

Where Byström uses AI to fracture the self, Elwes shows what happens when the self is never even assumed, yet both artists resist the immersive logic of affective realism. They create not identification but deferral, immersion, and suspension. Their works do not invite entry into a fantasy – they delay it, fracture it, and aestheticize its impossibility. Together, they stage desire as a glitch in recognition (Russell 2020): a site where image and affect no longer align, and where the erotic emerges as ambient instability. Desire here is not arousal – latency, friction, or refusal to resolve.

Through this comparative frame, we encounter two experiments with visibility: one that stretches the limits of what the self can become under synthetic light and one that exposes the classifier's unconscious aesthetic. In both, hallucination becomes a critical gesture, a method for revealing how digital systems construct, contain, and fail to comprehend the erotic body.

Immersion Revisited

As a dominant paradigm in contemporary digital aesthetics, immersion promises seamless integration between viewer and image, body and interface, staging desire through immediacy, responsiveness, and sensory

inclusion (Hutson 2024). This fantasy unfolds most vividly in virtual pornography, where presence becomes technologically mediated through haptic simulation, visual realism, and algorithmically tailored affect. Intimacy is shaped as technological proximity, a state in which the space between subject and object dissolves under visual and tactile synchronization pressure. Immersion signals the technological ambition to absorb the viewer entirely, to anchor affect in sensory saturation, and to resolve the image into an enveloping field (Malaspina 2024).

In the works of Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes, immersion does not guarantee presence or access. These images stage delay, sustain suspension, and generate estrangement as primary modes of visual engagement. Entry gives way to orbit; absorption yields to hesitation. The viewer remains proximate yet displaced – seduced by surface, animated by friction. Desire emerges not through fusion but through misalignment. Clarity recedes as the images organize experience around latency, uncertainty, and affective ambiguity.

Hallucination first obstructs immersion in its classical sense, where identification and presence rely on coherence and realism. However, this obstruction does not eliminate immersive engagement. Instead, it reconfigures immersion into a suspended form, structured not by immediacy but by delay, not by absorption but by atmospheric tension. This is the key claim: immersion is not denied but transformed.

This displacement of immediacy transforms the erotic image into a speculative proposition. Visibility remains, though emptied of its referential force. Meaning unfolds across intervals, gliding through patterns without anchoring to form. Immersion no longer serves as a passage toward identification; instead, it persists as an unstable perceptual terrain.

Byström's hyper-feminized avatars stage a self-calibration to recognition, yet are devoid of psychic transparency. Every gesture is legible within the codes of digital femininity, yet remains aloof, emotionally opaque,

and affectively suspended. Her images establish a grammar of estrangement: the body as atmosphere, the erotic as delay. Elwes intensifies this principle. In *Machine Learning Porn*, the visual field disintegrates into algorithmic residue. Desire circulates through smears, pulses, and glitches that suggest the memory of sex filtered through machinic abstraction. These images contain no actors, no narrative, no identifiable bodies. What remains is the hallucination produced by a classifier trained to suppress what it imperfectly remembers. Here, immersion takes the form of saturation without resolution: the viewer is enveloped not by coherent scenes but by recursive feedback, intensity without climax. Immersion persists in the mode of saturation, density, and recursive failure. The visual does not open into space – it condenses into a signal. The result is not narrative progression but rhythmic intensity, an aesthetic trance grounded in system feedback.

Across both practices, immersion becomes a condition structured by delay rather than contact and dissonance rather than absorption. These images expose the scaffolding behind the fantasy of immediacy. They unravel the aesthetic labor required to produce coherence, and through that unraveling, foreground the visual protocols that sustain immersion as a cultural form. Abstraction becomes operational, not as evasion, but as activation. Sensory overload, stylization, and affective blankness replace the tropes of realism and transparency.⁸ This reconfiguration marks a critical intervention in the politics of digital visibility. Byström and Elwes construct aesthetic experiences that sustain distance, privilege unreadability, and insist on the ambiguity of bodies rendered synthetic. Their erotics resides in the pause, the hesitation, the stutter of systems attempting to resolve what resists completion. Once equated with proximity and presence, immersion reemerges here as atmosphere: diffuse, recursive, and unresolved. Through this grammar of estrangement, the erotic image loses none of

⁸ Kate Crawford's analysis of AI as an extractive and infrastructural medium (2021), together with Anne Anlin Cheng's reflections on surface and opacity (2011), further illuminate how immersion is displaced into atmospheric suspension rather than presence.

its intensity – it acquires new force through opacity, through friction, and through the refusal of legibility.

Feminist and posthuman aesthetics converge in this operation, where the hallucination of the body detaches it from the imperative of recognition. Opacity functions as a strategy of refusal, a displacement of biometric realism through ambient erotics – a distribution of desire that circulates without centering, drifts without resolution. Desire does not anchor; it hovers. Proximity unfolds without reaching the point of possession. Estrangement does not signal the failure of immersion; it signals its reconfiguration as critical suspension.

Within this reframing, immersion loses its association with identification and becomes a modality of suspension. The bodies rendered by Byström and Elwes are not configured for consumption. Instead, they generate visual events that return the gaze to the viewer, who becomes implicated in the process and unsettled by it.

These works foreground the system's excess rather than its absence. Endless production – images, norms, codified desires – builds toward a threshold where the apparatus hallucinates, and that hallucination becomes the texture of its aesthetic surface. Immersion transforms: sensorial coherence gives way to intensity formed through estrangement and recursive density. Realism passes into resonance, expanding the interval between subject and object, stretching perception until it remains open as a sustained tension zone.

Opacity intensifies this critique (Glissant 1990). In a visual culture defined by its obsession with legibility and exposure – particularly about sexualized, racialized, and gendered bodies (Blas 2016; Marling 2021; Voto 2021) – opacity refuses the coercive clarity of visibility. It saturates vision and simultaneously frustrates its resolution, and allucinated erotics emerge. This reconfiguration proposes not a retreat from image culture but a transformation of its aesthetic logic.

Byström and Elwes elaborate this politics through divergent but entangled strategies. Byström con-

structs a visibility emptied of emotional reciprocity. Her surfaces are hyper-polished and meticulously stylized, performing seduction to the point of abstraction. Her figures oversaturate the codes of femininity until those codes short-circuit. Elwes, by contrast, reveals the opacity within the algorithm itself. His images arise from machinic hallucination – unfixed forms, visual murmurs without human origin, spectral arrangements that expose the neural network’s unresolved relation to sexuality. The classifier’s recursive labor becomes visible through a register of ghostly incoherence.

Across both practices, the image refuses epistemic capture. These bodies are not misrepresentations or aesthetic failures; they open the possibility for a visual presence that resists incorporation into the systems of legibility and control. Under conditions dominated by biometric indexing, automated content moderation, and algorithmic sorting, this mode of resistance is not reactive; it becomes a generative force providing the conditions for a speculative erotics – an aesthetic mode composed of drift, opacity, and visual misalignment. Immersion no longer indicates fidelity or entry; it becomes ambient tension. Identity does not consolidate; it disperses into aesthetic atmospheres. Seduction unfolds not through recognition but through an unresolved presence that refuses to be settled. This is not disappearance. It is deliberate misrecognition, a refusal to stabilize. Moreover, in this refusal, a politics of erotic opacity begins to take form.

Reverse Engineering and the Semiotics of Erotic Hallucination

If estrangement and opacity define the aesthetic condition of synthetic erotics, then reverse engineering becomes its critical method. The synthetic erotic image – dislocated from referential flesh, suspended in ambiguous desire – does not merely represent bodies or fantasies. It performs operations. It is the aesthetic residue of technical systems learning, forgetting, and hallucinating sex. To

understand such images, we cannot rely on hermeneutics alone. We must reverse engineer them – not to decode meaning, but to uncover function.

In its classical sense, reverse engineering refers to the technical act of deconstructing a system to understand how it works. However, when transplanted into a semiotic and aesthetic field, it becomes a way to engage with visual regimes *not for what they show, but for what they do*. This methodological shift mirrors the earlier displacement of immersion: just as hallucination reconfigures absorption into suspension, reverse engineering reconfigures interpretation into analysis of operation. It asks: what kinds of bodies are produced by this image? What assumptions about gender, desire, and legibility are embedded in its construction? What does the system see when it tries to imagine the erotic?

In the context of AI-generated erotics, reverse engineering becomes necessary because the image is no longer authored in the conventional sense. It emerges from a process: neural networks trained on biased data, classifiers conditioned to detect and suppress “NSFW” (i.e., not safe for work) content, and generative adversarial systems hallucinating bodies they were programmed not to recognize. The image is an operation, not a message. To approach it critically, we must reconstruct the technical and cultural processes it indexes.

Jake Elwes’s *Machine Learning Porn* literalizes this method. His project reroutes a censoring neural network – originally designed to identify and suppress explicit content – into producing its own vision of pornography. The result is not a reversal of censorship, but its *aesthetic excretion*: ghostly pulsations of synthetic flesh, algorithmically imagined but never fully rendered. These images are not erotic scenes – they are epistemic symptoms. They show us what the system believes sex looks like when asked to hallucinate it. The failure of realism here is not disengagement but a different kind of immersion – one structured by recursive feedback, glitch, and atmospheric saturation. This is reverse engineering as critical exposure. Elwes does not

intervene at the level of content, but at the level of *machinic fantasy*. They lay bare the classifier's unconscious, revealing how systems meant to control desire end up reproducing it in disfigured, residual form. It is not the erotic that seduces here, but the uncanny logic of a system misfiring – a machine trying to recall the thing it was trained to forget.

Arvida Byström's *In the Clouds*, by contrast, performs a form of reverse engineering from within the aesthetic codes of algorithmic femininity. Her AI-generated avatars embody the tropes of online desirability – smooth skin, pastel tones, curated softness – but do so with a degree of precision and excess that destabilizes their apparent cuteness. These figures do not appear monstrous immediately; their unease unfolds slowly, revealed not through disruption but overperformance. The perfection becomes too seamless, the pose too stylized, the surface too polished. What initially reads as legible beauty begins to dissolve into something uncanny. Byström does not glitch the system through this hyperbolic precision – she exposes its logic. Her avatars reverse engineer immersion by weaponizing recognition itself, overloading visibility codes until intimacy collapses into estrangement. Her avatars operate at the threshold where desirability collapses into abstraction, unfolding the visual protocols that define synthetic recognition and revealing the strangeness hidden beneath algorithmic compliance. Where Elwes reverses the neural network, Byström reverses subjectivity-as-style. She turns herself into a hallucination – a speculative portrait that floats at the edge of biometric realism. These avatars are not hidden; they are hyper-visible. However, their visibility does not grant access. Like Haraway's cyborg, they refuse to have transparency of identity. They exist in what we might call *operational opacity* – a space of appearance that resists capture.

In both practices, reverse engineering becomes a semiotic gesture: a way of making visible the structures that condition visual desire under machine vision. It aligns with the call to read media through their technical operations rather than their symbolic contents, and with the insistence on aesthetics as a mode of systemic intervention. It

is also deeply feminist, echoing N. Katherine Hayles's work on reflexivity in cybernetic systems and Donna Haraway's politics of irony, partiality, and resistant embodiment. Reverse engineering, therefore, is not a digression from the analysis of immersion but its methodological counterpart. If immersion is reconfigured by hallucination into suspension, reverse engineering allows us to map this process at the operational level – revealing how classification, legibility, and desire produce their own opacity.

Byström and Elwes ultimately share a commitment to refusing immersive realism – not by rejecting images but by repurposing them. They show us what happens when we stop asking erotic images what they mean and start asking how they function: what labor they perform, what fantasies they encode, and what forms of control they rehearse. In doing so, they propose reverse engineering not merely as analysis but as aesthetic counter-design.

In this sense, reverse engineering is not just an auxiliary tool – it is central to the politics of synthetic erotics. It enables us to articulate a visual culture where meaning is no longer tied to representation, but to operation. It provides a method for engaging images that no longer mirror reality but simulate its desires. Crucially, it offers a strategy for intervening in classification systems, seduction, and surveillance by turning their outputs inside out.

Synthetic erotics, when reverse-engineered, cease to be about immersion or pleasure. It becomes a map of epistemic violence, an archive of machinic bias, a choreography of algorithmic hallucination. To observe these images is not to enter a fantasy – it is to study its circuitry. Moreover, from within that circuitry, perhaps, we can imagine different desires.

Conclusion: Toward a Synthetic Erotics

The rise of AI-generated erotics marks a fundamental shift in how desire is visualized and shared in today's digital culture. Freed from the need for material reference, the erotic image now exists in a liminal space – sta-

tistically likely, visually balanced, yet ontologically uncertain. Instead of mimicking presence, it evokes possibility; its logic is rooted not in physical immediacy or true-to-life realism, but in aesthetic play involving estrangement, ambiguity, and synthetic opacity.

Within this new landscape, the works of Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes follow different yet interconnected paths. Byström creates avatars with hyper-stylized femininity and monstrous latent details that produce a kind of emotional stillness. These figures, set against pastel voids, do not seek emotional connection through absence but through performative visibility – oversaturating their presence to make intimacy seem inaccessible. Her images serve as speculative rehearsals of embodiment, where clarity is neither entirely given nor completely withheld, but continually postponed. Femininity here is not mimed as authenticity but staged as a shifting aesthetic artifact, encoded for algorithmic consumption rather than human intimacy.

Elwes, on the other hand, works at the level of the system itself. Their *Machine Learning Porn* reveals not the failure of representation but the productive inner workings of neural classification. The images they generate come from applying content moderation algorithms in reverse, exposing the machine's visual unconscious – a recursive hum of disjointed desire shaped by training data and suppression protocols. These images resist traditional storytelling and depiction; they communicate through pulse, blur, and spectral forms. Erotic tension arises not through direct connection but from the uneasy recognition that what we see is the system's echo of what it was designed to erase.

Both artists contribute to synthetic erotics, a new visual regime where desire no longer depends on identification. Traditional immersion, tied to presence and physical sensation, dissolves into delays, ambiguity, and unreadability. In this new regime, affect is not heightened through accessibility but suspended through atmospheric tension. What might seem like aesthetic incoherence is a deliberate act of resistance: a refusal to follow the epistemic rules of

biometric realism, data collection, and visual mastery.

A key method here is reverse engineering – not just as a technical dismantling but as a semiotic strategy that makes the codes behind the image understandable and adaptable. Unraveling the erotic image involves breaking its visual promises, exposing the algorithmic framework beneath its aesthetic coherence, and shifting its emotional direction. Byström does this through an excess that fractures conformity, while Elwes manifests it through the system's recursive output. Both turn hallucination from accidental glitch into an aesthetic technique, transforming malfunction into mode.

I suggest that these works gesture toward a synthetic erotics, a speculative aesthetics of desire grounded in latency, friction, and opacity. This notion does not seek to encompass the whole field of AI erotics; it traces a trajectory opened by the practices of Byström and Elwes. Their dual approach opens the horizon of speculative intimacy: a relationship with the image shaped by sustained dissonance, unresolved proximity, and a politics of refusal. Synthetic images withdraw the body from sensual fullness and instead distribute embodiment across opaque surfaces, saturated with signals yet resistant to interpretation. The erotic persists in the interval where signification slips away and seduction stretches into abstraction.

To theorize synthetic erotics is to explore the political and aesthetic possibilities that unfold within artifice itself. Hallucination emerges as a gesture that reveals the contingencies of desire under algorithmic regimes, while opacity articulates an ethic of visual presence that resists imposed terms of recognition.

These synthetic images redirect desire radically. They craft erotics through latency, friction, and atmospheric drift, and they challenge us to dwell within the interval, where resolution never arrives and tension sustains perception. Between the seen and the unseen, the legible and the opaque, the real and the synthetic, these works suggest that the future of visibility takes shape in estranged images rather than perfected ones.

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Photography and Pornography in 19th Century Italy: A Historical Perspective on Media and Sexuality



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Abstract

Although pornographic photographs can reveal the impact of the photographic medium on sexuality and its imaginaries, they have barely been considered as sources or themes in historical research. Considering the context of late 19th-century and early 20th-century Italy, this article explores photography's central role in disseminating pornographic material, its close link to shaping the definition of pornography itself, and its impact on redefining sexual imaginaries. The first part of the article provides an overview of the history of the Italian debate on pornography and the political responses to this phenomenon. It focuses particularly on the role of photography in these events and in shaping this context. Between the late 19th century and the years of the Great War, in fact, pornography became a serious topic of public debate in Italy and many other European countries. Many associations and politicians participated in anti-pornography movements while photography and postcards became the most popular and accessible medium for sharing images. The second part of the article explores pornographic imagery widely represented in photographs, particularly that depicting lesbianism and zoophilia. It compares this imagery with that found in other cultural productions dealing with sexuality, such as literature, visual arts, and scientific publications circulating in Italy. This article is based on archival sources, including police reports on pornographic materials, journal articles, and moralistic and scientific writings published in Italy during the analyzed decades.

Keywords

[Sexual imaginary](#) [Pornographic materials](#) [Sexology](#)
[Modern Italy](#) [Sexual representation](#)

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Introduction

Did the photographic medium change, influence or radically transform sexual imaginaries when it became popular and accessible to everyone? Although this question is not new to the field of the history of photography, a comprehensive answer is still lacking. A historical examination of erotic and pornographic photography could provide insight into the relationship between media and sexuality. In 1987, Abigail Solomon-Godeau posed questions about the historical relevance of erotic photography that are still waiting for answers:

Did photographic technologies themselves engendered demand and supply, or did they rather fulfill a pre-existing demand? [...] were such photographs a variant of pre-existing forms or a new form altogether? Is erotic and pornographic photography, considered in relation to older precedents, best understood as technologically different but representationally the same, or fundamentally different in both senses? (Solomon-Godeau 1990, 222).

Exploring the theme of pornography also means tracing and identifying the general elements of sexual imaginations in a specific context. The concept of pornography as a body of knowledge and a set of scenarios and fantasies has been examined in the context of the growth of the pornography industry and film production during the 1970s (Stoller 1975) and it has recently been revisited in the fields of history of sexuality and queer studies (Escoffier 2021b, 247; 2021a, 3). These fantasies and imaginaries of desire, which can be called “pornographic imagination” (Sontag 1967), have a dual nature being both fiction and fact. They mirror how sexuality was conceived, even if the represented behaviors are not common sexual practices (Sigel 2025). For this reason, pornographic materials play a key role in historical analyses of the relationship between sexuality and its representations in the media.

This article addresses the above issues through an analysis of the spread of pornographic photographs

in Italy between the late 19th century and the Great War. During this period, pornography became a serious topic of public debate in Italy and many other European countries. Associations and politicians participated in anti-pornography movements, while photography and postcards became the most popular and accessible medium for sharing images. During these decades, scientists and intellectuals devoted significant portions of their writings to sexuality in relation to modern society, morality, and recent advances in medicine and science. Their perspectives intersected and conflicted with the depictions of sexuality disseminated by so-called pornographic materials.

In order to answer the main question posed above, this article presents two groups of case studies in two parts. The first part analyzes the history of the Italian debate on pornography and the political responses to this phenomenon. It focuses particularly on the role of photography in these events and in shaping their context. The second part explores representations of sexual behaviors and sexual imaginations by comparing sexological descriptions with photographs. In particular, it discusses how pornographic photography transformed what sexologists described as illness and pathology into desire, with a focus on lesbian intercourse and a comparison with zoophilia.

Pornography: a Photographic Phenomenon?

Although classic historical literature on pornography traces its origins back to the early modern period (Hunt 1993), or even to archaeological discoveries in Pompeii and Herculaneum (Kendrick 1987), the earliest recorded use of the term “pornography” in Italy in its modern sense dates to no earlier than 1880.

A newly-formed word, coined in Paris to indicate not only all the filth that is printed in books and in certain newspapers, but also the drawings of these and other figurines, all of which the Parisian people, who have always enjoyed them so much, have become

so fond of in recent times (*Corriere della Sera* 1880).¹

When presented this way, pornography was not just a rewording of pre-existing phenomena such as obscenity; it represented an entirely new social threat. In 1886, another *Corriere della Sera* article explained that:

Each era has its sins: the sixteenth century had obscenity: we have pornography. Obscenity is better less harmful because it is frank, superficial, has momentary effects; while the second is insidious, idealises vices, often usurps tears due to sacred affections (Nervi and Pozza 1886, 2).

Although the term “pornography” was absent from Italian debates before 1880, similar concerns were raised over a decade earlier, a few years after the Kingdom of Italy was established in 1861. In fact, obscene materials, specifically photographs, were the subject of a circular issued by Minister of the Interior Giovanni Lanza in 1865:

the most noble art of printing and photography is being used as a filthy and corrupt market, for the sake of sordid and dishonest earnings. [...] All honest and discreet people recognise and lament the harm that the dissemination of these obscene figures and these small volumes of licentious narratives cause to the youth, and how much such licence contributes to corrupting and fomenting in the young vices and fatal habits that are harmful not only to morals, but also to their physical and intellectual development; and truly such foul speculation is unworthy and intolerable in a civilised people of noble and free aspirations. The corrupting of customs marks decadence in the nation.²

Similarly, the following year, the periodical // *Brenta* denounced: “Novel and Photography [...] now have unfortunately acquired the reputation of deviating people from the paths of the just and honest and of leading them

1 This quote and all the other following quotes from Italian texts are translated by the author.

2 Giovanni Lanza’s circular of 17 April 1865 is quoted in Wanrooij (1990, 20).

to immorality.”³

The central role of photography in disseminating obscene materials became even more apparent in the late 19th century. In Italy, pornography was not only a topic of public debate but also the primary cause of mobilization among intellectuals and moralists. With the *Public Security Law* of 1888 and the *Zanardelli Penal Code*, which was approved the following year, offenses against modesty and good morals, such as displaying images, were punishable by fines and imprisonment. However, these measures were not considered sufficient to stop the spread of pornography. For this reason, a general meeting against pornography was held on the 12th of April 1891 in Milan. Diverse political figures belonging to various organizations participated, ranging from socialists to Catholics. That same year, to promote these anti-pornographic efforts, a single issue of the journal *La Pornografia* was published; in one of its articles, Giulio Calchi Novati specified that it was intended as pornographic

any impudent manifestation of an obscene thought, made by means of the press and any other mechanical or chemical contrivance designed to reproduce figurative signs (plastic, photography, painting, etc.) (Calchi Novati 1891, 1).

Although photography was mentioned here as just one of the media among the vastness of pornographic materials, it was a constant presence in denunciations of this phenomenon and ignited public debate on pornography with news related to its circulation. During a period when social medicine was analyzing all types of living and working environments in modern society, and sexology was expanding as a field of study, Alfredo Niceforo reported the following testimony in a survey of boys boarding schools:

I was also aroused by prints of naked women that I could procure for myself, and before whom I performed the onanistic act;

3 This quotation from *Il Brenta* of 18 January 1866 can be found in Zannier (1993, 2: 11).

but later the same arousal was also given to me by portraits and prints of naked men, as long as they were young and well-made (Niceforo 1897, 35–36).

Postcards were the most popular item in the dissemination of pornographic material. In July 1901, the Typographical-Library Association sent a memorial to the Ministries of the Interior, Education, and Grace and Justice aimed at curbing the circulation of “picture postcards with indecent figures” (*Corriere della Sera* 1901, 2). Less than one year later, newspapers reported on a Milan police raid targeting “picture postcards that were too free with regard to morality,” which led to the arrest of eight dealers (*Corriere della Sera* 1902, 2). At the Second Italian Meeting for Public Morality in 1906, one of countless conferences on fighting pornography during that period, Angelo Valmarana denounced the dissemination of pornographic postcards and illustrated some of its elements:

Some postcards are embossed, some are the work of the draughtsman, but most are photographs [...] Some photographs then represent and excite in the beholder the worst aberrations and the most immoral perversions. Some postcards finally form series showing a sequel of successive obscene acts, as in a cinematograph (Valmarana 1906; Lega per la moralità pubblica 1907, 62–64).⁴

The most relevant case of photography during the decades of struggle against pornography is undoubtedly the scandal involving the German photographer Wilhelm von Plüschow. In May 1907, the Public Security Commissariat of the Trevi district in Rome was notified that, the previous year, a twelve-year-old boy had been deceived by the photographer, lured to his studio, and drugged. Once he awoke, the boy realized he was on the photographer’s bed and that he was without trousers, with a viscous substance on his back, especially around his anus. Despite his shock, the boy was convinced to return to the studio

4 This quotation can be found also in Wanrooij (1985, 26–33).

for payment over the next two years. On other occasions, he and other young boys received similar treatment and posed as models for homoerotic pictures. However, Plüschow was no stranger to scandal or the police. In 1898, obscene photos were found in his former studio (*Avanti!* 1904, 3). Following the revelations of 1907, Plüschow was convicted of corrupting minors and using photographs for indecent purposes (Falco 1919, 5). This episode shocked public opinion and received harsh commentary, as evidenced by Lino Ferriani's article published on the front page of the newspaper *Battaglie d'oggi*:

These facts are far worse than the camorra, the mafia, hooliganism, and woe to the nation that draws a veil over them and does not courageously aid justice – which cannot accomplish everything by itself – in striking down the guilty. At the German photographer's, over 2000 obscene photographs of boys and girls were found, including groups, which would, I believe, have made even Aretino and Casti blush, those 2000 photographs represent two thousand victims, two thousand children ruined forever (Ferriani 1907, 1).

From that point on, police documents regarding these materials were classified with a specific code and labeled as pornography. Although this case would be classified as pedopornography today, the term was not used at that time. Instead, Plüschow's case was considered the most serious example of pornography. Since Giovanni Lanza's 1865 circular, obscenity and pornography have been presented as threats, especially to young people. This idea was also echoed by sexologists like Paolo Mantegazza and Giuseppe Senizza. Plüschow's case was the most serious example of the corruption of young people, the main threat posed by pornography. For this reason, new and specific categories such as “pedopornography” were never considered or used in public debates during that time.

A significant step forward in the anti-pornography campaign was the Conference of Paris in May 1910. The conference aimed to establish international rules for shared laws among countries to stop the pornographic

materials market. This event led to the signing of the *Yellow Book*, an international agreement consisting of eight articles, which prompted the Italian government to compare its anti-pornography measures with those of other countries in Europe and around the world. Luigi Luzzatti, the head of the Italian government at that time and Minister of the Interior, did not immediately propose a new anti-pornography law. Instead, on June 16, 1910, he issued a ministerial circular to prefects and police departments throughout Italy, requesting more rigorous surveillance and quarterly reports on all anti-pornography operations to be sent to the Minister of the Interior. To celebrate his actions against pornography and respond to criticism about the lack of specific anti-pornography laws, Luzzatti sent several bulletins to newspapers to publicize the results of seizures and police surveillance. The first bulletin, published on July 7, 1910, reported the confiscation of 2,500 postcards and 50 booklets in Rome and 12,000 postcards in Turin (*Corriere della Sera* 1910b, 2). On September 18 of that same year, a new bulletin announced the seizure of 32,000 postcards, 6,500 photographs, and 2,200 books and brochures since June 16, thanks to police operations primarily in major Italian cities such as Turin, Genoa, Venice, Florence, and Palermo (*Corriere della Sera* 1910a, 4). Postcards and photographs were the most prevalent type of pornographic material seized in all of these bulletins. In December 1910, Luzzatti presented a draft of an actual anti-pornography law that specifically mentioned photography:

Whoever manufactures, prints, reproduces, possesses, imports or causes to be imported, transports or causes to be transported obscene writings, drawings, photographs, images or other objects for the purpose of exhibiting, displaying, selling or distributing them in any form whatsoever, shall be punished by imprisonment of up to six months and a fine of fifty to one thousand lire.

Whoever even in a non-public form distributes or sells the aforementioned writings, drawings, photographs, images or other objects, or trades in them in any way, and whoever exhibits or displays them to the public shall be punished by imprisonment for a

term of three months to one year and a fine of one hundred to two thousand lire.

The punishment shall be increased by half if the crime is committed to the detriment of a person under sixteen years of age (Luzzatti 1910).

However, this law was never approved due to bureaucratic timing and the fall of the government at the end of March 1911. The last bulletin published during Luzzatti's government, dated March 28, 1911, declared the seizure of "40,000 picture postcards, 20,000 photographs, 3,500 photographic negatives, 10,000 brochures, 300 drawings, and other items, including puppets, watches, cigarette cases, transparent papers, mirrors, and films" (*Corriere della Sera* 1911, 7).

Even after the Luzzatti government ended, police surveillance did not stop, and quarterly reports continued to be sent regularly from the prefectures to the Minister of the Interior until 1919. At the same time, anti-pornography campaigns continued to advocate for harsher measures. In particular, when Italy joined the First World War in 1915, anti-pornography movements presented their cause as a war against pornography.

It is the war against *pornography*, which disfigures social life in various forms, now brazen, now hypocritical, but always provocative, with *productions and stage performances* in theaters, cinematographs, café chantants, with *trivia novels*, with the fourth pages of newspapers, even of some of those that are in vogue, of humorous newspapers with continuous double entendres, in some of which it has even become a common feature to have alcove dithyrambs with engravings of the most daring poses; with the pamphlets or booklets with provocative titles or wrapped in mysterious covers or otherwise cleverly concealing internal filth; with the *picture postcards*, from which we now have a real storm; even with the matchboxes; with the toilets that sometimes station on our squares as appendages to the acrobats' shacks with the mysterious title "reserved for adults;" with the newspaper advertisements, with the

small mail, with the reclame notices, etc. (Comino 1916, 5).

In his description of the war against pornography, Antonio Comino mentioned the large number of postcards in circulation at that time. This scenario is confirmed by the quantitative analysis of police reports between 1910 and 1919. The most frequently seized materials were postcards, representing 63.2% of cases. Next were photos, representing 11.3% of cases. Lastly were pamphlets, books, and newspapers, often illustrated, representing 10.4% of cases.⁵ Additionally, most advertisements in newspapers that were reported to the police offered photographs described as “artistic,” “for lovers of beauty,” “with artistic nudes,” or “exotic,” as well as improbable photographic objects that revealed obscene images only through liquid contact.⁶

Reframing Imaginaries: Photography and the Representation of Sexuality

Pornographic photography and obscene literature represented sexuality quite differently. The latter was strictly linked to politics and satire (Darnton 1995), while the former rarely included elements or references from the surrounding context. However, in terms of sexual practices, photography seemed to be in closer dialogue with sexological books and pamphlets. Some intellectuals even mentioned pornographic photography in their works. Paolo Mantegazza, for example, owned a collection of pornographic photos (Campani 2023, 531–534).

One important sexual practice and subject of exploration in both photography and sexology is lesbianism, probably popularized by the widespread circulation of postcards and photos at the end of the 19th century (Gilardi 1976, 169). In 1862, Ferdinando Tonini defined the “lesbian

5 These percentages are derived from the author’s quantitative analysis of documents located in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Central State Archive – ACS), Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913-1915, fascicolo 12985.2, buste 151–152, and Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1916-1918, fascicolo 12985.2, busta 205.

6 ACS, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913-1915, fascicolo 12985.2, busta 152, Pubblicazioni oscene.

game” as a phenomenon prevalent in urban areas, particularly in convents, schools, and prisons. This phenomenon was said to lead to physical changes such as breast reduction, cessation of menstruation, enlargement of the clitoris, and increased sexual desire. A few years later, in 1878, Arrigo Tamassia defined lesbianism as an “inversion of the sexual instinct,” considering it a disease (Beccalossi 2009, 106–109). In 1919, Giuseppe Senizza described tribadism as follows: “By an ugly freak of nature there are women who feel the same excitement, the same emotions, the same desires in front of their fellow women as a man would feel” (1919, 477).

Photography reversed the perspective of illness, turning it into an image of desire. This worked perfectly for male observers, who became voyeurs and spectators of “what women do when they are alone” (Solomon-Godeau 1990, 235). In the Italian context, photographs of naked or semi-naked women suggesting lesbian behavior emerged in the late 1840s, although they likely became more prevalent a few decades later. However, this sexual imagery did not become widespread in Italian literature until the last decades of the 19th century. A relevant example is the 1877 novel *Al di là* by Alfredo Oriani, which tells the story of the love between Elisa and Mimy. In 1908 an anonymous collection of short stories entitled *Fede: L’eredità di Saffo* was published, in which Fede, the main narrator, declares a scientific interest in the intercourse between women. Although the details are not explicit, oral sex is mentioned and intended as the climax of the sexual experience. Maria Nannipieri Volpi, known as Mura, was the first female author to describe lesbian intercourse in her 1919 novel *Perfidie*.

The effectiveness of the lesbian imaginary on male spectators lay in the challenge it posed to masculinity, both in terms of treatment and desire, by depicting practices inaccessible to men. This was effective because female sexuality was generally imagined as passive, weak, or even nonexistent. According to Guglielmo Ferrero and Cesare Lombroso, the idea of passivity was the reason

why adultery affected women more than men (Ferrero and Lombroso 1893, 57–58). Senizza described passive female sexuality with these words: “The woman enjoys the exaltation she has provoked in the man, just as the female nightingale enjoys the melodies sung for her by the singer of the night” (Senizza 1919, 72).

At the same time, many intellectuals and sexologists admitted that social restrictions caused this passivity. Regarding this issue, Mantegazza stated that, in reality,

the woman is always physically ready for copulation, while the man is only sometimes. Many women have several impurities in the time that the man has only one. The woman, even if she conceals the throbbing of her breasts and her frequent desires, seeks these pleasures with greater fervor than the man, which are made all the more seductive for her by the mystery imposed on her by modesty and social manners (Mantegazza 1854, 65).

The scientific statements about female sexuality, as attested by the examples above, were formulated by male scientists. These descriptions were characterized by passivity, otherness, and irrationality: science, shaped by male perspectives, placed female sexuality between a field to be investigated and pathology, which imbued these behaviors with mystery. For this reason, science contributed to make the topic of female sexuality fascinating from a male perspective. These attractive elements were at the root of the representations of female sexuality, and lesbianism as its enhanced expressions, in pornographic photography. Similarly to how female nudes in painting and fine arts were created for male viewers throughout the 19th century (Hauser 1974, II: 48), these photographs satisfied male curiosity, which was echoed by sexology. Photographic representations of intercourses between women were mainly intended for men: these images were constructed to mirror male expectations, curiosities, and desires, in the same way literature and sexology saw male authors addressing the male audience.

As any other illegal production, pornograph-

ic materials were rarely signed by their creators, photographs in particular. For this reason, it is unknown if there were women photographers realizing pictures of lesbian intercourses. In the same way, sources attesting a female audience for these materials are ever rarer; however, this cannot be excluded. Consumption reorganizes production criteria, giving objects new paths, social lives, and cultural roles and values (de Certeau 1984, 30–38): in this perspective it is possible that these pictures were also consumed by women. Erotic and pornographic photographs also be shared visual materials within lesbian communities, in the same way they were so for homosexual ones. The photographs of Plüschow and Wilhelm von Gloeden, who was based in Sicily, are the main example of this phenomenon. In one postcard from the materials seized from Plüschow it was written: “I am homo-sezuell (*Urmingh*): are there many *Urmingh* in Rome?” (Falco 1919, 7). These photos visually represented the identity of men with a homosexual orientation and placed it in a fictitious, ancient Greek-style setting, inspired by archaeological findings in Pompeii and Herculaneum from the 18th and early 19th centuries. This imagery also found a place in literary expression, as evidenced by Luigi Settembrini’s novel *I neoplatonici*, written between 1858 and 1859 and published only in 1977, and John Addington Symonds’ *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, written in 1873 and circulated very narrowly. Unlike these literary works, Plüschow’s and Gloeden’s photographs spread transnationally and enabled communities to share this imagery and identity. Despite the absence of comparable traces and sources, the possibility of alike examples in lesbian communities should be considered.

As attested by the pictures of lesbian intercourses, pornographic photography broke the moral condemnation of intellectuals and sexologists regarding sexual practices and transformed what was described as an illness into imagery of desire. This process can be observed even with unusual sexual practices, such as zoophilia. Since the daguerreotype era in the mid-19th century, pictures of naked women with dogs have been found, and between the end

of the century and the early 20th century, pictures of women having oral sex with dogs were not uncommon. This imagery shared the engendered description of zoophilia found in sexological books. Sexual intercourse between men and animals was described as occurring in the distant past and in faraway places (Garnier 1907, 123; Senizza 1919, 347). These practices were related to psychopathology, as evidenced by the writings of Krafft-Ebing and Bloch, as well as satirical literature.⁷ Conversely, women having intercourse with animals were described as a common phenomenon:

Some women allow their vulva to be licked by small dogs and even cats trained for this purpose, and they feel no little excitement from it, as the tongues of these animals are rougher than those of men and women. In fact, this bestial onanism seems to be common in large cities, among prostitutes and gallant women. Hence the expression *cave canem*, applied to women who take these animals with them, caress them and have their mouths licked in public, which gives rise to the suspicion that they also have their mouths licked elsewhere (Garnier 1907, 124).

“Bestial clitoral masturbation” is by no means as rare as one might be led to believe. Prostitutes and gallant women are the most likely to indulge in it (Senizza 1919, 384).

This imagery may have its roots in the bestial eroticism of the mythological imagination, which inspired many 19th- and early 20th-century painters, such as Bouguereau, Cézanne, Klee, Chaplin, von Stuck and, in Italy, Aristide Sartorio, with *The pleasure* of 1889. In 1880, Gabriele D’Annunzio wrote the poem *Sta Donna Clara*, which describes the oral intercourse between a dog and a woman. The same imaginary can be found in ex-libris and in a bronze sculpture by Egidio Casarotti, dated around 1915. All these representations, photographs included, recalled the aforementioned idea of female sexuality as a form of irrationality. Similarly to the pictures of lesbian intercourses, pictures from the imaginary of zoophilia were mainly addressed to a

⁷ See for example *Amori briganteschi *ossia narrazione storica di fatti galanti, grotteschi e bestiali dei briganti del 1861 e 1862*, n.d.

male audience, and in the same way they transformed what sexology defined as pathology into sexual desire.

Conclusions

Before attempting to determine whether photography transformed the way sexuality was imagined and defined, it is possible to conclude that the case studies presented here demonstrate the close link between the photographic medium and the formation of the meaning of pornography and the debates surrounding it, along with sexual imaginaries and ideas about sexual behaviors that sexology attempted to influence. While this relationship is evident in the analyzed sources, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that photography alone gave rise to pornography or completely transformed sexual imaginaries between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Regarding the first case study, which focuses on the origins of pornography, historical research has revealed that the term emerged around 1880, while the first reports of the circulation of so-called obscene pictures date back a few decades earlier. Despite photography's central role in developing restrictions and measures against pornography, materials falling under the pornography label were not limited to photos and postcards. Moralistic intellectuals, doctors, and sexologists complained about various types of materials, not just photographs. However, a quantitative analysis of police reports reveals that photographic images were the most common form of pornography. While there is no evidence suggesting that the circulation of postcards and photographs was the main cause of anti-pornographic campaigns, photography was undoubtedly the primary medium through which pornography manifested.

The photographs circulating in this context made sexual imageries visible and popular. The second case study analyzed mainly the representation of lesbian intercourses, briefly compared to descriptions and pictures about zoophilia. The analysis revealed that sexological writings and pornographic photography shared many

elements, particularly the male perspective. The difference between the two was their purpose: while the former aimed to define diseases and unacceptable sexual practices, the latter created sexual fantasies, even if fictional. The circulation and consumption of pornographic photographs also created communities with shared images and imaginaries that shaped their identities. Similar representations, as pointed out throughout the analysis, can also be found in other media, such as literature and painting. It is possible to assume that, due to its wider circulation, photography popularized the same themes and imaginations represented in literary and artistic productions. However, there are not enough elements to determine whether photographs and postcards influenced or were inspired by these other types of media. Despite the shared elements between sexual writings, literature, paintings, and pornographic photographs, it is impossible to conclude that the photographic medium completely reshaped sexual imaginations since there are no visible traces of this potential revolution.

Ultimately, the initial question remains unanswered: whether the photographic medium alone was capable of reshaping sexual imaginations. The sources analyzed here cannot attribute the emergence of the concept of pornography and the demand for this type of material to the widespread circulation of photographs and postcards. During the latter half of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, sexuality was conceived of in new ways in both Italy and Europe due to the emergence of national contexts (Mosse 1985). This shift became evident in debates and policies regarding hygiene, education and demography (Bonetta 1990; Togman 2019). The theme of sexuality reflected the complexity of the context of those decades, and pornographic photography became emblematic of this subject. However, at the same time, this analysis reveals how photographs are strictly tied to the history of sexuality of this period, presenting contextual elements which require thick descriptions (Geertz 1975), and represent unavoidable sources and objects of analysis.

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HABBO (M)HOTEL – A Tale on Abstract Sex and Early Digital Girlhood Erotics*



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*INVITED PAPER

Abstract

This paper proposes a media-archaeological exploration of early digital desire, focusing on the experiences of teenage girls and femme-identifying youth in the early 2000s Italian context. Situated against the patriarchal and hypersexualized media landscape of Berlusconi-era Italy, it examines how the domestic bedroom became a site for the rehearsal of intimacy through opensource chatrooms, social platforms, and early online gaming environments. By tracing the intersections of libidinal curiosity, cybernetics, and digital architecture, the study foregrounds how early online spaces enabled experimentation with desire, gender, and pleasure beyond the constraints of heteronormative, reproductive, and familial scripts. Drawing on autotheoretical reflection and dialogical memory-work with former users of Habbo Hotel, the essay investigates the ambivalent nature of these proto-immersive platforms: offering both refuge and risk, enabling playful, disembodied erotic exploration while potentially advancing patriarchal abstractions of femininity. By attending to these early experiences as historically and politically charged archives of deviation, fantasy, and technosexual relationality, the paper contributes to understanding the emergence of post-internet erotics and the complex inheritance of intergenerational sexual hauntologies.

Keywords

[Virtual reality](#)
[archaeology](#)

[Technosexuality](#)
[Gendered labour](#)

[Internet](#)

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Fig. 1. Screenshot from *Habbo Hotel*, captured by the authors (2025).

Opening Reflections

“Do you think you have a better sex life than your mother? And what about your mother’s mother? And her mother?” (Malou Lyse 2021). It’s not my therapist asking, but an animated sex toy in Maja Malou Lyse’s film *Antibodies*¹. Since encountering her work at Index Foundation in Stockholm last year, this deceptively innocent question has replayed in my mind with an oddly persistent urgency, touching on the affective residues of post-internet erotics and the inheritance of intergenerational hauntology. Think

¹ Exhibited in the context of the show “Bodies and Antibodies”, held at Index Foundation in Stockholm between 17 November 2023 and 28 January 2024. See <https://indexfoundation.se/exhibitions/bodies-and-antibodies>.

of AI girlfriends², deepfake pornographies, immersive VR sex, gamified affects – and the vibrator’s voice sounds less absurd than it should.

While the public discourse appears increasingly fixated with predicting the architecture of the ‘sex-of-the-future’, I find myself reflecting on my own sexual prehistory. Long before my girl friends and I had any language for consent or pleasure, before our bodies had even fully arrived, our *desires* – unlike those of our mothers, and certainly their mothers before them – were already *online*. Dispersed across servers, filtered through avatars, and whispered through usernames. As part of the very first generation that experienced puberty with internet access, I think of my grandmother’s generation libido and how it had been systemically silenced. While mine, without my consent, was suddenly accelerated, mediated, and spatially reconfigured by the proto-immersive architectures of early social platforms.

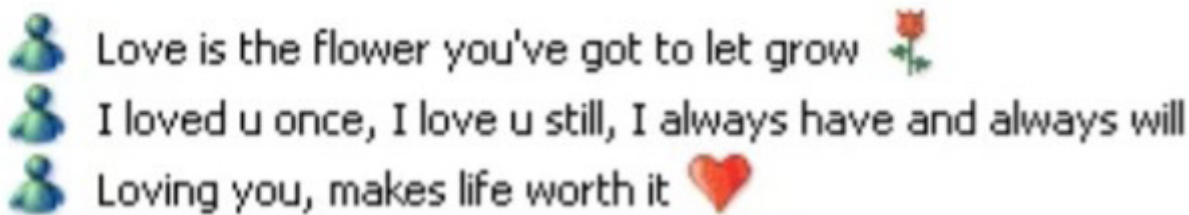


Fig. 2. MSN Messenger lovechain status, early online chatroom archive.

It’s hard today to do justice to the chaotic, horny absurdity of those early digital encounters. Even harder to recall the exact moment the internet entered our teenage girls’ bedrooms like an uninvited guest: disruptive, undisciplined and far too intimate. Against the backdrop of Berlusconi Italy, far from Catholic guilt and the daily broadcast of neoliberal fantasies of femininity, early online chatrooms seeped into the domestic space carrying a privilege both illicit and liberating: to be *unwatched*.

Only today I see just how deeply we were longing for a space that could feed our fantasies, fictions, crushes and connections. How desperate we were to flirt,

² I suggest to look into the work of Carmel Lael on AI Girlfriends. See Carmen Hines and Morgane Billuart, “Episode 13 – AI PornBots,” *Girl Employee*, June 26, 2024, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/7crSgZBun0ZRSnVwGlvF8L>.

tease, play, misbehave, exploring the erotic in its feral and unrestrained potential. It now feels almost inevitable how our teenager selves, aching for intimacy, felt so hard for the digital elsewhere. The excitement of navigating desire unanchored from the body, yet charged with feelings, had just entered our lives. And with touch gone, vulnerability seemingly appeared to vanish too. At the time we had no idea that our love affair with screen-time might have been the lovechild of a centuries-old lineage of repressed desire; passed down to us like recipes from our mothers, their mothers before them, our great-grandmothers...

In a time when digital desire drifts under the gaze of algorithmic governance and resurgent fascisms, it feels almost necessary to return – as one would to a tale – to those first moments when the web, and its awkward portals of e-dating, still appeared as a refuge. When wet dreaming managed to slip past economization, unclaimed by algorithms. If it is true that sex, far from being a liberatory experience, is now conceived as yet another form of inconvenient labour (Pettman 2017), the stories of early digital girlhood erotics let us glimpse more clearly on how the promise of the early web was indeed seductive: to outsource not just touch and vulnerability, but the struggle of *desiring* itself.

Introduction

Amid the restless questioning to decode the libidinal crisis we currently inhabit, this paper proposes a media-archaeology of digital desire. Both a nostalgic excavation and a forensic unpacking of cybererotics, it begins where so many adolescent libidos were first staged: inside the pixelated and unregulated interiors of *open source chatrooms*. This investigation stems from a precise historical, geographical and affective temporality. Against the backdrop of Silvio Berlusconi's patriarchal saturated-media, televisual hypersexuality, and neoliberal fantasies of femininity, the early 2000s were a moment in which internet access, particularly within domestic spaces, became increasingly widespread and normalized in Italy. This shift allowed net-

worked platforms to extend domestic intimacy, transforming the bedroom into a site where libidinal curiosity could be explored without the physical presence of others.

This research, however, is deliberately situated from the perspective of teenage girls and femme-identifying youth of this time, who, unlike first-time adult users, encountered sexuality under historically unprecedented conditions. If the early 2000s marked a shift for rerouting desire and intimacy through the apparent safety of texts, usernames, and avatars, young users had the possibility to do so prior to any real-life encounter(s) with the erotic. I thereby encourage to understand early online chatrooms less like adolescent playgrounds and more like rehearsal spaces for emerging libidinal protocols that Luciana Parisi would name “abstract sex” (Parisi 2004). Namely, those intimate engagements with others that unfold not between bodies, but between systems, circuits, and interfaces. On-line chatrooms were arguably the very first platforms to dissolve the boundary between biology and cybernetics, inaugurating a new paradigm of technosexual relationality – one in which the libidinal self was not only shaped by digital architectures but came into being with them.

For femme-users, early digital erotics offered a temporary relief from normative, reproductive scripts – a suspension of real-life consequences that allowed for experimentation, role-playing, and an unruly assertion of desire. The digital space soon became a refuge that allowed the exploration of pleasure in anonymous and curiously disembodied forms – untethered from the moral surveillance of society or family members, and the physical vulnerability that so often accompanied female sexuality in offline life. Yet this transformation should not be read solely as emancipatory. While digital erotic exploration offered a fleeting escape, it also risked realizing a longstanding patriarchal fantasy: the abstraction of female sexuality from its embodied, material presence. As Luciana Parisi warns, the autonomy of cybersex from reproduction may disrupt biological essentialism, but it also advances a technofantasy of femininity stripped of flesh – disembodied, programmable, and



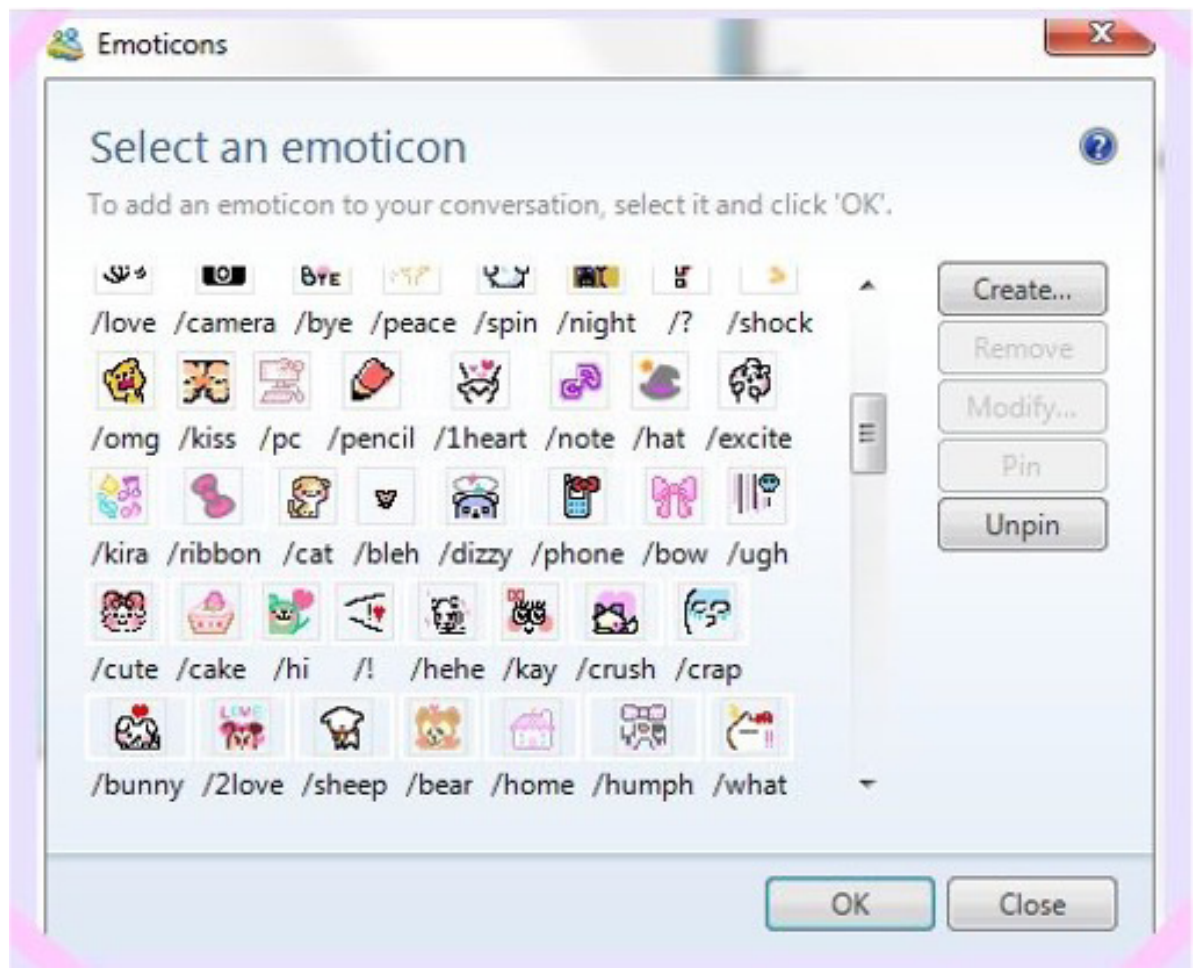
Fig. 3. Italian show *Ciao Darwin* host Paolo Bonolis kisses the hand of Madre Natura.

ultimately more manageable (Parisi 2004). In this post-flesh paradigm, desire risks being severed not only from consequence, but from the very matter that grounds it.

As much as our twelve-year-old selves could have possibly grasped the political and social implications of the digital environments we inhabited, this essay seeks to take seriously those early *e-dating* and *cybersex* experiences, as valuable archives of deviation and fantasy beyond the heteronormative scripts of televised girlhood. This text unfolds through a dialogical and autotheoretical reflection between visual artist Attila Manfredi and me, revisiting our respective memories of early digital femininity within the social gaming platform of *Habbo Hotel*. Although Attila and I only met in our mid-twenties, we both grew up in the same small town in Northern Italy, attended the same schools, and independently immersed ourselves in the unregulated interiors of habbohotel.com. Upon reconnecting as adults, we discovered a striking overlap in how our first romantic and erotic encounters were mediated through the spatial and social architecture of the game – its rooms, avatars, and interaction scripts that simulated intimacy while operating within the constraints of a gamified economy and

moral code. Over the years, countless relationships have spawned from within the *Hotel*, some of them leading to in-person meetings and memories. However, *e-dating* culture on Habbo cannot be addressed without acknowledging the way it has been stigmatized, while also doing justice to the heavy toxicity associated with it – the broken hearts, revenge porn scandals, cheating, roleplay, and age-difference-prohibited occurrences (Habbo Legends Wiki 2025). In the context of this essay, autotheory thus becomes a tool to revisit digital girlhood as a formative space for erotic becoming, where early online experiences are not merely anecdotal, but politically charged sites of gendered socialization, experimentation, and pleasure.

Fig. 4. MSN Messenger emoticon, early online chatroom archive.



Intermezzo – Attila Manfredi

Habbo looked innocent on the surface – cheerful, childish, harmless. A game, supposedly. But it was also strangely perverted, or maybe just soaked in the confused hunger of teenagers suddenly alone with their desires. Most of us were young – twelve, thirteen – maybe even younger. One of the strangest things was how much cybersex was allowed. You would meet a random player in the hotel lobby, then start a relationship with them, or engage in a one-time sexting moment.

Habbo Hotel's cybersex usually went like this: bump into a random stranger in the hotel lobby, head to their private room, lie down side by side on a pixelated bed – and then the grand digital striptease.

Avatars' outfits were swapped for sexy alternatives – reminiscent of lingerie, swimsuits or the closest thing to nudity a cartoon game could offer. Then type, line by line, messages that were awkward, tender, copied from something you had seen or heard on tv, or something outrageous and completely imagined. Sometimes you pretended to sleep together afterwards. Most times you wondered why you said things you didn't fully understand.

There were moments when things went further. You would exchange usernames (Channel 4 News 2012) – on MSN, Facebook – and maybe go all the way and turn on webcams. With enough hormone-peaking users online, it was only a matter of time before Habbo started featuring strip clubs, sex clubs and even some sex cults for erotic roleplays. Being wildly under-protected as it was, the platform eventually made headlines in 2012 when Channel 4 News reported a major scandal involving paedophiles on the platform, exchanging sexual chats and contact info with minors (Channel 4 News 2012).

Habbo Hotel

Cyber sex in a 6x6 tile room



Fig. 5. Cyber sex in a 6x6 tile room – furnitrader, “Habbo Hotel: Most Awkward Cyber Sex Prank,” 1'04", YouTube video, accessed July 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-h6HIO27E7g>.



Fig. 6. Cyber sex in a 6x6 tile room – furnitrader, “Habbo Hotel: Most Awkward Cyber Sex Prank,” 4'19", YouTube video, accessed July 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-h6HIO27E7g>.

Habbo Hotel Sex-themed rooms



Fig. 7. Habbo Hotel sex-themed rooms – *The pegging room*, owner: tinuviel.



Fig. 8. Habbo Hotel sex-themed rooms – *The Gentlemans Club*, owner: Limpbizkit.



Fig. 9. Habbo Hotel sex-themed rooms – *Red Light District: The Cuckening*, owner: Cakebutt.



Fig. 10. Habbo Hotel sex-themed rooms – *Speed Dating room*, owner: Maliya.

Cosplaying Adulthood

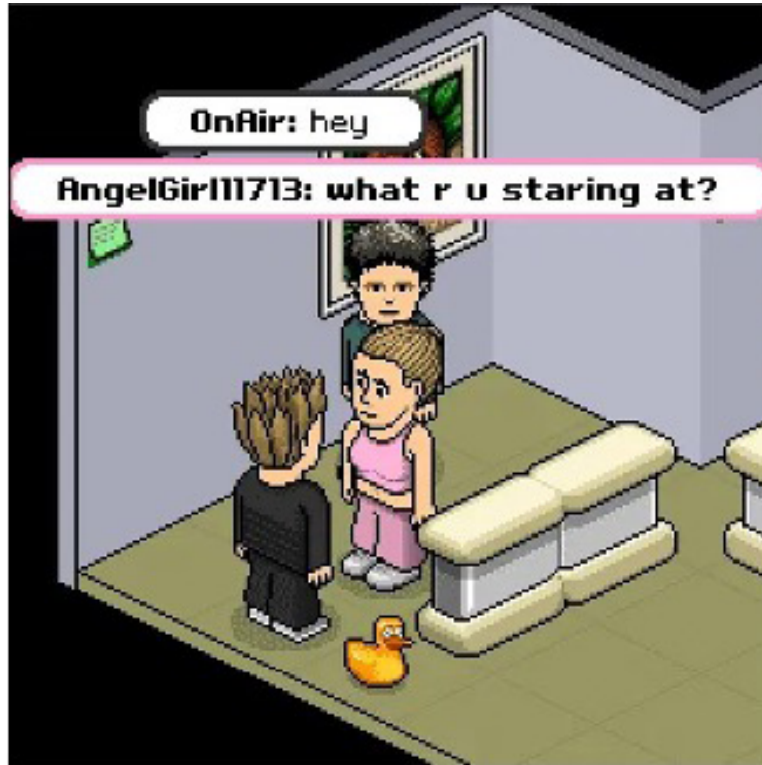


Figure 11. Archival screenshot from Habbo Hotel (source unknown). The image is reproduced as an example of the platform's interface and user-generated environments.

The precise moment of my first Habbo Hotel login calls for a recollection – the name of my avatar, the outfit I selected, the hue of my digital bedroom walls, have all faded into the haze of digital memory. What remains vividly present, however, is the affective atmosphere of the boredom that surrounded it. The long, meaningless afternoon after school, when a sense of close friendship came through the dial-up connection and a bulky desktop computer stationed in the living room. The idea of being constantly connected hadn't yet arrived; being online was an event, an appointment. Early virtual encounters were scheduled by calling friends on the landline: *Are you logging in?* we would ask. During our secret online getaway moments, my girl friends and I would indulge in long-distance gossip, trading school crushes updates, planning looks for upcoming parties and sending chain messages for good luck in love.

While the specifics of my first login to Habbo Hotel escape memory, I clearly recall the thrill of discovering it combined two of my deepest pre-teen obsessions. On one hand, the fantasy of building your own house and “doll”. On the other, the strange and exciting prom-

ise of being able to socialize with strangers all over Italy. Launched in 1998 by the Finnish company Sulake, Habbo Hotel was indeed among the earliest browser-based platforms to integrate digital architecture with real-time social interaction. The choice of a hotel as the platform's central metaphor might have seemed odd at first – hotels are sites of transience, typically reserved for adults, couples, and families. But it was precisely this tension – between the hotel's adult-coded exclusivity and our solitary child selves' access to it – that made Habbo Hotel so intriguing to our eyes.

Unlike the open, expansive geographies of later open-world games, Habbo offered a tightly enclosed spatial network, emphasizing encounters within its curated interiors rather than exploration of infinite terrains. The platform staged a temporary, semi-private sociality – rooms to check into, lobbies to linger in, strangers to meet and flirt with. Its promotional slogan promised exactly that: “Make friends, create your own room, become famous!” (Habbo Hotel 2025) – an early articulation of lifestyle-oriented digital networking where interior design, performance, and social climbing merged into a seductive promise of visibility and belonging.



Can you imagine a place with infinite rooms and infinite ways of having fun? Well, that's Habbo! There's rooms for hanging out, gaming, roleplaying... Like I said, the possibilities are endless. Most rooms are made by players - you should check some out and try creating one yourself!



Greetings and welcome to Habbo! My name is Frank and I'm the hotel manager. Let me show you around and give you a brief introduction to Habbo! Press the red X button if you'd like to pause at any time - you'll be able to continue whenever you want.

Fig. 12. Habbo Hotel, Introduction on Habbo Hotel's first login.

Upon entering, users were asked to create an avatar and design a private room. Avatars could either navigate the shared public spaces provided by the website – parks, nightclubs, cafés, and lobbies, where you would encounter other users – or furnish, expand and personalize their own private room. Private rooms could be opened to selected friends or made accessible to all, those with the highest visitor counts being featured on the homepage under “Most Popular Rooms” (Habbo Hotel 2025).

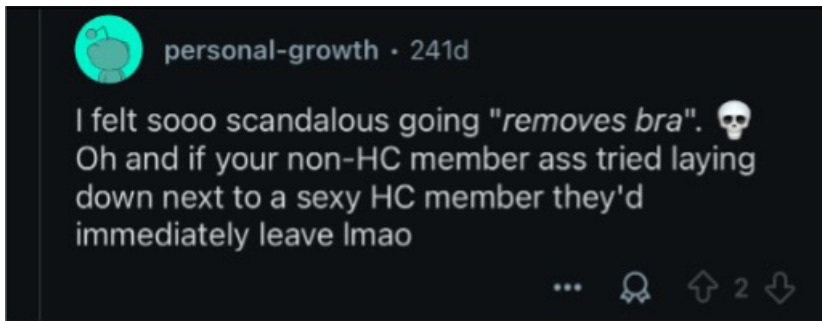


Fig. 13. Reddit, source unknown.
Author: personal-growth.

It did not take long before I understood the unspoken class system embedded within Habbo, a realization that, unsurprisingly, led me to beg my parents to purchase *Habbo credits* (paid with real-world currency) – to access a broad catalogue of virtual furniture and decorative objects known as *Furni*. This term encompassed everything from basic chairs and rugs to luxury items and rare design collectibles – the latter only available to *VIP Habbo Club (HC)* members, at the modest cost of a 10-euro phone credit recharge.

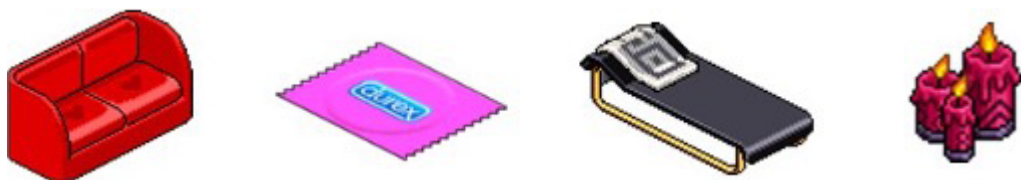


Fig. 14. Habbo Hotel, erotically charged furni selection
– Heart Sofa, Durex Rug, Leather Bed, Red Candles.

The thrill of acquiring digital status symbols was addictive, as each item was a marker of desirability. All users craved the king-size bed, the heart-shaped rug and the VIP badge next to their usernames. Owning VIP furniture and clothes signified status and taste within the

highly codified economy of display of the platform, which positioned interior design and looks as the primary form of social currency, indeed the very foundation of Habbo Hotel's microcosm.

Habbo's investment in interior aesthetics unfolded within a broader spatial logic of enclosure. While avatars could move freely across an expansive constellation of spaces, this freedom was always confined within the rigid architecture of the Hotel. Navigation was permitted, but only laterally: users could teleport from one room to another, but there was no "outside" to escape to, no exterior world beyond the hotel's symbolic and infrastructural perimeter. Even so-called 'outdoor' areas – gardens, rooftops, beaches, and town squares – were not true exterior environments but enclosed rooms disguised through visual motifs and ambient *Furni*. The beach, for instance, fondly recalled in nostalgic blog posts by early users who flirted poolside in pixelated bikinis (LMV Blog 2009) was not a liminal open space, but a themed interior: a set meticulously assembled from palm-tree *Furni*, wave-patterned tiles, and sun-loungers.



Fig. 15. Habbo Hotel, Beach, public room.



Fig. 16. Habbo Hotel, Speed Dating Room, user generated.

The *Hotel* functioned as a totalizing environment – its very architecture determining not just where avatars could move, but how intimacy, affect, and desire could circulate within it. And if that architecture was modelled entirely on the spatial grammar of an adult leisure resort – clubs, spas, pools, saunas, bars – then the social scripts it encouraged leaned toward adult fantasies, role-playing, and forms of relational experimentation far beyond childhood. While the explicitly erotic dimension of this environment will be explored further on, it is worth noting here that Habbo’s architecture offered a suggestively adult spatial lexicon masked by a child-friendly aesthetic. Within such interiors, relationships did not simply happen – they were inextricably tied to the Hotel’s social mimicry of adulthood.

Although Habbo avatars’ actions were quite restricted, the game had its own encoded language to allow for more. Anything apart from your avatar’s standing, dancing, waving, walking or sitting, had to be written enclosed in asterisks. This limitation produced a powerful linguistic workaround, a collective grammar of gestures and insinuations understandable only to its community. Through this simple typographic device – *kisses*, *touches thigh*, *moans*, *licking your neck* – users could stage full-blown erotic encounters, circumventing censorship. Asterisks be-

came the easy cue to sexting, to fantasy, to the simulation of bodily acts that were neither seen nor sanctioned yet vividly imagined. Erotic subjectivity, in this sense, was not only expressed but performed, line by line, within the very syntax of the game.



Fig. 17. Habbo Hotel, rare VIP *Furni* selection.

The Dollhouse

Let us indulge, just for a moment, in the sheer glamour of the carefully curated *Furni* selection above – a decadent wish-list of teenage fantasy, where heart-shaped Jacuzzis, rotating love beds, and velvet sofas were not just decorative choices but emblems of prestige and disposable income.

Rooms adorned with these coveted items operated as spatial self-portraits of their owners, immediately readable as social status within the social economy of the website. In screenshots shared across early forums

and blogs, rooms with prestigious VIP items became aspirational spaces, their objects functioning like digital heirlooms passed between users in the speculative economy of teenage capitalism (Atrio 2021).

Many *Furni* items on Habbo carried an erotic charge that went far beyond suggestion: stripping poles, velvet rugs, silk curtains, red-light interiors. Here I recall a friend's experience that perfectly captures the messy and thrilling contradictions of exploring sexuality and identity while surrounded by these intensely charged objects. She kept not one, but *two* avatars – her official, “good girl” profile – where she met IRL friends and kept things polite – and a secret alter ego, a full-on “bad girl” persona who visited every virtual bar in scandalously revealing outfits, even performing cheeky stripteases. This digital double life was her private space to play with desire and indulge in a “sexiness” that she could not afford yet in the outer world. But as all great dramas go, the curtain fell abruptly when her friend logged into her account and stumbled upon the “wild side” alter ego. The reveal was so scandalous that her friend eventually ghosted her – convinced she was crazy (Manfredi 2024).



Fig. 18. Habbo Hotel, heart shaped Furni.

It is important to emphasize that the real drama was rather scripted by the game itself. Through its visually charged and erotically suggestive architecture, Habbo constructed a distinctive environment which functioned as a proto-immersive social stage where boundaries between play and affective experimentation were continually blurred. Within such stage, users could reimagine themselves through their avatars and perform identity in intimate, carefully curated spaces. Combined with the platform's logic of visibility through decorated interiors, Habbo shifted from being just a game to becoming a fully-fledged

dollhouse society – one where identity, desire, and social dynamics were staged and made visible through space.



Fig. 19. Habbo Hotel, Luxury 1970s-Inspired Rooms, author: @ogsef_habbo.

In the traditional dollhouse, theorized as a disciplinary object for young girls, domestic interiors serve both as fantasy and training ground: spaces in which aesthetic sensibility, emotional labour, and the orchestration of social scenes can be practiced through miniature furniture and silent dolls (Stewart 1993). Habbo revived and reanimated these dynamics in a digital idiom. Here, avatars functioned as animated dolls – self-styled, costumed, and maneuvered through choreographed interactions – while rooms became modular domestic scenes to be furnished, curated, and shown off. The interface invited users to perform this type of affective labour: crafting atmospheres, hosting guests, and investing emotional attention in the care of interiors designed for both intimacy and social visibility.

This gendered labour was neither neutral nor equally distributed. While femme-coded spaces often centred on idealized domesticity – dreamy bedrooms, romantic villas, pastel-coloured bathrooms – male avatar's rooms mirrored fantasies of autonomy and economic power: casinos, private offices, mafia hideouts (Wizold Sage 2024),

nightclubs. These contrasting spatial logics echoed broader cultural narratives – the dollhouse was not just a metaphor, but a structural paradigm, naturalizing the aesthetics of care for some, and command for others.

This dynamic must also be read in relation to the sociopolitical climate of the early 2000s in Italy, when Berlusconi's hyper-gendered media culture amplified already existing gender stereotypes. The national television programming of the time centred around idealized domestic femininity, eroticized hospitality, and male entrepreneurial spectacle. Habbo, in its own way, mirrored and extended these cultural scripts into the digital sphere. While shows like *Striscia la Notizia* (Mediaset, 1999) staged the spectacle of the *Veline*³ beside the “businessman”, Habbo gamified these same tropes – hosting as labour, interior design as social capital, seduction as aesthetic performance. The digital dollhouse thus functioned not only as a space of play, but as a training ground for internalizing, reproducing, and performing gendered expectations embedded in both domestic and offline life.



Fig. 20. Mediaset Video. “Stacchetto Story 1999-2000.” *Striscia la Notizia*.

What appeared as innocent and childlike actions – arranging furniture, dressing avatars, hosting friends

³ In Italian national television, “Veline” (singular: *velina*) originally referred to the young women who assisted the hosts on the satirical news program “Striscia la Notizia”. Since then its usage has expanded to encompass more showgirls in Italian television and media.

in your “digital house” – was in fact a microcosm of a wider affective regime. It taught young users, especially girls, how to inhabit space not merely as occupants but as caretakers, decorators, and entertainers; to aestheticize intimacy, perform value, and once again internalize “visibility” as virtue. Habbo Hotel, under the guise of the ‘game’, was then more like a training platform of formal education that aligned closely with the normative scripts assigned to femininity, echoing lessons that would go far beyond the screen. Much like its *analog* predecessor, the dollhouse, Habbo Hotel’s ambient charm masked a deeply pedagogical architecture – one that rehearsed future roles through ritualized interface habits, sweetened by animation and reward. Even though Habbo has long since faded from the digital mainstream, its gendered scripts persist in today’s platforms that gamify domesticity, in influencer aesthetics that equate care with capital, in the economies of visibility that still shape how women perform online. What began as play now reads, in retrospect, as preparation.



Fig. 21. Habbo Hotel, Nightclub Public Room.



Fig. 22. Habbo Hotel, Girl-coded café, private rooms.

Intermezzo – Attila Manfredi

Apparently, the screenshot dates back to 2011 — the year Habbo Hotel (or Bobba Hotel) was our week-day after-school hangout. Saturdays were for catechism and pre-Confirmation activities at Church, but from Monday to Friday, this was our spot. We would gather here with

the same classmates I used to eat sandwiches with during lunchbreak – except now we were having sex with strangers dressed in swimsuits, bunny slippers, and shopping bags on our heads.

I don't remember exactly how the first time went – which bed it was, in which room, or what outfit I had picked. But I do remember the ritual.

Someone would whisper to you in a public room: “sex?” Or they would friend you, then slide into your private chat with the same question. I'd say yes (I didn't even really know what sex involved).

So: friend request > private chat > you see your partner vanish from the public room, and that's your cue to follow.

You would end up in a private room – I remember especially the classic 6x6 tile layout (like the one in the screenshot). Intimate. Just for two. Barely enough space for a few Furni (even if you're broke, my love don't cost a thing – as J.Lo would say). Just big enough for a bed to lie on – one of the few actions my 8-bit body could perform. Sometimes it was just a plain little box, grey walls, grey floor, no windows, no Furni – maybe one of those bugger-coloured stools (which cost a few cents of phone credit).

And there I was, ready to have sex with my partner. I wasn't into eccentric stuff – I never roleplayed as a baby⁴. At most, I would wRiTe LiKe ThIs because all my friends did it & I wanted to feel grown too.

*Anyway, lying on the bed: *kisses kisses* mmmmm mmmm *puts it in* I'M A VIRGIN *moans* oh yes *thrusts it in* mmmmm*

I never liked having sex on Habbo. I didn't get why people did it – sometimes not even how. So I would sneak into other people's rooms (when I saw two users were inside – sometimes I even rang the doorbell) just to study how the sexting worked. Most of the time I got kicked out pretty fast (not everyone liked having a voyeur in the room – or maybe that concept of kink/fetish was still few

⁴ Habbo Baby is a term used to describe Habbo users playing as infants or babies.

years away from reaching the habbo.it server). Not that I was there with such intention – I was there as an 11-year-old anthropologist.

That was my sex education.

xx_Kekko_xx was the first penis I ever saw – from Napoli, and apparently well experienced. When I asked “age?”, he didn’t even bother to ask mine before replying “12.” Who knows if it was true.

Anyway, the photo of my vagina travelled from my iPhone 4 to his phone via the Kik app.

Our one-afternoon love story began right there on Bobba Hotel (a retro clone of Habbo). After the climax, he left me alone in the room like some miserable leftover, and when I followed him to the other room, I found him already hitting on someone else with a simple: “u got a bf?”

Heart shattered.

The Masquerade – Skins, Scripts, Selves

In a moment when terms like *queerness* or *non-binary* were still years away from entering our vocabulary, Habbo set the stage for one of its most compelling features: the possibility of reimagining ourselves entirely. For a generation of young teenagers, Habbo Hotel offered an early, unspoken initiation into the performativity of the self within digital space, allowing for experimentation with relational codes, visual self-presentation, and sexuality. While such exploration was often deeply intertwined with normative gender roles and aesthetics that came from offline life’s media and family culture, it also offered space for moments of radical subversion, ambiguity, and role-play.

Unlike platforms that anchored users to their existing social circles or physical appearance – think MSN Messenger, or webcam-based platforms like ooVoo, and Chatroulette, which required names, photographs, real-time audio-visual presence – Habbo offered the possibility of radical dissociation from real life. The platform was structured around anonymity and self-fabrication,

each user being represented by an avatar highly customizable in every aspect of its appearance: hairstyles, clothing, accessories, skin tones, piercings. More than visual cues, each of these choices contributed to the construction of a persona that was at once artificial yet affectively resonant.



Fig. 23a.
HABBO HOTEL
Avatars, VIP
Habbo Club
members.



Fig. 23b.
HABBO HOTEL
Avatars, non-VIP
members.



Fig. 24. HABBO HOTEL, VIP HC Limousine.

For my girl friends and me, Habbo soon became an early laboratory for rehearsing forms of femininity not yet accessible or permissible in the public spaces of our offline life. Our avatars wore miniskirts, fishnets, heavy makeup and flamboyant accessories, partially to reflect our personal aesthetic preferences, but also as instruments of speculative embodiment. If the avatars were digital prostheses through which we could exaggerate, distort and eroticize ourselves, the Hotel indeed offered a low-risk territory for testing visual libidinal cues often associated with adult womanhood; and we enjoyed playing a femininity that was camp, extravagant, seductive, and unapologetically performative.

The virtual dressing room seemingly echoed our offline rituals: sneaking into our mothers' bedrooms to try on fancy clothes, high heels, smudging colourful makeup on our faces, and striking exaggerated poses in front of the mirror. But unlike those solitary playful rehearsals, the web was suddenly allowing that disguised version to be met by others. What set Habbo Hotel apart from other online doll-making games of the time – such as *Stardoll*, *Barbie.com*, and partially *The Sims*, which isolated the avatar in a loop of aesthetic play – was precisely the possibility of merging shapeshifting within a live social architecture. The platform did not simply allow users to decorate a doll; it invited that doll to speak, move, desire, interact with others. This very separation between our physical body and digital identity granted the opportunity to disappear as much as to multiply, allowing us to navigate the early stages of gendered socialization, and explore our subjectivities outside the confines of physical embodiment or normative social expectations.

Gender presentation on Habbo was inherently fluid and porous: while users were required to select a gender at the moment of registration, the platform's system of avatar customization allowed for femininity and masculinity to be exaggerated, subdued, or entirely reconfigured. Through aesthetic choices, users could construct gendered appearances that often departed from normative expect-

tations, enabling playful negotiations of identity as much as profound personal realizations. Numerous testimonies over the years attest to how the game enabled users to first articulate or encounter their queer desires. I here recall the article of a former player that recounts how Habbo was the place where she “learned how to be gay” (Schaufeld 2018), describing the transformative experience of user-generated rooms such as the *LGBT Wonderland* (Rogers 2020). In this kind of queer space, avatar’s stylistic choices – cropped hair, bright colours, gender non-conforming outfits – signalled affective belonging; and more than vessels for disguise, they were rather tools for revelation and identification.



Fig. 25. Habbo Hotel, Pride Promo 2025.

This capacity for self-discovery was not limited to solitary experiences. In a now-mythical anecdote from one of my friends, I recall one of them being in a relationship with a male-presenting avatar throughout her early teens, only to discover years later that the character had been played all along by a lesbian woman. Rather than deception, this moment revealed how the mediated space of Habbo allowed for mutual projection, emotional investment, and cross-identification, regardless of the player’s offline body. This was precisely the radical potential of shapeshifting – not the erasure of identity, but the surfacing of submerged desires through speculative embodiment.

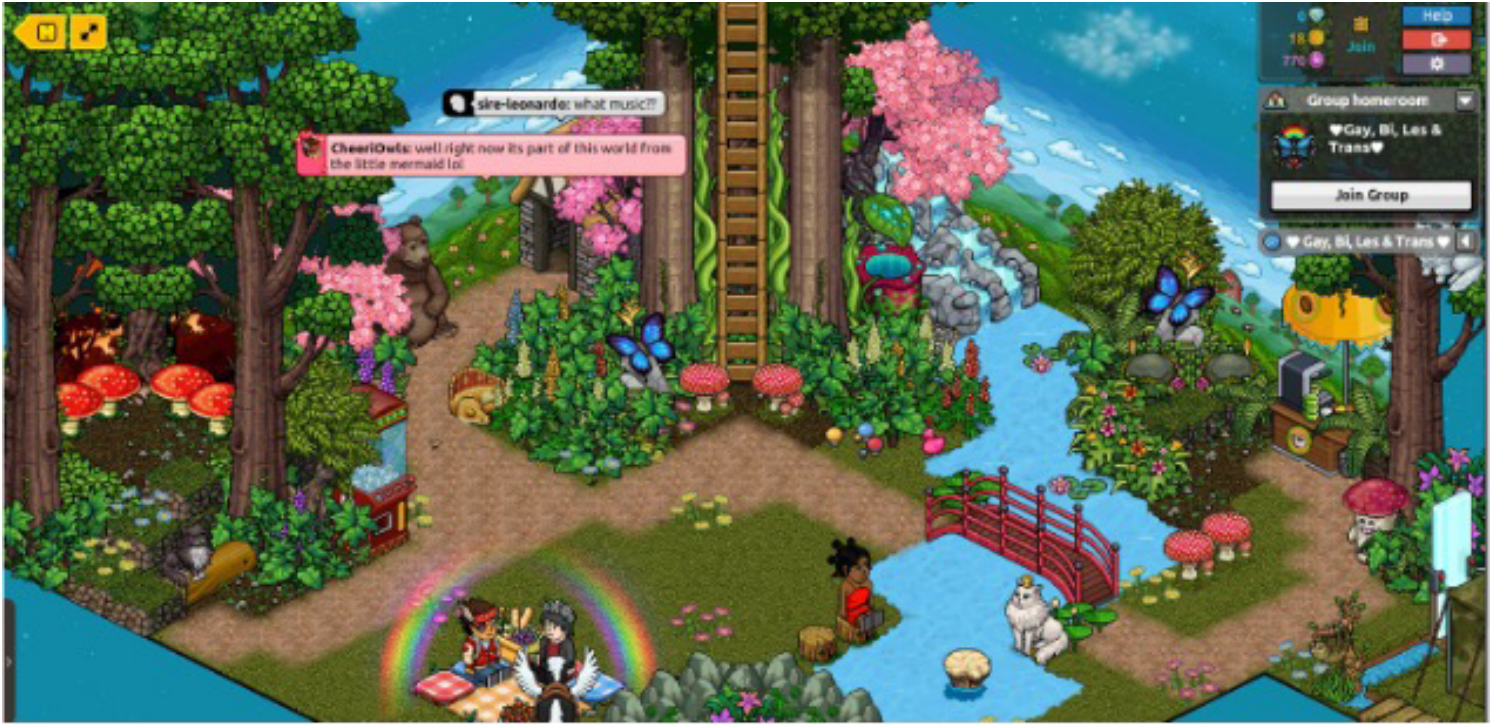


Fig. 26. Habbo Hotel, LGBT Wonderland Public Room.

Although racial experience is rarely documented within the Italian Habbo Community, it remains a crucial dimension to consider when examining the platform’s dynamics of sexuality – particularly in non- Italian servers, where race emerges as a visible and affective axis of interaction. Despite the limited variety of body modifications available in the platform design – for example, in terms of body size or height, which was not variable – Habbo offered a wide variety of visual indicators of identity – through skin tones, facial features, hair types, or culturally coded fashion – resulting in users still projecting, interpreting, and reacting to racialized bodies within the Hotel.

In a striking user testimony from Habbo US, one player recounts being approached by “the only other African American woman-avatar” (LMW 2009) in the room, followed by a proposition for dirty sex. In their blog post, the author wonders how this person assumed that they might possibly be interested in partaking in intercourse – “Who are these people? Who are these characters? What do these various personalities represent in this virtual world? What do they seek to accomplish?” (LMW 2009). In their blog post, they end up describing how these interactions unex-

pectedly provoked a deeper awareness of their own racial perception, unconscious biases, and affective responses.

While the digital realm of Habbo Hotel was often understood as a space of identity abstraction, it also unveiled the ways in which racial and sexual scripts persist and circulate even in environments that are ostensibly liberated from physical identity and real-world consequences. While avatars offered the promise of reinvention, fantasy, and disidentification, this user's experience makes clear that pre-existing cultural logics about race and sexuality are re-inscribed within virtual interactions – determining which bodies or visual cues are read as hypersexual or available. Being unanchored from the body, yet pushed towards intimate encounters by the platform, inevitably highlights the ambivalence of virtual play in Habbo – on one hand, its freedom served as a site liberation or experimentation, on the other, it opened the door for the reproduction and amplification of harmful tropes, unmediated by social accountability. Habbo's supposed anonymity, then, offered a stage on which users could reproduce, negotiate, or subvert hegemonic logics of identity – including the intersecting dynamics of gender, race, and sexuality.

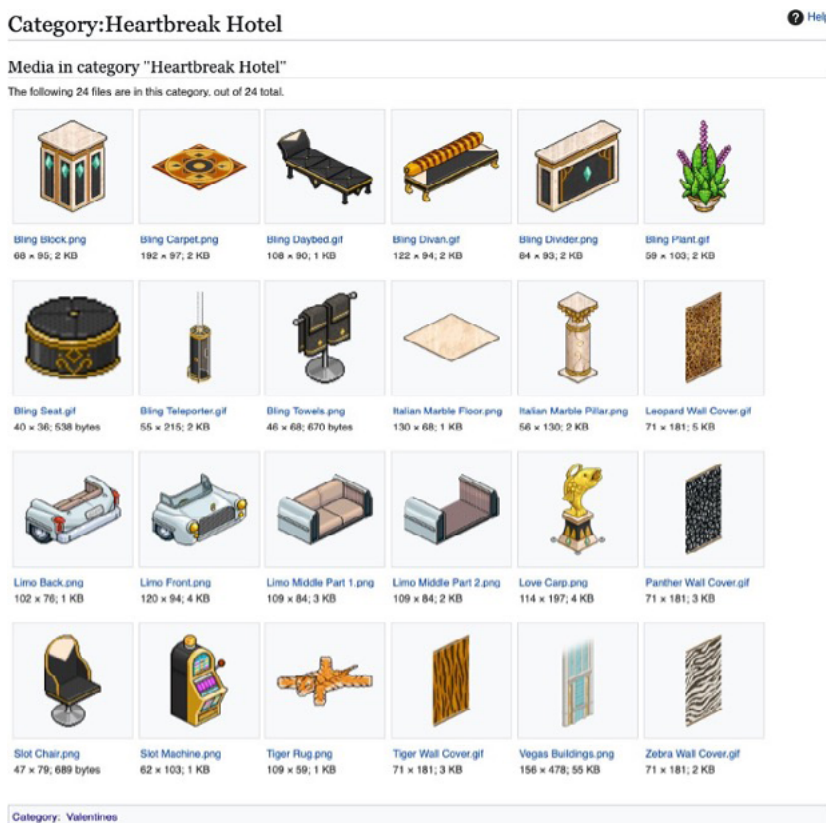


Fig. 27. HABBO's Furni Selection – Heartbreak Hotel.

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