Cybersex, Bodies, and Domination: An Immanent Critique of Cyber-technology and the Possibility of Emancipation

Raniel S.M. Reyes
Department of Philosophy, University of Santo Tomas

Abstract:

The paper [1] attempts at a social critique of cyber-technology through a discussion of cybersex phenomenon with an integral thrust on the human body and domination. In the first part, an overall picture of the cyber-landscape and cybersex—on how they radically transform the human condition, will be elucidated. The brand of transcendence rendered to us by this phenomenon has revolutionized man's understanding of sexuality and relationship. However, cybersex is not exempted from ethical diagnosis because its optimistic promises are troubled by its concomitant drawbacks. A reading of this kind of techno-cultural marginalization using the critical theory tradition informed by the larger social problems of pornography, gender-relations, and capitalist reification, will be the substance of the third. Lastly, it will be explicated that the very goal of transfiguring the cyber-landscape must initially begin with the transformation of technology and social values in connection to human sexuality and relationships by examining their immanent contradictions, towards the possibility of human emancipation.

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Introduction

> The very idea of a non-repressive civilization, conceived as a real possibility of the established civilization at the present stage, appears frivolous. . . . A non-repressive existence . . . if it is possible at all, can only be the result of qualitative social change.
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> —Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*

Sexual revolution is one of the interesting novelties authored by the contemporary human hand. Fundamentally, it is the massive transformation of our theoretical and practical eyeglasses towards human sexuality and interpersonal association. Its progenies such as homosexuality, adultery and prostitution, to name few, radically mushroom themselves and gain wider societal legitimization. The habituation rate of these multi-faceted revolutions is manifestly looming. Accordingly, the world has become pervasively disjointed because these sexual revolutions spawn perplexing problems in relation to the important notions of embodied subjectivity, humanity and responsibility.

Akin to this is the revolutionary emergence of cyber-technology. Its rise stimulates the malleable transfiguration of conventional epistemic yardsticks in perceiving human experiences and social patterns. The reconciliation of sexual revolution and cyber-technology is unquestionably not only capable of creating lucid advancements in the world, but is also culpable of rendering various complexities to the human condition, which require ethical examination.

Cybersex, Transcendence and Social Experience

1.   A New Space in Human Sexuality

Man's social constitution and life are the integral pillars grounding the very existence of the problems of sexual revolution. Interestingly, aside from the aforesaid ethical issues sexual revolution has brought mankind,

there exist presently another phenomenon shaped by the spirit of the techno-scientific times—cybersex.

The cultural critic Marshall McLuhan argues that one of the most peculiar features of our present times is the interfusion of sex and technology born from a "hungry curiosity to explore and enlarge the domain of sex by mechanical technique on one hand, and on the other, to possess machines in a sexually gratifying way."[2] Ideally, futuristic sex would considerably necessitate the reformulation of the traditional conceptions of human sexuality and embodied subjectivity that even includes modification of our bodies.

Today, there are more than 100,000 web sites featuring all kinds of sexual content, such as erotic photos, videos, live sex acts and web-cam strip sessions.[3] Visits to these pornographic sites highly increase with some sites reporting as many as 50 million hits.[4] Essentially, cybersex requires the reformulation of our pre-existing conceptions of human sexuality and embodied subjectivity—with a specific thrust on the material body utilized as a medium of reflection and relations. In the cyberspace, moral frames are manipulated, if not placed into oblivion and a distinctive type of eyeglasses is offered to the users. The old notion regarding the human body being dynamically constitutive of higher values is already alienated from this novel brand of practice.

Conversations in a cybersex encounter performed through the erotic exchanges of words jumpstart the procedure. Positively, being equipped with an imaginative mind containing unthinkable sexual fantasies spawns a certain degree of transcendence to the boundaries of our social world. In the said engagement, at least two persons are required to undergo real time text-based or live-camera conversations whose *telos* is none other than sexual pleasure. This is definitely an innovative sexual encounter not limited to sex.

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[2] Marshall McLuhan, "Young-Goddess Assembly Line" in *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 94.

[3] P.J. Carnes, "Cybersex, Courtship, and Escalating Arousal: Factors in Addictive Sexual Desire" in *Sexual Compulsion & Compulsivity: Journal of Treatment and Prevention* (2001), 45-78.

[4] Scott Worden, "E-trafficking" in *E-Law: Foreign Policy* (1 March 2001), ‹http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2001/03/01/e_trafficking›.

Sexual expression and exploration in our everyday life-voyage are legitimized to be emotionally pernicious.[5] According to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, "each one of us behaving in some respect like a paranoiac, corrects some aspects of the world which is unbearable to him by the construction of a wish and introduces this delusion into reality."[6] Unnatural sexual fantasies, like situating sexual fantasies in the public sphere,[7] are socially repressed due to the overriding fear of disgrace. On a positive plane, cyberspace is a pleasant place for this group of people. Users are able to experience and experiment with aspects of their personality that social inhibition would generally encourage them to suppress.[8] Therefore, cybersex users view Internet site navigation as a pleasurable and liberating event physiologically, emotionally and psychologically.[9]

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[5] Different countries have varying modes of disciplinarity regarding the sexual behaviors of people. At least in conservative societies, this view is collectively applied.

[6] Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents" in *Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Modern Library, 1965), 265.

[7] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 18. Foucault's enterprise on the history of sexuality negates the notion that western society has experienced sexual repression since the seventeenth century. Likewise, he dispels the idea that sexuality has not been the subject of open discourse. One should not be oblivious that in the Victorian Era, which depicted a very Bourgeoisie morality, the form sex played was very organized as it was only limited for reproduction. The state truly took control over reproduction in order to ensure empirical growth. Side-by-side was the knowledge dissemination of the sheer imposition that the whole populace is sexually repressed, as subjects would be persuaded that they are missing a lot of things, and then by their initiative, they would do something about it. Retrospectively, Diogenes became familiar to us because of the story of his masturbation in public. Other writings also illustrate his acts of urination and defecation in the market, and his advocacy of incest and cannibalism. See Robert Brach Branham, *Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (California: University of California Press, 2000), 226.

[8] Nancy Baym, *The Emergence of Community in Computer-mediated Communication* (California: Thous and Oaks, 2001), 138.

[9] Cf. Henry Assael, *Consumer Behavior and Marketing Action* (Ohio: South Western College Publishing, 1998).

2. Anonymity and Gender-Play

A culture of simulation characterizes the cyberspace. Appearance in this realm is the only one left because the *real* disappears in exchange of the *hyperreal*, founded on a certain virtual media where it functions.[10] Although people nowadays are still indulged into traditional types of sexual intercourse, the rise of cyber-technology simulates this experience, in such a manner that it veers our ideas regarding personal identities and social transactions.

Furthermore, cyberspace is a digital site where people can coat themselves with multi-faceted identities. This resembles one of cybersex's significant points about the sheer simulation of sexual activity. Being immersed in this brand of practice decisively contributes to the transfiguration of our customary eyeglasses in understanding our mind, body, self and machine.[11] Nevertheless, it brings a disconcerting state of affairs on gender issues that may aggravate the deterioration of gender constitution. Additionally, an illusory atmosphere is developed in the web. Other facets of users' behaviours are explored under the guise of a symbolic mask. Here, the structural breadth of the term "social" magnifies, as the traditional social mask is transfigured into a virtual mask. This is principally demonstrated in text-based communication when "men masquerade as women, and women masquerade as men."[12] For instance, since females are fearful of experiencing sexual harassment in the cyberspace, and they want to emancipate from the patriarchal bio-power governing our current state of affairs, gender-masking has relatively become an option for them. In most cases, they may dread of being collectively penalized and embarrassed in doing things uncharacteristic to their gender roles. In this vein, the cyber-milieu can be a hiding fortress offering a relative security from commitment, embarrassment and violence.

However, a significant quantity involving communication affairs in the cyberspace is veiled. Conventional gender enunciations are placed outside the cyber realm discourse. Since gender is dynamically envisaged in

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[10] Jean Baudrillard, "Two Essays," in *Science-Fiction Studies* (November 1991), 18.

[11] McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, 96.

[12] Steven Jones, *Cybersociety: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 129.

the cyberspace, pretending to be someone else seems a normative stance. In short, as long as the computer is within your grasp, impossibility is nothing: "You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative or less. You can just be whoever you want."[13]

Techno-Capitalist Marginalization and Critical Theory

1.   Fragmentation and a Re-reading of the Culture Industry

Contemporary man should not be oblivious on the confounding irregularities revolving around cybersex phenomenon. The cyber-transcendence and gratification concocted in the web are not blameless in inducing detrimental issues akin to person's body-self and gender relations, as well as, inter-personal communication.

In a virtual encounter, the mere focus is on the erotic-genital attribute of the person—a fragmented way of dealing with human sexuality. Users' transactions are premised not on the holistic dialogue with the individual, but on a specific object in mind—the breast, penis, or vagina of the partner. It is analogous to casual relations mediated by technology. A serious ethical concern should not be overlooked here. The fragmentation engendered by the cybersex encounter devalues the person, since his/her sexuality is solely reduced to utter eroticism. Integrative values constituting the whole individual, such as his genealogy and feelings, are neglected, thereby, conditioning personhood debasement. By reducing the individual to mere symbolic eroticism, he/she is degraded and objectified into a profitable item of commodity. From perceiving existence as a totality, cybersex averts our attention to merely perceive reproductive organs as a narcissistic sexual apparatus. The person's sexuality is commodified and is manipulated by the capitalist industry for the purpose of production, fetishization and domination.[14] The extensively vile sexual preoccupations in the cyberspace really demean the unified reality of the individual as constitutive and basis of higher values.[15] It perniciously

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[13] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 184.

[14] Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 108.

[15] Traditional philosophy has patently marginalized the body in privileging the mind or the *cogito* over it. On the contrary, several untimely philosophers in the likes of Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Gilles Deleuze, have criticized traditional epistemology and have ruptured the cage

violates the material integrity of the human body and critically assails the philosophical anthropology conception that the person is an embodied subjectivity.

In the advanced capitalist society, modifications in consumption and production have commodified the old social patterns of human interaction into a thing-like relation. Upon the advent of cyber-technology and capitalism's parasitic infiltration into its fluid corpus, modes of conformity and dominion fortify and the individual becomes increasingly assimilated within the rationally-administered system. Advanced capitalism has successfully commodified cultural values in a systemically subtle way. This is made possible by the collaboration of capitalism, mass media and technology. According to the critical theorist Theodor Adorno, "the culture industry generates a world of false specificity in which the advertised uniqueness of the individual product—the distinctive individual voice of a new poet, the inimitable style of a star conductor, of the sheer personality of a chat-show host—needs to be foregrounded by the relentless sameness of a whole range of the product's other qualities, from diction to typeface."[16]

Alongside the commodification of relationships is that of sexuality, that thereby add more complexities to our conception of subjectivity and inter-personal relation. Various economic, social and political occurrences strengthen the radicalization of sexuality. The increased commodification of sexuality is manifested in advertisements, pornography (actual and virtual) and prostitution. The capitalist-administered culture accentuates the market impulse of individuals in producing more desirable commodities. When sexuality generates pleasure, it renders leverage for marketing goods in the capitalist society. In the same vein, upon capitalism's aesthetic penetration into the cyberspace, cybersex has converted into a consumerist phenomenon providing a plethora of

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that imprisons the body from its multiple possibilities. See Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. by Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 17-19; Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 4-75; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[16] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), 123.

sexual possibilities characterized by accessibility, affordability and anonymity under the pretext of enduring subjugation.

In the Marxist tradition, fetishization is viewed as a kind of ideological false consciousness that conceals capitalist domination. Fetishism of commodities hence "replaces the false conception of this 'economy' as a relation between things by its true definition as a system of social relations.'[17] In this context, fetishism for the genital organ of your partner translates into fetishism for commodities. In the macro-level, this forms part of the larger structural scheme of the whole capitalist system that concomitantly serves as its blood-line. The real object of consumption in the age of advanced capitalist society for Adorno[18] is the labor or product's exchange-value, and not its use-value. Cybersexual satisfaction is gauged against cost and that *homo sexualis* has become *homo consumeris*.[19] The new cyber-economy creates a narrative composing of actors treating each other as commodity and as objects of desire. In this manner, the commodification of sexuality discards its value in the person's totality. The aptitude of innumerable pleasures without immeasurably thinking of the risks and responsibility involved engenders the moral economy's demise on one hand, and the strengthening of techno-capitalism, on the other.

"Culture Industry," advanced capitalism's contemporary face, is the term used by Adorno to refer to the wreckage of high culture to shallow spectacle and consumerism, as well as the corresponding manipulation of consumer preferences by advertising or the market economy expectations. In his words:

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[17] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, first edition (US: Verso Books, 2005), 216.

[18] Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse are the early proponents of the famous Frankfurt School, familiarly known as the Critical Theory. These social theorists were among the first thinkers to analyze the new configurations of the state and economy in contemporary capitalist societies, to critique the key roles of mass culture and communications, to diagnose new modes of technology, and forms of social control, to discuss new modes of socialization, and the decline of the individual in mass society—to evaluate and confront the consequences of the integration of the working classes and the stabilization of capitalism for the project of social change. (Herbert Marcuse "Introduction to the Second Edition" in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1991], xviii).

[19] Kevin Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (Lanham: Littlefield, 2007), 49.

> The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both, it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total. Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object.[20]

This novel machinery addles down its products and the possibility of a meaningful response from its consumer-victims. Undeniably, its only aim is to foster a titillating fetishized end in the consumer's part, rather than to convey meaning. Its disseminated products promote passivity and regression embedded in pre-fabricated responses. The reified delight propounded by the industry is seriously aberrant for instigating subtle yet brazen exploitation to the individual, especially akin to his/her critical consciousness. For David Ingram, the culture industry is the site whereby the individual is invited to experience, however, vicariously, the excitement, adventure, and glamour desired in everyday life.[21] Nevertheless, engaging into cybersex or going to the movie house, only let us realize what we do not have. To compound the pain further, the merchandise comes with a price that must be paid via longer hours of labor.[22]

Capitalism's public strategists afford set of false needs so as to systematically fashion the illusion of the product's importance (privileges, services, principles, etc.) to daily living, whereby the accidental appears to be essential. According to another critical theorist Herbert Marcuse:

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[20] Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 2001), 108.

[21] David Ingram, *Critical Theory and Philosophy* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 43.

[22] Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 112.

> False needs are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice . . . the result then are euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisement, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category.[23]

The necessity of commodified concepts which are beyond the regulative control of the individuals is expressed in an artistically propagandist language, through cyber and media advertisements, which transform into manipulative tools reifying our critical acuity.[24] Thus Marcuse opines in his phenomenal book *Eros and Civilization*: "In the contemporary period, psychological categories become political categories to the degree to which the private, individual psyche becomes the more or less willing receptacle of socially desirable and socially necessary aspirations, feelings, drives, and satisfactions."[25]

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[23] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press Boston, 1964), 5.

[24] See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). In this book, specifically the part entitled, "Poor Technicians of Psychoanalysis," they compare the model of the spin-doctors of desires to public strategists in the professional and corporate fields who are responsible for disseminating sets of strategies in order to analytically fashion the illusion of the product's or principle's extreme importance to daily living, thereby strategically justifying the necessity of capitalist dominion. These so-called experts take for granted human desire in interpreting it as a "lack" within us that must be treated clinically.

[25] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), viii. Moreover, in the section entitled, "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," of the book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that individual identity is already absorbed by massification: "In the culture industry, the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned." See Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 155.

Cybersex may not categorically run parallel to film, photography, and TV etc. However, this pioneering phenomenon has evolved into an extension of the culture industry's hegemony, since it is an integral component of a massified culture, wherein standardization and illusory differences are its evident attributes. Companies behind cybersex operations, characterizing the industry's apparatus, identify that higher levels of numbing interactivity and content lead to cyber-pornography site's success via the rates of subscribers and hits, as well as user perceived satisfaction and attitude toward porn sites. Four aspects of high interactivity level of relevance and interest to this research are user control, vividness, customization, and tele-presence.[26] Affirmatively, cybersex is constitutively embedded in the pornography discourse—a pornography with a new cyber-face.

Becoming sexually estranged in cyber-pornography is a distinctive experience. The individual is compellingly absorbed by the affective flow of his/her erotic consciousness and unconsciousness. Some keen cybersex participants find themselves entering a state of flow at peak moments of their sexual navigation routine during the activity. But on the deeper account, they are simply lured by the reifying supremacy of the culture industry permeating in the cyberspace. In other words, capitalism's geopolitical utilization of the cyber-realm efficiently buttresses its already vigorous and ubiquitous system into more malleable war machinery. From the television, the cyberspace is now the paramount culmination and device of the culture industry. The illusory freedom experienced in the web is manipulated by the culture industry so as to intensify an atmosphere of conformity and modulation. In fact, arguing that the cyberspace experience is more productive than that of the TV is still falling into the quicksand of capitalist domination side-by-side with the debasement of body or sexuality. Even this so-called comparative naivety is part of capitalist pre-figuration, as if you are claiming that the news programs in one TV station or channel is better than another, when in fact, both stations are under a single media company. Either way, therefore, the individual is controlled by a fictitious competition.

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[26] R.J. Coyle & E. Thorson, "The Effects of Progressive Levels of Interactivity and Vividness in Web Marketing Sites," in *Journal of Advertising* (2001), 30, 65-77.

In the cyberspace, the individual can almost virtually traverse any periphery or site with seemingly infallible capability, without experiencing confinement, while still being perfectly controlled.[27] Taking a cue from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the current capitalist social landscape, "no longer operates by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication."[28] The technical democratization of functions and capacities is counteracted by their atomization, and the bureaucracy appears as the agency guaranteeing their rational course and order.[29] In Marcusean perspective, the need for bureaucratized and calculative coordination of system reinforces mass (capitalist) society. The tension revealed by the Enlightenment project between individual and society, freedom and necessity, science and morality, resolves itself in a dystopia in which freedom, individuality, morality, and community are all but extinguished. [30] The one-dimensional path of realization of the Enlightenment project with its privileging of instrumental rationality prompted Marcuse to believe that science and technology in the current state of things have really become ideological. Despite the accomplishments that they brought to mankind, one must be aware, Marcuse argues:

> That these same achievements are being used to the contrary, namely, to serve the interests of continued domination. The modes of domination have changed: they have become increasingly technological, productive, and even beneficial; consequently, in the most advanced areas of industrial society, the people have been co-ordinated

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[27] In the parlance of critical theory, the numbing of the individual's critical consciousness is immensely abhorrent. Even the so-called freedom that we gain in choosing the internet over the TV is a forged script written by the culture industry. The reality is: instead of being critical about it, we even become paradoxically grateful into it; Gilles Deleuze, "Having an Idea in Cinema," trans. by Eleanor Kaufman, in *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture,* Eleanor Kaufman and Kevin Heller, eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14-19.

[28] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations,* trans. by Martin Joughin (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1995), 174.

[29] Herbert Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Technology," in *The Frankfurt School Reader,* 154.

[30] Ingram, *Critical Theory and Philosophy,* 67.

and reconciled with the system of domination to an unprecedented degree.31

Lastly, the culture industry's overpowering character is a real illusion: "an illusion because these social relations are humanly made and remakeable, yet real because such relations have become petrified"[32] In today's society, the user's animated participation in the playing field of the industry testifies to the premise of social exclusion upon deviation to the socio-cultural productions and patterns processed by advanced capitalism.

2.   A Critical and Historical Re-Reading of Pornography[33]

Early modern pornography overtly depicts women's sexual genealogies. On the other hand, men's sexuality is treated with great indulgence, as if it is an impenetrable realm. Likewise, pornography during this period dissolves its explicitly subversive qualities and converts readying women's bodies available for men's gaze.[34] In other words, this phase of the modern epoch has metamorphosed into a narrative of men gaining pleasures through the glamorous procession of women's bodies.

From its pre-figured structure characterized by a smidgen of criticality and creative sexual expression, pornography develops into a site for patriarchal subjugation. This is aggravated due to techno-scientific advancements that increase its reproductive mobility or capacity. As such, society becomes a witness to the complex clash between mechanical reproduction of pornographic materials and censorship against obscenity. The real issue at hand then transgresses the ethical framework of moral restriction, since pornography in this context cultivates into a regulative

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[31] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, vii.

[32] Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 75.

[33] For this part concerning cyber-pornography and Marcuse's critical theory, I have greatly benefitted from Steve Garlick's essay, "A New Sexual Revolution? Critical Theory, Pornography, and the Internet" in *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 48 (3): 221-239. My utmost thanks to him.

[34] Ibid., 224-225; Cf. Lester Hunt, "Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800" in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 42.

and subjugating hubris operating through the fundamental principle of men's privileged status in history.

Moreover, contemporary pornography acknowledges men in dominion of women and even of themselves. In this vein, it is conceived as a decisive aspect of hu(man) experience—equating male rationality to being in control. The so-called "masculine totem" in cyber-pornography enjoys a sort of privileged transcendence, where man is portrayed as a machine of rational potency. In illustrating women's bodies, an underlying desire to control serves as its capillary strength. The phallic symbol of the erect penis exemplifies male endurance and reign over nature (women's bodies and of nature within). Accordingly, the more female bodies are placed in the open, the more it reinforces the idea that women can only find satisfaction through the presence of men with large and upright penises. Using the gauge of the pleasure principle, the male body is transformed into a compelling mechanism of alienated labor. Consequently, a great wall safeguards its potency from critical challenge, as the female bodies are increasingly subjugated by the symbolic masculine.

When pornography is treated as an isolated problem and not as integrative part of the many social contagions comprising our society, it is as if the body is individuated from the person's totality. Under the modern and contemporary types of disciplinarity, sexuality becomes a focal point of social surveillance and modulation.[35] As argued in the previous paragraph, the experience of sexuality in the cyberspace appears to be very disparate for males and females. In the web, the privilege of one (male) signifies the marginalization of the other (female). The masquerading of women's bodies in the cyberspace is a techno-political predicament hewn from the social inequality circulating in the actual world. Faintly, images of women's bodies are advertised for male totalization. On the other side, men's bodies are not appropriated for the similar activity. The symbolic absence or the minimal existence of the images of their bodies in the web sites is a form of cyber-political injustice. While women's body images may have diversified with the founding of the netporn, that of men's are yet to be placed into the

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[35] Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).

open. This "lack" refers to the significance of preserving gender power-relations as a central domain in the critical analysis of cyber-pornography.[36]

Sexual discourse has progressively integrated itself into the mainstream socio-political fronts of contemporary relations—prompted by the escalation of cyber-technology. As sexual discourses are inevitably assimilated with communication technology (film and video) and advance digital technology, democratization of sexual representation gains predominance in a technologically-configured way, side-by-side with the cultivation of new patterns of social relation and subjugation.

In relation to these contemporary innovations and intricacies, Marcuse's project can be pondered to be more advanced than McLuhan's. The reason is that his cultural project creates a lucid landscape for the interfusion of "sex, technology and capitalist system."[37] In *Eros and Civilization*, he is perceptive on the recognition of the subject of pleasure as a paramount sphere for critique through a praxiological engagement with the works of Freud, accompanied with his considerable frustration with "the absence in Marxism of emphasis on individual liberation and the psychological dimension."[38] In this regard, his early project is generally pondered to have revolutionized Freud and eroticized Marx.[39] In opposition to Freud, Marcuse claims that repression and the surrender of sexual desires are not simply accidental fibers of human civilization. Rather, they are offshoots of the socio-historical organization and configuration of modern capitalism. Marcuse's formulation of surplus

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[36] In feminist epistemology, two wings contest via a stark debate between the critical ones and the pro-sex groups. Although both perspectives are very indispensable for a critical theory of cyber-culture and pornography, it must intricately transcend the chasm between these competing dualism—intersections between gender-relations and sexual expressions are the key components of this complexity. See John Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 20.

[37] Garlick, "A New Sexual Revolution?," 223.

[38] Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 154; Cf. Garlick, "A New Sexual Revolution?," 229.

[39] Jeffrey Ocay, "Eroticizing Marx, Revolutionizing Freud: Marcuse's Psychoanalytic Turn" in *Kritike: An Online Journal in Philosophy*, 3:1 (June 2009), 10-23.

repression is the "result of specific societal condition sustained in the specific interest of domination."[40]

However, the creative combinations of sex, technology and capitalism, must still be complemented by the issue of gender power-relations, specifically, with respect to the portrayal of masculinity in cyber-pornography. Although Marcuse is foremost for his radical analysis of technological rationality's ascendancy and capitalist society's inherent contradictions, he melded his over-all critique with a stern desire for freeing sexuality from the shackles of capitalist patriarchal machinery—the new regulative expression of the Reality principle. His philosophy's contemporary importance then can be perceived from the vantage point of the various processes, participations and exclusions circulating within the cyber-society that are complex ruminations of the dynamics of the actual social world. Therefore, a critical theory of self-organization oriented towards antagonisms and gender injustices can be developed.[41] And from this novel theorization, radical potentialities in emergent forms of self-organization in the cyberspace can possibly be cultivated.

But a caveat must be delineated at this point: Marcuse's philosophy is indispensably significant today with his pensively substantial diagnosis to numerous issues relating to sexuality and cyber-technology, but not directly to the cybersex phenomenon. However, despite having this theoretical lacuna, his work can still render an epistemological blueprint in the form of a rejoinder analysis and political imagination that can condition cybersex and pornography as new spaces of social experience and critique.

3.   Immanent   Resistance   and   the   Possibility   of Emancipation

In the context of cyber-resistance and emancipation, there are intelligibly progressive porn sites in the internet resident to critical rumination and appraisal. Famous example is the "Sensual Liberation Army" (http://www.sensualliberationarmy.com) that juxtaposes pornography and political activism by utilizing the facade of pornography to advance radicalized undertakings.[42] According to Garlick, the web site

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[40] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 87.

[41] Cf. Charles Fuch, *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[42] Cf. Garlick, "A New Sexual Revolution?," 230.

created by the individual with a name of Dr. Menlo, "clearly appears as pornographic in a largely conventional sense. It is visually centered on a series of "teasers"— naked or semi-naked images of women embedded with links to different, largely for-profit, porn sites—which invoke many familiar tropes of the mainstream pornographic imagination."[43]

This ardent project of re-defining cyber-pornography stands steadfast on the underlying belief that sexual emancipation can possibly translate into radical action and social transfiguration. Upon opening the aforesaid web site, sexually-motivated channels will instantaneously welcome the users. After clicking on a particular video, Left-wing political groups along with their socially-relevant platforms and pedagogies will appear, in the likes of resistance against sexuality debasement, gender inequality, capitalist oppression and the like. Others examples include http://www.doctorswithoutborders.com, http://www.masturbateforpeace.com, and http://www.suicidegirls.com. Positively, across these sites, you can find pornography, politics and radicalism being combined, as the spaces of cyber-pornography are ruptured for the affirmative formulation of spaces of critique and emancipation.

The cyberspace as a fortress of virtual transcendence largely motivates the site's authors in disseminating sexual images beyond the conventional schemes of the pornography industry. Subsequently, manifold genres in pornography afford an option to the unyielding rendering of the abusive male figure, passive women, and penetration in the traditional domain. Since the cyberspace already actualizes as an extension of social life, it can be a similar site for the potential restoration of a critical dimension in the pornography industry via an immanent critique. As mankind traverses the pages of history, gender oppression, sexual repression and individual debasement generate their respective internal nemeses. Meaning to say, despite exploitation's extension in the cyber-realm, contemporary pornography gains a political scent and muscle. It has fortified itself due to the internet's net-like and distributed coordinates that capacitate pornography to restore its radical fervor.[44] Thus, the very

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Cf. Ibid., 223-225.

corpus of pornography is chaoticized to convert into a kind of cultural rejoinder contra variegated depictions of conventional societal violence.[45]

The body both for the Marxist and Critical theory traditions serves as a dialectical location for the effects of social structures and as a means for the development of social reproduction and transformation.[46] This runs convergent clearly with Marcuse's perspective pertaining not only to the body's fallibility to suffer domination via techno-capitalist rationality, but more importantly, to its protean potentiality in transforming into a tool for emancipation.[47]

Regarding the repression of sexuality in the current period, Marcuse claims that "the power to restrain and guide instinctual drives, to make biological necessities into individual desires, increases, rather than reducing gratification."[48] In critically evaluating repression, he fashions an allusion to the architectures of power and knowledge that craft a plethora of sexual pleasure expressions, rather than power being manifested to simply negate sexual pleasure. More importantly, for him, "The organization of sexuality reflects the basic features of the performance principle and its organization of society . . . It is especially operative in the 'unification' of the various objects of the partial instincts into one libidinal object of the opposite sex, and in the establishment of genital supremacy."[49]

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[45] Cf. Kevin Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (Lanham: Littlefield, 2007).

[46] The Marxist tradition believes that there exist a dialectical relation between the body and the society. In so far as the former is conceived as a source of society, the latter materially configures the dynamics of the body. Additionally, the body in *Eros and Civilization* is depicted as a differential site operating at the middle (milieu) of the pleasure principle and the performance principle. The pleasure principle identifies instinctually what is real in the current historical situation and "under its rule, society is stratified according to the competitive economic performance of its members" (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 44). Meaning to say, the performance principle prevailing in the advance capitalist society limits the individuals' libidinal bodies by tactically modulating the worker or the student's leisure time, for instance, through the extension of its domineering authority to the area of popular and cyber cultures.

[47] Cf. Garlick, "A New Sexual Revolution?," 227.

[48] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 38.

[49] Ibid., 48.

This analysis pertaining to the materially-configured sexual body informs his perspective on the value of sexual desires and pleasure on the foundation of a new principle. For him, they are pregnant with dynamic forces that would condition the crafting of a cultural horizon where individuals form a symbiosis. In this manner, this notion of interconnectedness is an imperative because the struggle for sexual expression necessitates the fashioning of social relations capable of amplifying human liberation, which is itself a product of collective efforts.

Furthermore, sexual pleasure brings forth the transfiguration of sexuality into *eros* whereby sexual impulses are enhanced by its erotic energy that would "transcend their immediate object and eroticize normally non-erotic and anti-erotic relationships between individuals and between them and their environment."[50] But we must always be cautious regarding the idea that the new Reality principle imperialized by advanced capitalism will always hunt this affirmative event in order to totalize the *eros* by integrating sexuality into leisure, business, politics and propaganda, wherein sexuality gains a specific exchange-value or "becomes a token of prestige and of playing according to the rules of the game, it is itself transformed into an instrument of social cohesion."[51] This affirmatively Marcusean vision passionately aspires for the emergence of supra-individual organizations (social, political and economic), along with a "non-repressive order is possible in the sex instincts can, by virtue of their own dynamics and under changed existential and societal conditions, operate lasting erotic relations among mature individuals."[52] Hence, the erotic goal of preserving the whole body as subject-object of sexual pleasure effectuates its own project of flourishing within the backdrop of the social whole.

On the other hand, the portrait of Marcuse's exploration on gender distinctions, I must admit, is relatively bleak in *Eros and Civilization*. For the critical theorist Douglas Kellner, Marcuse fails to examine the specificity of women's oppression in the said book.[53] However, constructing this shortcoming as an argument pertaining to his repugnance

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[50] Ibid., ix.

[51] Ibid. x.

[52] Ibid., 199.

[53] Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, 191.

to women discourse is apparently doing harm to his philosophy. Instead of exploring specific gender relations, he is more concerned on the repercussion of techno-scientific rationality to the individual, since the relation of man to nature is greatly a part of critical theory's occupation on the status of nature in the contemporary society. Markedly, in order for us to squeeze the concept of gender relation embedded in Marcuse's overall oeuvre is to appropriate the proposition that the forceful ascendancy of modern science and technology is the instrumental foundation of masculinity.

At this point, what makes Marcuse's work very relevant is the fact that he finds a key source of antagonism to the performance principle in the light of *fantasy*.[54] Indeed, pornography appears to be a tranquil domain for people to achieve their fantasies in the real world. Fantasy is a mental activity that links the conscious and unconscious dimensions of life which is repressed by the reality and performance principle especially in relation to sexuality. For him, only one type of thought-activity is detached from the "new organization of the mental apparatus and remains free from the rule of the reality principle: *fantasy* is protected from cultural alterations and stays committed to the pleasure principle."[55] Meaningfully, it is a resistance against the existing faces of subjugation in the contemporary times capacitated of generating possible channels for affirmative energies.

Most pornographic sites proffer differential fantasies that reinforce the existing reality. Fantasy creates a space for the reconciliation of reason and sensuousness that acts as a critique of the pleasure principle's prevalence in life side-by-side with men's panoptical dominion. Though pretty ideal, Marcuse notes that "the relegation of real possibilities to the no-man's land of utopia is still an essential element of the ideology of the performance principle.[56] More importantly, fantasy's aesthetic potency enables us to remember our primal state of instinctual liberation in the past. It empowers us to recall past phases of individual realization under the condition of critical and a non-repressive existence be it in social relations or sexual representations—a forgotten image of emancipation buried in the grave of history.

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[54] Garlick, "A New Sexual Revolution?," 235.

[55] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 14.

[56] Ibid., 150.

A differentiation of fantasy stands on the unfaltering quest for new individuals who would promote and celebrate the gratification of the senses without instigating violence to humanity, as well as would exuberantly free the body from the oppressive hooks of the pleasure principle and advanced capitalism. This novel philosophical perspective would in turn transfigure the body to become an authentic vehicle for a collective antagonism against material and cyber-exploitations in pursuit of societal transformation.

Conclusion

The sexually gratifying and impersonalizing attributes of cybersex brand the user a certain form of optimism in transcending social strictures while engaging into a virtual relationship. From the debasement of the person to repugnance to genuine community relation, cybersex causes personal and social degeneration of values. Albeit peculiarly problematic, the anonymity aptitude available in the cyberspace can also become a space of antagonism especially for women. It can serve as a virtual site where they can empower themselves to liberate from social inequality and techno-capitalist one-dimensionality. Nevertheless, we must be incessantly vigilant since this so-called power of anonymity or freedom accessible from the cyberspace always has the propensity of simply turning into a ploy used by the capitalist patriarchy for further domination.

Further, providing an utter evaluation of the cybersex phenomenon would inevitably result to conservative moral criticisms and would isolate it from its interfusion with the larger domains of human sexuality, cyber-technology and advanced capitalism. If the progress of technological rationality fills our social experience with array of contingencies and makes oppression more subtle, then technology itself must be transfigured in a way that it can be used to examine the internal contradictions within the capitalist system itself and unleash human potentialities without clinging to an identitarian or totalitarian *telos*.

Lastly, the entire paper outlines two points that are worth reflecting upon. Firstly, a utopian treatment of the problems of contemporary of society is already next to impossibility. It is because giving ready-to-hand solutions to these predicaments would defeat the very core of critical theory as a philosophy of immanent critique or molecular resistance, as well as would possibly re-introduce another source of techno-social subjugations. Secondly, the 1st generation critical theory tradition is

inadequate in rendering a complete diagnosis of cybersex, sexuality, gender-relations and capitalism. This diminutive shortcoming would prompt us to open the doors of other waves of the critical theory tradition such as that of Jurgen Habermas (2nd generation) with his *Theory of Communicative Action* and of Axel Honneth (3rd generation) with his *Ethics of Recognition*.

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