

## Future Cinema and Selfploitation

G.Alan Rhodes, Nov. 2005.

*Everything began with objects, yet there is no longer a system of objects.*

—Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*.<sup>1</sup>

"Future Cinema" is used to refer to new dimensions of the classical cinema screen as it is modified and changed by emerging media. But we might ask ourselves, what if we need to reconsider the entire concept of 'screen'? Imaginations of this future screen are still based on the idea of a manifested, rendered image located in physical space. Even in Manovich's screen as information database, the end result is a rendered image with multiple "interfaces" to the same material: a selection of the database of information presented as physical screen or screens—free to change and move regardless of perspective, but still referring to an authored whole, the database film.<sup>2</sup> But what if there is no physical screen—as it exists as the point of relation between an audience and a virtual—in 'Future Cinema'? What if the audience and the filmmaker, too, refuse to stay static in their roles in the new media landscape—not just the screen? There is an attitude of future cinema theorists that cinema will somehow remain—emerge from the changes in technology intact—retaining its authors and audience. What I suggest is a total reinterpretation of the term, 'screen', that includes the changes in the roles of 'maker' and 'audience' in light of networked culture, ubiquitous production technologies, and ubiquitous distribution. The new screen is not a change in form, but a change in politics: the closing of the circuit between maker and audience, gaze and object, camera and screen.

The revolution of the networked internet space, as has been frequently noted, is not just technological. It is a revolution of information being exchanged on the

basis of non-hierarchical commerce. Based upon a low level set of highly rule based protocols, like a currency, the system is open at all higher levels. The manifestations of this were first recognized in text communication, because bandwidth remained tied to economics, but as the cost of bandwidth and technology access have become more flat, we begin to see the spread of the networked information space to video. In contemporary image media, it is not content or medium that remains as the signifier of power—the magazine was co-opted by the zine, photographs, video, and audio recording are ubiquitous—it is the artistic design that now signals power. This is especially true of the webpage, where the critical feature of the presence of a Sony, or Phillips, or Samsung on the internet is the constantly re-designed presentation (granted that these are technology companies, and maintain a certain techno-intelligentsia image, but, again, I put forward that the only method they can find to signal their technological power is through design). As production equipment becomes common, it is only the evidence of man-hours, education, and paid allegiance of the talented artist that can signal the wealth of the company. But if we consider the progression of television programming, that as it expanded it accommodated the disintegrating culture through a giant increase in low-cost production reality television, that stripped television down to its basic voyeuristic essentials replacing production value with the illusion of access and reflection of audience, we must wonder if this attempt to use design as a centralized manifestation of power is fighting a growing tide.

Here I want to look at two new internet sites: [www.beautifulagony.com](http://www.beautifulagony.com) and [ishotmyself.com](http://ishotmyself.com). Self termed "selfploitation" sites, these represent, in the genre of pornography or erotica, a new configuration of maker, screen, and audience. As has been frequently noted, pornography has been a driving force of the internet; the anonymous distribution of media to one's private domain serves as a perfect distribution system for pornography, and the obsessional desire for more—more pixels, more variety, more bandwidth—has pushed the internet ahead since its inception. On these websites, the media content is solicited from

its viewers, like reality television, but unlike reality television, the viewers are also the producers. In both websites, visitors are encouraged to join the images they see, and receive part of the profits from the paying viewers (of which they are also a member). Especially ishotmyself.com, where women send in pornographic photos of themselves, is adept at using the language of the chat room and the art gallery to request submissions: "stop freeloading, get a camera, start shooting," they implore, implying that the visitors—though they pay for the privilege, like any other porn site—are not full members, 'lurkers', if they don't also become imaginistically part of the website network. We have a collapsing of roles: the viewer become producer become image to-be-viewed. What is worthy of note in analyzing the point of view of the participant in these sex-driven sites—over an analysis of the video blog, or other networked media site—is the stark way that the concepts of gaze and object and their relationship to the new networked screen are revealed in their new configuration.

### **ishotmyself.com**

ishotmyself.com claims to have coined the term, "selfploitation" in 2003.<sup>3</sup> This website is based off of a sort-of pre-cinematic apparatus. Participating content creators upload narrative sequences of still shots. But it is clearly a small, inevitable step to expand the framework to video—a step which beautifulagony.com has already taken with a slightly different format. There is a simple protocol for participation—beyond the minimal access required to obtain a 2 megapixel camera and an internet connection—the "exhibitor" must be over 18, appear on camera solo, show full-frontal nudity, and always keep one hand on the camera. Beyond that, it is entirely up to the participant, "to reflect how you were feeling at the time." The site describes itself with the language of the art gallery:

**Project\_ISM** is a public art apparatus. Each day we exhibit a new folio in which the artist presents herself in a bold statement about nudity, fame and the Internet. This is Selfploitation. It can make you

look, make you think, make you jelly-kneed, and if you want, it can even make you famous.

Is **Project\_ISM** art? It gets more visitors than the Guggenheim and has more original portraits than the Louvre. Is it crude? That depends on what you do with it. Is it culturally valuable? That's not for us to decide.

If you like to look, the artists of **Project\_ISM** need your help. Sponsor us and we'll reward your philanthropy with access to every artist's entire gallery. Or better still, stop freeloading, get a camera, start shooting, and pickle yourself in the adrenaline rush of public nudity.

"Patrons" pay "membership fees" to view the "exhibitors'" "portfolios," which consist of "self-portraits," every month awarding one participant the "ISM Art prize" (\$250 and a permanent webpage).<sup>4</sup> As a site "run almost entirely by women," they claim their goal is to "satirise internet trafficking of the female nude. Here, women have the opportunity to be in control of their own image," through "participation in the site."<sup>5</sup> The roles of viewer, exhibitor, and producer are self-consciously collapsed (though the power structures are not, in exchange for their artist fees, participants transfer all rights to their photographs): there are only participators.

This site could be viewed cynically as a way to lure young feminists and artists into selling their privacy at a low price. Certainly the excellent ad copy borders on self-reflexive irony. But the site structurally is a functioning reality: each week they select 14 portfolios from "many more" submissions. And, unlike traditional porn (but similar to Ebay), there is an egalitarian principle, any age, any body-type encouraged to apply: "whatever your size, colour and how many toes you have."<sup>6</sup> Though this egalitarianism is presented as a feminist ideal, it could function also as an efficiency, like Netflix that chooses to scan every DVD every day, because it is, in fact, quicker than trying to organize them in a hierarchical system, or Ebay that simply charges a commission without concerning themselves with the salability of goods. But, in the end, in this networked information era, I am not sure that these ideas are not interchangeable: principal

and efficiency. Let's ask ourselves, instead, what is the nature of this circuit in relation to future cinema. What is this screen?

The screen of a movie theatre is a portal between the real and the virtual. It is, literally, two frames made to overlap: the film frame—that irrational, mechanical selection imposed upon the representation of the pro-filmic spectacle by the camera—is lined up to match with the edges of the physical theatre screen frame: the ritualized site of the virtual, that space that we allow and give ourselves on to, for the purposes of diversion. The frames, overlapping, function to disguise the dual nature of the chosen sets: the selection of in-frame from the out-of-frame whole of the film is set as equal to the border between the filmic representation, where our gaze is focused, and the open whole of our existence.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the purpose of this is to disguise our own open whole, to forget our existence in diversion, but the result is that the screen is the film. The plane of the audience's access to the virtual is overlapped with the virtual's plane of expression. These two aspects of the screen are separate in [ishotmyself.com](http://ishotmyself.com).

Where is the screen in [ishotmyself.com](http://ishotmyself.com)? The film frame, in this self-cam format, is a feedback loop, in that the camera is erotically implied in the filmic itself. The camera is the first thing out of frame, held in the just off-frame (in fact, the hand cut off from the body by the frame) of the subject of our gaze. The frame as a virtual gaze creating a closed and an open, a seen and an unseen, Barthes describes as the delimiter of the pornographic and the erotic. Barthes designates pornography as the "unary" photo without context—all denotation: "sex" without connotation, without "punctum."<sup>8</sup> It is the erotic that retains some sexual activity, reclaiming context through ellipsis: that which is not shown. This is an activation of the gaze through what Žižek terms "the spot," that is, the entry point for "looking awry" through our desire. Pornography, Žižek instead describes in terms of a reversal of the gaze: the image that we look at, by showing everything, gazes at us, turning us into the stupid object; there is no point of entrance.<sup>9</sup> Here

it is the literal point of entrance, the camera, that is also the "spot"—the erotic point of ellipsis: that which is missing from the frame.

The performer, alone, is locked in a narcissistic circuit, both observer and object, subject and object of gaze, their hand holding, erotically, the eye, their body arousing and performing for this eye. By removing the Deleuzian perception organ from their body, uniting it with the active tactile hand in a literal grasping of the other's gaze, their body is freed to be a complete object of affection. So the film frame is a mobius strip, the out-of-frame just that which curves back into the frame. It is the relationship associated with early video art, "aesthetic narcissism," as described by Rosalind Krauss, where "separation between subject and object are simultaneously submerged" resulting in "a kind of weightless fall through the suspended space of narcissism."<sup>10</sup> Krauss finds here a connection between the circuit form of the medium and the psychological situation of the creator—an idea familiar to art theory, but here the medium from which to extract expression is not "other" but a circuit which leads back to self.<sup>11</sup> But can we say the same of the physical screen—the site of giving on to the virtual? The film screen cannot be overlapped with this self-sufficient frame, it has no physical existence: we cannot call the webpage the ritualized altar of the virtual world any more than the laptop, the keyboard, the wires protruding from the house (though all of these, can take on fetishistic contagion). The screen is the network itself, the community of content, the gallery, of which each exhibitor is part. In this sense the circuit is doubled, from the 'privacy' of the shooting-of-self, to the complete exposure and exhibition in the community, where the exhibitor again is viewer and object, but here one of many objects, viewed by many. It is Baudrillard's "double obscenity" which blurs "the distinction between an interior and an exterior."<sup>12</sup>

Certainly this critique moves us toward's Baudrillard's "ecstasy of communication" where the concept of the obscene corrodes barriers between

subject and object, and "the stage" (and how is this different than "the screen") is dismantled:

Obscene is that which eliminates the gaze, the image and every representation. Obscenity is not confined to sexuality, because today there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, of functions and objects in their legibility, availability, regulation, forced signification, capacity to perform, connection, polyvalence, their free expression...  
...It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication.<sup>13</sup>

But despite Baudrillard's apocalypse of obscenity, there is a definite viewing that is taking place in these sites. If it is a circuit, it is a circuit of the gaze, and we can ask ourselves what is the nature of this gaze, and what is its relationship to identity, from the perspective of exhibitor/community-viewers.

If taken in the context of a Lacanian constitution of identity through the gaze of the other, ishotmyself.com is a perfect expression of the hysteria of the construction of self as object: "I will show you me so you can make me." It is a hysterical response to an existence within what Žižek terms "pathological narcissism," a desperate attempt to leap over the question: "why am I what you are saying that I am?" by reconstituting the self as image.<sup>14</sup> The other and the self are interchangeable, or indistinguishable. This is the territory of the alter-ego: that which both stands between and reconciles the gaze of the other with the self. This could be viewed as complete self-exposure, with enough resolution to "accurately capture the human soul," or the exhaustion of exposure through the complete suppression of "self"... "selfploitation" is the goal of participation.

### **www.beautifulagony.com and mediation as identity creation**

As the name implies, beautifulagony.com, too, is based off of a binary narrative: the orgasm. Like ishotmyself.com, the community of viewers is also the

exhibitors (here both men and women are encouraged to apply), who are required to follow a simple rigid protocol: the self-documentation—here with a tripod—of masturbation to orgasm with the camera frame showing only the face: the affective closeup. Though the camera is not physically extending from the subject, it is obviously still extending from the situation: the frame itself—self-imposed, transforming the subject from a body to a close-up, like Deleuze's "faciality machine"—is also the point of entrance: the eroticism of the camera's mechanical nature that doesn't care what titillation lies below the frame, but keeps its stupid eye where it is pointed.<sup>15</sup> It is an ironic version of the pornographic gaze: locked on what doesn't show all. Or, you could say, a denial of this "all"—instead the face is put forward as the complete embodiment of experience, the total denotation. "From the neck up... That's where people are truly naked."<sup>16</sup> says their description. Beautifulagony is stylistically based more around the blog. Users are told, "We need your support to keep on bringing the agony," \$15 a month for all the faces to be available to you. There are newsgroup-style forums, and a blog-style facilitation of the community, in a section titled "overkill," "where we post interesting snippets, interviews and outtakes." They have recently expanded to include narrative content: "confessions": "some Agonees have told us their dirty secrets, and we will let you watch."<sup>17</sup>

More than ishotmyself.com, beautifulagony denies the label, pornography, because of its lack of nudity. "Beautiful Agony is dedicated to the beauty of human orgasm," they say in their "about." Again, beauty and art are evoked. Umberto Eco notes the semantic existence in the west of this concept "beauty," as a good not necessarily connected to desire; beauty can be enjoyed "irrespective of whether we possess it or not."<sup>18</sup> This seems to fit into the semantic space of half-emptied signs: a pornography without desire, a face without the body. Is this just a sanitization of what is surely an income source similar to other porn sites, or is there something being offered to these exhibitors different from the standard porn or erotica industries? What is the nature of the lure?

In their submission guidelines, they exhort, "Let us see all of your idiosyncrasies and rituals, but we're only interested in reality, not performances, impressions, or exaggerations." The acceptance (if you follow the guidelines, they say they will "probably accept") results in an un-designated flat "publishing fee," but, they say, "don't do it because we'll pay you, do it to give the world a beautiful piece of erotica."<sup>19</sup> Again it is egalitarian and community minded, at least in word; and again, in an open access network where the community forms around the word, isn't the word the spirit? But is this spirit emptied of content? These participants do not leave any more politically empowered than they began. The broadcast of privacy (and the selling of the rights to this privacy to another) is not a political empowerment. It is only on the level of the gaze that it is empowering: like reality tv, the empowerment being offered is mediation. The domain of the alter-ego has been owned by the image complex. The opening of broadcast distribution on an information level allows for the removal of a barrier which has grown huge: a collapsing of the chasm between self and alter-ego that has grown up around the admiration of poreless models, and moviestars that always know their next scripted line... who never use the bathroom. Now one can enter this world too—enter the television set—be permanently captured in a marketable love scene, and these sites have developed initiation rituals around this process of entering the idealized other.

So is this simply the end of pornography—a completion of exposure, where every member is removed from the capture, but the self, and every member included in the audience, including the self? We have to ask ourselves, in relationship to this issue of public and private, self and other—the equation of signification and reflection—where are the virtual and the real... have they collapsed too? I would argue that for these exhibitors the virtual and real have taken the place of subject and object. Where we before had Lacan's description of an imagined self and an imagined other found in the mirror, we now have a circuit between the virtual and the real with no point of reference to stop them. It is not the imagined gaze of the

other that creates identity here, it is mediation itself. The community that is joined in these sights is a community of images. An exhibitor can become one of a set of images, to be given back to the self as a virtual. This is not the joy of "perverts" as Žizek describes it, finding enjoyment in the "instrumentalization" for the pleasure of the other.<sup>20</sup> Instead it's a total mediation of "self" to "other," a narcissistic circuit where they can be both object and subject, gaze and that which gazes back: your image giving pleasure to your self. Again, let's return to Baudrillard's: "yet there is no longer a system of objects." The screen is gone the way of the stage, in its place, mediation. Or you could equally say, the screen has become everywhere: "the surrounding universe and our very bodies are becoming monitoring screens."<sup>21</sup> There is no *point* of giving over to the virtual, but a circuit continually in flux. Similarly are the subject and object, the eye and the gaze re-configured. The screen must be the gaze.

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, Jean; *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Ed. Slyvere Lotringer, Trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Manovich, Lev; *Database as a Genre of New Media*, from [http://time.arts.ucla.edu/AI\\_Society/manovich.html](http://time.arts.ucla.edu/AI_Society/manovich.html)

<sup>3</sup> "about" <http://ishotmyself.com/public/general.php?p=about>

<sup>4</sup> "shoot yourself"; [http://ishotmyself.com/public/general.php?p=shoot\\_yourself](http://ishotmyself.com/public/general.php?p=shoot_yourself)

<sup>5</sup> "exhibitor's FAQ" <http://ishotmyself.com/public/general.php?p=faq>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> For this concept of open and closed sets I draw on Giles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Transl. Richard Howard; Hill and Wang, NY, 1981, pp41-2.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek, Slavoj; *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge & London, 1991; p110.

<sup>10</sup> Kraus, Rosalind, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in Battcock, Gregory, *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology* (1978) p56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, p20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p22.

<sup>14</sup> Žizek, p104.

<sup>15</sup> Hansen, Mark B.N., "Affect as Medium, or the Digital-Facial-Image," from *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2(2), London: SAGE Publications (2003).

<sup>16</sup> "about" <http://beautifulagony.com/public/main.php?page=about>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>18</sup> Eco, Umberto, *History of Beauty*, Transl. Alastair McEwen, New York: Rizzoli (2004) p8.

<sup>19</sup> "submit" <http://beautifulagony.com/public/main.php?page=submit>

<sup>20</sup> Zizek, p109.

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, p12.