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FOUCAULT, EXHIBITIONISM AND VOYEURISM ON CHATROULETTE

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Abstract. Sexuality, understood as a Foucauldian discourse that expresses itself through our passions and pursuits and contributes massively to our socially-constructed identity formation, has from the outset been a major factor in the growth of the internet. As the ultimate look-but-don't-touch medium, the computer screen has offered us a pornographic emporium in the privacy of our homes, fed first by the producers of material in the standard broadcast mode, then more and more by ourselves, to each other, in the social media context of online sexual social networking. The recent shift of sexual video material from broadcast to social media mode highlights the fundamental exhibitionism/voyeurism dyad at the core of all this activity, and finds its most impersonal, anonymous apotheosis in the phenomenon that is ChatRoulette, where visual discourse-objects are deployed in a nexus of online sexual power relations.

1. Introduction

Much of interest has been written in recent years around the subject of pornography on the internet, and sexual identity formation in the context of internet dating. As Waskul (2004) reminds us, the first mass-produced low-cost Polaroid camera was called 'The Swinger', mapping directly onto the 70s phenomenon whereby the twins "instant photography and instant pornography" (Edgley and Kiser 1981:59) were born. Video, camcorders, the computer screen, scanners, and the internet all followed in quick succession, but the essence of what the Swinger Polaroid represented remains true to this day: a shift of control of the production of pornography from the broadcast mode of producers creating for consumption, to the distributed mode of individuals creating their own material to share amongst each other, instantly. This shift itself is emblematic of a great many changes in twenty-first century western societies, including whereby news production by the major newspapers and networks is seen to be shifting gradually to the blogosphere and to social networks like Twitter; whereby the traditional format of the television, once the exclusive locus of broadcast entertainment, is shifting to a mixed platform of broadcast and broadband, with video material increasingly available for hand-held mobile devices, too. This paper highlights how these changes perhaps owe their origins to that same shift occurring in the production and consumption of pornography.

The impact of the internet upon the construction of sexual identities, moreover, has been the focus of early studies in the text-based world of online discussion forums, such as Atkinson & DePalma 2008; van Doorn 2008; Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008; and Kelly 2006. These studies have revealed lines of power relations between participants within such spaces, and relative freedoms from the power relations in the offline/real world, but also that the body, although graphically absent, is not any less present. Studies have even suggested that time spent online for sexual purposes can increase that spent offline, as well (Daneback et al 2006), and that time spent online can often be a concealed and secret exploration of sexual behaviour and sexual roleplay that falls –outside the confines of the heterosexual _norm“” (DiMarco, 2003).

This paper concerns itself with sexuality, and most specifically, the performance of the discourse of sexuality. It posits that the proliferation of sexual discourse and sexualities over the last two centuries outlined by Foucault (1990; 1992; 1998) continues apace in the Information Age, if anything accelerated and broadened to a wider public by the phenomenon of internet pornography – in both broadcast and social media modes.

This is of course a very large topic to which a conference paper such as this cannot do true justice, so the aim of this paper, more narrowly, is to introduce the relevant ideas of Foucault on the nature of sexuality, to explore briefly the nature of exhibitionism and voyeurism from a psychoanalytical – and Foucauldian – perspective, and then to apply these understandings briefly to some thoughts about the website, ChatRoulette.com, a site which generates one-on-one Webcam connections between each visitor and another randomly chosen user.

2. The *Scientia Sexualis*

This paper aligns itself with Foucault’s notion of political technologies of the body, and the progressive disciplinisation of the self over the last few centuries. His work on the creation of our concepts of sanity through the creation of the medical discipline of mental health (Foucault 1995); the creation of our concepts of good citizenship through the creation of the prison system (Foucault 1977); and the creation of a range of sexual character types and whole modes of desire in recent centuries (Foucault 1990; 1992; 1998), collectively provide an extraordinary insight into how social technologies of organisation, power and control have progressively shaped not just our lives but our bodies themselves, our self-concept, the individual performances of who we are. Foucault, then, outlines the map of contemporary social roles from our own subset of which we are able to select who we will be in any given situation. This map derives from the social environment of control where power and knowledge are intertwined and focused upon the human body as the object of their interplay. The human body is exposed as object and target of power in the modern era. –It is manipulated, shaped, trained, [it] obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces.... [it is] constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital, for controlling or correcting the operations of the body.” (Foucault 1977:136).

Foucault's contention, in his three-volume *History of Sexuality* (1990; 1992; 1998) is that sexuality is discourse. For Foucault the commonly held view that sexuality is something that we have "repressed" does not ring true. By contrast, he argues what appears as a "repression" of sexual drives is a huge increase in the discussion of sex, a proliferation of the discourse of sex, that has formed, defined, categorized, delineated, and constituted a concept - 'sexuality' - and that this concept has become a core feature of our identities. Foucault's concern, in the first volume, *The Will to Power*, (Foucault 1998) focuses around the nature - and sexual content - of 'confession,' first in its Christian context, through the evolution of its use in Christian theology and political influence, and then latterly to its translation into a 'scientific' form, the 'consultation' on the sexologist's, in the 19th century, and then in the 20th century the psychoanalyst's couch. These changes together constituted what Foucault describes as the "scientia sexualis" (Foucault 1998:67) - sexuality as discourse. This *scientia sexualis*, moreover, acts in concert with the interplay of all the other forces in the power-knowledge network described in Foucault's other works, becoming one of the many political technologies controlling, constituting, directing, and producing the human body in contemporary society.

It is clear that this sexual discourse, once perhaps more the domain of the learned and of the professional classes - the priest, sexologist, or psychoanalyst - has with the phenomenon of the World Wide Web, and especially of Web 2.0, become the domain of all. Understanding today's online social networks, and especially the internet dating sites that have proliferated in recent years, from this Foucauldian perspective, we can see that the discourse of sexuality is everywhere. There is a great range of different kinds of internet dating websites for a panoply of different tastes, where discussion, connection, and the sharing and exchange of confessional photographs and videos can be undertaken, all at the touch of a button for today's computer user.

3. Exhibitionism/Voyeurism and Sex on the Internet

It is truly not that long ago that spending large amounts of time in front of a computer screen was regarded as the behaviour of a young adolescent male, devoid of social skills. Now, more and more of us are attached to our screens much of the time, at work and at home - and increasingly to our mobile screens on our journeys in between. This activity is increasingly seen not only as socially acceptable and a 'cool' thing to do, but crucial to our economic well-being. The geekishness of the 1980s has in a sense taken over as normal activity, no longer viewed as the behaviour of a social misfit lacking in social skills, it is the social interaction mediated by the computer that has become the norm: social interaction has thus been subtly shifted from the control of the individuals involved to a shared control with the computer networks that now mediate it - a classic Foucauldian transformation that increases disciplinary power. The bodies of those using these online social networks, moreover, are the nexus of intense power relations, required to perform a myriad technical duties in a multi-tasking environment that has them pinned - literally - rooted to the spot, physically immobile sat in front of the screen. Whether that screen is a large fixed unit on a desk or a small portable unit on a mobile phone, the eyes, concentration and focus of the user of online social networks are

captured by the screen for the tasks associated with networking, while other tasks such as making coffee to drink at one's desk, or undertaking a journey on a train or bus, become secondary to the focus upon what is happening on the screen. Small wonder then that the sexualities of these disciplined bodies have migrated to the screen as well.

Many internet dating sites include private photos that can be shared once conversation begins. Some even dispense with this level of modesty. Naked pictures, often of individuals in a state of arousal, have been commonplace since the outset. The inclusion of video in internet dating profiles, however, is a relatively recent but very important development, and as camera technology has become more readily available – in our mobile internet devices, and other high-tech hand-held gadgets such as the Flip – the old tradition of the saucy Polaroid snap has grown into what is now hard to distinguish from professional pornography. In classic pornography, both the traditional cinema version and the more recent online version, the ‘ordinary’ individual gazes upon the (inaccessible – or at least costly) ‘extraordinary’ – the fit, classically good looking porn star. Video sharing is different. In this case it is the ‘ordinary’ displaying themselves to each other, as if at once both claiming to be ‘extraordinary’, and glorying in the accessibility of their ordinariness – if you like the video you can write to the individual and try to arrange a meeting. Some are simply mobile-phone videos, grainy and not well shot, but others are carefully edited, with accompanying music, perhaps shot with expensive home video cameras, even by second or third parties who do not themselves appear in the video. These latter videos represent perhaps the individual’s ‘perceptions of what are known as their hoped-for possible selves’ (Yurchisin 2005:737) – a reference to the potential for online ‘role-play’.

This phenomenon of posting revealing pictures and videos of oneself in internet sites, places where we go to view the pictures and videos posted there by others, clearly has impact upon our understanding of the nature of contemporary sexuality. In the discourse amongst the psychological/psychoanalytical profession regarding sexual problems in society, exhibitionism and voyeurism, two of the categories that the ongoing discourse of sexuality has identified, are defined and viewed quite differently. Both are regarded as quite normal aspects of human sexuality up to a point, beyond which they become an issue: a paraphilia.

Exhibitionism, as a paraphilia, has been defined by psychoanalysts as ‘recurrent, intense sexual urges and sexually arousing fantasies...involving the exposure of one’s genitals to a stranger’ (Spitzer, 1987:287). Historically, this kind of behaviour has represented some 30% of the anti-social sexual behaviour appearing in the legal system in the US (Cox 1988:227) and has clearly been a very serious problem. The psychoanalytical profession has long regarded such behaviour – particularly the implied violence contained within it – as an ‘attempt to alleviate tensions surrounding early psychic anxieties,’ (Piemont 2007:79), and although as a ‘non-contact’ crime, exhibitionism’s ‘psychological impact on women and children can be minimized—... it is a threatening act suggesting that the perpetrator intends a progression of his sexually aggressive behaviour and indicating a dangerous incapacity to control impulses.’ (Piemont 2007:79)

Voyeurism, by contrast, although certain voyeuristic fantasies, urges and behaviour patterns are classified as a paraphilia (Spitzer 1987), is more generally regarded as typical, and sexual arousal simply by seeing nudity or sexual activity unremarkable, and

normal. The voyeur suffering from paraphilia fetishizes upon observing unsuspecting people naked, and –often has the fantasy of taking part in a sexual experience with the observed person, but rarely seeks this outcome,” (Spitzer, 1987)

The principle at issue here, of course, in both cases, and the dividing line between what the psychoanalytical profession regard as normal and abnormal sexual behaviour, is the issue of consent. Exhibiting one’s genitalia to those who are consenting in such exposure, and enjoying looking at such an exhibition, are contrasted with such exhibition and looking where the viewer or viewed, respectively, are not consenting in the exposure.

With the advent of sexual social networking on the Internet (Waskul 2004; Light 2007, Light et al. 2008; Kreps 2009), the consenting exhibition of one’s genitalia has found a safe outlet, and arguably more social acceptability and even normalization: somehow the mediation of the computer screen, the distance implied in the telecommunications link, allows us to feel easier about exposing pictures and videos of ourselves for strangers to look at. Importantly, in the sexual social networking context, all those strangers, by logging into their own accounts on the website, have by default given their consent to view such exhibition, and indeed are there specifically to satisfy their voyeuristic – and/or their own exhibitionist - impulses.

In Foucauldian terms, as outlined above, the discourse of sexuality through the use of telecommunications and the exchange of visual information about ourselves has devolved from the psychoanalytical profession to ordinary people. The confessional manner in which young people take photographs and videos of their bodies in masturbatory or coital scenes and post these images and videos on their internet profiles, parading themselves to one another, is more than simply self-advertising in the hope of ‘scoring’ sexual partners. There is, at least in some cases (Kreps 2009) a competitive sexual exhibitionism apparent. Much of this activity is more to do with communication about sex – albeit that that communication is visual rather than oral or textual – than it is about sex itself. As Nakamura (2008) has described, digital images are as open to interpretation as Foucauldian visual –discourse-objects” (Foucault 1995:140) as are vocal and written statements. This, then, is video-discourse - a *scientia sexualis videre* – in which the exchange of imagery online becomes a confessional sexual activity in its own right, quite apart from the physical meetings that may or may not be arranged through the website.

The discourse outlined by Foucault between sexologists and psychoanalysts, around the judicial and penal response to and the medical definitions and treatments of the multiplicity of sexualities which were ‘discovered’ in the nineteenth century, relied heavily upon the ‘confessions’ of the subject – either patient or felon. Arguably, through the medium of online sexual social networking, such ‘confessions’ have really now become performances by subjects, performances that bypass the professionals and the broadcasters in order to perform directly to one another, and undertake the discourse of sexuality through the mediation of the computer, rather than the sex professional. Thus, Foucault’s argument that the *scientia sexualis* was also an *ars erotica* in its own right, a –pleasure in the truth of pleasure” (Foucault 1998:70), is perhaps borne out by these activities.

One image of the significance of the shift from broadcast to socialmedia mode in the history of consenting exhibitionism/voyeurism, or ‘co-pornography’, is a re-

imagining of Foucault's Panopticon as a Synopticon. (Vannini 2004) It was Jeremy Bentham who first conceived of a structure with a high central tower, housing guards who could overlook and see into every cell in the surrounding torus-like prison complex, and called it a Panopticon. The prisoner, for Foucault, is controlled by the gaze of the guard in the central tower, and the whole structure becomes, for Foucault, an image for society under the yoke of political technologies of the body (Foucault 1977). Vannini's re-imagining of this structure – the Synopticon – has the gaze of the guards shifted to lights and surveillance cameras, and those cameras themselves turned variously back onto the guards: prisoners and guards alike now come under the electronic gaze, all of them exhibiting themselves and enjoying the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing each other in exposed sexual positions. The one-way control of producer/consumer and of guard/prisoner, has become a shared slavery to the scopophilic urge. (Vannini 2004)

4. ChatRoulette

The internet, however, is always full of surprises, and there seems always to be something new just around the corner. The latest social media phenomenon, the website ChatRoulette.com, generates one-on-one Webcam connections between each visitor and another randomly chosen user. The site was created in November 2009 by a Russian 17 year old, Andrey Ternovskiy, who said of it, in a New York Times interview, “I myself enjoyed talking to friends with Skype using a microphone and webcam. But we got tired of talking to each other eventually. So I decided to create a little site for me and my friends where we could connect randomly with other people.” (Stone 2010)

As the New York Times says of it, the site is “intensely addictive—one of those gloriously simple ideas that manages to harness the crazy power of the Internet in a potentially revolutionary way.” (Anderson 2010) Experiencing the site, one is immediately confronted with the sheer ephemerality of the connections that are made. The vast majority of people simply click ‘Next’ within seconds of seeing your webcam picture appear in their browser. Indeed, for many of the pictures that appear, this is precisely one’s own reaction. Yet even when those seconds stretch into minutes, and a text-based or sound-enabled conversation takes place, it is clear within moments that this is to be a random, once-only meeting, and not likely to last very long. In this sense there is an anonymous and bite-size quality to these meetings that is somehow similar to the experience of a hashtag search on twitter – each tweet a brief snapshot of a thought from an anonymous tweeter somewhere in the world. But with Twitter one can look at the page of the Tweeter, explore more background on the web, find out more about the person, follow all of their Tweets from now on. With ChatRoulette, for all that the ‘tweet’ comes with the full richness of sound and video in computer mediated face-to-face communication, unless there is a direct willingness to exchange contact details, the moment will remain forever anonymous. If in its early days when barely hundreds of people were using the service it was possible to get the same person twice, as more and more people use the site for random meetings that likelihood becomes slimmer and slimmer. But as Anderson tells us: “Meeting a new person is thrilling, in a primal way—your attention focuses completely, if only for a nanosecond, to see if the creature in front

of you has the power to change your life for better or worse. ChatRoulette creates this moment over and over again; it privileges it over actual conversation.” (Anderson 2010)

In the experience of the author of this paper, any session is likely to include a mixture of immediate ‘_Next’s’ – the result of the vast majority of connections – interspersed with a handful of fascinating, brief meetings and conversations. In one session, in February 2010, by which time there were upwards of 20,000 regular users of the site, I chatted with a French teenager playing live electronic music on a keyboard in Paris, and a middle-aged man eating noodles in a café in Szechuan. I also saw a strangely still mug-shot of a classically beautiful Far-Eastern woman, and – very briefly as my finger reached for the ‘_Next’ button – a close-up of a naked man masturbating. This latter is emblematic of the early use of the site. As Anderson notes, “One man popped up on people’s screens in the act of fornicating with a head of lettuce. Others dressed like ninjas, tried to persuade women to expose themselves,” (Anderson 2010). In short, as Stone recommends: “Let’s put it this way: Parents, keep your children far, far away.” (Stone 2010) The experience will be, for many, as described by Tossell, “Naked guy. Click. Naked guy.” (Tossell 2010). All the press attention given to the site during its moment of recognition, in February 2010, has concluded that ChatRoulette is NSFW – Not Safe For Work.

The completely open nature of ChatRoulette grants it some of the wildness and frontier cache of the early internet. ChatRoulette is the most raw and unfiltered form of social media possible. As Ingram points out, “The addition of video brings out the exhibitionist tendencies in some people and the voyeuristic tendencies in others, and ChatRoulette subjects its users to plenty of both.” (Ingram 2010). Venture Capital is, at the time of writing, already intensely interested, (Ingram 2010) but there will need to be some changes, first. Filters will need to be applied, enabling people to choose, based on age, interest, language, location, what kind of random connections are made.

Why? Because the issue of consent, so crucial to the above discussion of exhibitionism and voyeurism, is here of absolute importance and significance. In the open, wild, unfiltered version of ChatRoulette, exhibitionists can thrill at the prospect of displaying themselves to those who have not consented to the experience. The technology, indeed, almost encourages it. Issues of power are foregrounded in this context: the power to display without consent, the resistance in the ability to click ‘_Next’ and escape – both inherent parts of the unfiltered technology. A dominant masculine hegemony in sexual expression, inherent in exhibitionism, is given free rein. Yet above all, the discursive practice of sexuality, rather than its visceral referent, is uppermost in this unfiltered masquerade where anonymous men display video-ed imagery of their tumescent genitals to the unsuspecting – or expectant – viewers. Without such filters, then, the future for ChatRoulette is clear – it will be gradually taken over by exhibitionists and voyeurs, and eventually no-one else will use it.

ChatRoulette, then, represents a discourse of depersonalized sexuality, with no interest in establishing contact towards a physical meeting for actual sexual activity, as is putatively the case in sexual social networking (regardless of whether such connections actually occur.) This is a discourse of depersonalized sexuality with – arguably – zero actual, visceral sexual *contact*, albeit the sexual *content* is plain. In this sense, ChatRoulette presents us with a video based Foucauldian discourse of sexuality, a *scientia sexualis videre*, par excellence, floating entirely free from such visceral and

bodily exchange as is usually associated with sexual activity, and devoted entirely to a visual communication *about* sex, with live streaming video discourse-objects. In this sense the exhibitionist on ChatRoulette is deploying a form of almost exclusively discursive sexuality. As a discourse-object, live-streaming video presents a very unusual Foucauldian statement, to be sure. The live video imagery of a masturbating man in a three-inch square window on ChatRoulette is a sexual speech act in the specific context of exhibitionism lacking consent, and thus additionally a statement, exerting power across broadband infrastructures. The unwitting viewer is disempowered – losing their choice NOT to view pornographic material. The exhibitionist is empowered, making their statement performatively before the safety of the webcam. Their power over the consent of others is enacted in the moment they are connected across the network, and sealed in the moment that connection clicks ‘_Next’ in disgust. Thus the nexus of power relations between exhibitionist and viewer gradually becomes the primary field within which ChatRoulette operates, until it is either filtered, or becomes exclusively populated by exhibitionists and voyeurs. Arguably, at this point, it may indeed lose its allure even for these people, once the element of empowerment and disempowerment is lost.

5. Conclusion

Sexuality, understood as a Foucauldian discourse that expresses itself through our passions and pursuits and contributes massively to our socially-constructed identity formation, continues, clearly, to be a major factor in the growth of the internet. Sexual social networks and internet dating sites are emblematic of the recent shift of sexual video material from broadcast to social media mode, and the fundamental exhibitionism/voyeurism dyad displayed in such sites finds its apotheosis in ChatRoulette.

Video sharing in online sexual social networking and on ChatRoulette, moreover, proves to be illustrative of Foucault’s concepts of sexuality as discourse. The disciplined body, glued to the screen, exhibiting itself in the act of masturbation, turns out to be the ultimate ‘_non-contact’ reduction of the visceral act of sex to a conversational, visual discourse-object communication with its corresponding voyeur. Conceiving sexuality as discourse moreover, offers us the possibility, particularly in relation to the all-important notion of consent in matters pertaining to sexual activity, to extend the penal controls deriving from what we consider right and wrong in society into the code – the filtering – of our online sexual social networks. In this way the architecture of our virtual social spaces can incorporate the powers of social construction and control, as well as panoptic surveillance of our activities, rendering Foucault’s political technologies of the body all the more openly apparent in our information society.

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