

Villainous Avatars: The Visual Semiotics of Misogyny and Free Speech in Cyberspace

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Abstract

This paper explores a noxious relationship between the emergence of liberal free speech online, and vitriolic sexual violence focused on women and girls. Internet forums provide instant access to expansive audiences. They provide powerful means for anonymous users called trolls, to amplify sexually motivated hate speech. In some cases suicidal deaths have been attributed to vicious Internet denunciations of women and girls. Demands to cease promoting gender violence online are often met with protestations invoking democratic rights to free speech, or that vilification of others simply voices “controversial humor”. In 2011 Mary Anne Franks defined this type of liberal view as “cyberspace idealism”. Franks has asserted that cyberspace idealism presupposes that the Internet is the ultimate bastion guarding the principles of equality and free thought. In social media such as Facebook and Twitter I examine deeply ingrained cultural meanings of images that vilify women and girls online. Through use of visual semiotics and feminist critical discourse analysis, I argue that the intrinsic mechanism of sexual power play informing gender violence in the “virtual” world, is embedded in “real” world language. It is amplified online at the expense of a woman’s right to dignity, privacy, and free speech. Patriarchal discourses that implicitly legitimate and normalize misogyny on the Internet, can only thwart the possibility of a truly utopian and democratic space existing in cyberspace.

Keywords

online gender violence, misogyny, free speech, cyberspace idealism, visual semiotics, Internet trolls, Foucauldian feminism

Introduction

How is violence enacted against women and girls online? What is its effect? What is the relationship between misogyny in cyberspace and democratic principles of free speech? This paper explores how recent online hate campaigns mobilized against females, are symptomatic of a broader normalization of old-style sexism evident in contemporary media such as advertising. Sexism, deeply ingrained in the history of literature and visual culture, has been amplified online to an alarming degree in recent vindictive causes targeting females. Easily accessible social media has provided instant tools for rogue Internet users, or trolls, to unleash extreme vitriolic verbal and visual abuse against women and girls, forcing them against their wills into exploitive relationships. A troll is typically an anonymous Internet user. His or her¹ aim is to disrupt online forums with a mission to inspire “flaming rhetoric someone who is

¹ While some trolls are female, it is estimated that a massive 90% are male. “What is an Internet Troll/ Forum troll?”, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://curezone.com/forums/troll.asp>.

purposely provoking and pulling people into flaming discussion.”² A contradiction evident in cyberspace is that a particularly spiteful form of harassment called *strategic trolling*—characterized by mob mentality, often including death threats and/or advocating sexual atrocities against women—is presupposed by its proponents to be innocuous.³ Recently doxed, or outed, trolls have asserted that derision of women is freely expressed in the interests of simply having “good fun” in a utopian scenario that “doesn’t really exist”. In invoking this defence trolls argue that malicious speech is not real. For the idealist, online vitriol is just a joke immersed in a virtual world that has no impact on individuals or real life. Franks has said that the idealist further proposes that “by their nature they [the abuses] are not physical, bodily harms.”⁴ A liberal fundamentalist assertion is that verbal and visual vitriol directed at females online, should, in the interests of free speech, be either accepted by its victims or simply overlooked.

I argue that vengeful online discourses are not neutral, innocent fun functioning in an unreal world. While some describe the Internet as a mythological mindscape beyond reality, its complexity linking us to everyday life negates a simplistic virtual/real-life split. Malicious language broadcast by trolls in the vast arena of cyberspace is in fact devised to have a devastating impact on victims’ lives. I further contend that the type of attacks to be discussed are not only inherently gendered, but that they propagate a powerful resurgence of sexism engendered by misogynistic hate speech evident in popular culture generally. My analysis identifies ways in which sexual power operates as a linguistic given in these cyber interactions.

A further goal is to highlight the relevance of hierarchical gender relations online, with regard to significant historical visual referents. It is evident that spiteful assaults on females in visual narratives are not new phenomena. The eighteenth-century satirist James Gillray, for example, often lampooned women, demeaning female sexuality by deploying it as a visual weapon to attack men, in order to make political points. While one can uphold democratic rights to free expression by acknowledging that satirists and cyber trolls do express a licentious form of free speech, I will conclude that malicious rhetoric defies the true spirit of democratic principles because it inspires hatred, and incites harm to others. In a quest to degrade, humiliate, libel, and offend women and girls strategic trolls, who I refer to as “villainous avatars”, intensify a distorted value of narcissistic freedom.⁵ They promote egoism, thus

² The “Netiquette Guidelines” describes a troll as follows: “An ‘Internet troll’ or ‘Forum Troll’ or ‘Message Board Troll’ [is] a person who posts outrageous messages to bait people to answer. [A] Forum Troll delights in sowing discord on the forums ...”. CureZone.org, *ibid*.

³ According to netlingo.com there are four type of trolls: *Playtime Trolls* (simplistic approach); *Tactical Trolls* (more serious engagement); *Strategic Trolls* (tactical response, mob mentality, death threats); *Domination Trolls* (create “bona-fide” mailing lists). The strategic form of trolling is the focus of this article. Accessed February 17, 2013, <http://www.netlingo.com/word/troll.php>.

⁴ Mary Anne Franks, “Unwilling Avatars: Idealism and Discrimination in Cyberspace” in *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*. (Available at HeinOnline, 20 Colum. J. Gender & L. 224 2011), accessed October 19, 2012, <http://heinonline.org>, 226.

⁵ In conventional terms, an avatar symbolizes how one chooses to represent oneself online. According to technopedia.com it refers to two or three-dimensional pictorial or graphic forms rendered as “a personalized graphical illustration that represents a computer user, or character or alter ego that represents that user.” “Avatar” on technopedia.com, accessed October 20, 2012, <http://www.techopedia.com/>. A more dynamic avatar takes on three-dimensional form, such as those used in gaming, and increasingly evident in advertising and other popular media. The avatar is, as Franks asserts, fundamental to one’s Internet presence as well as “central to cyberspace idealism”, Franks, *Unwilling Avatars*, 225.

disabling the opportunity for all individuals to pursue happiness without fear or favor — either online or off.

The examples for discussion will include the following notable strategic campaigns organized against females in 2012: Anita Sarkeesian (US online gamer; feminist activist); Charlotte Dawson (Australian model and television personality); Unnamed (but originally identified) victims of the *12 y.o. 'slut' memes* Facebook site in Australia.

Drawing on Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as a primary tool, I employ a multi-faceted methodological approach. Michelle Lazar has asserted that FCDA is "... especially pertinent in present times where issues of gender, power and ideology have become increasingly complex and subtle."⁶ This analysis explores influential verbal and visual cyber interactions that restate and sustain sexual stereotypes online which are informed by the concept of patriarchal logic. In this paradigm, according to Genevieve Lloyd, men are presupposed to possess mental power, which, unlike women, enables them to express superior rational thought.⁷ In *The Man of Reason* Lloyd has shown how deeply entrenched gender tropes inform characterizations of female identity in art and literature, whereby women are often portrayed in pejorative and sexually abusive terms. Therefore, a crucial aim of FCDA is to inform a larger commitment to emancipation from patriarchal logic embedded in narratives, which Elizabeth Grosz has further elaborated as *phallogentric*. Grosz has asserted that: "The term refers to the ways in which patriarchal systems of representation always submit women to models and images defined by and for men."⁸ The principle goal of FCDA, then, is to aim for social justice through critical deconstructive readings of cultural texts. In the broader context, it aims to "effect social transformation" through writing and art practice, through contributing to the body of knowledge, dissemination of analyses in a form of "analytic resistance", to participate, highlight, unravel, and offer new understandings about gender inequities.⁹ In accord with Foucauldian concepts about the relationship between social power and disursive practices, FCDA further intends to identify how repressive regimes can also provide emancipative sites of *resistance*.¹⁰ Perhaps the most effective site to challenge violence against women and girls online is through critical interactions in cyberspace itself. It is notable that the victims of cyber-stalking often employ social media and online forums, such as Twitter or YouTube, to reassert their existential rights to freedom.

An amalgamation of FCDA with *qualitative* visual semiotics, including visual analogy to historical referents, encourages one to delve deep into ideology informing visual texts. In "The Photographic Message" the semiotician Roland Barthes has asserted that images are

⁶ Michelle Lazar, ed., *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 1.

⁷ Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason. "Male" & "Female" in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1984).

⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, "Language and the Limits of the Body: Kristeva and Abjection" in E.A. Grosz, Terry Threadgold, David Kelly, Alan Cholodenko and Edward Colless, eds. *Futur*Fall. Excursions into Post-Modernity* (Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney and *Futur*Fall*, NSW, 1986), 106-117, p.xx.

⁹ Lazar, *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*, 1.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* Vol. 1, R. Hurley, trans. (London: Penguin, 1976).

loaded messages packed with encoded cultural meanings not apparent at first glance.¹¹ At the denotative (literal) level, signifiers appear to be normal, innocent, and natural. At the connotative (figurative) level, ideology informs discursive meanings to purport and transmit “truths” and “realities”. In terms of the sexual relation, profoundly ingrained cultural mores have led us to believe that materiality is mapped exclusively onto the bodies of women. This trope is resisted by feminists, not only because it renders female identity invisible in the discourse, but also because it invokes a mythological gender divide taken as a given to be the natural order of things. The sign of the sexual dichotomy purports that what we see makes sense; that “it’s only natural”. But as Barthes has emphasized, when we utter this phrase we should say “it’s only cultural”: “I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn,” said Barthes, “I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.”¹² Although not obvious at the literal level of meaning, the subtleties of gendered language remain active as the message is inferred. Our subjective interpretation of that message is meant to complete the communicative process.

Cultural norms have the power to screen or obscure ideology of sexual tropes evident in popular culture. Feminist media critic, video-blogger, and gamer Anita Sarkeesian has demonstrated this through her analyses of popular culture disseminated on the website *Feminist Frequency*. Sarkeesian has critiqued a powerful resurgence of sexism evident in mainstream media including “T.V. shows movies, comic books, and video games.”¹³ Her critical focus is on ways in which brutal gender asymmetry increasingly functions in online gaming where, for example, simulated rapes, murders, and pornography feature, or are the object of the game itself. In 2012 Sarkeesian was objectified herself as the villain in a slanderous strategic cyber-troll campaign. Intimidated through threats of rape, violence, and sexual assault, Sarkeesian also suffered death threats.¹⁴ The catalyst for the attacks was the “Kickstarter” fund-raising campaign established by Sarkeesian to finance her “Tropes vs Video Games”. The series, created to highlight ways in which women and girls are hypersexualized in popular online games, seeks to demonstrate how to overcome sexism through gender-positive gaming. Sarkeesian has further emphasized the non-gendered constructive aspects of gaming, such as “problem solving; team work; creative thought; multitasking; cognitive abilities”.¹⁵ At the same time, online gaming has emerged as prodigiously gender-biased, not just in terms of the diminution of female characterizations to patriarchal stereotypes, or that women are paid less in the industry, but as Leah Burrows has pointed out, women “account for only 11 percent of game designers and 3 percent of programmers, strikingly low even when compared with the broader fields of graphic design and technology.”¹⁶ Together with reiteration of gender repressive symbolism, this dynamic

¹¹ Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message” in *Image Music Text*, Stephen Heath trans., (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 15-31.

¹² Roland Barthes, “Myth Today” in *Mythologies* (London: Jonathon Cape Ltd., 1972), 109-159, 11.

¹³ Anita Sarkeesian at TEDxWomen 2012, accessed February 3, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZAxwsg9J9Q>.

¹⁴ Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen, *ibid*.

¹⁵ Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Leah Burrows, “Women remain outsiders in video game industry” in *The Boston Globe*, January 27, 2013, accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2013/01/27/women-remain-outsiders-video-game-industry/275JKqy3rFylT7TxxgPmO3K/story.html>

serves to encourage and perpetuate sexism in the formidable multi-billion dollar gaming industry.

Likewise, Jean Kilbourne has analyzed the gender ramifications of advertising in popular media such as magazines and television.¹⁷ She has highlighted the powerful impact marketing can have on us, arguing that no one is immune to the marketer's subliminal—often dehumanizing—persuasiveness, whereby advertisers want us to believe in (and love) the products they promote. Kilbourne has shown how marketers appeal to our desires; how they want to convince us that the product is paramount, and that we can depend on *it* rather than on each other. As Foucault has asserted power implicit in cultural discourses, such as advertising, appeals to our senses while, at the same time, it is productive and enabling. For Foucault, power does not persistently wear us down or coerce us against our will, it often amuses and entertains us.

Advertising is a formidable medium calculated to stimulate erotic fantasies and desires to sell products.¹⁸ For example, the popular and influential fashion designers Jimmy Choo (2006), Duncan Quinn (2008), Dolce & Gabbana (2007), and Bill Blass (1966) have each invoked chilling derivative sexual fantasies involving the death of women to portray glamorized overpowering, and brutalization of women in advertising. Representations of prone, apparently dead, women have featured in their promotions in which models are suitably immobilized, and yet, fashionably attired “post-mortem”. An unnerving Quinn advertisement in 2008, for instance, featured an ostensibly murdered female to promote men's fashions. In the campaign an elegantly suited man coolly engaged in dragging an apparently garotted, semi-clad dead female across an automobile hood. It is disturbing that the Quinn promotion resonates an earlier Bill Blass fashion spread from 1966. (Fig. 1) In the Blass campaign one observes how a woman is rendered animal-like; dehumanized in a tiger skin coat, then trussed tight with rope. and suspended like a dead beast from the radiator grille of a classic Rolls Royce. Set against the looming spectre of the metropolis, one further notes how the “hunter” and “hunted” in this perturbing *mise-en-scène* bracket the prestigious car which is its centrepiece. The almost imperceptible symbolic “spirit of ecstasy” appears to correspond with a distant “crucifix” set high in the skyline to the left of the picture plane. As in pornography there is no sense of care or emotion in promotions that simulate the death of fetishistically constrained women.

¹⁷ Jean Kilbourne, *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish the Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1979, c1977).



Fig. 1: Bill Blass fashion promotion, 1966, image accessed May 9, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/5916650/fashions-ongoing-violence-against-women/gallery/1>

Marketers link abuse and sexual violence to promote products and stimulate profits. These constitute vicious spectacles wherein women are viewed as unambiguously disciplined by men, and where men emerge as preordained conquerors. By employing this porno-chic motif, the implicit message is meant to inspire the desirability of glamorized violence, and the death of women. There have been other promotional thematics alluding to gang rape, such as that in a Dolce and Gabbana campaign in 2007. In an infamous display, a mob of semi-clad young men lay claim to a vulnerable, prone female being violently pinned to the ground by one of the “gang”. Although the ultimate message is that men and products claim ferocious victories over women, the main concern is of course the product itself: a suave suit, cool denims or strappy stilettos.

Aspiring to similar brutal sexual fantasies, an expressly sinister aspect of the online attack on Anita Sarkeesian, alluded to earlier, was advanced by online gamer Bendilin Spurr. Spurr developed a video game called *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*. (Fig. 2) Internet users were invited to symbolically violate Sarkeesian in cruel pornographic imagery superimposed in her likeness. Players were encouraged to figuratively rape, bash, and generally ill-treat Sarkeesian. The object of the game as posted on the Newgrounds play site, is “Interactive Assault Harassment”. Gamers were urged to “click to hit here” as Sarkeesian is incrementally rendered bruised, bloodied, battered, sexually assaulted, or dead.¹⁹ Under pressure Spurr closed the site, but in a cynical justification of the game he posted that Sarkeesian “wants to use the fact that she was born with a vagina to get free money and sympathy from everyone who crosses her path.”²⁰ When called to account for their actions Sarkeesian’s assailants protested that “it’s just

¹⁹ Bendilin Spurr, “Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian” on Newgrounds.com, accessed December 28, 2012, <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/598591>.

²⁰ Spurr, “Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian”, *ibid*.

a game”.²¹ According to Sarkeesian, her adversaries represented a “cyber-mob of [self-proclaimed] heroes”. They targetted her as the villain who aimed to usurp sexual norms in male dominated cyber spaces. Typical of strategic troll behaviour, the perpetrators of the attacks sought the “praise and approval of their peers”, and “documented the attacks like trophies or achievements”, thus reinforcing each other in an incitement to violence generated in a strategically toxic ethos.²² In *Women as Weapons of War* Kelly Oliver has studied how violent spectacles are often interpreted as “innocent entertainment” or “fun”.²³ At Abu Ghraib in Iraq, for example, US (female) soldiers who had broadcast images of stacked prisoners and naked Iraqis, invoked the defence that they were just joking, merely partaking in innocent fun, or simply playing. Oliver demonstrated that when perpetrating such violences, cries of innocence and ignorant fun are often valorized when she asserted: “To this extent, the media [including the Internet] participates in a pornographic looking that easily leads to trophy-viewing. We make ourselves the heroes of our own stories by rendering the vanquished mere objects for our gaze, and they do the same.”²⁴ Oliver explains how humor which depends on cruelty and the debasement of others, then becomes a tool of dominance, one often projected in the form of sexual trophies that can now be readily broadcast to expansive online audiences.²⁵

Interactive Assault Harassment

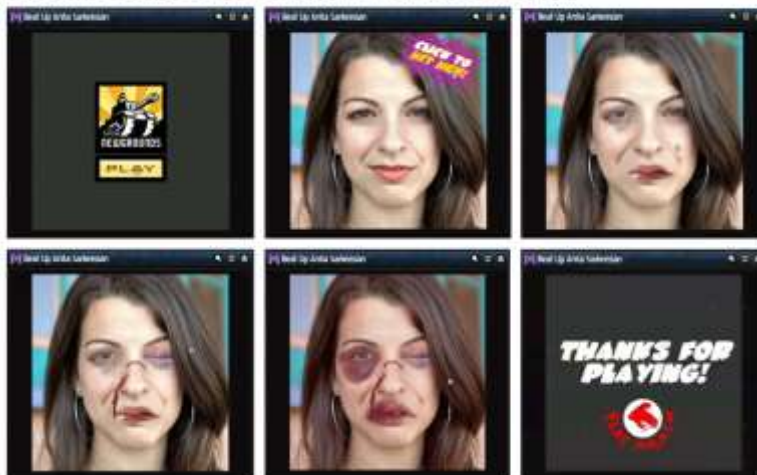


Fig. 2. “Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian” created by Bendilin Spurr on Newgrounds.com, accessed December 28, 2012, <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/598591>.

Was it a joke, though, in 2012 when Australian model and television celebrity Charlotte Dawson attempted suicide, after relentless cyber-harassment? A sometimes controversial host of “Australia’s Top Model”, Dawson was confronted by Twitter users who had orchestrated a formidable crusade against her. Typical of the array of online comments was “excuse me @MsCharlotteD on behalf of NZ we would like you to please GO HANG

²¹ Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen, *ibid.*

²² Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen, *ibid.*

²³ Oliver, Kelly, *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media*, Columbia (New York: University Press, 2007).

²⁴ Oliver, *Women as Weapons of War*, 10

²⁵ Oliver, *Women as Weapons of War*, 69

YOURSELF!!!”²⁶ After Dawson’s suicide attempt one tweet read: “[t]his was a great success. Vapid bitch deserved the raid.”²⁷ According to Jenny Sauers of the *Jezebel* forum: “Trolls sent Dawson grotesque photographs of dead bodies and mocked her for her for not having children.”²⁸ As part of an ongoing approach to deflect the assaults Dawson re-posted the offensive material on her own Twitter site, thus exposing it to her 33,000 plus followers. But in a twist of circumstances, this action had the adverse effect of re-stimulating a massive resurgence of viciousness.²⁹ Dawson then succumbed to the crushing barrage of spite which inspired a final tweet that read: “you win x”. This last tweet was accompanied by an image of Dawson holding the pills on which she later overdosed.³⁰ The *Herald Sun* reported: “It was the relentless and vicious messages that finally broke her. ‘It just triggered that feeling of helplessness when the trolls got to me ... they got the better of me and they won’.”³¹ On recovery (and with an intent to identify those who had maligned her), Dawson confronted her attackers, revealing them on live television asserting that “[t]he message is that if you want that freedom of speech and you want to lash out at people, well, you can be easily traced and if someone wants to find you, they can.”³² A prevalent response by trolls to this style of attack on high profile individuals, is that if one is a public figure, then one should expect—and accept—such treatment as being a legitimate expression of free speech.³³

Attacking high profile women, targetting them as sexually depraved for a laugh, is not a new phenomenon. In *The Satirical Gaze* Cindy McCreery has identified ways in which cruel humor lampooned women in late eighteenth, and early nineteenth century English lithographic prints. Often a woman’s sexuality was disparaged as a political weapon aimed to denigrate men.³⁴ A typical example occurred during the 1784 election in England when a notorious spiteful media campaign raged against the Duchess of Devonshire, a powerful ally of whig parliamentarian Charles Fox. Devonshire, identified as a fashionable and beautiful—but errant—female was targeted as an excessively sexual one, neglecting her “feminine” duties as wife and mother in favour of civic life. Hence, McCreery writes, Devonshire’s public

²⁶ Astrid Wilson, “University left red-faced over Charlotte Dawson Twitter exchange” at HC Online, accessed August 29, 2012, <http://www.hcamag.com/article/university-left-red-faced-over-charlotte-dawson-twitter-exchange-143048.aspx>.

²⁷ Bernard Keane, “Celeb tweeter just collateral damage in online war” in *Crikey*, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/09/03/celeb-tweeter-just-collateral-damage-in-online-war/>.

²⁸ Jenny Sauers, “Next Top Model Judge Hospitalized after Twitter Bullying Leads to Suicide Attempt”, *Jezebel* forum, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/charlotte-dawson-twitter/>.

²⁹ Tanya Heti of Monash University, who admitted to sending a series of abusive messages to Dawson, was temporarily stood down from her position as a mentor at the university. After Heti’s suspension, a barrage of abusive troll postings was directed at Dawson. Heti was eventually reinstated in her position at the university.

³⁰ Jonathon Moran, Ros Reines, “Charlotte Dawson reveals how Twitter trolls sent her into spiral of depression”, September 2, 2012, accessed January 1, 2013, <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/technology/charlotte-dawson-reveals-how-twitter-trolls-sent-her-into-spiral-of-depression/story-fn5izo02-1226463091491>.

³¹ Moran et al., “Charlotte Dawson reveals ...”, *ibid*.

³² *Herald Sun*, “Charlotte Dawson to expose media trolls on Seven News”, accessed January 1, 2013, <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/charlotte-dawson-to-expose-media-trolls-on-seven-news/story-e6frfmyi-1226501631778>.

³³ Dawson’s response to victimization can be viewed at: <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/technology/charlotte-dawson-reveals-how-twitter-trolls-sent-her-into-spiral-of-depression/story-fn5izo02-1226463091491#>, and, confronting the trolls at: <http://au.news.yahoo.com/nsw/latest/a/-/latest/15191781/charlotte-dawson-fights-back-against-twitter-trolls/>

³⁴ Cindy McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

humiliation was deemed to be a legitimate “source of both humour and titillation for male viewers”.³⁵ The satire wrought against Devonshire employed perverse logic whereby fashionable accoutrements feminized her otherwise hypersexualized, yet oddly “masculine”, figure.³⁶ Perhaps the most scurrulous of the prints that degraded Devonshire is an engraving by William Dent in 1784 called *The Dutchess Canvassing for Her Favourite MEMBER*, in which her alleged sexual promiscuity is portrayed as bait to win votes. (Fig 3). We can observe how Devonshire’s hand gropes beneath the apron of a stout (apparently hapless) butcher as she proclaims: “I’ll leave no stone unturned to save the cause”. With scandalously raised skirts revealing her bare calves, the Duchess engages the butcher with her lewd gaze. His elevated apron is fetishistically transformed by Gillray intent on titillating the politically-minded male voyeur.



Fig. 3: William Dent, *The Dutchess Canvassing for her Favourite MEMBER*, 1784, Etching on paper, 22.5 cm x 29.5 cm (trimmed), © Trustees of the British Museum. (Kind courtesy of British Museum)

John Richard Moores has further analyzed how the female body was used as a political weapon in eighteenth-century English prints.³⁷ In contrast to McCreery, Moores’ focus is on ways in which English artists portrayed French women. He has highlighted how pornographic connotations were deployed to deride French women and their male political affiliates, to inflame “rivalry and conflict” between England and France. English artists reflected paternal concerns about the power French women were deemed to hold over influential men, and the possible repercussions in terms of their negative impact on English women. French women were not just derided by artists for their involvement in politics, and intellectual pursuits, but especially for their reputed sexual promiscuity. Notable examples of lampooned powerful women include: Madame Pompadour (confidante and advisor to Louis XV); Joséphine Bonaparte, Napoleon’s first wife; and Thérésa Talien, outspoken socialite at the time of the

³⁵ McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze*, *ibid.*

³⁶ McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze*, 253.

³⁷ John Richard Moores, “Representations of France and the French in English Satirical Prints, c. 1740-1832”, vol. 1:2, PhD dissertation, University of York, England, 2011.

Revolution. Perceived to be independent thinkers, with political wills influencing powerful men, these women were savaged in satirical prints.³⁸ For instance in 1805 in *Ci-devant Occupations; or, Madame Talien and the Empress Josephine Dancing Naked before Barras in the Winter of 1797. - A Fact!* James Gillray ridiculed Joséphine Bonaparte and Thérèse Talien in exotic, erotic terms. In orientalist style he portrayed both women as naked, unruly Salomé-type femmes-fatales, entertaining the drunken politician Vicomte de Barras (Fig. 4). By evoking Egyptian motifs (pyramids and crocodiles), Gillray issues a further warning that Cleopatra had earlier been linked to the downfall of powerful Roman men. Barras, portrayed as a red-faced, flabby drunk, slouches at the feet of Bacchus. The voyeur Napoleon, meanwhile, leers through grand, diaphanous drapery to spy the naked dancing women. At the same time, Napoleon is mocked by the macabre, grimacing skulls of the Revolutionaries stacked high at his feet. The spectacle of the Revolutionaries, still garbed in their red Phrygian liberty bonnets, signals that the presupposed lasciviousness of the women, has the ability to destroy men, and even to precipitate the death of liberty. Moores concludes that the implicit message transmitted by this style of print, is that opinionated French women should be degraded, and that their male associates should be maligned through their connections to deviant females. That the women should be “put back in their place”, otherwise politically strong men risked being deemed emasculated, or being labelled as “weaklings”.



Fig. 4: James Gillray, 1805, *Ci-devant occupations - or - Madame Talien and the Empress Josephine dancing naked before Barras in the Winter of 1797 - a fact!* -, 1805, published by Hannah Humphrey hand-coloured etching and aquatint, paper size 31.4 cm x 46.5 cm. NPG D13042 [Kind courtesy of National Portrait Gallery]

The aesthetic theme of putting women down resonates in Facebook site created by Queensland students Dominic Terry and James Silverwood in 2012. The page, titled *12 year old slut memes*, functioned with an inspiring mission statement that read: “As long as there are sluts we will put them in their place.”³⁹ The site was dedicated to tormenting and vilifying young, identifiable females through simulated sexual abuse and public torment. While one might dismiss the page as the misguided activity of two hyped-up 19 year-olds, it is notable

³⁸ Moores, “Representations of France and the French” 257.

³⁹ Melinda Tankard-Reist, “‘As long as there are sluts we will put them in their place’: QUT students behind ‘12 year old sluts’ FB page”, accessed October 12, 2012, <http://melindatankardreist.com/>.

that in very quick time it attracted in excess of 200,000 Facebook “likes”. This indicated a massive response to an unsophisticated page devoted to tormenting and humiliating young girls. In an edited version of an image from the now defunct site, the girls’ individual identities have been erased. (Fig. 5). It is apparent that young men simulated the act of vomiting onto the girls’ prone bodies, defiling them in their own images hacked by Terry and Silverwood from other social media sites. In the original uncensored version, the girls’ identities were evident, as acknowledged by unabashed fans of the site through comments such as “I know her haha”.⁴⁰ Despite protests to Facebook, its moderators refused to remove the offensive material. Melinda Tankard-Reist wrote that Facebook defended it “on the grounds of free speech and tagging it as ‘controversial humor’.”⁴¹ Terry and Silverwood closed the page, not due to public pressure or remorse prompted by recall to higher ethical standards, but because they could not afford legal costs that threatened them. As a closing statement they thanked their formidable audience, reassuring them that “[a]s long as there are sluts we will put them in their place. Keep the submissions coming guys. We’re not going anywhere.”



Fig. 5: Screenshot: “How Dominic Terry and James Silverwood bully young girls in front of over 200,000 people. We’ve removed the young girl’s image”, available February 3, 2013, <http://melindatankardreist.com/> [identities of Facebook commentators removed by author].

As alluded to in the introduction, there are those who equate cyberspace with a mythological utopian landscape. They uphold it as an ethos in which one can freely express one’s views no matter how distasteful or demeaning to others. This view holds that the Internet provides a perfect place for the mind to roam free in a virtual, boundless world liberated from so-called real-life bodily restrictions. Mary Anne Franks has defined this liberal democratic vision as “cyberspace idealism—the view of cyberspace as a utopian realm of the mind where all can participate equally, free from social, historical, and physical restraints.”⁴² Idealists declare that online aggravation harms no one. Indeed they say that offensive rhetoric is in our

⁴⁰ Tankard-Reist, “As long as there are sluts”, *ibid.*

⁴¹ Tankard-Reist, “As long as there are sluts”, 3.

⁴² Franks, “Unwilling Avatars”, 225.

best interests to stimulate what he or she sees as healthy and vigorous free speech, no matter how malevolent. But the dystopic underbelly of cyberspace involves its victims, women and girls stalked and subjected to malicious hate speech, identified by Franks as “unwilling avatars”. Unwilling avatars emerge when Internet users hijack images of the real life bodies of women and girls, in order to denounce them for narcissistic reasons, “for the purposes of threatening, defaming, or sexualizing them without consent.”⁴³ The appropriation of unwilling avatars signals a particularly malicious form of identity theft. At the same time, villainous avatars are those exacting the abuse. They promote retaliation and incitement to violence against innocent victims targeted for sexual revenge and exploitation.

In 2012 *Gawker* reporter Adrian Chan doxed a celebrated villainous avatar called Michael Brutsch.⁴⁴ Brutsch, a computer programmer from Texas, had operated as an anonymous avatar disguised as “violentacrz”, on the social news website *Reddit* which described him as a master of “creep shots” and “jailbait”. According to GenderTrender, the “creep shots policy [on *Reddit*] was that all photos must be taken unwillingly, without the consent and participation of the women being targeted.”⁴⁵ Whereas creep shots refer to clandestine, lascivious photos of women and girls taken without their consent, then lewdly broadcast online, jailbait signals the inclusion of underage girls. Soraya Chemaly reminds us that to reinforce the impact of salacious identity theft “the use of photography (especially without the subject’s consent) intensifies the harassment, abuse and violence against women.”⁴⁶ In providing instant narratives, photographs serve to “magnify the effects of subtle and real violence along a broad spectrum.”⁴⁷ In response to Brutsch’s activities, a women’s group intent on identifying offenders on the *Reddit* forum, established their own site called *Predditors* as well as reporting suspicious activities to the law. One individual identified by the *Predditors* forum was “a [male] teacher who posted stalkery sexualized photos of his female students—was investigated and fired.”⁴⁸ Michelle Deans reported that when Brusch and his cohorts were identified, in typical troll response they pleaded innocence and were, “they say, merely engaging in the vaunted American tradition of ‘free speech’ which is what makes their activities ‘legal’.”⁴⁹ Thus any reactions against them, such as the *Predditors* site, should be deemed illegal.⁵⁰

⁴³ Franks, “Unwilling Avatars”, 227.

⁴⁴ Adrian Chen, “Unmasking Reddit’s Violentacrez, The Biggest Troll on the Web”, in *Gawker*, October 12, 2012, accessed February 28, 2013, <http://gawker.com/5950981/unmasking-reddits-violentacrez-the-biggest-troll-on-the-web>.

⁴⁵ Gender Trender, “Reddit Child Pornographer Violentacrz Flees”, accessed February 28, 2013, <http://gendertrender.wordpress.com/>, 2.

⁴⁶ Soraya Chemaly, “The 12-Year-Old Slut Meme and Facebook’s Misogyny Problem” in *Huff Post Media*, September 26, 2012, accessed October 20, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/soraya-chemaly/12-year-old-slut-meme-and_b_1911056.html.

⁴⁷ Chemaly, “The 12-Year-Old Slut Meme”, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ GenderTrender, “Reddit Child Pornographer”, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Michelle Deans, “The Story of Amanda Todd” in *The New Yorker*, accessed October 3, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/10/amanda-todd-michael-brutsch-and-free-speech-online.html>

⁵⁰ Despite the fact that western democratic countries has a plethora of codes and regulations enacted to uphold public decency, or to ward off vilification of social groups, and to protect minors, this seems to have little impact in protecting women and girls from online abuse. An example in Brutsch’s jurisdiction is, as Michaelle Deans (*ibid.*) says, the Texas Penal Code that does not condone gaining and transmission of photos “to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person.”

Cyberspace idealists, however, assert that free speech—no matter how malevolent—is sacrosanct. As Franks has further argued: “Cyberspace idealism drastically downplays the Internet’s power to activate discriminatory stereotypes and social scripts.”⁵¹ For the idealist, licentious free expression with all its vagaries and impulses, should be embraced and protected. Erik Ringmar has asserted a liberal view of Internet freedom in *A Blogger’s Manifesto*.⁵² His view is that curtailment of fundamental free speech is a far greater crime than racial intolerance or other online bigotry such as sexism.⁵³ In a more positive sense, Ringmar reminds us as to how we can speak freely online as our own “masters” without recall to official editorial filters or to authorities who inhibit free speech. He has argued that the “Internet revolution is giving voices to the previously voiceless and empowering the previously powerless. For the first time ever there are no editorial filters in place.”⁵⁴ On Ringmar’s view, the crucial overriding democratic principle refers to our total ability to communicate ideas and express our own differing beliefs.⁵⁵ Neil Netanel would agree with Ringmar that this is the most worthy democratic ideal to uphold, and that “private ordering” in cyberspace is the most appropriate form of self-regulation.⁵⁶ And yet it can also be argued that while founding libertarians, such as John Stewart Mill, who proposed in “On Liberty” that the greatest good should benefit most people, the first democratic principle of free speech is that our exclamations should not harm others.⁵⁷

Mill believed that a “harm principle” should apply to our ideals of free expression. To perceive an act of libel as a “harmless wrongdoing” is, for him, a gross contradiction in terms.⁵⁸ On the one hand, in terms of an offence, one is free to harm oneself, while, on the other hand, if that offence conspires to hurt others then a true egalitarian state does not exist. In “The Spirit of the Laws” the philosopher Montesquieu has said that “[w]ords do not constitute an overt act; they remain only an idea. When considered by themselves, they have generally no determinate signification; for this depends on the tone in which they are uttered.”⁵⁹ Montesquieu explored the power of thought and how certain “indiscreet speeches” were construed as high treason, therefore the implementation of extreme punitive measures enacted against reckless words, was unnecessary when milder responses would suffice. Like Mill, however, Montesquieu placed great significance on the connection of words to harm with regard to their impact and potency. In the interest of free speech, to denounce or punish a subject for mere utterances is not just the death of liberty “but even of its shadow”, says

⁵¹ Franks, “Unwilling Avatars”, 226.

⁵² Erik Ringmar, *A Blogger’s Manifesto: Free Speech and Censorship in a Digital World*, (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2007).

⁵³ Ringmar, *A Blogger’s Manifesto*, 109.

⁵⁴ Ringmar, *A Blogger’s Manifesto*, 12.

⁵⁵ Ringmar, *A Blogger’s Manifesto*, 7

⁵⁶ Neil Weinstock Netanel, “Cyberspace Self-Governance: A Skeptical View from Liberal Democratic Theory” in 88 *Cal. L. Rev.* 395 (2000), accessed March 2, 2013, <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/californialawreview/vol88/iss2/8>.

⁵⁷ John Stewart Mill, “On Liberty” in Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., William Benton, 1952) 267-323.

⁵⁸ Mill, “On Liberty”, *ibid*.

⁵⁹ Charles De Montesquieu, “The Spirit of the Laws” in Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., William Benton, 1952) 1-315 (89).

Montesquieu.⁶⁰ At the same time, if our thoughts are enshrined in words and pictures, or when thoughts are put into action, this then merits stronger measures, especially if words and/or actions culminate in harmful behaviour. The symbolic enshrinement of thoughts, when compared to simple utterances, makes meaning more intense, and far-reaching because our thoughts are preserved in permanency. For the fundamentalist, however, scorn preserved in a formidable far-reaching medium, that perhaps Mill and Montesquieu could not have imagined, should only be viewed as an anomaly. Troll diatribes should be tolerated or ignored in an otherwise perfectly functioning utopian community.

The term *utopia* signals a complex mythological state called “no place”.⁶¹ It is a mindscape of a type envisioned by Plato in 380 BC in his Socratic dialectical treatise “The Republic”. Plato’s ideal world centres on a perfect city-state in which he imagined a pacifist landscape in which just men exist in good spirit, in a free world where knowledge and charity are inextricably linked to justice.⁶² It is a fantasy place where boys and girls are educated; one where women and men work side by side for the good of the state. Benjamin Jowett has said that Plato’s “Republic” provided an influential template of this futuristic landscape for later writers such as St Augustine, and the humanist Sir Thomas More.⁶³ Plato, Jowett says, “may be regarded as the ‘captain’ ... or leader of a goodly band of followers.”⁶⁴ In 1516 More resurrected Plato’s theory to inform his own republican discourse called *Utopia*.⁶⁵ Utopia refers to a fantasy island comprising a faultless commonwealth where everything seems right. Personal ownership does not exist, and visionary systems function in tandem with political order and social justice—all in the interests of upholding liberty governed by reason. But as Jowett has further argued, in the “Republic” “[e]very shade of light and dark, of truth, and of fiction which is the veil of truth, is allowable in a work of philosophical imagination.”⁶⁶ Thus he signals that a bleaker, dystopic world emerges as a counterpoint to the idyllic utopian dream. Dystopia is an autocratic, authoritarian regime of imperfection. It is a place where life is difficult and people fight: a tyrannical landscape under surveillance such as that envisioned by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932), or George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

In “Dystopian Female Images in More’s Utopia” Adelaide Serras has shown how dark elements appear in More’s landscape due mainly to sexual asymmetry engendered by male superiority.⁶⁷ She reminds us how in Utopia man is invested as the sexual overlord, and that the prospect of a flourishing liberal democracy in which all are equally free seems very

⁶⁰ Montesquieu, “The Spirit of the Laws”, 89.

⁶¹ “*Utopia*, imaginary and ideal country in *Utopia* (1516) by Sir Thomas More, from Greek *ou* not, no + *topos* place: First Known Use: 1597”, accessed March 2, 2013, “Utopia” at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utopia>.

⁶² Plato, “The Republic” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., Benjamin Jowett trans., *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., William Benton, 1952) 295-441.

⁶³ Benjamin Jowett trans., “Plato ‘The Republic’” on *The Internet Classic Archive*, accessed December 22, 2012, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.1.introduction.html>.

⁶⁴ Jowett, trans., “Plato ‘The Republic’”, *ibid*.

⁶⁵ Thomas More, “Of Their Trades, And Manner Of Life” in *Utopia*, accessed December 24, 2012, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/utopia/more/more05.htm>.

⁶⁶ Jowett, trans. “Plato ‘The Republic’”, intro.

⁶⁷ Adelaide Serras, “Dystopian Female Images in More’s Utopia”, (undated), article accessed December 23, Universidade de Lisboa, dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/1977140.pdf.

optimistic.⁶⁸ The phallogocentric imaginary informing More's dreamscape (ruled by a Senate and headed by a Prince) determines, for example, that women in the trades "for the most part, deal in wool and flax, which suit best with their weakness."⁶⁹ Husbands maintain ultimate power over their wives with the authority to humiliate and punish, or to "correct their wives", as More put it.⁷⁰ As with the Internet utopian dream, the mechanisms of hierarchical gender power function in a "perfected" world where women are under threat. It seems women in utopian landscapes envisaged by men are relegated to subordinate roles, and subjected to male dominion. This, Serras has argued about More's Utopia, produced "a draw back effect in a commonwealth to-be, [and] may introduce a dystopian element in his eutopia, which contradicts the pursuit of happiness purpose for everyone."⁷¹ True freedom cannot exist in Utopia if the patriarchal imagination informs the dream.

For the fundamentalist, the Internet as the ultimate utopian forum is the key to its moral success. In *Cyberethics: Morality and Law in Cyberspace* Richard A. Spinello has argued that calls to impose sanctions against offensive rhetoric online have set the scene for moral indignation. On the one hand, it refuses to entertain curtailment of any form of free speech.⁷² On the other hand, some seek ways to halt unrestricted outpourings of offensive material, but for the idealist, government intervention would only ground the Internet to a halt. It would bind it to the "real" world of sanctions and regulations, thus prohibiting a true flow of free thought. He or she wants cyberspace to function like a unique mindscape subject to its own maxims, creating its own structures, codes and resolutions.⁷³ But as I have argued in this paper, discriminating between "real" and "virtual" worlds signals a troublesome dichotomy; a falsity which implies that disembodied, hateful discourses of villainous avatars have no impact on the daily existences of the women and girls they malign. It is an illusion that cyberspace functions as a transcendental realm beyond the reality of our embodied selves. Rather than it being an ethereal place in which all are treated in equal terms, significant forums have emerged as implicitly gender-biased and abusive. And yet, if we consider that at least at half of the world's population is female, and that one third of the world's population is online, it is astonishing that incitement to hatred, and the vicious abuse of women and girls online, goes relatively unchecked.⁷⁴ This occurs despite abundant human rights treaties and legislations, such as the 1983 Sex Discrimination Act in Australia which states: "The Act gives effect to Australia's

⁶⁸ More, "Of Their Trades", *ibid.*

⁶⁹ More, *ibid.*

⁷⁰ More, *ibid.*

⁷¹ Serras, "Dystopian Female Images", 323.

⁷² Richard A. Spinello, *Cyberethics: Morality and Law in Cyberspace*, ed. 4, (Massachusetts: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2011).

⁷³ Spinello, *Cyberethics*, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ There are some notable restrictions in place, including draconian regulations in China and Iran where autocratic governments in non-democratic states, censor online criticism. There are also international codes enacted against the distribution of child pornography and participation in paedophile chat rooms. Interpol operates across borders, and definitions of cybercrime do exist as in the case of security fraud or terrorism. Spinello reminds us that there is "... CAM-SPAM law in the United States [and] Europeans have been particularly active with their extensive data projection policies and international treaty on cybercrime. As these regulations proliferate, the haze of legal ambiguity in cyberspace will steadily dissipate." Spinello, *Cyberethics*, 28.

obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.”⁷⁵ At the international level, the Charter of the United Nations states:

We the peoples of the United Nations determined ... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained.⁷⁶

For the women and girls whose identities have been appropriated, distorted, and abused online, the utopian paradise of the Internet has become a dystopic hell on earth. Simultaneously, the power of the “freedom of the press” invested in Internet users does provide the possibility for the victims of cyber-stalking to be far-reaching, enabling them to challenge those whose aim it was to incite their destruction. In the end, the licentious axiom of the cyber idealist purports to uphold liberty, but it is a kind of freedom limited to like-minded, mischievous Internet users. They seek to form a formidable spiteful army of villainous avatars whose intent is to destroy others. Therefore they thwart the possibility of true democracy existing in cyberspace.

⁷⁵ “About Sex Discrimination”, Australian Human Rights Commission, accessed March 3, 2013, http://humanrights.gov.au/sex_discrimination/about_sex_discrimination.html.

⁷⁶ “Charter of the United Nations” (excerpt) in “Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women” in *The Human Rights of Women*, Reference Guide to Official United Nations Documents (USA: March, 1998, 3rd printing). Document adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly resolution 34/180 of 18 December 1979, entered into force September 3, 1981, in accordance with article 27 (1). Document accessed March 3, 2013, <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/women/engl-wmn.html#charter>.

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