

Mediated Exhibitionism:
The Naked Body in Theory, Performance, and Virtual Space

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Abstract

Through a review of theory pertaining to nudism, nude performance, and mediated nudity, this paper seeks to provide a better understanding of the practice of *mediated exhibitionism*: the phenomenon of amateur performers exposing their nude bodies on the Internet. I begin with the historical context of public nudity as described in the literature concerning nudist movements in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Australia. Following from this is a synthesis of scholarship on the subject of nude performance, focusing specifically on amateur performances in public contexts. Areas of particular concern in these sections include the social and cultural pressures exerted upon the naked body, political control, and the subversive uses of public nudity. The final section is a culmination of previous theory used to elucidate the practice of mediated exhibitionism. The historical development of nudity in traditional media forms (analog photography, film, and television), is described in terms of the objectification and idealization of the naked body. It is argued that objectification and idealization are a consequence of factors ranging from media form to economics. Conversely, because the Internet is highly interactive, new media (websites, electronic bulletin boards, chat rooms, etc.) are composed largely of user-generated content which is more diverse and representative of individual users. Thus, it is maintained that mediated exhibitionism is an avenue toward body acceptance and appreciation that involves the user in a process of collaborative identity formation. Lastly, mediated exhibitionism in user-constructed fantasy scenarios is considered in terms of its ability to liberate the user from repressive systems of social control.

Nudism and Naturism

Although physical nakedness is the original state of every human, it carries with it a stigma outside of socially approved contexts. To understand this stigma and explore how the naked body is offered and received in situations of social nudity, I sought out themes within the literature on various Nudist movements, including: (1) the relationship between nudism and nature, (2) the tension between culture and nature, and (3) the implications of nudism for politics and social control.

Nudism and Nature

There is an idea within the literature concerning Nudism that to be naked is natural in the most literal sense of the word. Specifically, this implies that nudism is best practiced in a natural setting such as a beach, a campground, or similar minimally developed environment. British theorists David Bell and Ruth Holliday (2000) state plainly that “The practices and discourses of the contemporary naturist movements in the West ... are at least in part about articulating a particular embodied relation to nature” (127). This belief is echoed in the early Twentieth Century German Naturist movement known as Freikörperkultur which, contrary to less radical brands of German Nudism, upheld the belief that Nudist practices could not be effectively implemented within the context of existing social structures that were the products of modern industrial social relations. Even in the United States, where Nudism is commonly practiced within the artificial confines of a resort with access to the full gamut of modern amenities, nudism is “promoted as a ‘natural’ form of recreation” (Woodall, 2007, p. 270).

Romanticizing nature in various Nudist movements is perhaps not surprising if it is considered alongside religious mythology, which often positions the naked body in a

natural setting. For example, at *ConFest*, an Australian countercultural festival where nudity is commonplace, researcher Graham St. John (1997) observes that nature is perceived by “Neo-Pagans” as a divine Mother figure who creates and shapes humanity. Even Judeo-Christian beliefs, which tend to inhibit the naked body by associating it with shame, draw an obvious connection between nudity and nature in the book of Genesis with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

In both of these belief systems, a relationship is posited between the human body and its place in nature. It is not coincidental, however, that some of the oldest and most influential articulations of Nudist philosophy come at the time of increasing urbanization around the dawn of the Twentieth Century. Early visionaries such as Heinrich Pudor in Germany and Maurice Parmelee in the United Kingdom and the United States saw Nudism as an escape from oppressive urban environments that had cropped up as a result of the Industrial Revolution of the previous century. Toepfer (2003) explains Pudor’s perspective that Nudism “was a liberating response to repressive constraints imposed upon body and mind by pressures of modernization and urbanization” (145). Parmelee (1927) reiterates this sentiment in his book *Nudism in Modern Life: The New Gymnosophy*.

Persisting into the contemporary discourse on Nudism, Bell and Holliday (2000) note that there is a predominant sense among nudists that “the countryside offers recreation and regeneration for city folk” (p. 134) and that it has the effect of “re-energizing urban dwellers” (p.135). Thus to escape *into* nature is to escape *from* human culture, but nudity can only ever be a symbolic escape, because culture does not reside in clothing, but in consciousness.

Nature and Culture

Photographic media often serve to further sanctify this relationship between nudity and nature, reinforcing the dualistic separation between nature and culture in the process. For example, in photographs of the Mru tribe living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (between Bangladesh, Burma, and India), nudity was very often emphasized by Western anthropologists and tourists (Van Schendel, 2002). Furthermore, the nudity of the Mru marked them as “primitive,” “underdeveloped,” and “indigenous” (VanSchendel, 2002) to both Westerners and surrounding tribes within the region. Photographs of the Mru are not the only example of this either. Leni Riefenstahl’s book of photography, *The Last of the Nuba* (1973) presented Nuba society in a very similar light. Toepfer (2003) emphasizes this, writing “Her images of Nuba society treated human nakedness with the same aesthetic detachment one would apply to photographing a herd of naked horses or naked lions” (p. 173).

Unlike the practice of Nudism in the West, the nudity of the Mru and Nuba societies is authentic because of its lack of pretense as a “social movement” and its complete integration into the respective cultures. To Western eyes, looking at photographs of “naked primitives” is similar to looking photographs of the natural landscape itself because the self-conscious efforts of human endeavor seem to play less of a part. Toepfer’s (2003) writing provides a good example:

Here nudity has enormous power to unify society only when that society is completely detached from any serious idea of “civilization,” from modernity, from technology, from scientific curiosity about the natural world, from history, from anything contaminated by fashion or temporal specificity (p. 173).

In these cases, nudity is closely associated with a state of untouched nature and the nude photography of tribal people has a de-civilizing effect that seems to ignore, or at least marginalize, their cultural innovations.

Moreover, the moral context of the naked body is often used to reinforce the culture/nature distinction and privilege nature as the exclusively appropriate setting for nudity. German life-reformers, who detested what they perceived as moral decay in the cities, believed that nudity was appropriate only in purely natural surroundings.

Industrial, urban, or even domestic settings carried the stigma of obscenity (Bell & Holliday, 2000). This prejudice against urban and domestic nudity is especially obvious in German naturist publications where indoor nudity was thought to carry with it “unwanted erotic connotations” (Jefferies, 2006, p. 78). But perhaps the largest scale example of the moral circumscription of bodily displays to natural settings is in the emergence of beauty pageants at seaside resorts in the United States. Noting the rise of beauty pageants at beach resorts such as Atlantic City, Latham (1995) finds that promotional literature attempts to allay visitor’s concerns about the moral environment of the city by highlighting the wholesome quality of its seashore backdrop. Thus the open display of female bodies is sanctified by nature.

Having established a division between culture and nature with respect to the positioning of the naked body, it is appropriate to consider what it implies. One way to interpret it is through the religious framework of creationism which is made obvious in the Nazi-era German publication, *Das Schwarze Korps*: “There is nothing unusual in being naked. That way, man is in a state created by God; that is how God sent men and women to earth and in that state the Creator will one day call us back” (as cited in

Kruger, Kruger & Treptau, 2002, p. 49). Although this is a peculiar quotation because of its historical context, all culture/nature dualisms which privilege nature as the exclusive province of nudity are undergirded by the same logic which takes for granted that culture is ontologically dependent upon nature because “God” creates nature (including humanity) and humanity creates culture. In this arrangement, nudity in nature is consistent with the original work of “God” and subordinates humanity to the dominion of a higher power; whereas nudity in the cultural setting becomes just another cultural product open to individual interpretation.

Religious aspects aside, the move to urban living in Europe caused by the Industrial Revolution was the impetus for the emergence of Nudist movements, especially in Germany and Great Britain (Bell & Holliday, 2000; Toepfer, 2003). Thus, the tension between culture and nature with respect to the naked body becomes especially clear when we consider it in terms of the opposition between *industrial* culture and nature.

Most early theorists who endorsed Nudism saw it as part of a larger social movement. Through the practice of Nudism, some sought to improve education from within the existing system of economic relations (e.g. Adolf Koch, Bess Mensendieck), but others had a more drastic agenda for social change. For example, Richard Ungewitter, an early German theorist and practitioner of Nudism, believed that it had the potential to cure all types of social ills, including the alienation from labor resulting from industrialization. As a Nazi sympathizer, Ungewitter also believed that, through nudity, Germany could be saved from Capitalist, Communist, and Jewish financial agendas (Toepfer, 2003). In his photography, though, Ungewitter seems even more revolutionary.

As Toepfer (2003) has observed, he “used photography to document the authority of Nacktkultur to restore German bodies to a bucolic paradise, far removed from the decadent landscapes of modernity” (p. 147). This sentiment is also present in the work of his contemporary, Heinrich Pudor.

Outside of Germany, Maurice Parmelee also had a romantic view of nudism, but without any hint of anti-Semitism or concern for national purity. Worried about the effects of industrialization on humanity, his utopia included a vision of people working together in small Nudist communes (Woodall, 2002). Modern Nudist organizations, such as the American Association for Nude Recreation reflect the vestige of this perspective by promoting the experience as one that frees the individual from “the stresses of urban life” (Woodall, 2002, p. 270).

One of the most dominant tropes in Nudism that builds off of the culture/nature divide is the association of nudity with freedom from the constraints of culture (Barcan, 2001). If cultural space is already spoken for and clothed in the hierarchical structures of society that are generated by economic, governmental, educational, and other social institutions, than natural space is open to possibility and free from the institutional structures that regulate social life. Barcan (2001) and Waskul (2002) note particularly that nudity has the effect of obliterating social roles and promoting egalitarianism. Waskul (2002) cites Baumeister (1991) in support of this point: “Just the act of removing one’s clothes can help strip away symbolic identity and work roles, allowing one to become merely a body” (p. 212).

Looked at this way, nudity represents a threat to the established order because it denies the naturalization of that order and reveals the potential for alternatives that

become visible when social roles and bureaucracy are “stripped off.” Writing about naked protest, Soweine (2005) describes how protesters’ use of nudity as a gesture intended to personalize political causes also rejects a hierarchy of power. By removing their clothing, they step outside of the artificial sanction of prescribed social relations and demonstrate that the individual has the potential to rise above any system of social control merely by rejecting its premises.

But can people break free from cultural sanctions simply by removing their garments? This is unlikely since Nudism exists as an enclave within the broader cultures upon which it is dependent. In other words, being naked in nature is a temporary state which practitioners enter and exit while maintaining the perspective of the dominant culture from which they approach it. One of the most obvious examples of this is the commonly referenced prohibition against sexual behavior at Nudist sites which aspire to be “family friendly” (Bell & Holliday, 2000; Woodall, 2002). Despite the connotation that nudity in nature is unconstrained by the repression of civilization and, thus, sexually liberated (Bell & Holliday, 2000), there is an almost universal proscription against open displays of sexuality in Nudist settings.

Many nudists argue that the naked body should not be understood as exclusively sexual and that such an understanding is the result of the repression brought about through the rejection of nudity in other nonsexual contexts so that the naked body and sexual arousal come to be synonymous. Bell and Holliday (2000) note this specifically: “The discourse of contemporary naturism, of course, stresses that only textiles find the naked body erotic; the normalization of nudity effectively desexualizes it” (p. 137). To some, this desexualization of nudity is the first step toward more egalitarian social life.

In his ethnography of *ConFest*, St. John (1997) found that nudity corresponded with a reduction of sexual harassment and aggressiveness among participants and made social interactions easier to engage in.

On the other hand, there are some very clear connections between the naked body and the sexual act. For one thing, nudity is associated with sex because the naked body is a prerequisite for the sex (Waskul, 2002). More to the point, the exposure of genitals implies a sexual situation because that is the context in which they are operative. Cover (2003) traces this back to biblical tradition, noting that “nakedness, as the exposure of the genitals, cannot be disconnected from sexuality” (p. 55). He goes on to argue that the fixation with genital sex is responsible for the conflation of nakedness and sexuality which leaves little room for sensuality and eroticism.

The context surrounding the body plays an important role as well. To illustrate the point, a naked body in a bedroom has a different connotation from a naked body in a physician’s office. Cover (2003) elaborates thoroughly on the role of context in “reading” nudity, noting that the postmodern destabilization of relational contexts results in any situation involving nudity (ranging from locker rooms to humorous “flashing”) to potentially be sexualized. Also arguing from the standpoint of context, Bell and Holliday (2000) note that nature is an especially congenial context for eroticism and has long served as the backdrop of sexual fantasy.

Building on a taxonomy developed by Grosz (1998), Cover (2003) goes on to describe four relational contexts which determine the meaning of nudity in specific social situations. Grosz’s three original categories include: (1) relationships of power in which the less powerful participant is gazed upon (e.g. doctor/patient, parent/child, prison

guard/inmate), (2) intimate relationships where nudity is shared for mutual physical pleasure, and (3) mediated nudity in art and pornography. Beyond this, Cover details a fourth category comprising “those (physical) spaces in which nakedness is shared for practical or pleasurable purposes in ways which are ostensibly non-sexual” (p. 56) such as public showers, and nude beaches. One critical difference between Cover’s additional category and the original three presented by Grosz is that it is determined primarily by physical surroundings as opposed to relationships.

Adding to Cover’s distinction, I would also point out that one of the determining factors in contextualizing the naked body is whether it is presented in a private or public context. Kruger (1991) notes that “Public nudity is at the crossroads of public/private, individual/collective, and biological/social” (p. 136). As such, it serves as a liminal zone with respect to the sphere of social control. Levi-Strauss (1972) characterized the structure of society as being based on sets of binary oppositions (e.g. life/death, man/woman, person/animal), and it follows that nude/clothed and public/private are extensions of this. Therefore, if certain spheres were to overlap with one another, the social structure is potentially compromised. Specifically referring to this possibility, Booth (1997) notes the popular perception is that public nudity “conjures images of debauched, chaotic and irrational behavior and undisciplined pleasure,” and that nudism “remains confined to the private domain and has no place in the formal, impersonal and neutral public world” (p. 156). This is especially the case in terms of genital nudity since that is the locus of sexual arousal and action.

As a destabilizing force in the social sphere, nudity provides a powerful tool for social protest through the elevation of “political personalism” (Soweine, 2005) which is

achieved through the dissolution of the boundaries between public and private spheres. This was a common strategy among “hippies” of the late 1960s (Booth, 1997) who employed nudity as a symbol of liberation and to impose personal values onto the ideologically abstruse political systems which they opposed. Such a use of nudity is preceded by the Youth Movement (*jugend-bewegung*) in Germany and the Christian Doukhobors of Canada, but is also expressed today by contemporary nude protestors.

As a defense against the destabilizing potential of public nudity, it is often allocated to separate spaces. Bell and Holliday (2000) and Barcan (2001) point out that public nudity is relegated to approved sites, which may have the effect of further marginalizing it. This is Booth’s (1997) contention when he notes that the Nudist site serves as a type of quarantine that “preserves the taint” (p. 153; p. 157) associated with public nudity.

What is the consequence of mixing public and private contexts through the open display of nudity? Does it have the effect of jeopardizing social order? Cover’s (2003) analysis of the sexual anxiety provoked from the postmodern instability of contexts implies that any situation involving nudity may become sexual so long as we remain culturally fixated on genital-sex as opposed to a more diffuse sense of eroticism and sensuality. Going back to one of the more intuitive arguments of Nietzsche (later elaborated by Freud) there may be grounds for such concern. If the mechanism for desexualizing nudity through relational or spatial contexts is inoperative, all nude situations become potentially sexual and *sublimation* is impossible since the motive for it is eliminated. Put simply, without the denial of sex shoring up the libido, the motive to enter into a demanding social hierarchy characterized by complex social relations is not

very strong. Similarly, “Herbert Marcuse wrote that civilization demanded the suppression of any feeling of closeness, thus guaranteeing the desexualization of our organism by mutating it into an ‘instrument of work’” (Döpp, 2001, p. 88). Nowhere is this danger more evident than in the situation of computer-mediated sex, where nudity is intended to have a sexual meaning (Waskul, 2002). Addiction to online pornography reduces the user’s ability to function socially because instant gratification negates the motive to engage in prescribed social relations.

For these reasons, there is a powerful social taboo against the public display of nudity outside of the allocated spaces where social norms permit it (e.g. Nudist spaces). Despite this taboo or, in some cases, because of it, unsanctioned public nudity persists through acts of both voyeurism and exhibitionism. Voyeurism makes the private performance of nudity public through the spectator’s intrusive gaze, and Exhibitionism reveals the nude body to public view through an act of willful exposure.

Aside from this difference in agency, voyeurism and exhibitionism are like two sides of the same coin and often occur simultaneously with an exhibitionist willingly on display for one or more voyeurs. More often than not, this means women on display for men. Excerpting an interview with a female informant reported by Douglas, Rasmussen, and Flanagan (1977), Forsyth (1992) presents a perfect example of this:

A group of boys had apparently entered [the nude beach] with the intention of peeking at some nudes. Since I was the only woman there, they congregated around me. This wouldn't have bothered me at all if they had been nude, too. But they remained clothed in their surfer suits. At first, this seemed a prostitution of the purpose of the Beach - they were being "dirty" about it and it almost made me

feel that way. But after a while I realized that if I gave them pleasure by looking at me, then that was a fine thing. If their thing is to look at nude women for a charge, I certainly am not one to stop them from doing their thing. (p. 393)

Woodall (2002) makes reference to this gender imbalance when she notes that female nudity is always perceived as “a ‘gift’ from the female to male” (p. 281). Such an observation is very much in step with the work of film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975) who maintained that the active male gaze structures perception through the objectification of the passive female body, creating a discrepancy of power in the construction of the gaze in both cinema and the culture at large. Barcan (2001) alludes to this directly in her discussion of the prevailing visual discourse outside of the Nudist context.

To examine everything from the perspective of the predatory male gaze, however, ignores other reasons as to why women (or men) might indulge in acts of exhibitionism. One alternative is for the sheer pleasure of gaining attention. For example, when the bikini first became available in Australia, it was illegal to wear it to the beach, but this didn't stop a young woman named Pauline Morgan from attracting a crowd of hundreds who followed her across Bondi Beach until she was ordered to change by a police inspector (Booth, 1997). Additionally some engage in exhibitionism to enhance self-esteem, improve body-image, experience feelings of fame, or gain sexual arousal (Forsyth, 1992; Redmon, 2003; Richardson, 2007; Waskul, 2002).

Politics and Social Control

As previously explained, the context of nudity as either “natural” or “cultural” plays an important role in the meaning of the naked body. However, even within a strictly cultural context, there are many ways nudity can be read depending upon the

particular culture it is presented within. Cultures dominated by the values of Christianity and Islam tend to place extreme restrictions on nudity (Van Schendel, 2002).

It is interesting to note that the larger and more complex the power structure of a society, the stronger the proscription against nudity. The imperialism of Victorian England, for example, had little tolerance for nudity outside of its sanctioned context, whereas German culture was more tolerant prior to the rise of the Third Reich. With the onset of imperial aspiration, however, public nudity became highly circumscribed in Germany (Jefferies, 2006; Kruger, 1991; Kruger et al, 2002) before re-emerging as a post-reconstruction leisure activity (Jefferies, 2006).

Imperialism was not always out of step with the open display of nudity, though, as the ancient empires of Greece and Rome demonstrate. This change is likely attributable to the dominant economy of the time. In antiquity, agriculture was the dominant mode of economic production and the physical labor of raising crops, hunting, and child birth were of primary importance. In such an environment there would naturally be a high emphasis placed on the body. As industrialization took hold, the focus switched from body to machine and nudity became the symbol of a backwards culture. Now, the naked body takes on a different meaning in the current age of electronic information and this is, of course, the subject of the forthcoming section on mediated nudity.

As alluded to earlier, public nudity is an inherently political concept because it can disrupt existing power structures that demand the sublimation of the sexual impulse into forms which benefit existing institutions. This is not the case in societies where nudity is permissible because it is not generally regarded as sexual, but in clothed societies with complex economic hierarchies, the naked body is likely to arouse desire

and disrupt normal social relations. Thus, the naked body is a site of conflict between pleasure and political control (Booth, 1997). Perhaps nowhere was this better illustrated than at the halftime show of Superbowl XXXVIII when Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" brought about a torrent of threats and legal action from sponsors and government officials, including FCC chairman Michael Powell, who launched a federal investigation into the incident. The ultimate outcome was more rigorous censorship of network television which is emblematic of the political response to nudity in mainstream culture: to quarantine it.

One of the greatest threats that public nakedness presents to the hierarchy of a capitalist society is its ability to equalize work roles through removing the tangible status-symbol of clothing. Adolph Koch, a German advocate for nudism in education who espoused a socialist viewpoint, has noted this aspect specifically. Regarding Koch's position, Toepfer (2003) has further pointed out that "[nudity] challenged the authority of an economy based on consumerism, and the false images of beauty and satisfaction of desires perpetrated by the entertainment media" (p. 158). Despite the revolutionary appeal of this argument, though, Woodall (2002) shatters the idealistic notion of nudity as the great equalizer in her analysis of the political economy of commercial nudism in the United States.

Noting that "Nude recreation, as a part of [the capitalist] system, cannot escape class distinctions simply by eschewing a few material status symbols" (p. 272), Woodall (2002) reports that the nudist concept of being "natural" has little to do with anything beyond physical nakedness because other consumer products and modern amenities are integrated into the nudist lifestyle. Modern nudists see no problem with hotels, sports

equipment, or even airplanes. Woodall further explains that modern nudism in the United States, specifically nudism sanctioned by the AANR (American Association for Nude Recreation), is fully integrated into the capitalist economy through strong relationships with other industries such as transportation and tourism. It is especially ironic that none benefit more directly from the legal prohibition of nudity than nudist clubs and organizations. After all, if public nudity were legal, how could they differentiate their product?

The profit motive is only half of Woodall's argument though. In addition, through their absorption of nudist ideals into the mainstream of capitalism, nudist organizations effectively defuse the dissention that could potentially erupt in the absence of a legal nudist outlet. Because those who identify with nudist ideals tend to be politically liberal, well-educated, and wealthy, they represent a potential threat to the political system which upholds the free market if they are not appeased through the option to practice nudism, even if in such a way that contradicts its underlying ideology (Woodall, 2002).

Even outside the context of Nudism, political sanctions are placed upon the body in the interest of the capitalist economy. Through the promotion of *body idealism* in media, industries ranging from fitness to clothing and cosmetics cultivate an almost unattainable beauty-ideal which simultaneously inhibits public nudity through shame and generates revenue through "corrective" products, services, and procedures. Booth (1997) describes this in detail: "Through advertising, consumer culture creates the desires it promises to satisfy, including the desire for, and loathing of, any deviation from mesomorphic bodies" (p. 150). He goes on to explain that "exhibitionism contains its

own method of discipline” (p. 150) wherein shame motivates the individual to conform to beauty ideals. Thus, social forums that are permissive of public nudity often circumscribe it to approved body types and, in so doing, transform the naked body into an unnatural costume.

Of course, the idealization of the body is nothing new, especially if we look back once again to the classical societies of ancient Greece and Rome. In fact, the notion that “classical Greek art has been the perfection in the realm of beauty” was espoused by Hegel (Kruger, 1991, p. 137) and perpetuated in the German nudist movement through journals such as *Die Schönheit*, which featured photographs that clearly aspired to Greek body ideals. Exercise and movement specialist Bess Mensendieck also emulated Greek statuary through idealization of female body posture in her widely popular book *Körperkultur des Weibes* (1906) (Toepfer, 2003).

Moving further into the Twentieth Century, however, it becomes evident that the rhetoric of body idealism lends itself particularly well to Nazi theories of Aryan supremacy. In this context, nudism serves as a means of ensuring “racial hygiene” (Kruger, 1991) as well as allowing better mate selection in the service of breeding a superior race. “Racial hygiene was supposed to improve the stock of a population by encouraging people with ‘positive’ genes to procreate extensively and by hindering those with ‘negative’ ones to [sic] procreate at all” (Kruger, 1991, p. 155). Thus, the prevailing sentiment among Nazi nudists was that clothing served as mask for physical imperfections and those imperfections could hinder the process of sexual selection needed to ensure a healthier race.

Not all notions of the ideal body are racially motivated though. Opposed to the racism of Richard Ungewitter and Heinrich Pudor, Karl Vanselow was more concerned with physical fitness than racial characteristics, and this was evident in the diversity of races represented in his publication of *Die Schönheit* (Toepfer, 2003). Such idealized images, though not racist, are perhaps still quite harmful though. Kruger (1991) points out that photography played a key role in glorifying bodies that were “difficult to achieve” (p. 139) but nonetheless set the standard to which average people of all ages were compared. This is also true of contemporary nudism in the United States where Woodall (2002) observes “While it is true that bodies of all types are seen at the nudist resort, those that are celebrated are of the same type revered in mainstream media” (p. 274).

Interestingly, the concern over “perfect” bodies is one that has deep roots in Nudist philosophy. In 1933, the Reverend C. E. Norwood noted that the idealization of the naked body in art has produced “unnecessary self-consciousness and shame” (Barcan, 2001, p. 309). This implies that nudists with imperfect bodies are somehow able to reconcile the difference between their own appearance and that of the idealized images without retreating from the practice of nudism with the feeling that they do not measure up. In fact, despite the prevalence of such images, Woodall (2002) notes that “nudism has evolved from an activity advocating social pressure as an incentive to keep oneself as attractive as possible, to a movement advocating acceptance of any body, healthy and attractive or not” (p. 264). Based on the literature, I would suggest that the reason nudists are immune to idealized body images has to do with their social interaction. Individual body images are grounded in the physical copresence of interactions with other (naked)

people, rather than inanimate sculpture, periodicals, and wall decoration. In brief, real human contact is more influential to identity and body image than mediated imagery.

In fact, shared nudity may be conducive to increased tolerance of physical diversity and improved body image. Barcan's (2001) term for this experience is "intercorporeality," which occurs when one's own body image is modified through the reciprocal perception of other bodies. She offers an example of intercorporeality in action with the brief story of Michelle, a large woman who gained the confidence to disrobe at a clothing optional resort when she saw a naked woman of her own physical proportions. Unlike Mead's (1934) notion of identity formation where one gains an understanding of the self through the internalization of the perceptions of others, intercorporeality is a negotiation modified through comparative perceptions of self and other in reference to body image. In Michelle's case, physical similarity to the other woman combined with an observation of the other woman's confidence in being naked compelled Michelle to overcome her self-consciousness about her body and conclude: "Well, if she can do it, so can I" (Barcan, 2001, p. 306).

Like Woodall (2002), Barcan (2001) observes that modern nudists "are likely to reject an aesthetic discourse" (p. 310) in favor of body acceptance. Thus, through intercorporeality, body acceptance is achieved and bodily unconsciousness replaces self-consciousness as the full range of revealed body types become commonplace.

Nudity and Performance

There are many forms of nude performance, ranging from pranks such as "streaking" and "mooning," intended as a humorous assault on social decorum (Forsyth, 1992), to the more deliberately sexual forms of exhibitionism practiced at *Mardi Gras* in

New Orleans, *Spring Break* destinations for college students, motorcycle *Bike Rallies*, and other spatially and temporally circumscribed contexts that permit such behavior.

Here I will be focusing specifically on amateur performances in public contexts. Mardi Gras, for example, is well known for acts of “playful deviance” (Redmon, 2003, p. 30), which involve everything from “disrobement” – “the exposure of intimate body parts in social actions that are (1) brief, (2) performed by nonprofessionals, (3) targeted to strangers” (Shrum & Kilburn, 1996, p. 424) – to public acts of sex.

At the outset, it should be noted that nude performance at Mardi Gras or similar contexts differs markedly from burlesque shows, or presentations of “performance art” that involve nudity. The former is an example of “theatricality,” which implies that the performance is unbounded by the strictures of convention, whereas the latter is an example of “performativity,” which implies a prescribed set of rules enacted by the context (Case, 2002). The spontaneity and impulsiveness of amateur participation highlights the difference between these types of performance. However, it is also true that the theatricality of Mardi Gras is not without social norms. For example, Shrum and Kilburn (1996) point out that displays of nudity are confined to one of three ritual paradigms which regulate social interaction based on the exchange of beads that serve as symbolic currency: (1) the “command paradigm” in which float-riders cast beads at women who disrobe, (2) the “market paradigm” in which nudity is negotiated in exchange for beads, and (3) the “veneration paradigm” in which “women disrobe from balconies to the acclaim of street revelers” (p. 425).

Nudity and Social Norms

One of the most important factors in determining the context of nude performance is social norms. Despite this, social norms are not stable and it is unclear to what extent they are actually transformed by the very performances which they are presumed to constrain. The emergence of the *Miss America* beauty pageant provides strong evidence of this because, as Latham (1995) observes, public bathing, female athleticism, and other forms of performance paved the way by revising the conflicted territory of public morality.

Culture and social context further compromise any sense of stability or consistency with respect to a set of social norms governing nude performance. For example, “Islamic, upper-caste Hindu, and Victorian English norms of propriety” (Van Schendel, 2002, p. 359) stand in stark contrast to the norms many tribal cultures, including the Mru and Nuba societies mentioned earlier. Even within a single culture, there can be drastic variation based on social context as demonstrated at the annual Australian *ConFest* event where social norms are suspended and nudity among participants is quite common (St. John, 1997).

In the United States and other nations with market-based economies, social norms are tempered by commercial considerations. This is to say that the generation of revenue has the effect of legitimating marginalized activities. The previously mentioned example of the *Miss America* beauty pageant applies here, but so do nude performances at other events. In fact, Shrum and Kilburn (1996) point out that disrobement at Mardi Gras only truly caught on as a widespread phenomenon after beaded necklaces started to be employed as a symbolic currency that expressed a “moral commitment to the market in

the profane, everyday world” (p. 430). An earlier practice of exchanging displays of nudity never caught on because the underlying motivation for the performance was inconsistent with established social norms. Once the motives for disrobement could be squared with the market economy, it could be incorporated into the set of social norms active during the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans.

Context of the Performance

As noted above, context often dictates social norms. It is thus useful to distinguish among *approved*, *liminal*, and *subversive* spaces with regard to the acceptability of nude performance. An “approved” space is one that is sanctioned by political authority while a “liminal” space is one that exists beyond the reach of formal authority where alternative sets of social norms are enacted. A “subversive” space is created when a performer violates authority by performing nude in a place that expressly prohibits such a performance.

The previously mentioned taxonomy offered by Grosz (1998) and elaborated further by Cover (2002) provides a categorization of the approved spaces for nudity (power relationships, romantic relationships, media, non-sexual public contexts). Liminal spaces, on the other hand, are less obvious and include some familiar examples: *Mardi Gras* (New Orleans), *Fantasy Fest* (Key West), *Burning Man* (Black Rock Desert), *ConFest* (Australia), Spring Break locations (e.g. Cancun), Bike Rallies (e.g. Sturgis), and even vacations beyond one’s native culture. Concerning the last example, Redmon (2003) observes “playful deviance occurs most often when small groups of tourists travel to symbolic spaces of leisure to participate in temporary forms of transgressions that they will not perform in places where they live” (p. 27).

Liminal spaces are experimental zones where social roles and relationships are tested and redefined. In his article, “Playful deviance as an urban leisure activity” (2003), Redmon used Goffman’s theories to explore liminal spaces as “backspaces” where “secret selves” could be practiced in an environment of reduced stigma and surveillance. On a broader level, St. John (1997), quoting Hetherington (1993), terms the liminal space offered at *ConFest* a “heterotopia” – “a site of dispersion and ‘outsiderness’ attracting ‘all forms of ambivalence and disorder’ in the wider culture, including displaced and rejected knowledge” (p. 169). Liminal spaces, therefore, provide an ideal forum for redefining physical relationships to the body through nudity and intercorporeality.

Perhaps the ultimate liminal space is facilitated through computer interaction. Pointing out the schism between physical location and the location of interaction in televideo cybersex, Waskul (2002) writes that “[t]he internet juxtaposes these “spaces” and “place,” and thereby creates a natural environment for liminality: a place separate from one’s space where the ordinary norms of everyday life easily may be suspended” (p. 205).

Lastly, an example of nude performance in a subversive space would be Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake’s half-time show at Superbowl XXXVIII, but would also include any performance that might be characterized as grounds for a charge of indecent exposure.

Performance as Rebellion

Outside of its approved space, nude performance is often perceived as an act of rebellion. In 1919, Hugo Peters claimed that “nudism was a form of revolution” capable

of “emancipatory transformation of a dysfunctional social reality” (Toepfer, 2003, p. 145).

One potential reason nudity is equated with rebellion outside of its approved space is the response it provokes. Mason (2005) points out that a popular legal standard used to prosecute acts of exposure is “affront or alarm” in which guilt is determined based on whether or not the act produced “affront or alarm” in a witness.

Some protesters have exploited the power of nudity to generate “affront or alarm” for political purposes. Writing about the history of nude protest, Soweine (2005) identifies “political personalism” as a paradigm for understanding the dynamics of protest that involves nudity, offering that “naked protest allows its practitioners to achieve a sense of autonomy and empowerment in the face of political realities over which they have little control” (p. 536). Through exposing the body and identifying it as a site of oppression, nude protesters bypass complex arguments in favor of a simple but powerful symbol of personal investment in a social cause. But the power of this tactic may be grounded in more than just its ability to shock. Nude protest might reveal a more basic “truth force” (Souweine, 2005, p. 536) or “moment of truth” (Case, 2002, p. 187) that unveils the obvious but often forgotten fact that the grip of political oppression is something we choose to clothe ourselves in, and that clothing may be stripped off at any time. Thus, clothing is a symbol for a more general social uniform which we voluntarily choose to adopt and are also able to discard.

Despite the arguments of the previous paragraph, nude protest is criticized as being “self-indulgent, flaky, even flippant – a celebration of individual gratification and symbolic contestation at the expense of the ‘real’ work of organizing unions, pressure

groups and political candidates” (Souweine, 2005, p. 535). Perhaps even more problematic, the nudity of protesters may be read as a form of sexual entertainment that contributes to the objectification of women while trivializing important social causes. On the other hand, “infotainment” journalism is congenial to the “affront and alarm” offered by nude protest and serves as a powerful vehicle for the dissemination of protest messages. The interpretation of that message as a form of mediated sexual gratification, however, is something that can scarcely be controlled. As Cover (2003) has pointed out, the frames through which we interpret nudity are not stable and there is always a possibility for a sexual reading, especially in a culture that tends to conflate nudity with sexual arousal.

Performance, Politics, and Social Control

As alluded to above, the public performance of nudity is perceived by political authorities as a potentially disruptive force which must be controlled. There are two ways of controlling nude performance: beforehand, through censorship, and afterward, through censure. For example, a century ago, the modesty of women’s swimwear was a controversial issue resulting in widespread censorship of personal appearance on the beach. In other contexts, individuals are punished for nude performances, as in the case of Catherine Bosley, a former anchorwoman who was fired because photos of her stripping nude on stage surfaced on the internet, or Vanessa Williams, a Miss America pageant winner who lost her crown because of nude photographs in *Playboy* Magazine. In the extreme, nude performers face physical violence, as in the case of the Christian Doukhobors (Souweine, 2005).

Despite such measures, nudity and performance are often incorporated into political power structures. In capitalist democracies such as the United States, the profit motive works to defuse and legitimize certain nude performances because capitalism can tolerate almost any form of social transgression so long as it is able to be successfully incorporated into the economy. From relatively modest beauty pageant swimsuit competitions to raunchy spring break wet t-shirt contests, examples abound because they participate in the economy and generate revenue.

One thing that is essential to the generation of revenue based on nude performance is the idealization of the body. With respect to the emergence of beauty pageants in the United States, Latham (1995) has contended that such shows have contributed to “the enshrinement of the female body via the bathing suit competition” and the promotion of a “Cinderella mythology” that presents “an ideal of physical female beauty” (p. 164). It is part and parcel of any pageant, contest, or competition based on physical performance that an ideal will emerge and be embodied by the winner. Once this ideal is established, value can be assigned and it can be marketed as a commodity.

Commodification of nude performance and the endorsement of a body ideal are taken even further if we consider how the media products generated from them magnify and disseminate an idealized image. Observe, for example, photographic imagery of models at a fashion show or Olympic athletes. One specific example is the barrage of pictures of both Dara Torres and Michael Phelps during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. These scarcely draped subjects represent not only the “best” bodies, but the best bodies caught at their best moments from their best angles under the best lighting. Of course, if the end result is still not satisfactory a bit of digital cleanup can be performed as well.

The obvious fact that the commodification of nudity is not blind to gender should also be pointed out, as the majority of performances, not to mention videos and websites, that are dedicated to public nudity feature female performances. Latham (1995) has pointed out that early beauty pageants which offered high status to women also enslaved and commodified them. Perhaps this is due to the perception cited earlier that female nudity as a “gift” (Woodall, 2002), whereas male nudity, on the other hand, is perceived more readily as a threat. This would account for the relative scarcity of performances of male nudity even in acceptable public contexts such as Mardi Gras (Shrum & Kilburn, 1996).

Another necessary component to marketing nude performance is a segregated context. If such performances cross the boundaries of context, marketing becomes impossible because proprietors lose control over the product as it becomes freely available to everyone. Thus the previously mentioned “approved space” plays a critical part in maintaining social control over nude performance based on the economic needs of a capitalist system. Both “liminal” and “subversive” spaces lack the standardization and predictability needed to commodify performances. Thus, nude performance in “strip club” is approved while nude protest is subversive.

One question that rises out of this discourse on nude performance is whether or not the profitable contexts and ideals set forth by commodified performances are malleable or able to be subverted by the performances of ordinary people with less than ideal bodies performing in liminal or subversive contexts. There is evidence that liminal spaces provide a safe environment where ordinary performers engaged in “playful deviance” may experience “self-validation” and “feelings of fame” (Redmon, 2003). At

events such as Mardi Gras, Bike Rallies, and Fantasy Fest, it is common to see people of a wide range of ages and body-types engaged in nude performance. Redmon (2003) interviewed 150 participants during Mardi Gras in New Orleans and found that some experienced a sense of self-validation, regardless of their physical appearance. One woman even reveled at the sensation of exposing herself next to “Playboy women,” noting specifically that, in that moment, she felt just as sexy as they were. Another woman, fearing she had gained too much weight, was encouraged by the unconditional positive regard offered by the crowd when she exposed her body.

In the following section, we will explore how nude performance is transformed through media.

Mediated Nudity

It is appropriate that a discussion dealing with multiple forms of media should begin by distinguishing between traditional and new media. In general, traditional media make use of analog systems of data storage and delivery, originate from a central source, and tend to be less interactive¹. Examples include newspapers, magazines, film, radio and television. In opposition, new media employ digital storage and delivery systems, are decentralized, and are composed largely of user-generated content. The ultimate example of new media, of course, is the internet where websites serve as the digital point of convergence for all previous media forms.

Below, I begin with a discussion of the representation of nudity through traditional media, including photography/film and television/video before moving into new media on the internet.

¹ Interpersonal media such as the telephone and some forms of radio technology are obvious exceptions to this rule, but among traditional forms of mass media it tends to hold.

Traditional Media

A brief historical survey of nude photography reveals that it was among the earliest content immortalized by the medium. German collector Uwe Scheid's extensive collection of nude daguerreotypes testifies to the fact that, although suppressed, nudity was among the first subjects captured by photographers. These images were first circulated through art academies and underground channels and later became more widely available with the advent of the so-called French Postcard which were printed on paper and circulated via clandestine mail order operations and "under-the-counter" sources. Many of the subjects of these photographs were prostitutes, but as the medium gained legitimacy and various nudist/naturist movements got underway, nude photography came out of the shadows and became available through journals such as *Die Schönheit* and *Sunshine & Health*. Perhaps the final step in the mainstream acceptance, or at least tolerance, of nude photography (of women, anyway) was Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine of 1953. It is important to note that *Playboy* serves as an excellent symbol of how narrow and circumscribed the presentation of nudity in the cultural mainstream actually is: 18-25 year old Caucasian female adhering to very specific criteria for physical proportions.

One common feminist criticism of the sort of nude photography featured in men's magazines such as *Playboy* is that it presents women as passive objects for male sexual consumption. While this is true, the claim of "objectification" can also be expanded to include any form of photography by virtue of the fact that the photographic process, in rendering an image out of context, produces an object (the photograph) which may be looked at with a sense of aesthetic and critical detachment (Benjamin, 1935). This is

seen in full effect in the book “*Veruschka*”: *Trans-figurations* (1986) in which the model, Veruschka, sought “the power to see her own body with the same detachment as other bodies and objects” (Toepfer, 2003, p. 170). Many similar examples of photography’s capacity to objectify the nude human form can be found in anthropological studies, such as those of the Mru discussed in the first section.

Idealized standards of appearance emerge from photographic objectification as photo-objects, simplified from human beings into mere images, are readily comparable with one another as pure physical forms. Toepfer (2003) observes this relatively early in the history of nude photography in the editorial work of Karl Vanselow, for whom nude imagery was “aesthetic phenomena and subject to *analysis* and *evaluation* primarily through their relation to a serious appreciation of art” (p. 148, emphasis added). But this tradition is carried over into modern media such as magazines featuring nude and semi-nude images of idealized bodies. In this context, photography is used to market products along gender lines in addition to promoting aesthetic values. Thus, for example, images of nude women are used to sell *Playboy* and images of semi-nude men are used to sell *Cosmopolitan*.

The critical feature of photography is the control it offers over the way an image appears and is represented. Pose, composition, and lighting, in addition to developing and printing techniques all play a vital role in sculpting reality into an idealized illusion. However, if this is true for photography, it is equally true for film.

As with photography, nudity on film coincided with the very beginning of the medium, or perhaps even preceded it if we consider the series photography of nude studies performed by Eadweard Muybridge. In the 1920s and 1930s nudist films began

to crop up in Germany and elsewhere with titles like *Wege zur Kraft und Schönheit* (1924), which influenced Leni Riefenstahl's famous film *Olympia* (1938) (Jefferies, 2006). Other films like the documentary *This Nude World* (1932) took an outsider's perspective on the nudist lifestyle.

Moving into the 1950s, propagandistic nudist films such as *Garden of Eden* (1954) were joined by "grindhouse" exploitation films which seized on nudism and other themes in order to lure audiences into the theater using the promise of bare flesh. Responding to the popularity of "exotic" European films and the rise in popularity of television, directors like Russ Meyer and Doris Wishman rushed to fill the niche. Wishman's recently rediscovered and restored first film, *Hideout in the Sun* (1960) was emblematic of this era which featured a sparse storyline along with an abundance of breasts, buttocks, and scenes of volleyball being played at nudist camps.

Of course, what these films had that was lacking in nude photography was an active gaze, facilitated by the camera, which positioned the viewer into the action of the film as a voyeur. By capturing movement, film brought the naked body out of photographic abstraction, and amplified the voyeuristic quality of the viewing experience, thus enhancing the object status of the naked body. In addition, the relative expense involved in producing a film compared with a photograph demanded a more narrowly defined physical ideal which would appeal to the widest possible audience.

With the advent of inexpensive, easy to operate, consumer quality video recorders and cameras, nudity began to proliferate in the more private environment of the home television screen. The pornographic film industry was completely revised as overhead expenses plummeted and competition for market share became fierce. Storylines and

character development (no matter how basic) were discarded altogether in favor of clinically depicted acts of sex. What emerged was an economy based on efficiency of production as an ever increasing demand for product took hold. It wasn't long before the liminal spaces described in the previous section were recognized as ripe for exploitation by these new video entrepreneurs. Locations like "New Orleans, Lake Havasu, and Key West" (Mayer, 2005, p. 310), where public nudity was already common attracted videographers because they presented a ready-made product that only needed to be recorded to tape and shipped out. Most participants were, in fact, eager to perform on video for free (Mayer, 2005), reducing talent fees to zero. In line with this notion, Mayer (2005) observes "The cheap production costs and relative ease of making videotapes assisted in the rapid growth of the industry" (p. 310).

As it is with any capitalist enterprise, there was much competition at the beginning. Hundreds of "documentary" films were produced by dozens of small companies with names like "GM Video" and "AMX," but it wasn't long before, in 1998, one of these small companies ("Mantra") struck gold with the *Girls Gone Wild* video series, which is best described as "a video series that featured amateur, college-aged women revealing their private parts in public places" (Mayer, 2005, p. 303).

The formula for Mantra's success was straightforward: choose only the most "attractive" women to feature in the program and market the product on television in the form of an extended infomercial that leaves the viewer eager to see more. How such a strategy caters to notions of objectification and, especially, body idealism should be obvious, but Mayer (2005) manages to shed light on the specifics in her interview with a former videographer who supplied content for *Girls Gone Wild*. He states bluntly that

“Other companies were OK with older women or fatter women, but Francis [head of Mantra] was more stuck up about the quality of the girls” (as cited in Mayer, 2005, p. 313). Thus, by narrowing the range of body types to a particular ideal, Mantra was able to tap into the established advertising potential of television to sell its products.

Although Mantra is just one example, it is emblematic of how the naked body is treated in traditional media. Content producers seek out a popular ideal that can be marketed through established channels for a maximum return on their investment. But what happens in an environment where the established channels of advertising and distribution needed to ensure success are less certain and the line between producer and consumer is blurred beyond recognition?

New Media

New Media such as digital photography and video, electronic bulletin boards, chat rooms, etc. are the basis of the online experience, so it useful to give a brief account of the development of the internet to better understand its impact on the content it delivers.

Although initially envisioned by J. C. R. Licklider, the internet began to take shape in the United States as a part of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in response to the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957. Amid concerns over the vulnerability of the nation’s communication infrastructure, a system of “packet switching” was envisioned based on the principles of “demand access” and “distributed control.” Demand access means having access to information only when required and distributed control means sharing control of information transmission across a network. In other words, contrary to the circuit switching system of telegraph/telephone communication (where a circuit is dedicated to a particular exchange of information),

circuits are shared by packets of information designed to compose a message when combined at their destination. When an exchange is initiated, information is disbursed through the most efficient path which is determined by the network based on its current demands. Thus a distributed network was resistant to being incapacitated by damage inflicted to any one part of the system.

By 1969, Larry Roberts had developed the ARPAnet by combining multiple computers into a single network through Interface Message Processors that were capable of facilitating communication among mainframes, and this became the foundation upon which the internet took shape. In 1992, the internet was made available to the public and pioneers such as Tim Berners-Lee and Mark Andreessen developed user-friendly interfaces that permitted ordinary people to share in the online experience as both consumers and creators of content. Today, in addition to user-friendly web-building software, social networking websites (e.g. MySpace, etc.) offer fully customizable shells that require almost no technical knowledge to share content.

As is evident even from this brief sketch, the internet developed along very different lines from traditional media due to its nature as a distributed system that facilitates and even promotes interactivity and collaboration. Contrary to traditional print, broadcast media, and film, which have a centralized origin and tend to promote passive consumption, the internet is a active medium that engages the user as a participant in content development. Whereas traditional media follow a “one-to-many” path of content distribution, the internet follows a “many-to-many” path where producers and consumers tend to be one in the same.

The character and effect of user-generated content on the internet is vastly different from the producer-generated content of traditional media when it comes to depictions of nudity and sexuality. Mayer (2005) observes at length:

Pointing to the popularity of intimate confessional programs, such as talk shows and reality programs, and the spread of digital home media technologies, especially video cameras and the Internet, McNair argues that the market allowed people to take pleasure in more diverse sexual expressions. Together, media and their consumers democratized sexual desire, creating the ‘pornographication of the mainstream’ (p. 12), and democratized the ability of amateurs to produce porn for mass audiences, making everyone what Jacobs (2004) calls the ‘everyday agents of mediated sex’ (p. 306).

Richardson (2007) echoes this characterization in his investigation of *Redclouds* (a website dedicated to amateur pornography), noting the phenomenon of “average people making do-it-yourself pornography” (p. 57).

It is this environment which produces *Mediated Exhibitionism*: the phenomenon of amateur performers exposing their nude bodies on the Internet. Examples of mediated exhibitionism vary widely and include everything from sending nude photos by email or text message (called “sexting”) to “televideo cybersex” chatrooms (where participants meet online and expose themselves using webcams) and websites that allow users to submit nude photos and videos of themselves for others to view. Adult social networking and dating websites also qualify if users share nude images of themselves.

Identity and Body Acceptance

Mediated exhibitionism relies on user-generated content, which is inherently more authentic and thus more intimate than producer-generated content. In cutting out the industry of sexual fantasy production that attempts to appeal to a mass audience of homogeneous sex consumers, new media offer a forum where real people actualize sexual fantasies, employing their own bodies as instruments of participation. Instead of a one-to-many path of distribution in which a narrow body-ideal is offered to consumers, user-generated content available via the internet facilitate a many-to-many network of human imagination in which a range of body-types and scenarios proliferate, redefining the aesthetics of sexuality.

The democratization of sexual aesthetics prompted by the user-generated content of new media also demands a renegotiation of personal identity. Unlike traditional media, which positioned users as passive receivers of the most popular/profitable physiques and fantasies, the new media participant must consciously construct an identity for others to evaluate. This may be as simple as choosing a “username” or as complex as customizing an interactive profile on an adult social networking site similar to Twitter, MySpace, or Facebook. Whatever the case, because the content features the users who create it, identity construction must be involved.

The question of identity and how it is constructed on the web is beyond the purview of our discussion, but we can say, insofar as mediated nudity is concerned, that it has its foundations in the physical body. Although exclusively text-based interaction offers a wide latitude for elaboration on one’s physical attributes, when the body is implicated through visual media, its appearance must be incorporated with the

presentation of the self offered by the individual. As Waskul (2002) observes concerning televideo cybersex: “being naked in the presence of others reduces the whole of the self to the body” (p. 215). If supplemented by text or voice, the body may not be the extent of the self in photographic media, but it at least serves as the physical base upon which the self is constructed and must be reconciled with.

The relationship between body and self is especially apparent when considering the face because “the face occupies a supreme position in connecting or disconnecting the self with the body” (Waskul, 2002, p. 216). In other words, the face is a marker that designates ownership of a body and its actions to a particular self. In the realm of televideo cybersex or any other form of mediated exhibitionism, it is possible to crop or obscure the face, thus freeing the performer from the stigma associated with a sexual performance. However, disguising the face online results in what Richardson (2007) calls “fragmentation.” His two key informants, “Sienna” and “A.H.” report that “posting nude photos of themselves ‘has been an important and fragmenting experience,” qualifying further that they “have a strong desire to be known ... but there are significant negative consequences to that” (as cited in Richardson, 2007, p. 58). Thus, the potential anonymity of the experience promotes the development of multiple social identities which may be at odds with one another.

Another consequence of identity construction on the web is the reflexive observation of oneself, including one’s own body. As Waskul (2002) has asserted, “the body and the self are not merely two separate entities; we can only experience either of them indirectly and symbolically by taking the role of the other” (p. 202). This statement is clearly inspired by the work of Meade (1934), because seeing one’s own mediated

image onscreen facilitates a process of reflective appraisal in which one internalizes the perspective of others with respect to oneself. Indeed, seeing one's own body from an objective point of view has been a source of fascination ever since the invention of the camera, and the extent to which the body is undressed should presumably increase that fascination.

Providing a concrete example of how the appraisals of others are internalized to form and modify self and body image, Richardson's informant confesses "no matter what your personal flaws, if people respond positively when you post yourself in this way, it makes you feel good" (as cited in Richardson, 2007, p. 125). Thus, the electronic bulletin board is a forum where the appraisals of both self and others impact identity and body image. The fact that such bulletin boards provide a space for visitors to leave comments and vote on the quality of the submission enhances this even further.

One motive for this type of virtual exhibitionism is the potential it has to promote body acceptance and appreciation of a wider range of body types. Just as described with respect to performance in liminal spaces such as Mardi Gras, the internet provides an opportunity for personal validation and public acceptance. This is especially valuable to those who are "disenchanted" (Waskul, 2002) with their bodies:

For some participants, this disenchantment has to do with perceptions of their appearances, especially with regard to age and weight – cultural standards of beauty and sexiness that refer directly to assessment of the corporeal body. The body may be disappointing to the self, but the sexual attention the individual receives in televideo cybersex serves to undermine that disappointment and reenchant the sexual body (p. 213).

Richardson (2007) further confirms this broader acceptance of body types, noting that “On Voyeurweb and RedClouds, the women range in age from 19 to 55 and weight from 95 pounds to Shamu². Both A.H. and Sienna feel good about that. ‘Madison Avenue isn’t setting the prototype,’ A.H. says” (p. 124).

It is also helpful, at this point, to revisit Barcan’s (2001) concept of “intercorporeality” to understand how this re-enchantment takes place. If, as previously stated, intercorporeality is an internal negotiation of appearance modified through comparative perceptions of self and other in reference to body image, then it stands to reason that the wider array of body-types presented through various chatrooms, websites and bulletin boards will have an impact on how one perceives one’s own physical body, since there is such a variety of alternative body-types on display. Reflecting this variety, many websites are divided into sections based on age and body type (e.g. BBW – “Big Beautiful Woman”). So, contrary to the nudist context, where human contact is more influential to body image than mediated imagery, these websites use media to index human contact. The bodies here are not projected fantasy ideals, but reflections of reality.

Throughout this discussion, the focus has been on the re-enchantment of one’s own personal body, but it is also logical that a person might experience re-enchantment with their romantic partner through observing outside responses to their partner’s body. Indeed it is an extremely common practice for men to post nude photos and videos of

² Even if Voyeurweb offers an avenue for body acceptance, Richardson, the author of the *Playboy Magazine* article, undercuts this with the use of the word Shamu to describe larger bodies. This derogatory reference is in keeping with the Playboy aesthetic which is jeopardized by the appreciation of non-idealized bodies.

their wives or girlfriends seeking positive assessments and other commentary from strangers.

Social Control

This, of course, is a rather optimistic appraisal of new media and the internet which should be tempered by the reality that the internet offers new methods for social control as well as new opportunities for self-expression and representation. Case (2002), for example, seems to suggest that cyberspace is an effective medium for constraining the power of a performance because of a “worlding effect” established through a revised understanding of time and place. She explains that “although images might be loaded onto the web at a certain time, that time is not necessarily a referent in their composition” (p. 194). Thus, through imposing a global context into which user-generated content is embedded, cyberspace establishes its own ontological ground, independent of real time and place.

Building upon this concern, Case (2002) also warns “the very lack of a referential base in ‘real’ time, place, and thing has created a world (web) that distances itself from the material effects of the ‘real’ one” (p. 194). The reservation that stems from this is serious: Any computer-mediated world is fully knowable and can be manipulated according to the will of the designer/programmer. Unlike our physical world which is not the product of human design and will never completely be under our control, the computer-mediated world offers programmers and webmasters a God-like position. As Heim (1991) wrote early in the emergence of the web, “The computer God’s-eye-view robs you of your freedom to be fully human. Knowing that the computer already knows every nook and cranny deprives you of your freedom to search and discover” (p. 78).

The potential social control available through programming is obvious: what appears to be random in the physical world may be a well-orchestrated but imperceptible agenda in the virtual one. Case (2002) presents this monopoly of power in terms of performance, noting that the virtual world can only ever be “performative” because it enacts a prescribed set of rules which must be met for the performance to occur in the first place. Disrupting social structures through performances of excess becomes impossible because “How could one perform an excess of the digital? Likewise, performance is impossible, since the system cites itself – and, as the system, the ‘power’ itself acts” (Case, 2002, p. 199). To illustrate, it would be difficult for nude protestors on the web to incite the “affront or alarm” discussed in the previous section because content is able to be managed much more effectively online than in reality. Because it is a more predictable and easily controlled experience, a savvy web surfer is rarely shocked unless he/she wants to be.

The only solution foreseen by Case is the practice of computer “hacking” (illegally accessing/interrupting/modifying systems and networks) because it is “an intervention into the discourse itself and strikes at the ‘power’ the system must protect in its very organization” (Case, 2002, p. 199). Despite this, even hackers must submit to the hegemony of digital systems. They may disrupt specific computers, networks, or websites, but will never disrupt the system of rules which must be relied upon to accomplish their goals.

Having discussed these concerns, it is not entirely apparent that they are justified with respect to the mediated exhibitionism of amateur performers on the internet. First of all, the idea that the world of cyberspace lacks mystery or is somehow completely

knowable is flawed because we lack complete knowledge of our own psychology: the very apparatus with which we confront the world. How can we know something fully without understanding the apparatus through which we know it? What may actually be at work here is a substitution of the terrain of exploration. Rather than objective physical surroundings (whether real or virtual) we turn inward to explore ourselves, and in the process project a reconfigured terrain onto the world that serves as the backdrop for fantasy construction.

Secondly, cyberspace is not a hermetically sealed world. Those who participate in mediated exhibitionism use the real world (especially their bodies) as the raw-material for their submission. They recompose themselves and their surroundings using only the shadow of reality captured through digital cameras and scanners. It is also not uncommon for participants to meet and interact in real life. So, despite the fact that programmers manufacture the foundation, the content submitted by amateurs indexes their physical surroundings and, in the case of the naked body, their own physical existence. There is certainly a degree of freedom offered in that.

Freedom and Protest

The focus of this paper has been on the interpretation of the naked body in theoretical and performance contexts culminating in new media representations. The internet, however, not only allows for the democratic representation of the body itself, but for the construction of the context which will contain the body. For example, many websites that serve as a forum for user-submitted content offer different categories based on context, such as “voyeurism,” “exhibitionism,” “nude in public,” “amateurs at home,” etc.. Oftentimes descriptions of photo contests along with exemplary images and videos

of contest winners are posted prominently on the bulletin board to establish the aesthetic of the particular website and subcategory. Most important, though, content providers are permitted to supplement their visual media with the written word to provide a story context for the submission. These range from basic factual accounts to more elaborate fantasy scenarios.

The role of multimedia storytelling in the social evolution of human sexuality should not be underestimated, especially if we adopt the subject/object perspective discussed previously in relation to the body. Specifically, it is a very different experience to actively construct a fantasy using media than it is to passively experience a fantasy as a subjective daydream. For one thing, the mediated fantasy can be experienced objectively by its creator, granting access to a “third-person” perspective on the event. When this third-person perspective is shared by other spectators in an online community, its proximity to reality is increased, fostering an “I know they know” effect that derives its power from the knowledge that others buy into the fantasy. Perhaps this is why the internet in general is such a fascinating medium when looked at from a postmodern perspective: objective reality (as doubtful as it is) counts for less than appearances. When those appearances are nude fantasy scenarios, participants (amateur content creators/submitters) take control not only of the representation of their physical body, but of their own sexuality. In this regard, the Internet offers the freedom and escape that was sought after by the various proponents of nudism discussed in the first section. There is, after all, an endless reserve of unclaimed territory existing (for the most part) beyond the reach of political and social authority. The only hindrance, of course, is the social conditioning of our own consciousness. If, as noted earlier, escape can only be symbolic

because culture resides in consciousness, a virtual fantasy environment is still subject to that consciousness. Conversely, though, culture and consciousness are subject to change through the new self-manufactured environment.

Perhaps the most important way change from within the virtual environment impacts the outside world is through testing the boundaries of acceptability. For example, one of the earliest points made in this paper stems from a deeply engrained religious view that the naked body is “God’s work” and thus belongs in nature, not culture (i.e. human work). The fact that many websites dedicated to mediated exhibitionism feature sections devoted to public nudity, wherein submitters disrobe in cultural spaces, is evidence of boundary testing. When media exhibitionists post images of themselves nude in cultural spaces, they challenge conventions and demonstrate their willingness to risk public shame and scorn for sexual expression. Although this is a far cry from organized social protests involving nudity, it is perhaps the most personal expression of sexual liberty that exists in spite of social control.

Conclusion

Over the course of this review and synthesis, I have provided a framework for understanding the practice of *Mediated Exhibitionism*: the phenomenon of amateur performers exposing their nude bodies on the Internet. In examining the connections among nudist theory, amateur performance, and mediated nudity, several themes emerge and contribute to an understanding of mediated exhibitionism as well as the potential meanings of nudity in a more general sense.

First (and most obvious) the context under which the naked body is presented is crucial to how it will be interpreted. Many early proponents of nudism saw nature as the

only appropriate context for nudity and lauded it as an escape from the pressures of culture and industry. Within the confines of human culture, however, agents of social control strictly circumscribe nudity to “approved” spaces so as not to compromise the structure of political power which is based upon hierarchy and sexual repression.

Second, in order to inhibit and control nudity as well as to impose the mark of culture upon the body, idealized standards of physical beauty are upheld through classical art, sanctioned performance, and (especially) traditional mass media forms including photography, film, and television. Conversely, new media forms enabled by the Internet have provided a grassroots aesthetic, which grounds representations of the body in the content supplied by ordinary people rather than professional manufacturers of fantasy.

Third, nudity can be a powerful expression of social protest because it represents both a symbolic and literal rejection of social authority. Mediated nudity, though capable of facilitating nude protest, more effectively enables people to test boundaries through publishing imagery that testifies to their liberation from social convention and reclamation of their own images and fantasies.

The final point concerning liberation and reclamation is of special importance to the understanding of mediated exhibitionism because it highlights the key features of the phenomenon: self-exploration and collaborative fantasy construction. Rather than a physicality and sexuality that is repressed and sold back to the consumer for the sake of preserving institutional authority and generating profit, mediated exhibitionism invites people not only to share their own stories, but to actively construct them.

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