

Thomas Klupp

9 to 5 Hardcore

(Extract from a novel)

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

I can't say I've developed a particular attitude to online pornography over the past few months. That may be – no, definitely is, in fact – what's expected of me. Prof. Faulstich in particular expects it of me, but I can't do her the favour. To my regret – to be perfectly honest, career-motivated regret – I haven't got one step further in terms of attitude than back when I was just a perfectly normal porn consumer. The fact that I've seen more porn since April of this year than any other person on the planet – and I mean: than really *any* other person on the planet, including all the directors, cameramen and editors at the major production companies in San Fernando Valley, California, USA – doesn't do anything to change my basic conviction. The conviction that the explicit portrayal of sexual intercourse awakens the viewer's interest even for purely evolutionary reasons.

Now, what I just said isn't quite true. Firstly, I've seen more porn in the past few months than *almost* every other person on the planet. The exception, the sole, annoying, in fact incredibly threatening exception for me and my future, is my colleague Uschi Seidel. Seidel keeps staunchly abreast with me, doubtless also for career reasons, when it comes to porn consumption. She does so despite a congenital visual impairment. Minus eight in her left eye, minus six in the right one, as she recently revealed to me. Without her bottle-bottom existentialist glasses, she could barely distinguish a computer monitor from a microwave at a distance of half a metre, let alone a woman's face from her genitalia, but there are plenty of opticians in this country. And eye drops too. If I were a less scrupulous person I'd add drain cleaner to the eye drops she keeps in the top desk of her drawer, but I'm just not tough enough in the

interpersonal sphere for that. No. There's nothing I can do but acknowledge Seidel's performance, take it as an incentive in fact, and navigate my own way through the web at maximum speed.

Secondly, and this too is unsettling, my attitude to porn has actually changed in a certain respect. Although the word attitude doesn't quite hit the right spot. Let me put it like this: Since taking on the job, I've developed certain preferences. Scenic preferences, to be precise. I've noticed that female genitalia and particularly the vagina itself play an ever-increasing role in my thoughts. Naturally, I used to think about vaginas every now and then before. Who doesn't, with the exception of asexuals and children? But I usually used to think about certain women's vaginas, the vagina as part of these particular women. Me, the woman and her vagina or me in the vagina of a certain woman – that was a unit in my imagination, a libidinous knot that is now slowly but surely beginning to unravel. As if a talented surgeon were removing the organ from the woman and implanting it on the inside of my skull – that's more or less what it feels like up there.

As unsettling as this development is, it does have its reasons. Primarily, I suppose, it's because around five-dozen close-ups of shaven or at least partly shaven vaginas flash out at me from the screen of my work computer on a day-to-day basis. The pale pink of the organ stretched out towards me offensively, at times even aggressively, the cylindrical contours of the constantly swollen clitoris, the entire 2-D pastel landscape of the female genitalia, framed by fingernails varnished in shades of mother-of-pearl and guaranteed to be shining moistly – you can count on that. This scene, this appetizer, if you like, is an all-time-favourite on all the websites I've documented. Bearing this in mind, wouldn't it be even more disturbing if I *never* thought about the vagina as such? Isn't it actually in my favour, for me and my character I mean, that I pay this particular scene – and not other, very different scenes – slightly too much attention? Believe me, you don't want to know all the other things I have to look at, take my word for it.

So this is my, or rather our job. We, Uschi Seidel and I, sit at our computers for a minimum of eight hours a day in Room 101 of the Cultural Studies Institute at Potsdam University and research ‘Staging Strategies of the Explicit in Mainstream Online Western Pornography’. Although in fact, right now we’re not researching anything yet. Right now we’re still in the documentation phase. We’re clicking through the archives of three popular free porn sites and noting down whatever we come across there in the control sheets opened up on our desktops. We note positions, camera angles and field size, but also hair colours, styles and shaving and any tools & toys used. It may sound like a bed of roses, but it’s not. Every website we document has a minimum of fifteen categories, from *A* for *anal* through *M* for *milf* to *V* for *voyeur*, with about twenty photo series per category, each consisting of twenty individual photos. In sum total, that adds up to 6000 pictures per site. 6000 pictures that are updated every day. 6000 pictures, per day, times three.

If there’s one thing I’ve realised over the past months – although I can’t speak for Seidel – then it’s this: Somewhere out there, somewhere beyond the monitors, people are really fucking; fucking and filming and cutting and uploading. Somewhere out there, people are at it with a consistency that I find rather depressing, just between you and me. Not because my own sex life is particularly depressing. Or in fact, since I started the job my sex life has been pretty depressing, but that’s by the by. That’s not the point. What I find depressing is the mere undertaking of bracing myself against this tide of images day after day, confronting this hardcore overkill head on as it mushrooms by the second. Sometimes I see Seidel and me as two half-blind scouts, spying on the virtual tracers of a billion-dollar high-tech industry. We’re cavemen armed with clubs, squaring up to a fleet of Stealth Fighters. Before we’re even capable of swinging our clubs, we’ve long since been pulverised down to our atoms by our opponent’s remote-controlled weapons systems.

As if that weren't enough, it's not only the mass of images, let alone the brain-chewing monotony of the same scenes over and over again, that depresses me. No, I've got used to that. What really puts me in a bad mood at times is the study design itself. I'm talking about the fact that we're documenting photographic pornography. Photographic pornography, for God's sake! What do you reckon, how many of the approximately half a billion porn users worldwide bother undoing their flies to pass the time with photos? Do you? I doubt it. Like every halfway normal human being, you too carry out targeted online searches for services in the field of filmic pornography. That's what we call it here: filmic pornography. In other words, you too scour the web for videos, entering youporn.com or porntube.com in the address line of your browser at generally shorter and shorter intervals – and not freepicseries.com, slutsgate.com or public-pussy.com, like I do.

But still. Despite the adversities accompanying my professional activity, I would like to state: I love this job. I have to say – what a godsend of a job. What an incredible godsend of a job! Like every fresh Cultural Studies graduate, I'd come to accept the fate of long years on unemployment benefits or – even worse – a series of demeaning begging positions in the so-called cultural sector, shattering my self-esteem with extreme brutality. I'd envisioned myself as an intern to the assistant to the deputy head of PR for the Coburg Long Night of Short Films, as a second lighting assistant on the thousandth obscure cable-only documentary on Russian white slave-traders, or – the worst-case scenario – as one of those desperate start-up entrepreneurs who spend years flogging ideas that absolutely nobody on the planet will ever need, only to give up in my mid-thirties and start a teaching degree while hallucinating towards my parents' inheritance and simultaneous death. Until recently, scenarios like these even haunted me in my dreams, and I'm not the dreaming type. Honestly, I never normally dream. About anything whatsoever. I'm a realist, and as such I know what life entails: paying constant farewells to visions you once had of yourself and your future, uninterrupted downwards relativizing of what you used to

demand of yourself, and permanent betrayal of earlier ideals – which in reality weren't ideals at all, but teenage aberrations of the worst kind.

From this perspective, every blowjob I document, every gangbang I register, every cumshot I note, every click on another picture means simply one small step towards permanent a contract. At least towards a possible permanent contract. And this possible permanent contract could be followed at some point, if everything goes smoothly, by civil servant status. A civil servant in the bosom of my alma mater, in other words a licence to think as much idiocy as possible, a fixed income, a brightly lit office on campus and – last but not least – seminar rooms full of permanently renewed generations of young female students, 3-D updates of themselves if you like, who will never get older than twenty-seven, while I myself stride on towards old age, ill health and death.

I'm talking, and I've no doubt you'll agree with me, about paradise on earth in job terms. I'm talking about the promised land, and unlike so many others, I'm not just seeing it from a distance, but have already entered it. I mean: here I am. Officially, even with my name on the door. *Robert Thaler, Research Associate, Section II, Cultural Studies Institute*, it says in black letters on the square plexiglass sign outside Room 101. Here I am, and I swear I'm never going to leave the place. Or rather, if it was up to me I'd never leave the place. In actual fact the situation isn't quite as rosy as that. In actual fact the situation is: the two half-time positions that Seidel and I are occupying right now, as Prof. Faulstich informed us right at the beginning of our project, will be melded into a single full-time position in the near future, and it's rather unlikely that I'll get that position. To be honest, no one here at the institute would bet as much as a cent on me getting it.

The problem isn't so much that Seidel's younger and, I assume, more intelligent than me as well. No, both factors I could live with. Unlike in the real world, in the academic world youthfulness isn't the only thing that matters. And certainly, this time just like in the real world,

intelligence doesn't matter. On the contrary: the ability to nip one's own thoughts in the bud and instead adopt and paraphrase professorial opinions without question is a key skill here. I certainly don't know anybody on the mid-level faculty who didn't use this strategy to get precisely there, to the mid-level faculty. If that were all that was needed, I'd have the best prerequisites to make the running.

The actual problem, the grave problem is something else: Uschi Seidel is a woman. She's a woman, and that's a serious factor. It's as if we were running a hurdle race, only my penis is fastened to Dr. Huber's washing machine. Dr. Huber is our university equal opportunities officer, and she takes meticulous care that 'female applicants are to be favoured in the event of equal suitability.' She does so even though she debunks the idea of a clearly defined gender identity as reactionary and strictly negates it in her very own doctoral dissertation. Dr. Huber. Dr. Heike fucking Huber! The woman embodies the entire lunacy of our world, and if I were easily impressed I'd throw in the towel simply because of her mere existence. But that's not my style. I believe in my chance, as slim as it may be, and I even have my reasons. Three reasons, to be precise.

Firstly: there's always the possibility that Seidel might fall ill or pregnant or something along those lines in the foreseeable future. She wouldn't be the first dropout at the institute. Staff are constantly disappearing here for the most opaque reasons, suddenly gone as if they'd never been here, and nobody gives two hoots about them any more. Why shouldn't that happen to Seidel too? She has her visual impairment and she's often complained of migraines from the computer screen. Plus she's been with her boyfriend for an eternity and she turns thirty in December. Who knows where her thoughts wander in the midnight hour? A little accident, a little baby accident, is certainly within the realm of the imaginable.

Secondly: my looks. I am, there's no other way to put it, obscenely attractive. Think Colin Firth as a young man, think Colin Firth in the

sexiest scenes in *Pride & Prejudice*, and you'll have a pretty good idea of my face. Doe-brown, incredibly attentive-looking eyes, above them a high forehead crowned with dark spiral locks. Plus intelligent, finely cut features and a fine-pored, pleasantly pale but by no means sickly pale complexion. My face, as I've established on numerous occasions in the past, has a similar effect on my surroundings as a black hole. Most people who come close to it can never tear themselves away. I hope and pray that Prof. Faulstich, whose research interests include not only pornography but also aesthetics, has also had this experience.

Thirdly, and this may well be my greatest trump card: my commitment. My literally breakneck commitment to the institute's interests and projects. In other words: nobody here watches nearly as much porn as I do, not even Uschi Seidel. Her working day ends at precisely the point when she closes Internet Explorer and saves her last control sheets on the hard drive. Mine doesn't. Like her, I click my way through the sites to the point of exhaustion, until the pictures on the monitor blur into flesh-coloured expanses, and after that... after that I carry on. I strip off my researcher existence and make myself available to Prof. Faulstich as a test subject. It only takes a jiffy. I open the *Faulstich-Pedersen* folder on my desktop, click on one of the hardcore videos saved for me in there and activate *Ariadne*, an advanced piece of Danish documentation software. With the aid of the software, I produce what's known as development diagrams during my viewing sessions. Lust diagrams would be the better name. The professor's question is this: how much lust do I feel during which scenes? Where are my lust peaks, where are my lust plateaus? And how does my lust curve look over the entire length of the video? The measurement method is foolproof, practically designed for toddlers. All I have to do is press one of the ten number keys every fifteen seconds – 9 stands for maximum lust, 0 for absolutely no lust – and at the end *Ariadne* generates my personal lust graph.

Please note that it's about lust, not about arousal. Any erections occurring during the viewing sessions play only a subordinate role. She's

not interested in the reaction of my corpus cavernosum, the professor has told me more than once, but in the lust in my mind. Inside your skull, Thaler – to quote her exact words – that’s where we want to go. I just nodded and refrained from any further questions. Even without being able to reconstruct her distinction in all its subtleties, I know what she’s talking about. In actual fact I myself, my body, am the best example. I’ve noticed – more and more often recently – that my penis dangles between my legs like a loose cable even during the hardest and most complicatedly produced sex scenes, while at other moments, for instance when I look at myself in the mirror in the institute toilets or clean my ears with a cotton bud, it displays humongous reactions.

But lust vs. arousal and my penis’ reactions aside: I’m plagued by very different concerns while I watch the videos. What’s particularly unsettling is that the measurements aren’t only concerned with my own feelings of lust. Prof. Faulstich is collaborating on the study with the Copenhagen-based sexual psychologist Prof. Inga Pedersen, who has gathered a group of porn addicts around her at her institute. Men who compulsively rip off their trousers at the very sight of a modem, men who’d sell their own mother to the devil for five minutes online, men who’ve fled into the hands of therapists of their own free will. These men – and this is the potentially breakneck part of my commitment – watch exactly the same videos under exactly the same conditions as I do. And then the professors compare our results. They want to determine differences in feelings of lust between psycho-pathologically conspicuous and psychologically stable porn consumers. Heaven knows what they expect to get out of it, but the whole thing makes me nervous. What if, I keep asking myself, what if my lust curves correspond exactly with those of the Danish porn addicts? What would that say about me? And even worse: what impression – never mind academic objectivity – might that make on the professor?

Back at the beginning of the study I’d have given my little finger to get hold of the Copenhagen curves, but now I take a more relaxed view. For

one thing, I'm becoming more and more aware of the positive effects, above all of my close, one might say even intimate contact with the professor. As unsettling as a comment like that about my corpus cavernosum may be at the first moment, it can ultimately be interpreted as a sign of increasing familiarity between the two of us. Or that's how I interpret it anyway. And for another thing, I've been spending entire nights over the past few weeks on various self-help forums, where armadas of porn addicts chat about their consumption behaviour. It's characteristic of the hard cases, the comments suggest, that they click through dozens of simultaneously opened videos at top speed, in a constant search for the next cumshot. Sperm-driven speed-zapping is what the Swedish user Ole B. called it. To dissociate myself from this type of behaviour, I enter my lust peaks mostly at lesbian scenes, (simulated) female orgasms and the occasional slow blowjob. I've reserved keys 0 to 5 for gangbang and cumshot sequences, on the other hand. I'm confident that *Ariadne* generates curvatures on the basis of these values that contradict the Danish charts. Curvatures that suggest an effeminated, possibly slightly inhibited but certainly morally upstanding porn consumer. That's how I want to come across to the professor, that's how I imagine it, ideally.

All in all, my strategy seems to be working. At least, nobody has objected to my curves so far. Or rather, nobody but Uschi Seidel. Only last Friday, she caught me by the hot beverages vending machine in the institute cafeteria, and I suspect she chose the site deliberately to lend our conversation a casual tone. While I was getting my tenth cappuccino or so out of the machine, she sidled up to me, fumbling at her spectacles, only to assault me with her concerns as if out of the blue. She wasn't quite sure, she said into the vending machine's hissing, whether it was methodologically correct for me to help the professor out as a test subject. In fact, she claimed to be wondering whether one ought to even take my data into account in the evaluation. She herself was apparently in no state to make cogent statements on her feelings of lust after eight hours of documentation work. In fact she felt in no state to make cogent

statements on anything at all. She felt simply like death warmed up after work. Now be honest Robert, she said in an almost pally tone, isn't it exactly the same with you?

Clever old Uschi Seidel. She knows which way the wind's blowing. She's trying to undermine my commitment with methodological critique, and get the odd incriminating statement out of me on top. But she hasn't reckoned with me. I know all the tricks. I smiled at her, steaming cappuccino cup in hand, and advised her to voice her concerns directly to the professor. That shut her up. She knows as well as I do that Prof. Faulstich would quash all her objections. Not because they aren't justified. God knows they are. Every time I open one of the videos I go through exactly the experience she described. The experience of a whole load of Technicolor pictures of copulating couples and groups flickering across the screen, each one of which generates as much or as little lust in me as the next. But that's not the point. The point is that eight out of ten students at our institute are women. And the men – a third of whom are gay, at a conservative estimate, and therefore irrelevant from the data point of view – aren't exactly queuing up to send their curves to Denmark. They're even more scared of Pedersen's porn crew than I am. Quite simply, the professor needs every available man to complete the data collection.

And even that's only part of the truth. The other, far more significant part is this: the professor – like every other humanities academic on the planet – doesn't really care how her data comes about, as long as they *do* come about. Data, one mustn't forget, are our currency. Data mean cash flow in our world. Data, especially evaluated data, bring follow-up studies and thus new project applications. The applications tap into fresh funding sources, which flush further financial means into the institute budget, which in turn are used to create jobs. Jobs that are taken on in order to – precisely – generate new data. All research means is simply keeping the place running. Everything else is beside the point, and methodological inconsistencies don't really make a great difference.

Particularly bearing in mind that our studies – albeit just like all studies in every sub-area of the humanities – are about as societally relevant as brochures on rabbit-breeding. To be perfectly honest, nobody outside of the universities gives a flying fart about what we have to say. No one out there ever reads a single sentence we put on paper. And that's not just my opinion. Every humanities academic who's not completely mendacious will confirm what I just said is an empirically assured fact.

Of course, you can complain about the situation. In fact some of my colleagues here at the institute do little else, but I'm not one of them. Or only to keep up appearances. Every now and then I join in their chorus of laments – especially to out myself to these colleagues, who include Dr. Huber for example, as one bound by a common suffering. As one apparently ground down just like them by the subjective burden of our own insignificance. These occasional laments, these spontaneously belted out arias of bitterness, are no great effort for me. Essentially, the knowledge of my own insignificance is one of the few convictions I have, perhaps in fact my only conviction. With the difference, however, that I don't find it a burden. Quite the opposite. I thank God every day that society doesn't take the slightest interest in me and my views and I have the privilege of hiring myself out as its badly paid but at least paid observer. Whereby the word observer (not to mention the word scientist) doesn't quite hit the spot. I see myself more as a speculator. *Master of Cultural Speculation* Robert Thaler, that's what I'd have written on my degree certificate. At least I would have done in a sincere world.

I – and by the way Uschi Seidel too, who even openly admits it – both of us experience it anew day after day. Every time we click through the web archives and find ourselves staring at one of the pictures for even a fraction of a second too long, the observing cuts out and the speculating kicks in. It doesn't just happen with photos where we have to think a bit longer about field sizes and perspectives or whether we're dealing with a gangbang or more of a group orgy. No, it happens with perfectly clear and simple representations too – for instance a close-up of a spread

vagina with threads of sperm seeping out of its opening. With scenes like this, my synapses start firing on all cylinders, shredding the idea of mere observation to pieces like a slice of moist bread. What, I ask myself as I stare at the monitor with reddened eyes, what exactly am I looking at here? Am I, as the simpler minds at the institute claim, actually looking at merely the reproductive organ of a female mammal? Or am I not rather looking at a picture that tells a story of zillions of people's lust? Or men's lust, if you insist. But why their lust? Is it the idea that their own penis is in this vagina? But it's not; it's in their sweaty fist. So does the picture not rather show these men's lustification? Or is it the fiction of these or all women's sexual availability that makes them feel lust? And what do the women actually see? What does Uschi Seidel see, for instance? Does she, being a semiotician, perhaps see the visually manifested negation of the Christian worldview? Does she see the pornographic online vagina as an indication of a cultural paradigm shift? Or are we both wrong? Do we not in fact see through the vagina and through male lustification into the medium itself? Is it the self-referential triumph of the media apparatus that constitutes the allure of the picture? The demonstration of its total force of exposure? Or are Dr. Huber and her feminists right after all and all we're looking at is a load of filth?

So many questions, shooting around my brain like shards of shrapnel, to which I have no answers, or at least not yet. To which, I hope and pray, Seidel doesn't have any answers yet either. To which there may perhaps be no conclusive answers at all. Although, who knows? Perhaps I give up too easily. Perhaps I just haven't seen enough yet. Perhaps I haven't penetrated the subject far enough and I need to drastically increase the impact rate, in other words my daily picture workload. Yes, perhaps that's the solution. To wrest the secret out of the online pornographic cosmos, I have to penetrate even deeper. Much, much deeper. Until the online vagina not only presses up on the front plate of my brain but fills my entire skull. A pink shimmering and flashing passing through every single nerve fibre – that's what I have to reproduce. Then I'll find answers and an attitude to the whole thing, all right. I just mustn't lose

control. That's important, not losing control. I tell myself that every day, whenever I sit down at my computer and go online: I mustn't, under any circumstances, I just mustn't lose control.