LSD AND THE THIRD REICH

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

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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 queer? 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? Altematively, 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 technologies that we use today. This has compounded old alienations while most of the new possibilities have been barely explored. She explores "play," "intensity," 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 color 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 lines. Trying to enjoy café society can be uncomfortable when the men dominating the terminals
no feminist pretensions and are panting and salivating on chat lines with names like “Zwet panties.” And they would become highly agitated if they were waiting and saw the titillation erection or friends’ polite fancies into lesser smut. Actually to get on to the internet is to be confronted with the marginality of its few queer sites. In City of Bite, 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 negate s geometry...it is fundamentally and profoundly antispacial.

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 marked by the mere market. The overwhelming majority of gay and lesbian relationships that are reenforced 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 told 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-nots. It’s simple; 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 contested zones will surely emerge.

For some 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 Net Lab where virtual reality research was reduced to the early wave of computer games.

I confess to being easily bored with queer life in cyberspace. Maybe I lose interest too easily. In looking for new queer spaces on the internet, I often go through familiar gateways such as university les/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 consensus legislation in the United States, is losing and predictable. Web sites oriented to women are still rare. The "sharing," personal promotion and narcissism on the main home pages are often tedious, e.g., in the Rumper Room from Texas and Norwegian Hakon Raknes Johannessen’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 findezenmiteaire 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 wandering through the "darkrooms" images of the Amsterdam pink pages, to realize that the net is really about selling access. A rudimentary mouse game allows the user to fish out hypermasculine images of men with androgynous forms on them. There is an ambiguity suggesting part vacation and part slave auction. But eventually the "game" says that the 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 society, 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 subjective 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 decorations 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 transmission 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. Doubles, 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 lactivism consumerism at the expense of real communication, engagement and community.

WEB SITES

Amsterdam Pink Pages, http://www.euro.net/5thworld/piak
http://www.euro.net/5thworld/urb/darkroom
Cyber Queer Lounge, http://www.cybernets.org
Hakon Raknes Johannessen’s home page, http://www.hedvig.no/~hakonr
Rumper Room, http://k6c.net/~rumperrr

The writing of this article was supported through the Canada Council Explorations Grant. "Queersville."