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LSD AND **THE THIRD REICH**

The New Yorker, **BLACKS AND WOMEN**
HAVANA after dark
the **streets of SAN FRANCISCO**



FREDRIC JAMESON, DAVID HARVEY, MASEO MIYOSHI; GEORGE BOWERING; **MCLUHAN AND QUEBEC**



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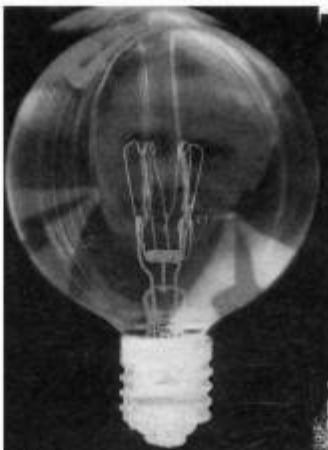
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BORDER/LINES



book

BY Gordon Brent Ingram

REVIEW

Has cyberspace really "arrived" for many of us? Not without its costs. Will the various new webs and the expanding net improve the lives of "minorities"—including gay men, lesbians, and other "sexual outlaws"? Maybe. Can the "net" "queer" [as a verb] and be queered? Only sometimes. Is the net a particularly attractive space for sexual minorities? Apparently. But could the intrusion of cyberspace replace real, physical public space and

their new hierarchies while suggesting only partial liberation from older forms of domination and isolation. Allucquère Rosanne Stone, Director of the Interactive Multimedia Laboratory of the University of Texas, spins bleak tales of only a few gains and as many or more lost opportunities. Her wonderfully crafted stories illustrate how particular pressures for returns on capital, along with muddled agendas and cultural biases, have shaped the computer

in search of queer space on the internet

technologies that we use today. This

has compounded old alienations while most of the new possibilities have been barely explored. She explores "play," interactivity, and computers as arenas for social experience. She shows how the "community," electronic village style, that is being marketed today is a pale version of what is possible by current technologies. Stone concludes that as soon as cyberspace was established

as a new realm of public space it was quickly privatized.

Every day, now, we are bombarded with messages to go "on the net." Most people I know are struggling to upgrade their computers and peripherals or to pay the larger-than-expected bills that come from making the mistake of giving internet carriers their credit card numbers. I was suspicious about the hyperbole surrounding "the information superhighway" that came after I had an email address for ten years. Email for me was associated with tedious work and the transfer of dry messages. It did not become a place to hang out until people learned how to email porn and to advertise.

Last year, I started to feel like I was missing something so I started going to places with faster connections and larger, higher resolution colour screens. My inability to afford individual access to those faster chips pushed me into a new sort of public space, the cybercafé, but it was sometimes awkward as a gay man. For one thing, there is not very much space. Often there are line-ups. Trying to enjoy café society can be uncomfortable when the men dominating the terminals have

William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, place, and the infobahn*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995.

Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995.



make some people, in reality, more isolated than they already are? It may be already happening. Can the net really provide a basis for new forms of exchange and community or can it function only superficially to accommodate sexual minorities? Unclear. What

is going to happen as the net becomes more commercialized and censored? It is probably going to be more difficult to

find queer spaces that do not function to sell something or broadcast the banal.

Two thin books provide clues to the trajectories of the information networks and



no feminist pretensions and are panting and salivating on chat lines with names like "2wet panties." And they would become highly agitated if they were waiting and saw the tell-tale erection or friends' polite forays into lezzie smut. Actually to get on to the internet is to be confronted with the marginality of its few queer sites. In *City of Bits*, Mitchell argues that

the worldwide computer network—the electronic agora—subverts, displaces, and radically defines our notions of gathering place, community, and urban life...The Net negates geometry...it is fundamentally and profoundly *antispatial*.

But for most people, getting on to the net is far from seamless. The space of access, even when trying to get on through a private telephone line, is full of conflict masked by the free market. Early on in his book, Mitchell acknowledges the power relationships that are re-enforced by the underlying architectures of these electronic landscapes.

So the Net eliminates a traditional dimension of civic legibility. In the standard sort of spatial city, where you are frequently tells who you are. (And who you are will often determine where you are allowed to be).

The starkness of the new hierarchies emerges:

The bandwidth-disadvantaged are the new have-notes.

It's simple; if you cannot get bits on and off in sufficient quantity, you cannot directly benefit from the Net.

How will we survive in the land of cyberspace as our livelihoods are increasingly tied to it? Mitchell outlines an ambiguity that will inevitably lead to alienation in the ranks of underpaid "intellectual workers."

It will no longer be straightforward to distinguish between work time and "free" time or between the space of production and the space of consumption. Ambiguous and contest zones will surely emerge.

For any kind of cultural or sexual minority or outright outlaw this all seems like business as usual. And why should it be otherwise? Nothing makes this technology particularly different from what has come before. There are some new possibilities, but few are being developed because there are not clear strategies for marketing them, as Stone illustrates in her chronicle of the rise and fall of the Atari Lab where virtual reality research was reduced to the early wave of computer games.

I confess to becoming easily bored with queer life in cyberspace. Maybe I lose interest too easily. In looking for new queer space on the internet, I often go through familiar gateways such as university lesbian/gay/bisexual bulletin boards, (e.g., Berkeley's or the Cyber Queer Lounge). There are the political bulletin boards, occasionally with fresh news, and the growing international links with a few countries such as France. The male homoeroticism, especially since the recent federal censorship legislation in the United States, is boring and predictable. Web sites oriented to women are still rare. The "sharing," personal promotion and narcissism on the male home pages are often tedious, e.g., in the Rumper Room from Texas and Norwegian Halvor Raknes Johansen's scanning of every aspect of his life and his body. It is not that I don't like porn, or when it is possible to tell the difference, broadcast "sharing," but it

begins to all look the same. This *fin-de-millénaire* will be known for its heavy emphasis on "dicks" in (cyber)space rather than any sort of equity in the broadcasting and sharing of intimate digital imagery. The net is still largely a boy toy.

It doesn't take much time, sitting and wading through the "darkroom" images of the Amsterdam pink pages, to realize that the net is really about selling accessories. A rudimentary mouse game allows the user to fish out hypermasculine images of men with members and asses exposed in kitsch poses. There is an ambiguity suggesting part vacation and part slave auction. But eventually the "game" says that a rule has been broken and it is time to buy, buy, buy. There are ordering instructions. So much for the "free" ride.

Sometimes I find gems but they are put on and taken off unpredictably. For queer activism, cyberspace, like sexual minorities in real public space, is often volatile and fleeting. The London Lesbian Avengers have had an inspiring home page as have the Guerrilla Girls. The most interesting queer "art" in cyberspace, so far, is subversive parody such as the television network of Dyke Action Machine (DAM)! It is sites such as this that reproduce critical frameworks through humour rather more-of-the-same consumerism. But even the artists of DAM!, with their careful deconstructions of gender and lesbian culture, are still largely reacting to the commercial, available technologies rather than finding the space to develop new visions and media configurations. Works as these may create some of the queerest spaces in this decade, but they are still years away from subverting the means of transmissions so as not simply to reproduce the messages already built into these media.

The prospects of finding queer space on the net will continue to be about the same as on the streets and in other "public" places except that access to cyberspace is more expensive. Doubtless, there are some strategic advantages to being able to manoeuvre through cyberspace and to save on telephone bills and postage. The new worlds, the places to "engage" in profoundly different ways, are waiting to be constructed, but they remain as limited by what is already here as they are expanded by technological possibilities. Time will tell how much of life in cyberspace will be subsumed in kitsch consumerism at the expense of real communication, engagement and community.

WEB SITES

Amsterdam Pink Pages. <http://www.euro.net/5thworld/pink>
<http://www.euro.net/5thworld/mtb/darkroom>

Cyber Queer Lounge. <http://www.cyberzine.org>

French queer news bulletin board.

<http://www.casti.com/FQRD/qrde.html>

The Girlie Network, Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!).

<http://www.echonyc.com/~dam>

Guerrilla Girls. <http://www.voyagerco.com/gg>

Halvor Raknes Johansen's home page.

<http://www.hednig.no/~halvorj>

Rumper Room. <http://txcc.net/~rumpngr>

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