Cultural studies practitioners have long debated the signification of clothes and the ways in which they signify sensuality, sexuality, status, as well as the ethics and codes of production of clothing, consumption, the operations of notions of belonging in the subscription to fashion trends – all in all, the ways in which clothing represents. Analyses of clothing and fashion have often treated the ‘naked’ body as if it is prior to representation other than in its depiction in art, pornography, advertising and other media. The debates in art history and public sphere parlance over the differences between naked and nude are moot points when viewed through a post-structuralist lens. Kenneth Clark (1956) suggests that artistic representation – high art – has the ability to render the naked as nude, as if ‘nude’ is another form or style of clothing, leaving behind ‘naked’ as the truly disrobed. Treating the naked body in this way ignores how it is always already represented and constrained by codes of behaviour, contexts, differentiation from the clothed body, loose significations and cultural rituals. Although nakedness is most often performed during, with or alongside practices of sexuality, it appears in frames that connote otherwise. In contemporary film, for example, nakedness
has sometimes connoted vulnerability, humiliation or comic transgression: almost compulsory in teenage comedies is a scene of male nudity in a public space for comic purposes. Films such as *Lost and Found* (1999) in which David Spade loses in a game of strip poker – a representation that is used in the publicity material for the film – are not altogether different from the context-based presence of nakedness in carnivalesque transgressions such as the New Orleans Mardi Gras, in pornography, in the communal showers, or other context-based ‘containments’ such as streaking across the cricket pitch. All such representations and spaces operate as a context for the representation of nakedness in legitimated ways that defuse both vulnerability and obscenity. Despite the cultural legitimacy given to such representations of the body, the fact that charges of obscenity continue to come from more conservative quarters indicates that the representation of nakedness is not altogether exempt from differentiated reading positions. I argue here that there is an encroaching pattern in which nakedness as gazed upon is read correlative with the sexual, and that zones, frames or contexts of naked representation that might once have been considered ‘non-sexual’ are more frequently sexualized or eroticized. Where David Spade’s nude comic humiliation might, for example, commonly be read as harmless amusement, others might just as easily read that nudity as an inappropriate display of sexuality or as a prompt for masturbatory fantasy.

The experience of nakedness under the gaze of others is highly diverse, and important background differences will affect the relative comfort with which one might strip in front of others. Such factors of experiential difference might include the levels of privacy afforded within the private house among and between generations. Mark Davis suggests that such internal, personal privacy has been on the increase in recent decades with the modern house designed to keep children’s rooms away from the exclusive spaces (and bathrooms) of parents (Davis, 1997: 2). Those who were brought up in more rural areas have rituals and traditions relating to nudity that differ from those of the cities – the naked swimming in the Australian outback waterhole for example, as the cover to Robert French’s (1993) *Camping by a Billabong* testifies. Such traditions, experiences and codes that contextually attempt to keep nakedness separate from the sexual are probably as diverse as the variety of clothing worn today. However, what is of interest are the trends in how the public sphere – as the mediated site of cultural exchange – reacts in and towards discussions of nakedness.

I begin by discussing the ways in which nakedness in contemporary western culture, as a relationship between an unclothed body and the gaze of others, is variously legitimated through contexts of representation, and how those contexts are placed in patterns of a cultural hysteria over the legitimate and the obscene,
in spite of the increased depiction of ‘nudity’ in film, television and advertising. Working through increasing contentiousness in cases of shared nakedness, such as communal same-sex showers, bath-time photographs of children and contemporary film and popular culture representations, I suggest that a sexualization of the public sphere destabilizes the contexts in which non-sexual nakedness and gazing have been legitimated in modernity. Understood through fears of illegitimate sexual reading, homophobia and a fear of presenting the embodied self in a mode of eroticization, this contextual breakdown results in an increasing de-legitimation of several sites of non-sexual nakedness. Where there is an increased bodily and psychic anxiety about the self naked under the gaze of others, this is not merely the result of contemporary cultural codes of the obscene, vulnerability and personal privacy, but of the ‘postmodern’ destabilization of contexts, frames and reading practices which formerly ‘protected’ the naked in certain sites from slipping into significations of the sexual.

Context: Sexing and De-sexing the Naked

Nakedness across a vast array of representations in the history of western culture has been inseparable from sex and sexuality, and has hence been located adjacent to the indecent, the obscene and the immoral. The primary ‘authority’ which informs this link is in the Judeo-Christian genesis creation myths, and while biblical authority might be in question in 20th- and 21st-century western culture, it takes its place as ‘residual’ which, in Raymond Williams’s (1977) formulation, does not belong to contemporary dominant (liberal-humanist) culture, but informs it nevertheless. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were naked but innocent, naked but ‘not ashamed’ (Genesis 2:25).³ Shame, for Adam and Eve, occurs only after the fall brought about by Eve’s eating the apple, when ‘the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked’ (Genesis 3:7).

Reading intertextually the story of the first fall of humanity through John Milton’s Paradise Lost, we can infer that the shame brought about by nakedness could not be disconnected from Adam and Eve’s sensuality. The first humans were ‘forfeited and enthralled / By sin to foul exorbitant desires’ (Milton, 1966: 261, lines 176–7). Milton makes clear that in his version of the fall, the subjugation of reason to sexual passion is the cause, permitting the blame to be placed not only on woman but on both the naked and sexual creatures. In the biblical tradition – as read from our contemporary vantage-point – nakedness, as the exposure of the genitals, cannot be disconnected from sexuality. The genitalia play a double role: first, they are culturally important as the seat of procreation, following the injunction to ‘be fruitful, and multiply’ (Genesis 1:28). The genitals of males must
remain intact and unblemished, for ‘He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord’ (Deuteronomy 23:1). At the same time, the exposure of the genitals is cause for shame – nakedness operates in this tradition as euphemism for sexuality, particularly for illicit or impure sexuality. For example, ‘The nakedness of thy father’s wife shalt thou not uncover: it is thy father’s nakedness’ (Leviticus 18:8). It would appear that the early proliferation of Judeo-Christian bodily ethics situated nakedness in terms of forbidden codes of sexuality, and that this linkage informs the contemporary sense of bodily behaviour, subjective performativity and the ethics of privacy.³

Nakedness in contemporary culture is a solo affair, or else it is sexual by virtue of the presence of a gazing second party. For nakedness to occur among the gaze of others without sexuality for the very practical reasons of bathing, changing clothes, artistic representation, examinations for purity or health, sporting events or other practicalities, discrete frames or contexts need to be established which permit the signification of that nakedness to elude sexuality. Twentieth-century western culture authorizes particular sites of nakedness, some of which are ostensibly and explicitly linked with the sexual, others which are not. In a brief article considering the representability of contemporary nakedness, Elizabeth Grosz (1998) provides a useful means of delineating the legitimacy of nakedness under the gazes of others. She suggests three frames or contexts in which a naked body is legitimately gazed at by others: (1) within the context of power relationships such as parent/child or doctor/patient, in which the lesser member of the relationship permits a gazing at his or her body; (2) when the subjects are lovers or in other forms of intimate sexual context; (3) when ‘we are mediated in a relationship to nudity through representations – in art, in pornography, in advertising, in medicine, in cinematic and fictional contexts and so on’ (1998: 6).

For Grosz, these:

... three contexts are the privileged spaces of bodily intimacy, not where nakedness takes place, but rather where nakedness is automatically coupled with the desire, possibly even the imperative, to look and with the leisure of looking. It is in intimate and/or nurturing relations that we are encouraged not just to look but also to show ... (1998: 6)

While Grosz gives a useful account, I contend that we might add a fourth category or context: those (physical) spaces in which nakedness is shared for practical or pleasurable purposes in ways which are ostensibly non-sexual: the locker-room showers, streaking as a cultural theatrics of transgression, performance street art, the clothing-optional beach which is set apart from the ‘textile beach’ by a sign, or screened from the highway by shrubbery and dunes. These sorts of spaces differ from those in Grosz’s third category by virtue of their
(presumably) unrecorded status, their temporality, and the carefully constructed codes by which behaviour is policed in order to ensure that neither the expression of nakedness nor the gaze upon it is construed as sexual. Which is not to suggest that such a relegation of the sexual or the erotic to an 'other' space is ever necessarily effective.

What such categorizations of naked/gazing legitimacy open are ways of viewing both the subjectification of the naked subject and the sexualization of the naked subject in contemporary western postmodern cultures. In a theory of the embodied performative subject, such as that promulgated by Judith Butler (1990), the body is performed ‘in accord’ with highly ritualistic and stylized codes of behaviour which lend the illusion of subjectionhood. In the context of a parent–child relationship, a naked child can playfully frolic without shame or humiliation. Both the child and parent are performative subjects by virtue of what it is that body can do – be naked and/or gaze in particular contexts. Likewise, the patient naked under the medic’s gaze non-voluntaristically performs submission to that gaze and the institutional knowledge that authorizes the doctor’s ‘looking’.

The category which is constrained less by modernist institutionalized power relationships – though power relations are constituted in all contexts of course – entails other coded and ritualistic sets of behaviours and possibilities: the locker-room showers which, for example, permit only the barest glimpse of likewise naked bodies and the restriction on sexual activity (or arousal). The ways in which these contexts and significations work to inculcate and constrain the performative body cannot be disconnected from the subjective sense-of-self as a (sometimes) clothed body. What Grosz has labelled her second category involves an extensive range of bodily activities, from a diverse variety of looks and seeing between intimate partners, casual non-looking between naked intimates going about pre-coital or post-coital non-sexual activities, glimpses between naked ‘possibilities’ in, for example, the gay male sauna – where nudity and looking are collapsed with sex and sexuality itself.

The first, third and fourth of categories are the privileged sites of non-sexual nakedness in 20th-century western culture – sites in which the naked body is performed and constrained, looked at, spoken about and gazed upon in rigorously coded and restrained ways. These sites allow the performance of nakedness for practical reasons: the bathing of children, the medical examination of the body, washing the sweat and dirt from the body after sport and physically vigorous activities – all necessary and necessarily both speculative and self-speculative, as codes of cleanliness and health are maintained and policed not only by the self but by each other. These ‘types’ of naked contexts expanded in the late 1960s and 1970s, with increased frequent nudity on university campuses,
streaking as a more common practice of transgression and entertainment, and even 'naked group therapy' (Bindrim, 1970). They are non-sexual sites by virtue of the context – sexual activity is neither authorized nor legitimated in such frames. Indeed, according to Bell and Holliday (2000:130), naturist societies – an example of context-dependent shared and gazed-upon nakedness – have taken great pains in recent decades to stress their non-sexual nature, frequently through invoking the signifier ‘family’, and by contrasting themselves with other sights of naturist nakedness, particularly those advocated in 19th-century proto-gay accounts and contemporary gay male sexual sites where nakedness is more frequently celebrated alongside a certain sexual freedom. The non-sexual imperative of such sites is maintained by the establishment of a bordered frame which attempts – however unsuccessfully – to relegate the ‘sexual gaze’ to an outside.

What Grosz’s categorization lacks is a suggestion of the increasing post-modern sexualization of the supposedly non-sexual sites of nakedness. Despite the codes and conventions which work to separate nakedness from the sexual – to prevent slippage between non-sexual and sexual frames of nakedness and gazing – there is a notable difficulty or instability in maintaining the discrete separation of these contexts. Contexts which are generally understood to fix meaning are, as Derrida has shown, never stable or discrete, but always open to différance, re-signification, instability and citations that are never under the command of their author (Derrida, 1988). In the case of the frames of nakedness, the instability of the contexts causes not only a certain seepage of the sexual or erotic into the privileged sites of non-sexual nudity, but also the ways in which nudity in those sites is read by others, whether they be temporally present at the site or reading the site through further representation, such as in a photograph or a documentary film.

What is at stake in the breakdown of the myth of discrete contexts which relegate the sexual in nudity to the second frame is a certain disruption to the cultural imperative of coherence of the performative subject. All subjects are impelled to perform in intelligible and recognizable ways, regardless of the location of the cultural coordinates, whether they be coordinates of belonging such as gender or ethnicity, or more personalized and less categorized signifiers such as trajectories of personal history, memory, career affiliations, and so on. Where nakedness upsets the performance of subjecthood is in the paradox between the sheer commonality of nakedness, since we all have a body that does naked, and the signification of nakedness as something very, very personal and private (with private parts); hence the strictures of contexts which code and constrain the ways in which naked is performed under the gaze of others. The blurring between the boundaries of sexuality and nakedness, the encroachment
of significations belonging to ‘sexually naked’ contexts into sites of non-sexual nudity, indicates an increasing cultural awareness of the instabilities of context and signification. While sex and sexuality have been discussed at such length in the public sphere in recent decades in terms of the normal and abnormal – always within particular limits, and informed finally by the cultural injunction of the hetero/homo binary and its variants and boundaries – they have become banal and tedious subjects, no longer sites for concern and cultural hysteria or spectacle. What replaces it as spectacular, then, is not public nudity by any means, but the struggle over signification under the breakdown of context. This struggle, as I will go on to show, occurs at the very personal level, since nakedness per se has been deemed a highly personal thing, but at its most important it relates to the ways in which the performative subject acts and behaves in relation to the gaze, and the problems that occur when the rituals that constrain both the body and the gazer become unstable.

Showing and Showering – The Encroachment of the Sexual

The site of the communal or public shower might be decreasing in use, but it has been a considerable space for the expression of nudity coupled with various practices of the gaze. Nakedness in this site is a practice of the Foucauldian confessional – by virtue of the revelation of an ‘inner’ image of the body devoid of the significations of clothing and variously encoded otherwise in terms of musculature, genitalia shapes and sizes, chests and breasts, abilities, skin colouring, tan or sun exposure and so on. As a result of the gaze and the variants on the imaged body, this is a site of discipline – the compulsion to produce a body that looks ‘in accord’ with particular codes and conventions and behaves in particular ways. And likewise it is the site of a disciplined gaze – a gaze that is allegedly without interest in the sexual, a gaze that is performed as a glimpse, or an affronting lack-of-interest, a peek or a non-prying glance.

It is no coincidence that the frame of the communal shower operates in connection with disciplinary institutions such as schools, gyms, sporting facilities – sites which, for Foucault (1977: 172–4), are those in which the microscopic focus of scrutiny cultivates not only the bodies on display and their attributes, abilities and movements, but how the body in such a context is played out and looked upon. Nakedness in the shower or locker-room allows an extremity of policing of the body: its musculature, its masculine or feminine pubescent development, its properties and peculiarities, all without the various significations of clothing (wealth, status, group affiliation, etc.). In this sense, then, the ‘type’ of nakedness – non-erotic – and the ‘type’ of gazing that occurs is produced in
and through the context of the showers by ritual and convention. The erotic here is relegated to other frames, and a transgression of the context results in punishment. In an episode titled ‘The Apology’ (1997) of the popular sitcom Seinfeld, Kramer attempts to learn techniques to reduce his time showering by examining – and taking notes on – men showering at his local gym. When his comments are mistakenly understood to indicate sexual gazing, he is attacked, appearing in a later scene bruised and sporting a black eye. The irony here is that in being a site which heavily polices against sexuality and the erotic gaze, it becomes a highly sexual site, requiring further and more harsh policing.

As importantly, the site and its policing against sexuality is entwined in the contemporary cultural binary system of gender. Apart from some very specific and peculiar formations, communal showers which encourage gazing at the naked bodies of others are masculine- and feminine-exclusive. Culturally, such sites are highly ‘guarded’ from a transgressive invasion by genders which have no legitimacy in that space. Dozens of ‘teen sex’ films, such as Revenge of the Nerds (1984), depict a carnivalesque transgression of the women’s showers by male college students, almost always for erotic purposes (of both the fratboys and of the audience). As a means of keeping the shower site non-sexual, the separation of genders operates entirely in the terms of Butler’s ‘heterosexual matrix’ in which the compulsory, illusional order of sex/gender/desire codes sexuality as the natural desirous attraction only ever to the gender-which-one-is-not (Butler, 1990: 6–7). The two-gender exclusiveness of the shower site betrays the high potential of the site as a sexual site, the gaze at nakedness as a sexual act and the implicit eroticism that is encoded in such a site. The relative adjustment of the ‘heterosexual matrix’ which sees an increasing legitimation of a gender-sexuality system in which the trajectory of sexual or attractive desire is permitted to extend to either gender (as long as it is an ostensible, coherent gender) destabilizes the non-sexuality of the site. Where the gender exclusiveness can no longer be understood to guard against the presence of desire as homoerotic desire, and where the potential collapse of homosociality with homosexuality is increasingly charged, the site becomes unstable, and nakedness and gazing upon it can no longer be understood as exclusively non-sexual forms of pleasurable activity.

Nevertheless, the instability between the frame of the communal showers and that of the sexual is commonly understood by participants. Particular rituals are in place to stop the homosociality of communal nakedness sliding into homosexuality. As Janene Hancock recently points out, these rituals are practised in the forms of ‘appropriate’ conversation:

When sportsmen gather in the locker room, before or after a game, and their conversation turns to women, the semantics used are not always complimentary. They discuss issues such as their
Among men, statements of homophobia, conversations about women and the ways in which the gaze is performed as a non-erotic looking protect the communal nakedness of men from signifying nakedness-as-sexual. Likewise, among women there are particular codes of behaviour that stop the nakedness in communal showers from slipping into the sexual. I am reliably informed that women in such a site will often either have a conversation that avoids drawing attention to the common nudity as available to the gaze of others or, if more comfortable, remain perfectly silent. These too are particular ritualistic codes which prevent the nakedness/gaze duality from being understood as having a sexual component, regardless of the ways in which such nakedness/gazing might be involved in acts of policing the physical.

So what, recently, has been happening to the site of the communal shower as a framework in which authorized nakedness is tied up with various legitimate codes of gazing? According to a 1996 New York Times article, showering after gym class by secondary school males is not only on the decline but has now become a significant rarity (Johnson, 1996). Although the author speculates that this decline intersects with issues of modesty and expectations of body image and fitness, he also points to an erotic component:

... some health and physical education experts contend that many students withdraw [from post-exercise showering] precisely because of the overload of erotic images – so many perfectly toned bodies cannot help but leave ordinary mortals feeling a bit inadequate. (Johnson, 1996)

The proliferation of a sexualized male physique reliant on the display of flesh in advertising, combined with the collapse of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ and the heterosexual matrix increases the fear that communal nakedness among boys will be gazed upon in erotic or sexualized ways that have previously been protected by the gender segregation of communal showers on the presumption that all participants in the showers are heterosexual and can thereby only perform a sexual gazing at another gender. This ‘cultural concern’ is augmented further as the stereotype of gay men as non-sporting is increasingly discredited.

The legal controversy that surrounded the filming of Apt Pupil (1998) illustrates this recent cultural concern over shower-space nudity increasingly coupled with sexual or erotic forms of gazing. While portrayals of naked women in film have been common and cannot easily be separated from a desire for erotic gazing
by a phallocentric film industry, the portrayal of naked males in film is by no means recent. As early as the 1925 production of *Ben-Hur*, male frontal nudity was shown on-screen and, despite the ban on nudity through the intervention of the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code between 1934 and 1968 (Russo, 1981: 121–2), a spate of popular films from the 1970s onwards depicted male nudity – *Born to Win* (1971), *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), *Ace Ventura 2: When Nature Calls* (1995) and *Powder* (1995) being just a few examples from different genres depicting nudity without ostensible or explicit sexual overtones.

An important scene in *Apt Pupil* has Todd Bowden (Brad Renfro) showering naked among fellow secondary school students. Having been deluged with information from Nazi-in-hiding Kurt Dussander (Ian McKellan) on his experiences in sending Jews to the gas chambers – under the guise of sending them to the showers – Todd has a delusional moment in which the other showering students are viewed as starved and dying incarcerated Jews. This is an obvious and meaningful scene in the film, one which is ostensibly designed to indicate the traumatic effect of personal anecdotal and autobiographical records or narratives of abuse, murder and genocide. However, several of the showering extras filed a lawsuit against director Bryan Singer and other crew members, claiming the nude shoot subjected them to ‘sexual harassment, invasion of privacy, [and] false imprisonment [on the set]’. The vital element in the legal claim was that Singer ‘appeared . . . to be a full-fledged homosexual’ (Cheevers and Ebner, 1998). However, the majority of the plaintiffs’ claims – both legal and uttered during media interviews – expressed the severe discomfort they felt being naked on set. As one plaintiff put it, ‘there was smoke guys who had to stand on each side, and all they did was sit there and look at you while they’re pouring their smoke. It’s basically like all eyes are on you’ (Cheevers and Ebner, 1998). The suit caused a media scandal, with several newspaper and television interviews being granted the young plaintiffs and their lawyer, although the hysteria was stemmed somewhat after several other extras disavowed the plaintiffs’ claims. Cheevers and Ebner’s article states that: ‘Several people present on the set denied that the crew eyed the boys in a sexual way’ (Cheevers and Ebner, 1998), that is, they maintained that the gaze was not a sexual gaze.

What is interesting about this case is not merely the ways in which the accusation that the director and other crew members identified as gay is seen to collapse gay identity into gay sexual behaviour, but the wholesale collapse of nudity into sexuality. One of the central plaintiffs made the following statement in a court document:
I didn’t want to be standing there for the world to see... That to me is for me and my future wife to see, and for us only. That is not for the enjoyment of the homosexuals on the set... I don’t like being oogled [sic]. (Cheevers and Ebner, 1998)

For this extra, nakedness as gazed-upon belongs only to Grosz’s frame number two, the intimate or sexual context, thereby disintegrating the contexts that protect the appearance of nakedness for the purpose of showering, whether ‘for real’ or on the set of a film.

Where nakedness under the gaze of others is now more commonly causing anxiety, stress, shame or even terror, it hits at the very stability of the self as subject. If all subjective performativity is, as Butler (1990) shows, a citation of the signifier, then the instability of the signifier of nakedness undermines the psychic self as it is constituted in and by culture. In other words, if nakedness can no longer be determined and delineated clearly in particular sites and under particular gazes, then it risks destabilizing the performativity of the subject by introducing an anxiety-causing encounter with unstable signifiers. The instability of the frames undermines the subject’s sense of coherence and intelligibility, and the discomfort in nakedness can be seen to be a discomfort with the question of what nakedness is for.

Bathed in Sex – Reading as the Pornographic

In the various competing contextual spaces in which nakedness is performed legitimately, one involves a set of ritual and institutional power structures of varying kinds, in which the empowered (and usually clothed) subject is positioned to perform a non-sexual gazing at an objectified naked body. This frame is most readily experienced in contemporary society by children being bathed, dressed or supervised by parents, guardians or older siblings, or by patients being examined, prepared or operated on by doctors, surgeons and other medics. In the case of the child/parent relationship, we once again see a particular cultural concern that such a relationship is not always necessarily non-sexual in the terms of sexual given by contemporary culture.

In 1995, a Visual Arts student at a Western Australian university was arrested and charged by police with ‘indecently recording... a child under thirteen years by the taking of still photographs’ (Bowles et al., 1998: 5). The photographs were depictions of her own naked sons, taken as part of a project in a photomedia degree. Although the images used classical poses – a standard motif used by such photographers as Wilhelm Von Gloeden and Guglielmo Pluschow in order to protect depictions of the nude male youth from being understood as the obscene – police interpreted the images as pornographic, thereby focusing the court...
proceedings and both the media and academic discourses on whether or not ‘naked photographs of children typical of family albums’ are pornographic (Bowles et al., 1998: 5–6). In similar cases throughout the United States, persons who are found to have family snaps of naked children are frequently arrested for the possession and production of child pornography (Kincaid, 2000). The heatedness surrounding the breakdown of the convention of discrete contexts that separate nakedness from the sexual feeds the hysteria around the debates over ‘pornographic’ depictions of children. This area serves as a useful example of the instability around contexts in which nakedness could be seen as separate from the sexual.

Child pornography – an issue which, according to Laura Kipnis, is so emotionally charged that it has become difficult to approach it rationally (Kipnis, 1996: 5) – is difficult to define. According to the Campaign to End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT), child pornography consists of ‘sexually explicit reproductions of a child’s image – including sexually explicit photographs, negatives, slides, magazines, movies, video-tapes and computer disks’ (ECPAT, 1996: 4). For the Australian Office of Film and Literature Classification, child pornography is characterized in the following scheme: (1) texts containing depictions of actual sexual activity involving persons under 16 years of age (hardcore); (2) photographs of nude models under 16 which have sexual overtones such as sexually suggestive poses; (3) texts devoted in the main to nude children in a non-sexual context. Such recent determinations of what constitutes child pornography concentrate on the textual image and are not concerned with the image as a record of the sexual abuse involved in their production. In that respect, child pornography is generally defined through its reading rather than its production, and most legislation of western states governing the criminality of child pornography possession, viewing and distribution determines the interpretation of the image according to what the supposedly ‘reasonable’ person would find offensive (Hartley, 1998: 12; Cover, 2000: 108).

While it is certainly the case that the practice of recording sexual abuse of children should be considered a criminal offence – and as offensive – the simple record of a naked child can now be characterized as obscene because it is understood to sexualize the child. For example, in a case in California, police were called in by a photo developer when he discovered ‘family snaps’ of an 8-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl together in the bath eating sausages. What alerted the developer and caused the police to consider the photographs as ‘indecent’ and ‘degenerate’ were the sausages, despite the fact they were not, as James Kincaid puts it, ‘being licked, stroked or inserted’ (Kincaid, 2000). In another case identified by Kincaid, a woman:
... turned in bath-time pictures of her 8-year-old daughter to a Fuji film processing lab in Oberlin, Ohio. The lab contacted the local police, who found the pictures ‘over the line’ and arrested the mother for, among other things, snapping in the same frame with her daughter a showerhead, which the prosecution apparently planned to relate somehow to hints of masturbation. (Kincaid, 2000)

These are two cases in which the record of childhood nakedness under the gaze of the parents was deemed to be obscene through processes of sexualization or, better, a reading that presumes the gaze of the parents through a camera lens was a sexual one. The signifiers that recontextualize the shots as sexual are, in these two cases, the phallic sausage and the apparently phallic showerhead. No such signifiers are necessary for the sexual reading, however, as testified by the case of the visual arts student and many other recent cases of charges or arrests for child pornography production.

What is occurring here is a destabilization between the frame in which the parental gaze at the naked child (and its filmic record) is presumed harmless, and the frame in which nakedness is seen as sexual. As with all textual interpretations, the meaning resides in the reading. In Tony Bennett’s post-structuralist formulation of reception theory, the meaning is not held by the text, but actively produced in the act of reading, and in the relationship between the text and the reader. For Bennett, the productive activation of meaning is governed by the ‘reading formation’ or the ‘set of intersecting discourses which productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way’ (Bennett, 1983: 216). Such readings of harmless photographs of naked children that once appeared in every family photo album as a standard record of childhood and familial relationships as ‘child pornography’ are activated through the destabilization of the contexts which protect nakedness from being viewed as sexual, and a return to the biblical and western Christian tradition of viewing the naked as purely sexual. As for the ‘props’ such as showerheads and sausages, these merely confirm what is already read as sexual: the exposed genitalia of children under the gaze of the adult.

Where the parent/child authorial relationship once protected this frame from being viewed as sexual, the breakdown of the contexts, the possibility of reading the photographic record through sexual discursive formations, and the prohibition based on this possibility, all combine to relate the photographed naked child as a sexual object. This is far more than a mere conservative swing to pre-20th-century bourgeois values of propriety and decency, and far more than a backlash against the sexual permissiveness and frequent nudity of the 1970s. Instead, this is a case where an understanding of the instability or inefficacy of ‘context’ – a symptom of postmodern contemporary culture – accedes to a certain hysterical
conservatism in order to protect society from what might, in the commonsense view, be considered dangerous, exploitative and invasive. It would appear, also, that it is the act of photographing the event of, for example, bathing, that sexualizes the event, thus showing how significant the act of recording is in the sexualization of a previously non-sexual sphere.

Burning with Desire

The increasing ‘cultural hysteria’ over the pervasiveness of the sexual brought about by the collapse of non-sexual nakedness back into the sexual and the – in conservative terms illegal – ‘obscene’ is witnessed across an array of sites, particularly in film. It can be seen in the different climate with regard to what is acceptable in differences between original films and their sequels. In *Blue Lagoon* (1980), many scenes contain frontal nudity of both Christopher Atkins and Brooke Shields, particularly while they are swimming and playing, both in sexual and non-sexual performances. The 1991 sequel *Return to the Blue Lagoon*, which attempts to repeat the same story on the same island with two new castaway kids, very carefully excludes nudity, as the two young adults swim clothed, and are carefully robed in other scenes. Similarly, the 1963 film version of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* – which makes much symbolic use of clothing and nakedness to indicate the separation between culture and nature or civilized and primitive – relies on filmic depictions of nakedness among the boys. The 1990 remake does not. Similarly, we might also pay attention to the enactment of laws to prevent ‘naked guy’ Andrew Martinez from attending University of California, Berkeley, without clothes, as well as the 1990s pressure to prevent non-sexual nudists from marching as they had traditionally done in lesbian and gay pride parades across North America.

The encroaching prohibition against nakedness in school showers, on film, in family photo albums, and laws against streaking and so on should neither be read as a growing conservative trend which automatically equates nakedness with obscenity, nor should it be suggested that the extremes of the anti-pornography crusade in radical feminist thinking, and embodied in the work of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, is overly responsible for providing ‘moral’ sexual charges against the depiction of feminine and, by corollary, masculine nudity. The more productive understanding of this phenomenon is to consider the slippage across contexts as an element in a crisis of postmodern culture. The loss of ‘easy’ definition between contexts which allows a reading of nakedness as, ostensibly, sexuality, combined with the increased liberalty of sexual depiction throughout late 20th-century culture, is a more predominant reason. This causes
as backlash against ‘sexuality’ and not nudity – a restriction on depictions of the naked in frameworks that are not clearly private, that disrupt the public/private distinction; it also illustrates marked fears over the instability of the heterosexual matrix which dissolves the myth of non-eroticism in sites of same-sex nakedness.

Certainly the ease with which sex and sexuality is discussed, coded and classified more than ever in contemporary Euro-American culture through magazines, television documentaries, sex-advice on the radio, etc., shows precisely how pervasive sex and sexuality is, and how easily it encroaches into areas previously considered non-sexual. For Enlightenment discourse, the public realm of media, artistic production, public space, sport and education were considered non-sexual spaces. The cultural system of frameworks and contexts of nakedness operate to control and police sexuality. It could be suggested, in light of this, that the second frame, in which nakedness and gazing are connected with sexual intimacy, and certain third-level frame representations of nakedness self-consciously produced as pornography, both operate as a sort of lightning-rod designed to contain the sexual undercurrents of pleasure and desire that do, in fact, exist in non-sexual frameworks of naked behaviour – the pleasure of gazing and the desire to know, the pleasure of showing and the desire to be seen. For contemporary postmodern western culture, sex and sexuality have become significant motifs in advertising, art, entertainment and other frames such that sexuality seems an external force, roller-coastering or bulldozing its way through previously ‘protected’ spaces, and not only public ones. The ‘protected’ sites of nakedness – children bathing, locker-room showers – are likewise ‘crashed through’ and sexualized.

If it is useful to combat the prohibition on nakedness that results from the (renewed) collapse of nakedness into sexuality – and probably it is – then it is not done by taking the position of nudists, naturalists and nude activists in attempting to reclaim a space or frame for non-sexual nakedness, for the instability of the myth of the closed frame or context is productive, in the sense that it opens up all sorts of possibilities for contingent, continuous re-thinking of subjectivity, bodies, attributes, resources, statuses and identities. Nor is it useful to celebrate, or even necessarily advocate the collapse of the contextual frames per se. Instead, I suggest it would be productive to consider a refiguring of sexuality altogether. This is where queer theory makes a useful contribution to such re-thinking. If nakedness can be, and is, collapsed with sexuality, then it is by virtue of the continued focus of sexuality on genitalia. As Freudian, Marxist-Freudian and Marxist-feminist scholars have often attested, sexuality in modernity is confined to the genitals in order to free the rest of the body for labour (Jeffreys, 1990: 104–5). In post-structuralist queer theoretical terms, the sexual subject is a
performative illusion of a (genitally sexed) body, gendered culturally and projecting a sexual desire towards another body labelled opposite by virtue of its dichotomously differentiated genitals – a regime upheld by the ‘heterosexual matrix’, and where homosexuality becomes the ‘proof’ of heterosexuality by virtue of its binarial difference.

Critical of this Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment position, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that sexual attraction across gendered (and thereby genital) lines is not only unproductive but unimaginative. She suggests alternative dimensions of sexuality that

... distinguish object-choice quite differently (e.g., human/animal, adult/child, singular/plural, autoerotic/alloerotic) or are not even about object choice (e.g., orgasmic/nonorgasmic, noncommercial/commercial, using bodies only/using manufactured objects, in private/in public, spontaneous/scripted). (Sedgwick, 1990: 35)

Queer theory allows us to add to this list along trajectories that generally are not encompassed in dialogue on sexuality – time, space, place, the disunified body or, as Grosz (1994: 139) hints, body-parts that are not usually constituted as libidinal or gendered zones. Gender – any concept of gender and thus genitalia – might be removed entirely from a trajectory of sexualized desire. What queer theory opens is what pedestrian understandings of sexuality and public sphere discussions of sex ignore but fear: that sexuality pervades all elements of the subjective and performative body, but not in the gendered, genital terms which continue to fascinate contemporary culture, and which contemporary culture continues to be incited by, and to fear. The gaze in all its many forms is, by virtue of its in-signifiability, always sexual, always erotic. In a very broad and pragmatic way, and in light of the failure of the contextual frames, the erotic can be defined as what occurs in the encounter between performative subject-bodies and other bodies. For Butler (1990), the performativity of embodied subjecthood is a citation of the signifier, reiteratively performed such that it establishes retroactively an illusion of an inner identity core. An extensive and radical treatment of subject performativity would consider an ‘individual’ (never quite) subject to be a multiple citation of an array of coordinates, always in flux as those coordinates change and alter their significations, as new coordinates come into being or are encountered and cited, always differently, in the process of performing subject coherence. An encounter with other subjects, such as meeting, greeting, sharing space, gazing, speaking and listening is always erotic in that it infuses the subject’s body, alters the significations of the signifiers cited by which the subject maintains his or her subjectivity and sexual identity. It is the citation of ‘the sexual’ defined as sexual that causes anxiety, certain coded or knowing pleasures, fulfilment, relief, release and, by corollary, the encounter with, between or as naked bodies is to be
considered the root of such effects. Only when the erotic breaks free from its sexual classifications, regimentations and codes is it acknowledged that the erotic is both pervasive and innocent.

By admitting this, nakedness under the gaze can continue to be harmless, yet erotically and pleasurably charged. Gazing at a bathing child can be pleasurable – and pleasure can of course drive the disciplinary gaze of the parent. Likewise with gazing in the communal shower-space – and there are erotic dimensions to this pleasure by virtue of the continuous citation and processes of sexual subjective performativity. Under this schema, however, such gazing is to be seen as harmless pleasure, in contrast to the regimented notions of western sexuality that, since the 19th century, have carefully coded sexuality into appropriate and inappropriate, harmless and harmful, natural and obscene categories. This schema admits sexuality and all sorts of practices of naked display and gazing, but breaks the link between nakedness and current definitions and understandings of sexuality.

Where this already occurs is among the celebratory and transgressive descendants of the Woodstock festival, such as the Burning Man festival of installation art, performance, music, craft and dance held in the Nevada desert during the United States Labor Day weekend – a site that can be described as a temporary autonomous zone operating not outside but at the margins of the dictates of dominant social ideologies. Attended by an array of visitors, including families and children, Burning Man is described as ‘an annual experiment in temporary community dedicated to radical self-expression and radical self-reliance’ in which ‘nudity, iconoclastic art, sexuality, rude language, cultural commentary, and weird behavior are all a part of the essential Burning Man experience’ (Burning Man, 2001a). The site encourages naked displays as art or nude frolicking through the spaces, both protected from contemporary prohibition by virtue of its desert frame. It is a sexed space, as attested to by some of its named pathways, like ‘Anal Avenue’ and ‘Sex Drive’. But it is more than just codified sex as genital copulation, and embraces the instability of sex as signifier. There are references to ‘sexual energy swirling and whirling about’ as if it is a chaotic force that pervades all elements of the weekend, and the preparation advice on its website makes permanently unclear the dynamic between nakedness and genital sex:

Be respectful. Just because people are walking around naked does not necessarily mean they wish *you* were naked in a small enclosed space with them. Learn to take no for an answer, and don’t be afraid to use the ‘n’ word yourself. (Burning Man, 2001b)

By all accounts, Burning Man is highly erotically charged – a celebration of the exploration of what bodies can and might do in the encounter with other bodies,
with representational art and with the desert environment. As the producers put it, ‘Make love to the playa, and she will love you back. Become one with the sun, the stars, and the omnipresent dust’ (Burning Man, 2001b). The literal burning of the man-figure can perhaps be read as the burning and dislodgement of contemporary and patriarchal codes of bodies and their appropriate deportment, containment and regimentation. At the same time, it is an acknowledgement of marginal notions of community which dispense with the individual body and show how the body is erotically materialized ‘in accord’ with its environmental and other-bodily surrounds. Although Burning Man and its ever-present nudity and erotic charge operate within a contextual frame – spaced by Black Rock, Nevada; timed by the Labor Day weekend – it is representative of ways in which we can think and gaze at nakedness differently. By re-thinking sexuality away from the genitals, the genitals are both de-sexualized and the remainder of the body eroticized such that nakedness, and gazing upon it, can be considered at a distance from the codes that have characterized it as obscene without having to reverse the charge of obscenity. Nakedness in the showers, the locker-room, the bath, in family photographs, the nudist camp and in conversation can in this way be thought of as neither sexual and always sexual – and thinking in this way is to dismiss culturally codified significations of sexuality and to bear nakedness, subjectivity, the materialized body and culture as naked to the erotic as subjectivity itself.

Notes
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1. Such parades and festivals commonly reward the flashing of genitalia with the presentation of beads and jewellery – the aim of many being to obtain as many beaded necklaces as possible.
2. Biblical citations are from the King James version.
3. From a European perspective, pre-Christian nakedness signifies differently under different theological regimes: I am thinking here of pagan rites which continue, to this day, to require certain codes of non-sexual nakedness in ritual, as well as of ancient Greek customs of naked performance in sporting events.
4. See Bowles et al. (1998) and Hartley (1998) for analyses of this case and the questions it opens on the formation of ‘pornography’ and ‘children’ as textual categories.
5. Mr Martinez, who in 1992 and 1993 quietly attended classes and the university campus nude, was eventually arrested by campus police but was not prosecuted after the county prosecutor determined that nudity without lewd behaviour was not illegal. The university responded by banning nudity on campus.
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Filmography


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Rob Cover is lecturer in Media Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He completed his PhD in queer theory and cultural studies at the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University, and publishes on sexuality, popular culture and media technologies.