What Porn Says to Information Studies: The Affective Value of Documents, and the Body in Information Behavior

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ABSTRACT
In this paper we examine how the everyday life of information seeking of pornography reveals two things. In contradiction of the general theory that says documents are sought for their cognitive value, the commonplace phenomenon of browsing pornography online demonstrates that documents are sought for their affective value. Furthermore, affective response reveals ways that the information seeker’s own body is an important element in the negotiation of assessing and understanding documents during the seeking process. We also assess the degree to which these specific observations are true in more general settings.

Keywords
Pornography, embodiment, affect.

INTRODUCTION
The cognitive turn in Information Studies, signaled in the work of BC Brookes and Nick Belkin, marked greater insights in both studies of information seeking and in information retrieval. That work, which we can call “the cognitive theory of information system use,” made explicit the cognitive nature of the exchange in a wide variety of human-information system interactions. That theory is given famously in a formula by Brookes (1975) and articulated later with broader philosophical foundation (1980). The application of that theory features prominently in Belkin and others (1982), who also explicitly assesses the theory and the work of Brookes in (1990). Later researchers have built upon this work, sometimes explicitly basing their work on these cognitive foundations, sometimes only assuming cognition as the basis of human information behavior, including as a characteristic of user information need.

A corollary of that theory suggests that users will use an information system until they answer their question (sometimes characterized as filling their information need or gap), or they abandon their search due to futility. Dervin’s sense-making model (1983) and Bates’ browsing model (1989) both begin with the cognitive theory that change occurs through a negotiation between the user’s mental construct of the world and new information received from the information system or from the documents it retrieves. Both provide a crucial extension to the basic cognitive model by recognizing that information needs will evolve over the period of information system use, but both Bates and Dervin characterize the nature of the system interaction as exclusively cognitive. Both authors have more recent work

However, recent work by Hartel has overturned some of the basic assumptions that cognitive theory would imply. Most clearly in her study of hobbyist cooks (2007), she found that information system use persisted beyond the point of initial or even an evolved information need, and that users were interacting with the system for pleasure, whether because of the nature of the system or of the documents returned. She characterizes this kind of information use “Staying Informed and Inspired” which indicates the possibility of an affective use of information, and includes behaviors such as reading cookbooks and gastronomy, reading culinary magazines, watching culinary television shows, browsing on the Internet, and taking cooking classes (2011). Kari and Hartel (2007) extend this work further, characterizing much of the preceding research in information seeking as focused on the negative, i.e. problems and needs, and call for research on the “higher” things in life, including the pleasurable and the profound. Expounding further on the negative, they find that many such things are associated with anxiety or unpleasant feelings.

Here we believe we have some of the first indications of information seeking and use research that is oriented toward affective rather than cognitive effects. To be sure, Kari and Hartel identify possible precedents, including characterizations of reading pleasure that often occurs in public library settings, and we are sure others can be located. Affective information use are those uses that

77th ASIS&T Annual Meeting, October 31- November 5, 2014. Seattle, WA, USA
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engage the user primarily in an affective manner, i.e., the experience of feeling or emotion; this is in contrast to the cognitive engagement with information, which is characterized by mental processing, including engagement with memory, reasoning, comprehension and production of language, problem-solving, and is often the predominant way learning is characterized. Under the cognitive model, users seek information to learn or solve a problem; once the problem answered or the information is learned, the user moves on to another task. Engagement with information, and seeking within an information system, ceases once the task is fulfilled. Information and its related systems are the means of fulfilling a task. But what is the information task associated with listening to music, watching TV, certain kinds of reading, such as reading nonfiction? To be sure, there can be and are cognitive components of those acts, and sometimes cognition moves to the fore, such as watching news or a documentary. But, if we are honest with ourselves, many times a person engages in those acts for the pure pleasure (or excitement, or other variations of affect).

While studies of information-seeking have acknowledged that different objects might be sought differently, they have yet to offer a sufficiently meaningful examination or structural description of this relationship that fully recognizes its impact of affect in the process of seeking or browsing. Marcia Bates (1989) acknowledges that online searching evolves throughout the process, but her insight needs to be substantiated by a description of specific subjective relations to the specific objects sought. James and Nahl (1996) believe that affect plays a serious role in the seeking process, yet they rely on quantitative descriptions and narrowly identifies affect as disruptive to the seeking process, rather than an enhancement of it; they offer methods for “coping assistance” to “mitigate” affect by “achieving focus” in order to return the seeking process to an “ongoing cognitive operation.”

Scrutinizing the literature turns up other examples of the recognition of affect in information seeking or use. While Dervin’s model early on provides us as an example of a strong focus on the cognitive and the exclusion of affect, her later work recognizes the role of emotion in sense-making, but the sense-making itself remains primarily cognitive (Dervin & Frenette, 2003). Dervin attempts empirically to describe sense-making, including information seeking, with comparatively superficial descriptions of perception of sensation. She concludes that there exists a gap between faculty perception and cognition that must ultimately be reconciled in some way, though generally cognitive. More recently Dervin focused specifically on the role of emotion in her sense-making methodology (Dervin and Reinhard 2007).

Dervin’s work is often compared with Kulthau’s work on information seeking processes (see, for example, 1991), who gives greater emphasis to the role of emotion, particularly in her study of high school students working on a research paper assignment. Kulthau’s particular interest is in how changes in mood, feeling and motivation are associated with different stages in the searching process. Affect is used to characterize the seeker’s general mood as he or she proceeds with an imposed course assignment, and does not describe more general contexts such as online browsing for pleasure, and is illustrated by the fact that the predominant emotions she uncovers are confusion, doubt, and anxiety.

Reijo Savolanien’s (1999) “everyday life information seeking” model, while admirable for recognizing the need to consider social and cultural factors in the seeking process, continues to focus on a cognitive description of the phenomenon and an understanding of it as an object-oriented, problem-solving situation.

The study of information and affect was given a significant boost with the publication of the book edited by Nahl and Bilal (2007). For the first time, the user’s emotional response was given the foremost attention in a series of essays. Most essays in this volume continued to conceptualize affect as a carry-on component of a traditionally conceptualized information-seeking task, for example, library anxiety or exam only defined information behaviors in work or academic settings. There were a few notable exceptions, such as Gazan (2007), McKechnie, Ross and Rothbauer (2007), and Fisher and Landry (2007).

Ross (1999) is an excellent example of examining affect outside of a traditionally defined information-seeking task. “In short, in order to qualify as information-seekers in most IS research, individuals must experience a ‘problem situation’ and then formally initiate the search process by querying one of our systems: a reference service, an online catalogue, a database, a collection of books. The emphasis on goal-directed, problem-solving information is reinforced when the researcher frames the data collection by asking interviewees or respondents to think first of a specific incident in which they had a problem and took steps to resolve it or had an uncertainty and tried to clarify it.”

Another precedent is that of S. D. Neill (1990) who states “the body plays a continuing and fundamental part in the process of thinking, and the development of the knowledge used to think.” Neill is concerned with embodied thought as a form of cognition, particularly in learning physical skills; the use of feeling to prefigure thought; the development of synthetic knowledge, especially when discerned from a very large amount of information, such as gestalt psychology; moments of intuition or insight that manifest as much as feeling as of thought; the way we develop general senses of complex systems or people, or as general structural foundation for our conceptual knowledge. Neill, for his interest in the body, sees it as a component not just for mental phenomena including affect but purely as it relates to specifically cognitive mental phenomena. However, most usefully for our purposes, Neill is also interested in the difficulties of incorporating such embodied information in conceptual models used to represent knowledge in information retrieval systems, and how such models fail to express embodied information.
A more recent example of the use of embodiment as a conceptual to investigate information and subjectivity is Olsson (2010), who asserts embodiment is a central aspect of information use for theatre professionals. There is clearly a connection between embodiment and cognition. The body’s role in cognition—from perception, to its situatedness and interactions with environment—have led to investigations on embodied cognition. These investigations have led to understandings of the body’s role in cognition, including, usefully for us, in categorization, reasoning and judgment (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Varela and Rosch, 1992).

Both Neill and Olsson give indication that the idea of embodied information is insufficiently incorporated into our theories of information, such as others have similarly demonstrated the same regarding affective information. We also believe that there is a strong dependency between these two concepts. Affect is a mental phenomenon, but it is one that is closely associated with the senses, and felt in the body. And like Neill, we are interested in embodied affective information both in the information seeking process and the ways it is characterized (or not) in information systems. We approach this issue not because we are well-grounded psychologists but rather because we are concerned with understanding the meanings and uses of documents—documents from the full cultural range. And thus we turn to pornography as one type of particularly embodied and affective information. We might also have studied funk music or horror film as other documentary genres with strong affective appeal, but pornography has been previously characterized as “sexual information” within our field, and thus, demonstrates the limits of the cognitive approach. In fact pornography is so affective and so prevalent, especially in the online environments that have transfixed this discipline for the last several decades, it may yet turn out that we have seriously underestimated how common affective response is as a dimension of information use and behavior.

THE TURN TO PORNOGRAPHY

A field that purports to examination information and online cultures must, at some point, also examines the use of pornography. For those that find pornography inherently offensive, we suggest a clinical detachment to the issue for the simple fact that pornography occupies a central position in the contemporary cultural, documentary, online and informational landscapes. Hollywood makes approximately 400 films a year, while the pornography industry makes from 10,000 to 11,000. Seven hundred million pornography videos and DVDs are rented each year (Williams 2004, p. 2). Pornography revenues—including magazines, Web sites, cable, in-room hotel movies, and sex toys—total between 10 and 14 billion dollars annually. This figure is not only bigger than Hollywood movie revenues; it is bigger than professional football, baseball, and basketball revenues combined (Rich 2001, p. 51-92). These numbers suggest that pornography is a central part of American culture, and that access to pornography may be a significant reason for many to adopt online information communication technologies.

Xtube, a member of the Pornhub Network, is one of the largest pornographic video hosting services online. According to its website, Xtube, founded in 2006, is the first pornographic “tube site” on the Internet and has nearly 10 million users. It is one of the only pornographic video hosting services to consist mostly of homemade videos (Xtube 2014). The Pornhub Network has a global Alexa rank of 78 (48 in the United States) and attracts more than 100 million unique visitors per day (Alexa 2014 and Lanxon 2009). Xtube is a sufficient stand-in for any of several similar popular pornographic websites. Any single-word search on Xtube, an online video host for porn, inevitably produces a set of images tagged with an array of sequenced descriptors. For instance, an inquiry for all items designated as “bear” returns images and videos also labeled as twink, bareback, trucker, beefy, daddy, hairy, piercings and mature. Following the sequence to “twink” materials introduces blond, vintage, love, kissing, 18, breed, smooth, bubble, perfect, club, Latino, strip, amor, college and interracial. A new search for “domination” returns materials tagged as Asian, Thai, Japanese, worship, control, humiliation, black, pussy, skinny, whip, bdsm and transsexual. The relationship between some of these tags probably seems, if not natural, at least familiar—in porn terminology hairy is a characteristic feature of bear. Other tags, however, create unexpected associations and wondrous juxtapositions—bear would often exclude twink. smooth bubble conjures the fluid permutations of a lava lamp, while the national identity Japanese precedes worship without the adjectival modification common to a syntactical relationship. While these unusual indexes may look disorderly, in fact, they evidence the process by which viewers and algorithms interact to arrange digital materials housed in archives of amateur pornography. These arrangements take shape according to patterns of browsing that simultaneously enact carnal desires and serve as algorithmic data for the continuous process of organizing sexual representations.

This essay will consider both sides of that organizational process. First, we examine how the carnal aspects of browsing pornography online creates a conjoined relation between subject and object via embodied engagements with the documents and information systems that organize and represent them. Second, we explain how this carnal activity informs the arrangement, through algorithms, of online pornographic images in relation to each other. Such an arrangement effectively represents an index or diagram of the social network in which various pornographic images appear online. In this way, the body participates in creating a virtual community of masturbators and an alternative universe of sexual sociability.

Online pornography has become a significant issue for media and information scholars. A study by Spink, Ozmutlu, and Lorence (2004) finds that “searching” for sexual images on the Internet accounts for more time and effort on the part of users than any other type of search. Yet much of the research within information studies around online pornography discusses these subjective encounters using quantitative and behaviorist modes of description,
rendering the experience of browsing pornography as purely cognitive, with affectless effect. In extreme examples, some studies within cognitive science claim that searching online pornography is pathological, asocial behavior that destroys families and relationships and should be treated with potentially lethal drugs (Bostwick & Bucci, 2008; Manning, 2006). In information studies, the experience of browsing pornography online has been described as “seeking sexual information,” an example of the way in which some scholars have attempted (somewhat defensively) to put the sensuous, embodied and ambiguous realm of online pornography into our dominant cognitive paradigm, using detached but still ambiguous terms (Spink, Cenk Ozmutlu, & Lorence, 2004). Despite that sexual arousal is a central experience to browsing online pornography, it has gone unexamined in much of the research on the subject. Perhaps carnal responses to pornography have been considered too crude to invite much investigation. Or perhaps studying the sensuous and affective dimensions of “seeking sexual information” is dismissed as imprecise criticism in favor of more “rigorous” and “objective” (usually quantitative) modes of description.

The neglect to examine affective responses in pornography—particularly carnality—reflects the common assumption among scholars that browsing online is fundamentally cognitive and that, therefore, browsing pornography is analogous to searching for plane tickets. That analogy is misleading, however, because in the latter case pleasure derives from finding a precise object, usually the least expensive and most convenient tickets, using the least amount of effort. Viewers of online pornography, on the other hand, do not wish exemption from sensual being during the process of browsing. The pornographic experience is meaningful to viewers precisely because of their own bodies. Zabet Patterson (2004) has shown that the pleasure of browsing pornography online does not derive from locating an imaginary perfect image that will satisfy one’s desire. Instead, pleasure derives from the process of browsing itself. “To imagine the goal,” writes Patterson (109), “is to project into a moment of perfect satisfaction — and the obtaining of a perfect image, one completely adequate to the subject’s desire.” Yet nothing can compare to an imagined perfect image, leaving every image inadequate, and so the search continues. Browsing pornography, thus, adheres to something like a ‘principle of significant effort,’ one that has an illusive object orientation. Perhaps this describes the difference between “seeking” and “browsing.” Whereas “seeking” suggests a specific object-oriented action, “browsing” suggests an action in which the object orientation is less defined and more open to serendipitous discovery.

Methodology

In viewing information behavior has fundamentally cognitive, our embodied experiences become immediately objectified, not only in the form of quantitative descriptions, but also in the form of self-conscious awareness or positive knowledge. The perception of pornography, however, cannot be reduced to a question of knowledge alone, just as sensation cannot be equated with the reflective consciousness of making sense. In other words, perception cannot reduce only to the senses, just as sensation does not wholly constitute conscious knowledge.

Perception (or “sense making”) owes as much to embodied existence as it does to conscious thought. Following Brenda Dervin, information-seeking scholars commonly describe the way we perceive our world and others through our engagements with information as “sense-making” (1992 and 2003). While Dervin cites phenomenological theorists, her sense-making model has little to say about embodied ways of knowing. By considering the senses, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 1964b, 1970, 1980, 2005, 2008), I am offering a different account of sense making. To suggest that sense making is either embodied or conscious is to reproduce Cartesian dualism’s mind/ body split. One should not make the mistake, however, of thinking that carnality and consciousness are equally valued in every sense-making situation; they are not fully disclosed to each other, and at times one might preoccupy us more than the other.

Sense making is neither purely conscious nor corporal; rather, it is mediated through both consciousness and corporeality and, therefore, always indirect and incomplete. We cannot accomplish a holistic analysis of our experience of browsing online pornography through a methodology that attends only to conscious experience at the expense of embodied experience. Such is embodiment’s centrality to this particular kind of browsing activity. An analysis of our engagements with and activity around online pornography must synthesize cognitive reflection and embodied experience.

Existential phenomenology seeks such a synthesis. Because we are concerned with the decidedly material nature of human existence, specifically our embodied encounters with and activity around online pornography, we have adopted a method of critical practice guided by existential phenomenology. Ihde (1990) characterizes this method as “a philosophical style that emphasizes a certain interpretation of human experience, and that, in particular, concerns perception and bodily activity.” Merleau-Ponty (1988, p. 196), the philosopher whose work on embodiment transformed transcendental phenomenology into existential phenomenology, explains that the purpose of this method is “to describe the animation of the human body, not in terms of the descent into it of pure consciousness or reflection, but as a metamorphosis of life and the body, as the ‘body of the spirit.’” Finally, Sobchack (2004, p. 5), in her study of film and embodiment, describes existential phenomenology as “philosophically grounded on the carnal, fleshy, objective foundations of subjective consciousness as it engages and is transformed by and in the world.” Combining an analysis of bodily activity with the reflective process of writing and scholarship, existential phenomenology synthesizes both cognitive reflection and embodied experience.
Sobchack’s emphasis on our bodies’ engagement and transformation by and in the world reminds us that embodied experience is always already shaped by the context of history and culture. Embodiment does not take place apart from an historical and cultural existence. As such, embodiment cannot be reduced to fixed essences; instead, embodied experiences are always open to other interpretations. Existential phenomenology is, therefore, a subjective method that will help improve our understanding of the way our bodies, in addition to conscious, reflective thought, engage in certain browsing processes.

As such, this essay adheres, in certain ways, to Day’s reconceptualization of subjects, objects, and their relations. Day (2011, p. 78) suggests an end to certain understandings “of human beings and their activities as either determinative causes of, or effects from, ‘generating’ or ‘using’ information.” Like Day, my method inverts models of the mind (mechanism, cognitivism, and behaviorism) and displaces the concept of need into a contrasting conceptualization of subjectivity and objects. This essay also demonstrates one way in which our relations to objects (such as representations and technology) constitute us as subjects. An analysis of our encounters with and activity around information must, therefore, consider our subjective relations with information, including the value and meaning we derive from information activity. Day takes great pains to explain his philosophical method and to provide, where relevant within the limited space of a journal article, the intellectual history that allows for his various mappings and remappings of ontological concepts about subject-object relations.

Examining our embodied encounters with information and its technological apparatus does not adhere easily to behaviorist and scientific modes of description. Computer technologies and their attendant networks of communication (including televisual, audiovisual, cinematic, and photographic) are never merely used, never merely instrumental. As I shall show, they are part of our lives and help constitute our embodied existence in ways that are profoundly personal. It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to say that our encounters with the objective phenomena of computer technologies transform us as embodied subjects and alter our subjectivity.

Therefore, rather than rely on detached and dispassionate modes of description, this essay relies on a method and discourse that reflects our subjective experiences. For example, following Day, we are not “users” – a word that echoes the prevalent rhetoric of addiction that surrounds sex and the Internet. In popular discourse, addicts are “users”. Some may argue that my use of the subjective case of the first person plural pronoun (“we” and its reflexive “our”) is merely anecdotal or a rhetorical attempt to universalize subjective experiences. Others may wonder whether subjective experience can contribute to generalizable knowledge. Let me address these two points in turn.

Subjective analysis, particularly a focus on what it is to live one’s body, is indeed at least partly anecdotal to the extent that it relies on lived experience. It is important to remember that embodiment is fundamentally part of what it is to be human (we are bodies; we do not have bodies). That is to say, embodiment, in addition to conscious, reflective thought, helps constitute our subjectivity. The purpose of analyzing the subjective (and sometimes personal) experience is not to universalize a particular experience. Neither should we confuse the process of subjectivity with individualism or particularity. As Braidotti (2002, p. 7) explains, “Subjectivity is a socially mediated process. Consequently, the emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, external to the self while it also mobilizes the self’s in-depth structure.” My turn to the subjective second person plural pronoun (“we”) reflects the collective enterprise of subjectivity. Furthermore, the intention of my subjective analysis is to open up (rather than close down) our understanding of more general entailments of our engagements with and activity around online pornography and to suggest an intimate and material relationship we have with those engagements and activities.

A turn to the subjective is not merely a self-indulgent analysis of an individual encounter with online pornography. Its aim is to describe and explicate the general and possible structures that inform this particular browsing process and make it potentially resonant for others. Sobchack (2004, p. 1) puts it best in the following passage:

Although in historical and cultural existence particular experiences may be lived idiosyncratically, they are also, and in most cases, lived both generally and conventionally – in the first instance, according to general conditions of embodied existence such as temporality, spatiality, intentionality, reflection, and reflexivity and, in the second instance, according to usually transparent and dominant cultural habits that are not so much determining as they are regulative.

The value of interpretation and subjective experience—common to humanistic disciplines – is not necessarily whether we have actually had the experience; it is about whether or not “the description is resonant and the experience’s structure sufficiently comprehensible to a reader who might possibly inhabit it (even if in a differently inflected or values way)” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 1). Finally, to the extent that the experience of online pornography is embodied and intimate, subjective logic serves as an antidote to the behaviorist and scientific accounts of our experience of online pornography that do not describe our living that experience.

**Sensing Sensuality**

Our embodied experience of seeking pornography online is an experience of seeing, hearing, touching, and moving in which our sense of the literal and the figural vacillate, sometimes discontinuously, but usually configuring to make sense and meaning together. This is because, according to Vivian Sobchack, “we are incorporated systemically as embodied and conscious subjects who both ‘have’ and ‘make’ sense simultaneously” (emphasis her own, 75). To have and to make sense is an undifferentiated experience that grounds and conjoins body and language, feeling and knowledge. Alphonso Lingis, too, has emphasized the
conjunction of the lived body and representation: “My body as the inner sphere where representations are perceptible… and my body as an image seen by rebound from the world, are inscribed the one in [the] other…. The density of the body is that of ‘pre-things,’ not yet differentiated into reality and illusion…. [The] body is a precinct of signifiers” (162). For Lingis, then, the literal and the figural inform each other even as they inform us. We are both embodied and conscious in that we both have and make sense.

The process of seeking pornography online especially highlights and privileges the conjointed relation between the lived body and representation because it uses lived modes of perceptual and sensory experience to represent bodies that are also participating in lived modes of perception. Granted, porn viewers cannot fully caress the smooth shoulders of the man on the computer screen; the precise smell and warmth of the body on screen remain vague. Nevertheless, viewers have a partially fulfilled sensory experience of these things that make them both conscious and meaningful. This experience is not reducible only to one’s senses or only to cognitive reflection.

Needless to say, the structure of this fulfillment is quite different in several ways from a context in which the man is literally present. One’s lived body sits in readiness in front of the screen as both a sensual and sense-making potentiality. Focused on the screen, the viewer’s “postural schema” takes its shape based on an inclination toward (or uninterested recoil from) what she sees and hears. “If I am engaged by what I see,” writes Sobchack, “my intentionality streams toward the world onscreen, marking itself not merely in my conscious attention but always also in my bodily tension” (76). This tension reveals itself sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly, but always includes an engagement of the body, and one’s material being: the body contorts, retracts, straightens, reclines, leans in, gravitates, recoils, and so on. While online browsing cannot fulfill certain sensory experiences (touch, smell, taste), when physically aroused, Sobchack writes, the “body’s intentional trajectory, seeking a sensible object to fulfill this sensual solicitation, will reverse its direction” to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible. That more literally accessible sensual object is my own subjectively felt lived body” (emphasis her own, 77).

Although Sobchack is discussing her experience watching a film, this description of embodied experience maps onto the embodied experience of browsing pornography online. Indeed, we cannot assume that the electronic presence of pornography completely breaks from the procedures of general cinema and photography. Digital representation participates in a broad network of communication that includes the cinematic and photographic. In an electronic cinematic presence, one is “in rebound” (recalling Lingis) from the screen, turning reflexively (un-reflectively) “toward my own carnal, sensual, and sensible being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality” (77).

Merleau-Ponty (1964, 166) has described this phenomenon as our lived body’s capacity to sense itself:

There is a relation of my body to itself which makes it the vinculum of the self and things. When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a “physical thing.” But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right…. Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes “a sort of reflection.” In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch is here diffused into the body – that body is a “perceiving thing,” a “subject-object” (emphasis his own).

This description of the lived body’s capacity to sense itself, when considered in the context of browsing pornography online, coupled with Lingis’s description of sensing one’s own sensuality, sounds remarkably similar to masturbation. Effectively a form of “self-touching,” it can also be described as “autoerotic,” “spontaneous eroticism” or “self-eroticism.” Viewers, thus, take pleasure from both seeing and feeling in the process of browsing pornography online. The touching in pornography (the smooch of a kiss, the touch of a shoulder) becomes actualized as the touch of one’s self. The pleasure represented by the image is physically felt by the viewer as she touches herself.

This form of self-touching is consciously other-directed, and as such, some might argue, it maintains the subject/object distinction because it is different from forms of self-touching in which one’s body and one’s consciousness is self-directed. Narcissism aside, however, one’s consciousness is never entirely self-directed and it would seem that masturbation demands special focus on an external, if also imaginary, figure of desire. It is precisely because one’s consciousness is not directed toward one’s own body but toward the figure of desire onscreen that the subject/object distinction remains interlaced rather than distinct. The diffusion of consciousness is matched by a dispersion of embodiment. The viewer is “caught up without a thought (because [my] thoughts are ‘elsewhere’) in this vascillating and reversible structure that both differentiates and connects the sense of my literal body to the sense of the figurative bodies and objects I see on the screen” (77).

To the extent that viewers are provoked by figural objects that are elsewhere, we are not focused on the particularities of our literal bodies either. My perception of the figure on screen and my sense of self are, therefore, vague and diffuse, even as the interaction heightens and intensifies my sensorium. At the moment one’s lived body, in rebound, senses itself in the online pornographic experience, the particular objects that sensually provoke the viewer are perceived in vague and diffuse ways. One’s body is the site where the sensual event of representation occurs, where the
sexual solicitation by the figure onscreen and our self-touching become diffused into our bodies. Thus, the literal body and the figural bodies onscreen are both differentiated and connected.

Furthermore, a form of autoeroticism in which one’s body and one’s consciousness are self-directed requires such cognitive reflection and attention toward oneself—what Sobchack calls a kind of double reflexivity—that it can and often does undo carnal pleasure. Sobchack points out how it is nearly impossible to tickle oneself for self-consciousness of our laughing results in it becoming forced. The process of browsing pornography online collapses the distinction between object and subject insofar as browsing for sexual representation participates in perceptual “rebound.” At that moment, the search reflects sexual desire itself as necessarily other-directed and requires an object other than oneself “so as to avoid a reflexivity that is so doubled as to cause conscious reflection on sexual desire itself” (78). One might even claim, then, that seeking sexual objects online fails to be pleasurable at the moment it becomes consciously reflective.

In these moments, one does not think about one’s own body and one is not, therefore, thrust outside of the onscreen image. Instead, viewers are consumed by the image; they feel their bodies as only one side of “an irreducible and dynamic relational structure of reversibility and reciprocity” that has as its other side the figural body onscreen (79). It is a process of reflexive and reflective exchange that allows viewers literally to feel the warmth, moisture, and smoothness of a body.

This relation can be broken, not only by conscious reflectivity by also by reflexive feelings of shame, disgust, or the panic of being discovered by someone outside the scene intruding upon the moment (entering the picture, if you will). The intensity of these feelings attest to the body’s relation to the figure on the screen, its sense of investment in what it sees, hears, tastes, touches, and smells. Consider, for example, when we cover our eyes or ears in a slasher film, literally sickened at the sight of blood, terrified by the psychopathic murderer, and frightened, frustrated, or anxious by the victim’s impending doom. All these attest to the conjoined relationship between the figural body onscreen and our literal body in the movie theatre – an affective experience that is carnally and consciously meaningful. Similarly, browsing pornography has a carnal and conscious relation to pornographic images, conjoined by the always reflexive and reflective exchange of sensation that defines the autoerotic goals of this particular browsing process.

**Sensual Structure**

Pornographic images online are arranged around affective and social experiences, whereby curiosity, frustration, disgust, surprise, desire, pleasure, and wonder arise from the relation of images to their location within a digital space. The representation of particular acts, body parts, and fetishes can be as striking as an image’s proximity to similar or different images. By rolling the onscreen cursor over thumbnail images, for example, one causes a scrolling visual field of objects to pass the screen, which unfolds metadata surrounding an individual image or set of images, such as textual fragments and audio files about the image. As the process repeats itself from image to image, what the viewer sees is not only metadata about images, but also metadata about relations among images. On a superficial level, such relations reveal the associative principles of indexing and classification, in which images always exist in relation to other images. To offer a familiar example, such indexing occurs on Amazon.com when algorithms arrange objects based on other viewers’ interests (“customers who bought this item also bought…”), creating a relationship according to predetermined datasets organized for the online display.

For pornography websites, however, these relations also operate on a level of sensation in that their tendencies and currents are particular to viewer-initiated spatialization. That is, viewers initiate these relations through the process of browsing for images to “satisfy” their sexual desire. The images they choose are recorded into an algorithm that then participates in producing the visual (as well as textual) association of images (proximate display) for future browsing. The resulting arrangement of pornographic images on display, effectively an index and catalog of images, is made increasingly affective by calling up anecdotal and historical information about an image’s everyday use through its proximity to images or metadata of other fetishes, revealing its place in a larger social network of sexual fetishistic relations. In other words, the algorithm participates in creating a kind of sexual network among viewers.

Xtube, for example, arranges images from the moment it first engages viewers on its splash page by asking viewers to select their identity as a man or woman and to select their corresponding interest in men or women or both (the default selection is for men interested in women). Upon identifying one’s gender and corresponding gender(s) of sexual interest, Xtube displays columns and rows of the most recently uploaded videos, similar to YouTube. Viewers are able to browse through a wide variety of pathways: most viewed, best rated, recently featured (by Xtube’s staff), most discussed, top length, top favorites, and random. Within these standard categories, Xtube arranges videos according to the latest uploaded video by default, though one can filter their search results.

On the right side of the screen, Xtube offers viewers a wide selection of categories of images and videos, which correspond to viewer’s previously identified sexual interests. For example, if a viewer identifies as a man interested in women or a woman interested in men, categories include anal, anime, asian, BDSM, fetish, ebony, latina, mature, miscellaneous, toys, group sex, interracial, lesbian, MILF, and voyeur. If a viewer identifies as a man interested in men, categories include many of the same categories above with some variation, such as bear, fisting, hunks, muscle guys, transsexual, yaoi, big cock, daddies, general gay, and twinks. Curiously, Xtube uses the same categories for viewers who identify as women interested in
women as those categories used for viewers who identify as
men interested in men, even when the categories seem
inappropriate.

The viewer adds titles, descriptive information (often in the
form of tags), commentary, and narrative description about
images. Viewers can rate images, add images to a collection
of favorites, create playlists, browse other videos uploaded
by specific viewers, or browse a specific viewer’s collection
of favorite images and videos. Having incorporated social
networking design elements into their websites,
pornographic video hosting services make explicit the way
browsing pornography has become a social experience.

Viewers can befriend each other online, exchange stories
about their fantasies and desires, follow each other’s
uploaded videos or favorite videos, and contribute to wikis
that attempt to explain the sexual nomenclature used in
tagging pornographic videos and provide synonymous
search terms, effectively a sexual thesaurus.

The sexual categorization that surrounds pornographic
images ostensibly allows viewers, according to Patterson,
“project their virtual selves into a seemingly endless variety
of scenarios and environments, and to embody an infinite
variety of freely chosen subject positions, roles and desires”
(106). This nomenclature, which reflects already present
social relations, functions to guide, if not overtly discipline,
viewers’ subject positions and desires by creating an
environment in which subjects and desires are produced as
essential standards. According to Patterson, “part of the
captivation of cyberporn is that it allows images to be
managed and categorized so readily, allowing the subject to
assimilate and emulate a particular subject position while
retaining the hallucinatory promise of fluidity” (107). Many
of these categories reflect the nomenclature of subjects and
desires within sexual subcultures. Hence, the bounds of
power are not always top-down. Instead, these stabilized
categories of subject and desire operate in complicated
ways within the dominant culture. For Chauncey (1993,
300), such categories are created under the weight of social
disapprobation, leading members of a sexual subculture to
insist on a form of solidarity that requires conformity to
group standards.

The search and browsing interfaces of online pornographic
services also require discernible categories and
classification in order to make information retrieval
effective. Images are available to viewers through the
negotiation of an elaborate schema in which categories of
sexual desire are produced through the sequencing of fixed
subject positions always defined in relation to each other.

While the viewer might role-play within these
classifications, the exploration is constrained by a logic of
recognizable cues. In pornographic video hosting services,
viewers who submit material to the website organize their
images, videos, or narratives among standardized
categories. Some of these sites offer tagging options, a form
of folksonomic classification, but the tags are subsumed
under the standardized classificatory scheme. That is,
tagging, in some instances, operates within overarching
categories.

The Internet allows online pornographic services, then, for
a global community of users who have in common similar
fetishistic desires and whose affective and social relations
become effectively cataloged, indexed, and organized
through the very structure of online pornographic images.

Thomas Laqueur (2003) has suggested that these online
communities of masturbators constitute a change in the
history of masturbation. “There are hundreds of thousands
of pornographic sites that cater to every masturbatory
fantasy imaginable,” writes Laqueur (419), “but what is
really new is the proliferation of virtual communities of
onanists, an alternative universe of sociability that is
created through the public revelation of the not-so-vice.”

Masturbation – once a solitary sexual pleasure, marked by
privacy, loneliness, self-absorption, guilt, and shame – has
come to be an increasingly public, social, and communal
experience online. Viewers enter into a participatory
relationship with online pornography, contributing to how
pornographic images will be arranged and displayed in
relation to other images in future browsing scenarios. In
other words, browsing habits supply affective and social
data about the images viewers see. The algorithm arranges
images around affective and social experiences around
shared and algorithmically negotiated meanings of arousal
and desire, which means that the arrangement is both the
result of affective and social experiences and that affective
and social experiences arise from these arrangements.

Merleau-Ponty’s description of physical self-consciousness
reinforces the way in which viewers experience the
algorithmic arrangement of images as affective and social.
As touching in pornography becomes actualized as the
touch of one’s self, one become conscious of his or her
desire. The actualization and the consciousness are both
embodied. The proximate display of images produced by
an algorithm reveals one’s desire in a broader sexual and
social network of fetishistic relations. This display of
associated images provokes viewers to act on their self-
conscious desire by clicking through to an associated
desire. Viewers are, therefore, not simply lost in their
desire, a purely sensual experience, but prompted to
become conscious of the relation of their desire to other
images.

It is important to remember, too, that the arrangement of
images on display in online pornography does not reveal an
image’s fixed identity in relation to other images.

Pornographic images online do not constitute the static
presentation of a thing. Instead, these images and the
process of their arrangement are lively events in which
viewers participate as bodies and so make the images they
see meaningful at the level of the body. Both the meaning
and the arrangement of images on display constitute a
probabilistic materiality in which images are not an entity
but a provocation to interpretation, which thereby offers an
indeterminate possibility for their arrangement through the
algorithm.

This is to say, to the extent that the meaning of images
change, so too will the browsing activity around that image.
Two otherwise unassociated fetishes become associated
through an algorithm when viewers’ browsing activity repeatedly associates the two. Should viewers interested in images categorized as “bear” also frequent images categorized as “leather,” the two categories of images will be arranged online in close association with each other. The same is, of course, true of individual images. Should the meaning viewers create from the these images change, so too will their browsing patterns and the association, e.g. arrangement, of different images. Thus, these images do not express a set of things in relation to each other whose identities are self-evident or whose arrangements are fixed. They are always associative identities, and probabilistic in nature.

Outside the context of pornography, information scholars have long acknowledged the extent to which the arrangement of objects reflects a broader social and cultural network. Notably, Suzanne Briet in her treatise *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?*, discusses the ways in which information systems (or “documentary systems,” in her language), such as the catalogue and index, not only point to the object but also reflect the social networks in which the object appears (Day, 2006, 49). Catalogues and indexes, whether visual or textual, are always a culturally embedded and socially networked phenomenon. Moreover, the technologies as well as the techniques for accessing pornography, following Briet, are themselves expressions of culture. Ron Day puts it succinctly: “Information and communication technologies may introduce a ‘new rhythm’ to society and culture, but they themselves are a symptom of […] social development” (55). Thus, the arrangement of images displayed online is fundamentally cultural and social.

Nor have the embodied aspects of the arrangement of objects been lost on visual criticism. Scholars of enlightenment visual culture, for example, reveal a corporeal relation between exhibition and viewer in the arrangement of objects on display in the Baroque curiosity cabinet, the *Wunderkammer*. In such cabinets, the arrangement of objects on display also arose out of wonder, surprise, irritation, and curiosity. This is not to say that the arrangement of images online today can be anchored solely in the referents of the early modern period, or that there is some kind of causal effect of old media on new. Instead, the digital functions as part of a baroque genealogy, which articulated differential relations between embodiment and technics. It places, according to Munster, “body and machine, sensation and concept, nature and artifice in ongoing relations of discordance and concordance with each other.” The relationship between digital visual culture and Baroque visual culture has been articulated by numerous new media scholars (Murray 2008 and Munster 2006).

As with the *Wunderkammer*, many pornography websites provide an overflow of images and textual fragments, seemingly arranged in a rambling and chaotic fashion, opposed to concepts of ordering and system. Recall the myriad of pornographic images on display alongside pop-ups, advertisements, flash and animated GIFs, all accompanied by background music. Many pornography websites provide an enormous range of selection that seems to promise satisfaction to the viewer. This conception of design participates in an aegis of “getting what you want” but in excess of it. In this way, pornography websites promise the accessible and visible while delivering the curious, obscene and obscure. Such a method of display is an aesthetic contrivance that draws the wonder, curiosity, surprise, and, sometimes, frustration of the viewer, amassed, no doubt, by the material limits of computer technologies, such as the capacity of silicon to conduct electrons at particular speeds.

Understanding the role of pleasurable browsing in the arrangements of online pornographic images allows one to map the contours of new forms of sexual associations in an electronic age. In this way, the Internet does not merely act as a repository for objects – no archive ever does. Instead, these objects are relational and dynamic, and their arrangement is socially and culturally embedded. The Internet is, therefore, never merely used, never merely instrumental. It is itself a site of social relations that has been incorporated into our lives, its uses primarily affective, and transforms us as embodied subjects.

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