

FROM COMPUTER-MEDIATED SEX TO COMPUTER-GENERATED SEXUALITY: AN OUTLOOK ON THE POSTHUMAN SEXUAL TROPE

Lecture Note for *Arse Elektronika 2008: Do Androids Sleep with Electric Sheep?* Presentation

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Abstract

The Internet is full of weird people – and I mean, *really* weird people. Especially in porn. Tentacle hentai is OK, and maybe even clown porn is understandable... But, seriously, multiple leg worship and macrophilial snuff? How did we get these stuff in first place? Researchers generally take them as a proof of how vast and unexplored the human sexual universe is, while politically-correct liberals thank the Internet (and Photoshop) for letting minority sexual groups have their say. But what if the Internet is what created those minority sexual groups in first place, and thus not a proof but a cause of the vastness of human sexuality? With my psychoanalytic informatics take, I offer an alternative perspective that it's actually not a matter of a couple of weirdos using the Internet to do weird stuff they've always been inclined to – it's how the Internet inspires people to do weird stuff and make weirdos out of themselves. As Slavoj Žižek noted about pedophilic priests, it's not the unconscious of the individual that is at play – the perversion is already inscribed in the unconsciousness of the system.

If sexuality evolves with technology, then, how are we to predict the future of sexual cultural politics? Teledildonic sex and orgasm pills will suddenly look very mediocre as politically-correct movements demand biotechnological generation of easy-to-chop lifeless bodies for snuff fans, artificially-intelligent mollusks for tentacle masochists, and excrement-sterilizing pills for scat parties that can be geotagged to encourage outsiders to join. If many of us now feel guilty and incomplete if we do not engage in anal sex, what will the majority of us feel guilty about in a future in which technology has eliminated all possible malignant properties of sex? What kind of sex life will our grandchildren enjoy – or, rather, feel morally obliged to enjoy – then?

Introduction – Let's Enjoy Posthuman Sex!

When I first heard the Moravecian posthuman dream of the ability to someday live an immortal life by downloading our consciousness into machines, my reaction was, “Um...?” I was thrilled, already the sci-fi geek that I am, but had several questions in my mind. I mean, what's the use of being immortal if we are deprived of all our biological enjoyment? Are they seriously expecting anyone to be willing to float around cyberspace for one thousand years without sex?

Then the reaction was, as you may have guessed, “Well, we won't be floating around for long! We will download the minds into physical machines that can fuck and have crazy orgasms! And have dicks that are permanently erect!” Well, one thing is clear: it sure made the idea sound a whole lot more fascinating.

But the lesson here is clear: the posthuman dream implies a radical rupture between the human body and mind, and hence the contingency of embodiment and sexuality. This underlying logic is one I will take as background of my theories. Since we are all in this room because we share the same dirty fantasies of fucking with or as intelligent machines and awesome genetically tweaked monsters, it should be clear that it is against this posthuman fantasy that we stand today.

Part I. Could it be?

The theme song and video of this year's Arse Elektronika fascinates me. Intimate pixels that are gay subroutines? Wow!

But I have a simple question: how did we come to accept rectangular pixels as subjective signifiers in engaging in such intimacy?

To signify is to abstract, and to abstract is to generate universality. A minimum abstraction of a face is the usual two-dots-one-line drawing, which means that anything having such structure can be socially accepted as a potential face (potential as in we can see faces in front shots of cars and electric sockets). A minimum abstraction of a human sexual body, as depicted in the video, is dot, a minimum countable entity. What does this imply? You guessed it – *any countable entity can now be socially accepted as a potential sexual body.*

Now, how did we come to this? How did we come to accept dots as a valid signifier of an entire subject that is about to have sex?

My best bet is that such signifier, such perception of the subject (as a blinking digital dot) does not exist before the radar. But even then in the early times of the radar, hardly anybody would think of crashing these dots together on the radar and pretend planes having sex (unless, of course, you have some sort of weird perversion – but that's another story).

We may prefer to go back to its non-digital predecessors: people have been representing themselves as static points, and their groups as statistical numbers, since analog war simulations used for war tactics. Military tacticians have been sketching themselves as dots on dirt as early as war tactics were invented. For wars, it just was not necessary to depict the limbs. All that matters is individual location as such.

But people actually bothered to add body and limbs to the dots and circles to actually depict intimate sexual relations. They needed those limbs – their positions matter. But now it's no longer necessary. We settle with those nice, rectangular, limbless pixels. Not only in this song, but in many cases I'm sure you're all familiar with. (Keep in mind that I am talking about the minimum visual sexual signifier here, not the possibility of complexity possible in today's pornosphere.)

We can probably guess that what made these pixels horny were computer games. We have to have some sort of crazy warplane fetish to want to crash planes in radars for the sake of sexual pleasure, but it's a lot easier to imagine the dots of Pong going at it. Which means that at some point in time, some military tactician dude must have said, “Hey, fuck it, let's get them out of their war context so we can feel better about having fun imagining these generals on horses having sex!” Ditto for radars and flight simulations – we wanted to have more fun with them, and, *voila*, the computer game was born, enabling us to enjoy ourselves as pixels!

The existence of gay subroutines in our imagination can precisely be read as a combination of the legacy of the military radar and political correctness, two of the largest cultural legacies of our 20th century. The lesson to learn here is clear: the visual signifier of the subject is now taken to the extreme point that it does not even retain its minimalistic definition of anthropomorphism. Granted, we can be anything – and have sex with and as anything.

Let us focus now to the dimension of the voice: however we may think of the visual signifiers as non-anthropomorphic, we should not forget the life dimension given to them by their enunciation. Given voices, the pixels are now fully alive, passionately romantic. Here's an irony: even pixels can be romantic!

I would argue that this statement that even the mere, utmost minimalistic signifier of a subject can have the full extent of emotional life does not only imply an excess of life – it also implies the *installability* of life, one of the primary tenets of the posthuman since Moravec. We do not think of the pixels as alive from the beginning, but we take it for granted that in some point in time someone must have injected life to them, giving them a voice to speak with, making them an avatar of the human being.

And don't forget that they are subroutines – they are purely cyborgs, machines but nonetheless capable of love.

The art we create speak volumes about how we understand ourselves. What do I mean by “posthuman sexual trope”? By now it should be clear that I am not thinking of dancing Roombas with human brains implanted in them, not even dildos strapped on to artificially intelligent computers. Instead, the brief analysis above precisely illustrates the main tenets of posthumanity that I will use here and have used throughout my entire research. I will state them again as follows:

- 1) **The transformability of bodies:** As we signify ourselves more and more with numbers and dots, we feel more and more free to derive any form of body and sexuality that suit us from these numbers and dots. The biological human body is already an avatar.
- 2) **The installability of life:** Our current computer culture is visual-dominant, in which every picture can be modified at will with Photoshop, and on the occasions that we use voice, the voice we use is mostly not ours (audibles, dedicated songs, etc.) – our

dimension of life becomes permutable.

- 3) **The programability of intimacy:** We see love as a set of programs and algorithmic functions, friends as addible, intimate details such as children's photos as shareable and your dinner menu as tweetable to complete strangers.

So what does all this amount to? *Our contemporary language and culture structure us to fantasize inherently mutable bodies with interchangeable lives and new functions of intimacy.*

Could it be that meddling with computers not only makes it easier for us to do sexual activities, but *radically alters our sexuality altogether?*

Part II. The Body Problem: Photoshop and Inherent Mutability

As many theorists are already well aware, each new form of media not only structures the way we relate to the world, but also redefines our understanding of the body and our experience of space and time. Thus it should not be surprising that novel technologies make for novel sexuality. As I have illustrated above, our current understanding of the body, life, and intimacy is very different from what would be the norm, say, half a century ago.

Since the focus of this paper is to interrogate why people do all the sick things one can get with the Internet, I will focus mainly on one aspect of Internet culture that made all the sick things possible: digital images. I will define this term here in a very broad understanding, however, so as to include both static and moving images, both Photoshopped and non-Photoshopped. As long as it is in pixels, I will call it a digital image.

This simple definition is sufficient for my purpose: when things are in pixels, they all look the same to a computer. A computer doesn't tell the difference between a masterpiece photography and something done in MS Paint. It just processes the pixels all the same – with simple clicks here and there, suddenly, all images become editable. (This is what WJT Mitchell calls the inherent mutability of the image.)

A computer basically tells us that all images are the same – no one image is more true than another (possibly responding to the demand for a universal equality of things, as Manovich put it). Which is why a pixel and a realistic photograph can both be taken as a signifier of the subject – and still interact with emotions, etc. All digital images are potential avatars.

But avatars by themselves aren't alive. What makes them alive is their enunciation, be it in the form of tweets, vampire bites, profile theme songs, Flickr updates... We have to do something with our avatars to make it alive, to make it exist in cyberspace. *We have to install life into our dead pixels.*

And of course now we have all the conservative complaints of how the Internet sucks life out of you (“Too much online life will make you asocial,” etc.), while on the other hand we wish that real life could be as easy as our digital one (the typical joke that wishes the ability to Photoshop one's looks, etc.). The predominant fantasies of today rely on the primary fantasy of a total contingency of our body. Think about it: with genetic engineering, nanotechnology, Web 3.0, are we not already heading there?

The true revolution of the digital image is thus not only the transformation of the signifier of

the subject on computer screens as such, but, more fundamentally, the birth of a new desire of radical body modification. *When signifiers of the subject is inherently mutable, subjective embodiment becomes inherently contingent.*

It is not only that we consider that our avatars in online life as a contingent visual identity of ourselves, but also that our visual identity in real life – i.e. our bodies, gender, and sexuality – as contingent. Abstraction has always been an effort to grasp the (Lacanian) Real. The ability of abstracting subjects into pixels while keeping a fantasy of intimacy demonstrates that information and data flow represented by pixels are closer to the Real of our being than our physical body.

Shortly, all this basically means it's now easy for us to say, “So we're just information? Then why settle with normal bodies – let's grab some awesome sex monster body instead for the hell of it!” Thanks, Photoshop!

Part III. The Gender Problem: From Women to Mutants

Many people today talk now about computer-mediated communication. Then, sex naturally enters the equation, and we have computer-mediated sex. But if there is one thing we learn from Lacan, it is that sexuality itself is already an effect of language, of communication. Thus, if language generates sexuality, then the sexuality generated by computer language may very well be fundamentally different from all that we know so far of our more common notion of biological sexuality.

The illustration I used above, taking an example from a piece of artwork we should all now be very familiar, should already show the fundamentally different concepts we now have of our bodies, lives, and notions of intimacy caused by computers, cybernetics, and the Web. But let's just talk briefly about psychoanalysis for a moment to see where all this might lead to in terms of the larger cultural evolution.

You probably remember that in psychoanalysis, the apex of nightmare is the castration – which is why we have the stereotypical evil feminines: the seducer, the witch, the *vagina dentata* monster, etc. Our society was obviously crudely sexist, one in which all monsters could be traced back to the feminine.

But there was no Cloverfield monster in the times of Freud when he did his analyses. Heck, even Godzilla was not yet there. It seems that our Freud was missing all of those kick-ass geeky giant monster movies. And Cronenberg films. What a shame! Well, we can't really blame Freud – television is not yet a mass-produced thing in his time.

What does this have to do with psychoanalysis? Well, basically, everything. First, why are those giant monsters the bad guys? I would claim that it is not because they are the feminine, the seducer, the anti-mother, and so on. It's not even because they are the feminine “nature,” as many deep feminists might claim. It's because they're weird bastards. They're not nature, but *nature gone wrong*.

My point here is that the evil Other is now defined not by a lack of penis (recall tentacle hentai), but by an error in the creation of the body. *The horror of castration is now replaced by a horror of mutation.*

Here is the catch: mutation can either give you no penis (Cronenberg's *The Fly*), or it can give you hell of a lot of them (tentacle hentai). So basically, unlike castration, the very malignance of mutation is contingent: it can reduce your phallus to null, or it can multiply it by factors. Mutants aren't all bad – recall all those superheroes who save the day?

Of course, women in the past were also not all bad. Their virtue was defined by their certain values such as reproductive function, obedience, and loyalty to men and the family – in other words, by their subordination to male values. Likewise, contemporary mutants are good only insofar as they can be controlled to do the good of society and is friendly with modern technology.

Technology, with all its deterministic control potentials since the Enlightenment, has become the new phallus, replacing the violent gun and sword of the institutions before it. Cybernetics is an excellent example of this shift, and the information society is its perfect manifestation. Plus, technology has a rhizomatic structure: you can't castrate it, you can only mutate its nodes and hope the mutation spreads.

Now here's the punchline: if women are replaced by mutants, what becomes of our definition of beauty? Yep, you probably guessed it – *we are seduced no longer by the feminine, but by the mutant*. Remember the never-ending debate of how the media “teaches unrealistic beauty standards for teenage girls”? This view sort of explains all those Photoshoppery now, doesn't it? Of course they are not realistic – it's because the ideal beauty is no longer that of realism, but of digitally mutated cyborg subjects!

More empirical and daily would be this: unless you're a weirdo, chances are you are not attracted to the chaste, plump women of classical paintings. You're attracted to those lesbian nymphos in porn movies – not because they are feminine, but because they are excessively sexual mutants. *Now* we understand why paraphilia is proliferating – it's just the next step, after all!

Part IV. The Politics Problem: The Nightmare of Future Pornotopia

By now, the first part of my abstract should be clear, and you should have understood the reason why computers, by its entirely new media and cultural language, may very well be altering our most fundamental notion of sex, radically changing how we view our bodies, gender, and sexuality. And, of course, so far in this conference we have talked about how to do sex to gain what we would call pleasure.

But we may be forgetting one important and crucial fact: people are dicks. I mean, during the birth of the Internet, who would have thought that it will be used to disseminate and propel 2 Girls 1 Cup into such immortal fame?

Sex drives technology; that much is clear from last year's Arse Elektronika. But if, in turn, technology generates new sexualities as my thesis above, the function now has a feedback loop. Apropos my thesis, computers and the Internet actually *generate* stranger and stranger forms of paraphilia; apropos the more general thesis of this conference, those paraphilia will in turn drive our new technologies.

So don't expect the future of pornotopia to be one with sunshine and daisies, full of only orgasmotrons and intelligent sex machines. Instead, expect it to be full of shit – literally – plus lifeless body parts and artificial blood.

Sounds nightmarish? Well, to do a stupid spontaneous Galileo gambit, we could easily say that all of the technology presented in this event would be very nightmarish for conservatives. But conservatives reject all these on the grounds of vague superstitions; we, on the other hand, reject it because when we say an action is sick, it literally is sick and harmful, often mortally so. The reason we can reject paraphilia as “sick” but accept consensual BDSM as “normal” resides precisely in the question of practical logic.

The problem with practical logic is that it changes with technology. The Žižekian illustration of today's “era of decaffeinated coffee” could not have been more precise: the logic of commodity today is that it is already its own counter-agent – technology is primarily being deployed to deprive commodities of their malignant properties. Most of us now think of sexual technology in terms of how to achieve better orgasms. Why not think in terms of how to achieve more orgasms, as in, get aroused at everything? Perhaps a vibrator that only turns on when one is feeling disappointed, to keep the mood up, as it were? How about creating pills that enable us to endure more pain and receptive to more pleasure? There will be no more practically logical reason to think of scat fetishists as sick people when excrements are sterile (or even, to go further, vitamin-rich!), much as there is no practically logical reason for us today to think of consensual BDSM practitioners as sick (with all their safe techniques, etc.).

Political correctness teach us to give everyone a chance. Why not use technology to eradicate all the malignant properties of paraphilia? We can create sterile excrements for coprophiliacs, torture-endurance pills for masochists, bioengineered artificial dead bodies for necrophiliacs... Perhaps a fire-resistant skin to take “hot” into a new level? And maybe the Moravecian dream would be especially exciting for fans of guro manga who want to live out all the fantasies to have sex like the immortal Mai in Waita Uziga's *Mai-chan's Daily Life*, who stays alive even after being violently mutilated – after all, we will be immortal, and when we are, no sexual minority group would be oppressed.

While that may be right, in the sense that all perversions are now accepted more and more as the norm, I would claim that the atmosphere of our sexual lives today is far from what one could call free. Try walking into a room of sexual libertarians (e.g. this room) and say out loud that you don't enjoy sex. What would happen would need no explaining. Already today we make fun of the people who claim chocolate is better than sex, and there are numerous cases of couples breaking up because one or the other refuses to enjoy a certain sexual experiment.

Let's take the case of anal sex: why are more and more women today, in sex consultations, curious to try the sexual act (as we learn from last year's panel talk of Autumn Tyr-Salvia, Tasha Bob, and Jocey Neveaux), compared to the last several decades? Why are they not doing the same old stuff and asking the same old consultation questions instead, those of a traditional troubled woman that could not enjoy sex with her partner?

We have two possible answers for this question: the first would be the typical one, that sex-positive feminism is winning, and women today are finally coming out and not only are enjoying their sex, but also are brave enough to fulfill their long lost sexual desires and probe

more fantasies. The second one is much more simple yet much more obscene: women today simply feel ashamed to ask the old questions and obliged to ask the new ones. Our trouble today is no longer that we feel we cannot fulfill our desires, but simply that we feel constantly inferior because we do not desire enough. The society of control, as we know, do not tell us what to do – it tells us what to want.

Now combine this formulation with politically-correct pro-paraphilia technologies, and what would we have in the future? People will be encouraged to try out new fetishes just because they can – the lack of harm itself becomes a good enough reason to morally oblige the enjoyment of an object.

Thus, our future pornotopia may in fact be a true nightmare, *one driven more by obligation and fear rather than desire*; one in which every sexual and masturbatory act is done just to reassure oneself that one can still properly enjoy (erection, orgasm, life, etc.) – *a foreclosure of the superego of enjoyment*.

Conclusion – Saving Pornotopia

How, then, are we to take a step forward? In this lecture I have presented a brief historical trajectory of our evolution to posthuman sexuality and elucidated several aspects of our contemporary sexuality that is radically different than what we may have thought so far of ourselves. I have presented what I hope to be a good interpretation and reading of the dynamics between sex and technology – not only how sex alters technology, but how they engage together in a feedback loop and work together towards an evolution of our self-consciousness, subjectivity, and sexuality.

In the last part I presented an obscene critical reading of the cultural politics of today's so-called sexual liberty and attempted to problematize the idea of sexual political correctness, without any calling for old, conservationist ideas, but rather, of a true libertarianism where we are free to desire without any moral obligation to enjoy.

But as far as providing an answer, I will not be doing that here. What I am giving to the Arse Elektronika conference is instead what I hope to be a good critical cognitive mapping of all the controversies of today's sexual technologies, how they relate to our understanding of bodies, how they correspond to our cultural politics, and how a possible future may look like based on this mapping.

Quoting Grenzforthner's main thesis of the Arse Elektronika conferences, “The question is not whether these technologies alter humanity, but how they do so.” By knowing how they do so, perhaps we would be able to save pornotopia once more, a pornotopia free of the market oppressions to enjoy ourselves with the latest trends in perversion.[]