Maiming the Master: Erotic Body in Segmented Spaces

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Abstract- **This article explores the phenomenon of porn live streaming as a digital reorganisation of erotic space, in which power, desire and embodiment collide via structures of mediation and surveillance. From ideas of the partitioning of space in the thought of Michel Foucault to the reading of desire in Lacanian terms by Slavoj Zizek, it argues that the live-streamed erotic encounter subverts the traditional structure of the master and the slave because it reveals the dependence of mastery on lack. The paying viewer, who seems to be in control of the performer, becomes symbolically maimed by the very mechanisms of visibility and deferral by which pleasure is maintained. The paper considers how the digital screen acts as an apparatus of control and fragmentation, creating the erotic body as a place of performance and critique. Ultimately, it suggests that pornography live-streamed exposes the paradox of modern desire: Mastery lives by dying.**

Keywords: Porn live streaming; digital erotic space; Foucault; Žižek; Lacanian desire; master-slave dynamic; visibility; symbolic maiming

I. INTRODUCTION

In the current digital culture, porn live streaming has become a particularly hotbed where power, desire, and embodiment intersect in complex and often contradictory ways. It reflects a wider cultural shift towards mediated intimacy: the erotic act no longer depends on the face-to-face but takes place in networks of surveillance, transaction and performance. At a first glance the relationship appears to be straightforwardly hierarchical. The audience, through payment and attention, seems to have some control, whereas the performer is positioned in a position of objectified visibility. Yet the more that this apparent mastery is exercised, the more the real paradox lies beneath it. Within what can be termed segmented space, the digitally mediated, bounded space of the screen, the perceived authority of the viewer is destabilised. The master's gaze, it turns out, is dependent upon its own absence, its dependency on the object that it would seek to dominate.

In this case, desire circulates in a state of suspension. Pleasure is no longer connected to possession, instead it is generated by a constant deferral, a movement of desire, which is never quite satisfied. The live stream becomes simultaneously a stage and a trap: a space in which erotic control is simultaneously claimed and subverted, in which power makes itself visible even as it destroys itself even as it claims legitimacy.

This article explores such tension. It positions porn live streaming as a cultural text through which the processes of desire and authority are performed rather than represented. The analysis is based on Foucault's (1977) spatial analytics of power and Zizek's (1989) reading of Lacanian desire in order to understand the construction, destabilization, and reconstruction of the subject who thinks he commands the digital erotic encounter. By analysing online eroticism as a performative and spatial practice, the article traces the shift in visibility brought about by technology now seen as a paradoxical economy: one in which lack as its medium of circulation, rather than mastery, becomes the ultimate medium of pleasure and power.

II. SEGMENTED SPACE AND DIGITAL DISCIPLINE

Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish (1977) has provided an interesting framework for an understanding of the spatial logic of porn live streaming. Foucault conceptualises modern power as not pure force and prohibition but as an intricate system of the organisation of space and regulation of visibility. In his discussion of the panopticon, visibility itself is an exercise of control: individuals internalise surveillance and control their own behaviour within structures designed for the constant observation of them (Foucault, 1977, pp.

201-203). Though his analysis was based on prisons, schools, and hospitals, the logic of his analysis fits neatly into digital culture. As Mathiesen (1997) and Lyon (2006) note, online surveillance is a way of adapting Foucault's observations concerning spaces constructed around the collection of data, attention by algorithms, and mediated interaction (Mathiesen, 1997, p. 223; Lyon, 2006, p. 12).

Porn live streaming is this disciplinary logic acted out digitally. The performer's body is also made into a site of surveillance as well as a mechanism of self-discipline. Keilty (2018) refers to modern pornography which "extends the logic of panopticism into the intimate sphere, transforming sexual performance into a mode of quantified visibility" (p. 225). In such an environment, a digital panopticon is formed by the interaction of the camera, interface and audience: the performer is both subject and object of observation. Every gesture, every adjustment of the frame, every reaction to input from the audience is organized according to protocols of visibility. The performer knows that everything she/he does is being recorded, evaluated and commodified - an example of Foucault's (1977) micro-physics of power. Control is dispersed, subtle and related instead of being centralised.

Visibility is here the exposure and the constraint. Enclosed within the camera frame, the performer is in a "cellular space" that Foucault (1977) describes as partitioned, ordered, designed to maximise observation and minimise resistance (p. 143). The sexual body is converted into the digital screen into a point of governance, where pleasure and performance are indelible from surveillance. The dynamic Paasonen (2021) highlights is this - online sexual labour "renders affect and embodiment into algorithmic visibility, a mode of labour that is as much about being seen as about doing" (p. 44). The performer is not restricted physically but through technological and affective demands - the mandate to be seen, desirable and responsive.

But the viewer, the putative master of this system, is equally fettered. The digital interface that mediates the erotic act is a regulator for access, desire and participation. This asymmetry is similar to McClintock's (1995) idea of the "imperial gaze" which creates a sense of mastery through distance and this dependence on the objectified other (p. 23). The viewer's feeling of being in control is an

illusion, mediated only via screens; comments, payments, and interactions influence the performance only indirectly. Preciado's (2013) idea of "pharmacopornography" neatly explains this dynamic: In our current visual economies we are subject to control through prosthetic mediation and affective labour instead of direct physical domination (pp. 39-41).

The gaze is the dominant because it cannot touch. Williams (1989) calls this a "scopic regime," in which pleasure is gained through sight rather than having (p. 44). This condition is all the more severe in live streaming: in real-time, the more you want something, but because it's digital, you can't have it. Crary (1990) holds that modern visuality is inherently disciplinary in the way that the subjects are structured through patterns of looking which simultaneously empower and constrain them (p. 18). The live-stream pornographic encounter is the epitome of this duality: the screen frames the viewer's field of power, an illusion of power based on separation, repetition, and deferral.

Mastery, then, exists via distance. The architecture that allows power fragments it at the same time. Performer and viewer alike are placed in a system of mediated visibility: the performer disciplines himself, while the viewer exerts his control (only by abstraction and delay). This is a reciprocity that mirrors Foucault's (1977) perception of the relational nature of power, which is never constant and fixed, rather constantly negotiated in webs of observation and resistance (p. 27). Porn live streaming takes this logic and puts it into digital form, making it a kind of microcosm of late modern power - in which surveillance, desire, and exposure are all brought together into one, spatialized economy of the gaze.

III. DESIRE WITHOUT OBJECT: ŽIŽEK AND THE LOGIC OF LACK

Slavoj Žižek's reinterpretation of Jacques Lacan's theory of desire offers a compelling lens through which to examine the paradoxes of porn live streaming. Building on Lacan's assertion that desire is structured around lack, Žižek emphasizes that desire never seeks a tangible, attainable object but instead revolves around the void that constitutes subjectivity itself. As Lacan (2006) observes, "desire is a metonymy" (p. 289), a ceaseless motion sustained by that which it cannot capture. Žižek

(1997) refines this insight into a theory of ideological enjoyment, suggesting that "desire's object is merely the fantasy that masks the void of the Real" (p. 66). Within this framework, the erotic encounter is less about fulfillment than it is a performance of impossibility.

In the realm of porn live streaming, this theoretical apparatus illuminates how digital mediation transforms desire into spectacle. The erotic object—the performer—appears in real time, interactive and seemingly accessible. Yet, as Williams (1989) argues in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, pornography is fundamentally "about seeing the impossible" (p. 30). The performer's body is visually available but remains untouchable. The immediacy of the live stream intensifies this paradox: viewers witness events as they unfold, yet they remain separated from them, mediated by the screen. Presence becomes a function of distance, where proximity magnifies the awareness of absence. Paasonen (2021) notes that "digital pornography's liveness is always haunted by its delay" (p. 117), revealing how latency—both technical and affective—sustains desire by perpetuating absence.

This interplay of presence and absence animates what Lacan terms *jouissance*, a pleasure that transcends satisfaction, where fulfillment borders on pain. Žižek (1991) describes it as "the paradoxical pleasure of the very impossibility of satisfaction" (p. 9). In live-streaming contexts, *jouissance* emerges through repetitive engagement: tipping, commenting, and viewing operate as rituals of deferred gratification. Audiences pay not for consummation but for the illusion of proximity to the unattainable, participating in an experience that cannot be completed. Wark (2019) frames the interface as a "vector of desire" (p. 57), a mechanism that channels longing into circulation, transforming lack into an economic force. Each click, each transaction, enacts a choreography of absence, emphasizing that desire is not for the performer but for the structural deferral that frames the encounter.

Mediation thus does more than transmit desire; it produces it. In digital eroticism, desire becomes algorithmic, cultivated through interfaces that monetize delay and anticipation. Banet-Weiser (2018) observes in *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* that digital economies thrive on "affective labor that performs

intimacy while withholding its reality" (p. 82). The live-streamed encounter transforms absence into value: the more inaccessible the object, the more consumable it becomes. In this light, Žižek's notion of desire without object finds its most literal expression in digital pornography, where the object of desire is not the body on display but the mediated lack that structures the entire exchange.

IV. REVERSING THE MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC

Within the complex dynamics of live streamed erotic performance the relationship between viewer and performer simultaneously reflects and destabilises the master-slave dialectic of Hegel. Mastery, Hegel (1977) reminds us, is never simply power but rather it exists as a relation that is constituted through the process of recognition, dependence and labour (pp. 112-118). The live stream interface creates a similar paradox: the paying audience seems to command: as it does, however, the command cannot be separated from an infrastructure and set of practices that bind the viewer to both performer and platform. This interdependence is made tangible by empirical research on camming. As Jones (2020) discovers in his fieldwork, platformized exchanges, including tips, requests, and rituals on the screen, generate asymmetrical intimacy. Users may be able to feel in control, but economic and affective dependency is created for both parties at the same time (Jones, 2020, p. 230-233). What appears to be sovereign distance is in reality a close-knit web of mutual dependence.

This illusion of control is intensified with the design of the platform. Taylor's (2018) ethnography shows that the immediacy, interactivity and performative responsiveness produce in viewers a felt sense of influence: a gesture, a shout-out or private message tends to follow monetary or normative action, creating the feeling of efficacy (pp. 45-58). Yet Taylor emphasises the ways in which this immediacy is mediated and contextualised through the medium of algorithms, constraints within interfaces and economic imperatives. The agency of the viewer is formed and channelled by design (rather than historic reciprocity). Van Doorn's (2017) analysis of Chaturbate makes the same point: while tipping economies and rankable performer metrics act to simulate exchange, structural power rests squarely in the hands of platform rules and

logics of monetization (p. 214). A tip can specialize in an gesture, but does the gesture itself, that is scripted. viewer command in performative and not causal.

Psychological work on parasocial interaction helps to understand the compellingness of these gestures. Horton and Wohl (1956) do demonstrate that mediated performers are able to evoke features of real interpersonal encounters - familiarity, direct address, and perceived reciprocity - even for structurally one-sided relationships (pp. 215-219). Studies of digital sex work build on this insight. Webcam performers develop intimacy - eye contact, personalised nicknames, direct address - because these cues increase the illusion of reciprocity and invite repeat interaction (Jones, 2020; Patella-Rey, 2021). Here, affective labor turns mediated distance into a commodity: viewers don't pay for authentic connection - for as long as a perception of being seen is maintained, one of structural asymmetry.

The technological and economic understanding of these platforms locks in this dynamic. Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism explains how platforms extract from people behaviour data and attention, which it converts into predictable and monetizable streams of action (pp. 27-34). Porn live stream platforms operate on the same principle of desire turned into repeatable transactions through leaderboards, token economies and automated notifications. Platform architecture converts intimacy into quantifiable numbers - followers, tokens, hours watched, rankings (Patella-Rey, 2021; van Doorn, 2017). This viewer pleasure is made dependent not on mastery or mutual exchange but on patterns of repetition and quantifiable engagement.

Every gesture is mediated. Empirical research has been documented to record the delay between request and response, the regular use of prearranged sequences, and the widespread performative scripting (Jones, 2020,pp. 238-244; Patella-Rey, 2021, pp. 56-62). Satisfaction comes not from consummation but from deferment. Pleasure is created by repetition -- through the ritualization of request, response, and renewed desire -- rather than control. The more investment (financial and emotional) is made by the viewer, the more invested is he or she, in a system set up to deny closure, reinforcing the fantasy of mastery and every bit undermining it.

This structural withholding is what creates what may be termed a symbolic erosion of mastery. Segmented interfaces - separate windows, private shows, token syon, control into exposure (Williams, 1989, pp. 29-36). The master's gestures - the clicks, comments, payments - are equally forms of evidence of agency, forms of data for the platform, and forms of cue to the labor of performers. This apparent viewer sovereignty goes up in smoke into a web of mediated dependencies. In both Hegelian terms, the master relies on the slave to obtain his recognition and, in the case of camming, the apparent master relies on the (performer) labor, (platform) architecture, and continually acts of consumption to sustain the illusion of command (Hegel, 1977, pp. 116-117; Jones, 2020, pp. 88-95).

Thus, the porn encounter live-streamed is a reversal of Hegelian polarity. The power of viewers is conditional, performative and fragile. The interface produces the sense of control and confines participants into cycles of repetition and dependency at the same time. Empirical studies of camming, theories of parasocial intimacy, and criticisms of platform capitalism combine to illustrate the nature of mastery in this situation: it is a fleeting thing, one that occurs only for as long as the continued existence of the system is assured by the ongoing participation of people who sustain their systems of co-extraction by viewing.

V. THE SYMBOLIC WOUND: SCREEN, FRAGMENTATION, AND REFLECTION

The destabilisation of mastery in porn live streaming comes not by overt physical coercion but through symbolic and perceptual fragmentation. The digital screen works in a paradoxical way as both conduit and barrier: it allows access and, at the same time, where it separates. As Paasonen (2021) notes, online pornography reconceptualizes the body as "a visualized assemblage of gestures and postures" reducing corporeality to discrete and consumable units through digital mediation (p. 53). In this context the erotic body - transformed into pixels and mediated signals - is no longer coherent; at once present and abstracted, acted out and commodified. This fragmentation resonates Mulvey's (1975) concept of fetishistic disavowal in the cinematic gaze in which the classical cinema organises visual pleasure around an object of desire carefully controlled and mediated (p. 13). Live-streamed

pornography, however, amplifies this disavowal: it is no longer the mere visual, then, but the transactional, which can't be separated from economic engagement.

Paradoxically, overexposure destroys authority by showing the viewer's reliance on the mediated system. The screen no longer operates as a transparent window; rather, it brings to the fore the mechanisms that support desire (Williams, 1989, p. 44). The erotic encounter develops into a sort of permanent feedback circuit: The performer and the audience interact in a reciprocal visibility that is necessary for their self-definition, but this visibility is always incompleteness itself. As Williams (1989) further states, the "frenzy of the visible" produces pleasure which is inseparable from absence and deferral (p. 29). Similarly, Paul (2015) highlights the materiality of the screen - its framing, interface and liveness - as creating a constant tension between closeness and inaccessibility (p.101).

Desire, therefore, is destabilized not by the corporeal presence of the performer but by architecture of digital mediation itself and its prosperity on incompleteness, latency and repetition. The screen presents mastery in the form of a shattering show: the viewing gaze of the viewer, a symbol of control, is turned back on itself, revealing the structural and affective limitations of the subject.

VI. EROTICISM, POWER, AND DIGITAL SELF-DISPOSSESSION

Porn live streaming is a good example of the reconfiguration of erotic power in late capitalism, where the body is at the same time commodified and problematized as the site of critique. As Jones (2020) notes, cam and other forms of pornography performed live online commodify intimate labor into a marketable spectacle; where visibility, affective labor, and emotional responsiveness are commodified; where pleasure, in this sense, is inseparable from technological and economic mediation (pp. 88-95). What might seem like simple consumption is, in fact, the form of self-dispossession: the viewer's satisfaction is dependent on subjection to a system whereby desire is organised around absence and lack. In parallel, Zuboff (2019) argues that digital platforms monetize attention and affect and that this creates what she calls "behavioral surplus," which translates into and redirects subjective engagement into economic value and erotic consumption that links dependence rather than mastery (pp. 34-36).

The erotic body live streamed is not simply reproducing established hierarchies of power, but destabilising them. Ostensible mastery is made dependent - conditional on the viewer's repeated submission to the economy of the platform. Each interaction (a tip, comment or showing of appreciation) serves simultaneously as an enactment of authority and an exercise of structural dependence. Williams's (1989) analysis of visual pleasure in pornography brings out the fact that erotic media are structured by absence and deferred gratification, resulting in what Lacan calls jouissance, a pleasure inextricably related to impossibility and lack of closure (pp. 29-31). Watching, in this mediated context, becomes an unstable action: the looking eye that tries to control the goals of the power struggle meets its own shortcoming, and paying action is the acknowledgement of absence rather than fulfilment.

In this mediated erotic sphere, it is the dynamics of pleasure that are transformed from possession to the circulation of lack. The live-streamed encounter makes visible Lacan's (2006) theorization of the impossibility of the sexual relation: no amount of visual or transactional mediation is able to fill the structural gap that separates desire from fulfilment (pp. 288-291). The screen, as a spatial partition, turns this structural impossibility into just the condition of pleasure. The undoing of the master is not a failure of authority but a revelation of its constitutive fragility; in digital eroticism, mastery prevails only by putting the systematized perpetuation of absence and deferment through retention-neutrality in its positive requiring that power stays in existence by doing that very thing of its own undoing.

VII. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of porn live streaming is one example of the radical shifts that digital technologies force upon erotic experience, and place desire in complex matrices of mediation, surveillance, and economic exchange. As Paasonen (2021) observes, online erotic labour makes a body hyper-visible and commodified at once: corporeal and affective labour is no longer a matter of immediacy and privacy but is organised through platform affordances and algorithmic regulation (pp. 53-54). Yet the seeming

authority given the viewer is fundamentally unstable. The very mechanisms that promise control, screens, paywalls and interactive features, transform mastery into dependency, interaction into repetition and instantaneous access into never-ending deferment too.

The interplay of the two forces of power and resistance are further clarified through Foucault's (1977) study of disciplinary space in conjunction with Zizek's (1991) theory of desire without object. Foucault's comments on segmentation, enclosure and surveillance are indicative of how the performer's body is made legible, governable and tractable, and the viewer's freedom is curtailed - "not so much by human supervision as by technological architectures and economic imperatives" (pp. 143-146). Based on Lacan, Zizek emphasises that desire is organised around lack and not fulfilment because the erotic object is never entirely there, and the erotic charm of that object comes precisely from the lack of presence in structure (Zizek, 1991, p. 9). The live-streamed body, therefore, performs a kind of symbolic destabilization by the supposed mastery of the viewer: his or her supposed mastery is simultaneously performed and undone, displaying dependence, incompleteness, and provisional authority.

Porn live streaming in this sense is not only the depiction of eroticism, but its theorization. Through such fractured screens, mediated glances, choreographed gestures, and orchestration of deferred pleasure, it enables the staging of the paradox of liberal subjectivity today, that I strive to inhabit, lacking is to attempt to be master to face the symbolic limitation. The digital erotic body becomes a critical lens through which one might examine the instability of power, the circulation of desire and the mediated conditions of pleasure in late capitalism. As such, the pornography can be live-streamed not only as an expression of modern structures of authority and subjection, but also their constitutive and evident fragility, that the act of looking, which has been a symbol of the exercise of mastery, becomes inseparable from the recognition of absence.

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