

# Book Reviews

## Breakout: Cyberporn, Privacy and Reality-effects

*Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age.*

by Frederick S. Lane III.

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'Of the \$10 billion sex industry, it's not ten perverts spending \$1 billion a year'—Nadine Strossen, former president of the American Civil Liberties Union and author of *Defending Pornography*.

The first daguerreotype of a nude was taken less than two years after the French government announced Daguerre's invention. The first public photography gallery, opened in Paris in 1841, specialised in so-called 'academy studies' or 'Academies'—nude photographs ostensibly designed for art students but sold as pornography. Within a year of the first public screening of a movie by the Lumière brothers in 1895, blue movies were being produced in France and Germany and distributed internationally. It was the pornography industry that popularised the video cassette recorder in the 1980s (North Americans alone now rent around \$5 billion-worth of 'adult' videos a year). Pornography drove the development of the BBS (bulletin board system) and scanner-manufacturing industries in the 1990s. And it is reputedly to pornographers that we really owe the amenity of on-line shopping. The U.S.-based cyberporn industry grosses between \$1 billion and \$2 billion a year, and by demonstrating the Internet's potential as an advertising medium and storefront, testing consumer confidence in on-line credit card-purchases, and pioneering on-line sales techniques such as monthly site fees, the provision of free material as a lure to

site visitors, and the concept of 'upselling'<sup>1</sup>, the e-porn industry proved the Internet a viable place for commerce, greasing the rails for businesses like Amazon.com.

The *Kama Sutra* couplings of the pornography and communications-technology industries would take more than a sexologist to unravel, but today's cybersex entrepreneurs earn immense profits for too many 'legitimate', collateral industries and agents—from phone companies and ISPs to manufacturers of VCR's, PC's, modems, filter programmes, camcorders, scanners and colour printers—for any Western government to be seriously willing, still less able, to put the pornographers out of business. (Even when the illiberal Howard government in Australia earned the sobriquet of 'global village idiot' last year for implementing patently ineffectual, because national, Internet-censorship laws, it was only addressing the hard-core end of the pornographic spectrum.) Meanwhile, the interest of establishment broadsheets like the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* in monitoring the potential of e-commerce by tracking the fortunes of pornographic sites and services—undisputed as the one indefinitely-sustainable dotcom enterprise, in which even major mutual funds have begun investing—has contributed to the 'businessification' of public discourse on pornography in the West, its assessment and analysis as business, industry, investment and return, rather than its judgement simply by moral or religious standards.

Vermont lawyer and computer consultant, Frederick S. Lane III's *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age* looks on these developments with approval, as might be expected of a book originally subtitled 'Becoming a Pornographer in the 21st Century'. Lane's book (itself apparently composed largely of Web downloads) set out to profile and assess the different business models, pricing schemes, Website styles, prosecution-risks and income-generating potential of e-porn enterprises before being converted into a Routledge 'quickie' with academic Cultural Studies pretensions. (The 'How-To' pitch of the book crystallises in Lane's advice to American entrepreneurs that the safest kind of Website business with which to enter the lucrative e-porn trade is a 'link site', which provides directories, reviews of, and links to, Websites offering 'picture galleries'—safest because such sites consist mainly of text and the US judicial system has accorded the highest level of First-Amendment protection to words.) Inexcusably, given his subject matter, Lane is one of those American writers for whom the world seems to be coextensive with the United States (it takes a non-American reader a while to adjust to the unacknowledged fact that all the statistics Lane quotes—on industry revenues, Internet site numbers, computer-owning households—refer only to the U.S. scene, not to the Web's wide world); and he suggests that the best news in recent years for cybersex entrepreneurs was, paradoxically, the American public's limited appetite for

<sup>1</sup> 'Upselling' the the selling of related services to people once they have joined a Web site.

the lurid details of Clinton's Oval Office trysts as reported to Congress by Ken Starr. Contrary to the expectations of conservative columnists and impeachment-bent Republicans, public indignation over 'Monicagate' ended up focusing on the impropriety of the exposé rather than the presidential self-exposure, and the nation showed a surprising willingness to distinguish between its President's public performance (of which it strongly approved) and his private life (of which it strongly disapproved but wished to hear nothing further). Lane's reviews of the recent history of U.S. obscenity law suggest that he is no friend of the censorship that can trim the 'obscene profits' of pornographers: what citizens choose to read, view or talk about in their private lives (or do in their oval offices) is their own and not their government's or neighbours' affair. If Lane's data-cluttered book offers an ethical perspective on the cyber-sex industry, it is a classical liberal perspective that treats the bourgeois dichotomy between public and private life as a given; identifies sexuality with the private sphere; interprets liberty as freedom from state interference in one's private life; and equates the constitutional right to 'freedom of expression' with the uninhibited exercise of consumer choice in a free market of cultural goods and services (no matter that neither markets nor 'self-expression' are ever, anywhere, really free).

There are many ways to challenge the liberal invocation of the public/private dichotomy in arguments against censorship. What is interesting about Lane's handling of the dichotomy, however, is that while he celebrates the Internet for the increased privacy it affords to browsers and buyers of pornography (thus massively expanding the market, and hence profits, for pornographers), his book provides evidence of how, 'in the cyber age', the privacy or secrecy with which pornography-consumption was traditionally associated is fast displacing sex itself and becoming the new pornographic commodity. As the mass-mediated public sphere becomes increasingly saturated with explicit images of sex (whether on freeway billboards, in magazine fashion shoots, car ads, music videos, or prime-time television series like *Sex and the City*), the new pornography becomes privacy itself, with or without sexual content.

How so? If *Obscene Profits* offered anything resembling a 'progressive' thesis, it would go something like this. Market forces are the best guarantor of personal liberty, and a free market in pornography is one means to sexual 'liberation'—or the liberalisation of sexual culture—in the form of increased visibility, public recognition and acceptance of 'marginal' sexualities. Consider how market forces operated in the U.S. pornography industry before the advent of the Internet. The gradual rise of sexual content in the national news and entertainment media from the Roaring Twenties onwards, culminating in the bourgeois acceptance of mass-circulation magazines like *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan*, made it difficult for individuals to become sexual entrepreneurs, unable as they were to compete with the economies of scale available to the large manufacturers and distributors. To keep a

foothold in the market, therefore, individuals and small businesses had to specialise in ever more marginal and taboo pornographies—the niche-markets of the 'perversions'—and the consequent multiplication of the varieties of sexuality on display, the stretching of the boundaries of the pornographically visible, in turn influenced 'community attitudes' and led to an expansion of the parameters of 'normal' sexuality. (Thus the erstwhile 'perversions' of oral and anal intercourse have become increasingly accepted as part of the 'normal' repertoire of heterosexuality, while polymorphous perversity in general has stepped out of the psychoanalytic closet straight onto the catwalk.) A free market in cyberporn can only accelerate this liberalising process—in two main ways.

One of Lane's themes is that the Internet is not only an ideal medium for the advertising and selling of pornography (being a purely verbal and pictorial commodity, it can be reproduced and distributed digitally) but that the Internet as a market-place offers a comparatively level playing field, in which self-funded individuals can compete on almost equal terms with large corporations. He points out that an individual with a single home page can publish several hundreds more sexually explicit photographs for a world-wide audience in one afternoon than can be found in a month's issues of *Penthouse* and *Hustler* combined. The economies of scale of the mass-circulation magazines no longer apply. The Internet's intrinsic limitations on display space—the viewer's monitor—mean that large companies have no edge by virtue of bigger buildings, more shelf space, or sports stadiums emblazoned with their corporate logos. All Web addresses are equal; location no longer matters; there are no property taxes, no rent or mortgage, no city licenses to purchase, and no 'bad' or hard-to-reach parts of town: Web surfers can visit a personal home page as easily as an on-line megastore. All this, in Lane's view, radically increases the opportunities for individuals, including the sexually individualistic, to represent themselves in the market-place of sexual imagery. *Obscene Profits* recounts the 'success stories' of several individuals who have turned themselves from humble wage-labourers into multi-millionaire pornographers by publishing sexually explicit photographs of themselves on their Web sites—some claiming to have been inspired simply by a desire to counter the stereotypes of mainstream masculinist pornography. So it would appear that Walter Benjamin's vision of the democratising potential of the daily press as a medium in which any reader might become a writer, any consumer a producer, is being realised in the so-called 'pornutopia' of the Internet, where any owner of a camcorder, laptop and modem can, as Benjamin put it, 'gain access to authorship' and assert 'modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced' (Benjamin 1969:232)<sup>2</sup>. Such, at least, is the

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin [1936]1969. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Arendt, Hannah (ed): *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.

theory. (In practice, the logic of monopoly grips the cybersex industry as firmly as it still does the daily press. The structure of the industry is pyramidal. Virtually every 'adult' site, whether operated by an individual with a single home page or a company with thousands of domains, is connected in a traffic-sharing vortex in which the smaller portal sites redirect potential customers to 'pay sites' operated by big companies with large picture libraries, in return for commission on any sales that may result from this redirected traffic. Meanwhile, the larger companies are fast swallowing the smaller in their bid to top the pyramid<sup>3</sup>.)

Equal or, at least, easy access for individuals to the Net-porn market guarantees diversity of content, in Lane's account, and the range of sexual materials available on-line more accurately reflects the population's sexual preferences and interests than do the mainstream commercial entertainment media. (He suggests, for example, that one of the niche-markets 'left open' by the endemic ageism and sexism of Hollywood, with its 'May-and-December' castings pandering to the fantasy of 20-something women falling for 50-something men, is the so-called 'Mature Woman 40+' sites, such as SeniorS EXposé.) And the corollary of 'equal opportunity' for individuals to display their distinctive tastes, fetishes and fantasies in the e-porn market-place is the opportunity for otherwise isolated individuals to recognise their sexual likenesses in the self-representations of others. Lane reports that 'One organization that has been particularly successful at helping people realize that there are others out there like them is *People Exchanging Power* (P.E.P.), a dominant/submissive support group founded by Nancy Ava Miller in Albuquerque, Mexico, in 1986' (161). Miller reportedly had no intention of starting a business but turned her support group into a phone-sex and on-line dating company when she found herself short of ready cash.

Ironically, the sheer number and variety of the pornographies now going shamelessly public on the Internet has spawned an on-line market for—if not quite privacy—then at least what might be called the 'privacy-effect'. The privacy-effect is close kin to the reality-effect, which has become the staple commodity of prime-time television entertainment for a generation of media-saturated and media-cynical viewers who turn to the amateurism of 'Real TV' for the reality-fixes that now, paradoxically, constitute 'escapist' entertainment. Consumer demand for reality- and privacy-effects has spawned numerous sub-genres of free-to-air VTV (voyeur television), ranging from broadcast compilations of security-camera, speed-camera and police-video footage to big-budget productions like 'Survivor' and 'Big

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the MSNBC Web site reports that when the public company New Frontier Media recently bought out the cyberporn firm Interactive Gallery, it acquired more than 1,300 adult-related Internet domains that funnel traffic to 27 e-commerce sites selling pornographic photos and videos.

Brother'—the last functioning to reconcile and cathect mass audiences to a life of total surveillance by all the postmodern 'little brothers' (CCTV systems, personal phone-call and email monitoring by employers, credit card-tracking devices, DNA-print databanks etc.) and to teach us that the most exciting sex to be had is not secret sex but sex performed before an audience of millions. But the technology that caters most convincingly to the voyeuristic appetite for privacy-effects and reality-fixes is the Web camera, with which individuals can publish the most intimate moments of their lives to a global public, 24 hours a day. Planted in the bedroom and livingroom, taking images at set intervals, digitally compressing them so they can be instantly uploaded to an Internet server, Web cams hold the promise of extending the Warholian 15 minutes of fame to a life-time. As Lane suggests: 'Web cams are the quintessential medium for persuading consumers that they are paying for the privilege of viewing someone's private activities'—regardless of the fact that the operators are usually giving up their privacy both willingly and for a price (255). A typical example is the AmateurCam Network, a site featuring 17 individual Web cams whose operators (17 women) run them from their homes, charging subscription fees to viewers who want their images refreshed every 60 seconds, and generally promising to appear in lingerie or nude at specific times of the day or night. Even more titillating for the privacy-effect addict are 'secretary cams', planted under the desks of unsuspecting secretaries by their droll colleagues. While most sexually explicit Web cam sites advertise themselves as 'amateur', however, many amateur sites offer little or no nudity or sex—without, apparently, losing their market appeal. On the contrary. Consider the case of Jennifer Ringley, who accidentally discovered a way to get people to pay to watch her sleep. Inspired by 'Fishbowl Cam,' a famous cam-site featuring regularly updated images of someone's office fish tank, Ringley started JenniCAM in 1996 when she was a college student, as an experiment in living in a human fish bowl, initially restricting access to her home-based Web cam images to a small circle of friends. It proved popular, she went public, and her site was soon receiving half-a-million hits a day. After working briefly as a freelance Web page designer, Ringley now lives on, and apparently for, the subscription fees she charges viewers to receive quick upgrades of her broadcasts from the two camcorders set up in her apartment. (Peter Weir reportedly became an obsessive viewer of JenniCAM and sent Ringley anonymous emails during the shooting of *The Truman Show*.) Lane comments: 'What makes JenniCAM so compelling, apparently, is the sheer normalcy of the images'. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, 'mainly it's real life, which means endless phone calls, sessions at the computer and plodding hours when Jenni is asleep' (253). JenniCAM's popularity spawned numerous imitations, and that the appeal of such sites is the reality- or privacy-effect of 'sheer' 'plodding' 'normalcy' seems borne out by the fact that even a parody of JenniCAM—WesCAM, with which Web site designer Wes Denaro broadcasts nothing more than shots of himself sitting

in his cubicle at work—keeps attracting more than 5,000 visitors a day.

In a *mise-en-abîme* characteristic of cyberspace, the plethora of amateur Web cam sites now publishing the banal, shapeless stuff of 'private' life has given rise to commercial meta-sites which assist the would-be consumer of reality/ privacy-effects by listing, classifying and reviewing such sites, presumably applying the reviewing criteria of professionally produced drama (strong plot? good dialogue? too many Beckettian pauses?) to the 'real lives' being broadcast via camcorders on the Net and whose appeal supposedly consists precisely in their unscripted ordinariness.

The implosion of the public/ private dichotomy in the market-place of Net-porn goes hand-in-hand with the implosion of the professional/ amateur dichotomy. Like the 'normalcy' of JenniCAM's content, the very amateurism of home-made pornographic Web sites—on which individuals or couples post photos of themselves engaging in sex for pleasure, not profit—is a powerful drawcard for voyeurs, since what they are evidently seeking in a cyberscape saturated with millions of commercially produced, sexually explicit images is precisely the reality-effect that amateur exhibitionists offer. But such is the appetite of voyeurs for the reality-effect of amateurism that they are, ironically, willing to pay for it, thereby encouraging amateurs to turn into professionals. (Lane: 'Unlike many other industries, pornography is one field in which amateurism is not merely tolerated but actually prized. Privacy has proven to be a commodity to which a price can be attached and, quite often, amateurs are perceived to have more of it to give up'; 111). This, in turn, encourages professionals to simulate amateurism—the corporate entrepreneurs to masquerade as private individuals. One of the largest transnational pornography companies (a public one?) is called 'Private', and the counterpart of the 'success stories' Lane tells of amateur on-line exhibitionists becoming wealthy professional pornographers is the way the professionals have, literally, been taking leaves out of the amateurs' books. Chasing the immensely lucrative market for the reality/ privacy-effects of amateur erotica, the big companies have not only been busily buying up, in the thousands, the grainy images of unglamorous bodies posted by amateur pornographers but also heavily investing their technical expertise in simulating the low production values of home-made erotica.

All of which helps to explain how the privacy-effect and reality-effect without sexual content could become the pre-eminent pornographic commodity. If the classical bourgeois association of sexuality with the private sphere is what created and drives the market for the privacy-effect, which in turn drives the professionalisation of the amateur, then it would seem to be the very absence of sexual content (as in sites like JenniCAM) that now produces the most convincing reality-effect, and hence its most marketable commodity-form.

Academic Cultural Studies has been accused of cultivating a superior form of fandom (and why not? you might ask. At a time when universities in Anglophone

countries are being run as businesses and are busily forging commercial links with mass media corporations, why shouldn't humanities departments be helping the entertainment industries to reproduce their markets by turning out highly-trained consumers, skilled in watching endless repeats of *Seinfeld* and still finding new meanings in them?). But Lane's book is for the would-be producer, rather than fan or consumer, of pornography, and for this reader at least, there is nothing titillating about its contents. Those seeking an amateur-effect in their reading-experience, however, could do worse than buy *Obscene Profits*. A cut-and-paste job, the book is a true child of the Internet. Its ratio of noise to information is around 1:4; download time is frustratingly long (Lane's prose neither flows nor streams); and annoying 'banners', or sub-subheadings, clutter up its pages in a desperate bid to keep the reader's attention. Its numbing repetitiveness and slipshod writing suggest that the publishers have eschewed all editorial 'interference', doing nothing to spoil the immediacy of Lane's amateur compositional process.

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## African Unity

*Reawakening Commitment, Obligations and Responsibilities to Unity in Africa: African Union and a Pan African Parliament*

by Manelisi Genge, Francis Kornegay & Stephen Rule

Pretoria: African Institute of South Africa, 2000, 44pp.

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This collection of three essays addresses urgent events on the African landscape and reawakens inspirational ideals for civil society. The papers open up pertinent debates about authority / subjugation, democracy / tyranny, autonomy / dominance at a time when fragile economies in Africa make self-determination and self-sufficiency somewhat problematic. Certainly, the discourses provoked by the large issue of greater African unity have been to some extent submerged since 1994, as the world stood in awe of an unexpected phenomenon—the miracle of the demise of apartheid. But the post-liberation euphoria, both locally and internationally, led to a silencing of