WHAT MEN WATCH WHEN THEY WATCH PORNOGRAPHY

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On a busy corner in downtown San Francisco, only a few blocks up from the pyramid, a popular adult emporium has been in business for decades. Up front they sell pornographic videos and magazines alongside a large assortment of “toys,” also generally euphemized as “marital” aids (although the dildo demographic certainly skews away from couples filing joint returns). At the back, separated from the front of the store by a curtain of glittering tinsel, a single, narrow corridor of multi-channel video booths extends into the shadows. Walk this hallway and you will find behind each door a plastic chair, bolted to the ground, and a video monitor, set into the wall. Men slide through the curtain into this dark corridor, then secret themselves separately into the tiny closets to watch pornographic videos, 100 movies playing simultaneously across 100 channels. Standing or sitting in these cramped spaces, the men plug tokens into the slots and click through the selections until they find what they need. And the men masturbate. The video screens, walls, and floors are streaked with dried semen. Outside, above each door, a small, red light signals whether the booth is occupied, and occasionally an attendant walks through, mopping up the vacant stalls.

The scene can, perhaps, be considered Romanesque—a masturbatorium of sorts—a venue to which the male populace retreat to relieve themselves and release whatever has built up within them. And if this behavior is at all remarkable, if these booths are a legitimate social phenomenon worthy of consideration, it is not because they are unique, but because they are quite common. A few blocks away, on and around Broadway, a similar scenario is
played out in a number of locations, and also along Market Street, just over the bay in Oakland, across the country, and around the world.

Ours is the golden age of masturbation. Following the proliferation of video and the dawn of the Internet, never has so much pornography been available to so many so easily. Of course, this porn/tech connection is strong throughout history: From the frescoes and statuary exhumed from the ashes at Pompeii, to flickering peep shows, 16 millimeter, VCR, CD-ROM, DVD, and DSL lines, new technology has always been adapted to the purpose of disseminating pornographic material.

Today, private viewing forms the foundation for the expanding pornographic market, so it is no surprise that the industry quickly assimilates whatever technology suits the purpose of sequestering its audience’s activities, eliminating by degrees the potential for exposure and embarrassment. What’s worse? Deleting a few cookies from your hard drive or facing the woman behind the counter when you purchase your new Juggs? Hence, it is not surprising that the Porno Theater proper, with its torn seats, sticky floors, and iconic man in the trench coat, has virtually vanished. If only Pee Wee Herman had a modem.

So, in this particularly private field of entertainment, the booths evidence the obvious: The masturbating man is pornography’s target audience. Of course, this is not an epiphanous declaration. That men watch pornography to masturbate is hardly kept secret. For instance, Hustler Erotic Video Guide foregoes the standard four-star rating system, imposing instead a sort of sexual doppelganger to Ebert and Roeper’s thumbs, a “dicks up/dicks down” review. Hustler’s critics, apparently quite adept at precisely gauging their own penile rigidity/flaccidity, rate the videos along a surprisingly nuanced spectrum: limp, one-quarter, one-half, three-quarters, fully erect. And they frequently refer to the number of times they were inspired toward self-pleasure while watching a film. For example, in his one-quarter-erect review of Corkscrew, the expert warns, “The only kink you’ll find in this film is the one in your wrist from trying to get off.” Dispel all doubt. Masturbation is pornography’s raison d’être.