Talking about sex is probably one of the oldest activities human beings have been eager to do. Surprisingly, it seems that there is always something new to say, or rather, something old to say in a new way. Here is another book that embraces the vast—it’s a euphemism—question of human sexuality. As the editor says, “After all, we’re talking about sex and pornography—something defined, experienced, interpreted, and made meaningful in the context of a plurality of differences” (p. 7). This plurality is clearly shown in the book, an anthology compiled by Dennis D. Waskul, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

In his introduction, Waskul reminds us that there are traditionally two leading narratives around the advent of a new technology: the utopia and the dystopia. In our case, we all know that the Internet has changed the way some people experience their sexuality. For the utopians, the Internet has given rise to possibilities never thought before, enabling a user to have an orgasm while virtually making love live with someone far remote from her living room. On the other side, the dystopians claimed that this vision of “unfleshed” sexuality was inhuman, machinist, and decadent. Reflecting on Laurence O’Toole’s book Pornocopia (2000), Waskul suggests a third narrative, that of the normality. Sexuality and the Internet could be experienced not as a revolution giving birth to a sexual Übermensch, and not as a tool that could bring schizophrenia to the addicted user, but rather just as a technology that could be used as a valuable sexual resource. That makes three points of view and three realities that have to be dealt with. This is why Waskul affirms that “this book does not seek to expose ‘the’ truth about Internet sex. Instead, this book explores various truths and places them in a context where readers can assess them for themselves” (p. 7). In so doing, it gives the reader six perspectives on the subject, which frame the six parts of a deeply interesting book.

The first part deals with personhood and Internet sex. In the first chapter, Waskul holds that while “we all engage in self-games any time we knowingly attempt to portray ourselves as this-or-that kind of person. . . , what makes on-line
environments unique is how the remotoness of a physical body expands the fluidity of self-enactments” (p. 21). In the case of textual communication, the presence of the other is purely semiotic, its very body contained in verbal traces that can be interpreted in dozens of ways. But when the text is coupled by images, as it is studied in the second chapter, the encounter is different: “Participants themselves are spectators unto their own bodies, as they must see and respond to the images of their bodies and thus act toward, manage, and interpret that image as others might” (p. 57). An interesting aspect of these two texts that form the first part of the book is that the information they give has been drawn from personal interviews with people practising cybersex, instead of sole reflection.

The second part is entitled “Culture and Internet Sex.” Its first chapter is an excerpt of Claudia Springer’s Electronic Eros (1996) and looks more like a list of loose ideas than an article. Next follows a chapter on Foucault, Goffman, and the notion of synopticon, where Phillip Vannini holds that even in cybersex, “the seductiveness of embodied agency and corporeal desire, represented by the sexual fantasies of pornography, continue their emancipatory struggle, and always will—without ever completely prevailing” (pp. 87-88).

Part 3 touches on problems, deviance, and ethics. Donna M. Hughes begins with an article on the use of new communications and information technologies for the sexual exploitation of women and children, where she raises the fact that the Internet has deeply facilitated the diffusion of illegal sexual material involving abused individuals. On the other side, Keith F. Durkin’s chapter studies how the Net provides a safe milieu for the management of a stigmatized sexual identity. And finally, Jim Thomas tells us about “cyberpoaching”—cheating on the Net. This part, with its contrasted opinions, shows very well that the big issue is not the technology by itself, but what people are doing with it. As Vincent Mosco has shown in The Digital Sublime (2004), history has proved often that utopias and dystopias are short-lived; after some time for the novelty to be appropriated, people just transfer onto the new technology what they were already doing, enjoying the improvements, but not running amok by its use.

The fourth part of the book draws on gender and race, with a first chapter where Naomi McCormick and John Leonard hold that the Internet, granted the problems of exploitation, can also be a tool for sexual and gender empowerment, when employed correctly. For instance, “Cybersex, like the love letters of old, enables individuals to present themselves carefully, choosing just the words and phrasing they think will have the greatest impact” (p. 189), but also to have a quasi-immediate reaction, which is not the case in written letters. Adding to this is the question of race. Erica Owens, in her study of personal advertisements, finds that “whether or not whites are aware of its presence, race is always a factor in partner choice” (p. 233).

The next part takes a look at the industry of Internet sex. First, the reader is given an excerpt of Taylor Marsh’s “semenal” My Year in Smut (2000), which is followed by another excerpt, from Lewis Perdue’s EroticaBiz (2002), which demonstrates eloquently how sex has built and shaped the Internet. After all, “sex as been [sic] the only consistently profitable online sector because it started out with a product for which consumers are willing to pay” (p. 261). Given the free
expression amendments and the borderless nature of the Web, it is very complicated to regulate pornography on the Net.

The last part of the book tries to sketch the future of Internet sex, as Trudy Barber imagines the cybersex tourist, able to fulfill its need for exotic experiences while not even quitting its computer chair. On the list of possible future avenues figure ideas such as the “Sin City” Resort, the celebrity-programmed avatar, the digital recording of pleasure, and the end of physical sex—and of sex for procreation, of course. Needless to say, these views are somewhat utopian, but they raise the final question: will the evolution of communication technologies ever redeem the pleasure of having “old school” sex? The answer lies in our hands—and in our heads.

References

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