NAKED LUNCH:
TALKING REALCORE
WITH SERGIO MESSINA

Mark Dery

Sergio Messina has seen the future, and it's sticky.

Messina, 47, is the Margaret Mead of Alt.sex on the Internet. Imagine Mead as a shaven-headed intellectual with a drawing by Michelangelo tattooed on her back and Italian street cool to burn, and you've got an inkling of why this open-source anthropologist rocked the 2005 Netporn conference in Amsterdam with his lecture — more of a dance remix, really, with freestyle riffing and mind-curdling slides — on the online amateur porn he calls "Realcore."

Born in Rome ("where we hate the Catholic church with great vigor") and now based in Milan, Messina is a pirate radio DJ-turned-anti-copyright activist, electronica musician, and freelance journalist (his technology column has appeared in the Italian *Rolling Stone* since 2003). He's at work on a heavily illustrated book about his investigations of amateur sexual subcultures on the net, titled *Realcore: The Digital Porno Revolution*, which he describes as "a brief history of Realcore," defining Realcore as "a new brand of sexual images that appeared in the late 1990s thanks to the then-new digital tools." Realcore, says Messina, is pornography that's grittier than traditional hardcore, even, "striving to portray the reality of the (amateur) scene and the true desires of the participants." To him, Realcore and the community of file-swappers that has congealed around it, is about "new and interactive sexual practices, extreme digital lifestyles, a true

gift economy, web personalities." Says Messina, "The future is here…and it's sweaty, it's sticky, and it swallows."

His live multimedia presentation of his travels among Realcore enthusiasts is a heads-pinning fusillade of unforgettable images and hilarious one-liners. Messina's delivery has as much in common with the staid lectures at a typical academic sexology conference as Norwegian death metal does with *American Idol*. "Realcore isn't exactly a lecture, nor is it just a presentation of a book," he notes. "It's the main 'product': a stand-up anthropology show. The book will be like the live album of a rock band: useful to repeat the experience, to digest the songs, but nothing like the original."

(NOTE: I conducted the following interview with Messina via e-mail, in July 2006. With his permission, I've debugged his English: correcting, compressing, and in a few instances rephrasing his responses for clarity and concision. He has approved every edit, and has carefully vetted this transcript for factual accuracy. MD.)

Mark Dery: Give me the historical backstory of Realcore. When and how did you first encounter it?

Sergio Messina: I got online in early 1996 and Realcore was starting to happen. Web porno was already huge; "amateurs" (regular looking folks) and "fetish" were two thriving genres. Back then, "fetish" meant anything from femdom to watersports.

The amateur fetish boom hit in 1997–98, as digital photography became widespread. (The first digital camera for the consumer market that worked with a home computer via a serial cable was the Apple QuickTake 100 camera, which came out in 1994). Also, free Internet space became available and easy to use. Yahoo/Geocities, MSN, and so on all tolerated porno. And, obviously, so did the Usenet newsgroups. The hierarchy of newsgroups, devoted to special interests, favored the division into subgenres. The first visit to the complete hierarchy makes you dizzy.

MD: What weird wormhole led you into the parallel universe of Usegroups?

SM: In the 1980s, in Europe, there was a wave of amazing BDSM movies (the early Pain and Slavesex series) that were different, and not only because of their content, which consisted of long, unedited sequences of real BDSM practitioners, in actual dungeons instead of sets. Formally, these movies were very low-res, and the overall feel of the productions was more like underground films, made by and for BDSM people. I had seen some of these movies, which were very hard to find in Italy, and I was looking for more. Usenet seemed like the right place to start.

MD: How did you hack your way into these Usenet subcultures? In my experience, gaining access to porn-related newsgroups is massively time-intensive. You have to apply

Corduroy fetishist. Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina. Used with permission: collection of Sergio Messina.

"The first 20 titles of each series, SlaveSex and Pain, were really unbelievable," notes Messina. "About the same time there was another, more fetish-oriented series (with mostly the same 'actors'), called Hard Games, which featured many porn-video firsts: first scat, first serious bestiality, first needle play. You can find some covers at dvids.com. The covers say 'original ton deutsch,' which suggests that the videos were made by Germans. The production seems to be by Scala. Martina [pictured above] was the true star of the genre. Her screen name was Martina, but her real name, apparently, is Anita Foeller or Feller; she did some stuff under this name, too. But her name was stolen by another, much weaker, pornstar. So if you look for her you'll find the other…" Caveat emptor!

Mandingo fetishist. Fan of well-hung black men advertises her obsession. "Very often, realcore people communicate online (or advertise themselves) by writing on their bodies and then posting the pictures," says Messina. Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina. Used with permission: collection of Sergio Messina.

"Tom, thank you for the shoes." Amateur fetishist. Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina. Used with permission: collection of Sergio Messina.

to the moderator for membership, keep nudging the inevitably unresponsive moderator, and so on.

SM: First, you have to find out from your provider if you have Usenet access; it's likely you do. Then you need a newsreader. There are millions of freeware programs you can use to read newsgroups—for example, Mozilla is also a newsreader (but not Firefox). And your ISP may have a news service, with an address that goes something like news. yourprovider.xx. Once you have this set up (very simple, much easier than setting up e-mail), you configure it so you can see the full group list.

    If your provider is good, you'll get a very long list. These are the upper parts of newsgroup hierarchies; think folders. You go to "alt" and open it; you'll see another immense list, the second level of the hierarchy "alt." Then you open "binaries" (images), and inside you select the folder "pictures."

    I'll give you an example:

alt.
alt.binaries
alt.binaries.pictures
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.anal
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.asian
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.bodybuilder
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.bodybuilder.moderated
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.chubby
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.hardon
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.oral
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.oral.cumshots
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.piercing
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.shirt-and-tie
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.tattoos
alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.male.underwear

There are thousands of newsgroups in the "alt" hierarchy, like alt.sex.bondage (same folder as the one in the example, but not in the subfolder "binaries"; it's in "sex").

    Within the hierarchy alt. binaries.pictures.erotica (which is infested with spam—spam makes up over 50% of all Usegroup posts, but you learn to spot it), I suggest you look into the .interracial, .transvestites, and .wives groups, just to get an overview of this stuff and its history (many people repost older pics and collections). Also alt.personal. bondage is sometimes quite amazing (watch out: explicit images!).

    I should also say, since not many people ever visit certain newsgroups, that the chance of stumbling across objectionable material (from violence to child porn) is very high.

One way to avoid it is to subscribe to one of the many web Usenet services (such as www.pictureview.com) that remove child porn before displaying images from these groups.

In addition to Usenet, Yahoo hosts groups that archive amateur porn. For a while, Yahoo was the best source of self-produced, self-published sexual imagery. Now, it's much harder to find it since Yahoo stopped listing such groups. They're there, but they're covert; you have to know exactly where to look, and there's more moderation.

MD: How, as an accidental anthropologist, did you penetrate the perimeter defenses of these groups? Were they wary of outsiders insinuating themselves into their subcultures?

SM: If you see a set of images with a subject line like "comments please," these are new images, and often the e-mail address on the image or in the message (all images have a space for messages, although they're often empty) works. If you mail someone, they always reply. Also, images often have URLs written on them; I follow those URLs. So I didn't find many "perimeter defenses"; after all, these are exhibitionists!

MD: Let's return to the timeline you were unraveling. You said amateur fetishism first hit, online, around 1997–98, enabled by digital photography and free Web hosting. What were the cultural reverberations of the amateur fetish boom?

SM: You had the fetish people finally seeing (and making) images that weren't available before people like vomit fetishists, who turned out to be unexpectedly numerous.

MD: What was the effect, for amateur-fetish porn people, of suddenly discovering that they weren't the only ones in the sexual universe with their obsession, in some cases an obsession so rarefied they thought they were its only examples?

SM: Let me quote from the splashpage of the very first Hiccup Lovers' website, circa 1997 (hosted on Tripod and no longer online):

> Welcome to the Hiccup Lovers' Web Site. We are a group of both male and female lovers of the hiccups. We have found one another through the power and anonymity of the Internet. Most of us had one very basic thought when we found one another: that we were strange or weird or that there was something very wrong with us because of our attraction to the hiccups, either in others or in ourselves.
> By finding others who share this powerful attraction, we found that we are not alone. We are not strange or odd and there is nothing wrong with us.

By the way, the site discussed various methods for getting the hiccups. Naturally, it had no pictures — just sound clips!

MD: Speaking of arcane obsessions, I still can't get that hilarious, fascinating image

from your presentation at the Netporn conference in Amsterdam out of my mind: the sneaker freak—the guy with his cock in a running shoe!

SM: The Web inspired people. You had regular people posting images that for various reasons hadn't been available, images of real people enjoying themselves in various ways, some of them predictable (the alt.binaries.pictures.erotica newsgroups are still full of self-portraits of people just having missionary sex), some unusual, like the sneaker fucker.

Via the web, the white couple into well-hung blacks who hosts a gangbang in an Austin apartment can arrange it a lot more easily, and probably got the idea from images posted by happycouple69 (happycouple is a popular nickname) from Dover, England, who will get very horny when they see the images posted by the Austin couple…and so it goes.

MD: What inspired you to coin the term "Realcore"?

SM: During the 1990s, there was a strong trend toward "reality," culminating in today's reality TV shows. I'm thinking of the Rodney King video, shows like Jackass and Cops. In this genre, there are some aesthetic factors, such as low resolution, unsteady camerawork, and unedited footage, which we gladly accept because of the so-called reality of what we're seeing. We wouldn't believe the Rodney King footage if it was shot by three cameras with adequate lighting. Only 9/11 is an exception to this rule: many people objected to the cinematic editing of news coverage of the attacks and their aftermath exactly because it made things look unreal.

Now, cellphone cameras allow people to film in adult theaters, parking lots, cars, or wherever. And, as in the case of Rodney King, you exchange good, high-definition photography (cold, in McLuhan's terms) for imagery that is low-res but indisputably real (very hot!). This is why I call it Realcore. Softcore was simulated sex, hardcore went as far as actual sex, Realcore goes beyond: it strives to portray, without too much interference, people "actually" fulfilling their desires, often fully clothed.

Realcore is all about the reality of what you see, the truth of these images. It's about the desire to see someone doing something because they like to be seen. They're filming it because you are part of the game as well. You're the audience. They get horny because someone is getting horny over them. As Dante said, "Amor ch'a nullo amato, amar perdona" (Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving).

MD: Cultural theorists might argue that Realcore goes beyond Baudrillard's Nostalgia for the Real, crossing over into a fetishization of the real—a fetishization that is only possible in a Matrix world where the air is thick with simulacra, from the digitally retouched celebrity faces on magazine covers to the surgically perfected flesh of the millions who whittle themselves to fit those images; from Bush's Last-Action-Hero photo ops (Mission Accomplished!) to the Hollywood blockbuster titling and pumped-up
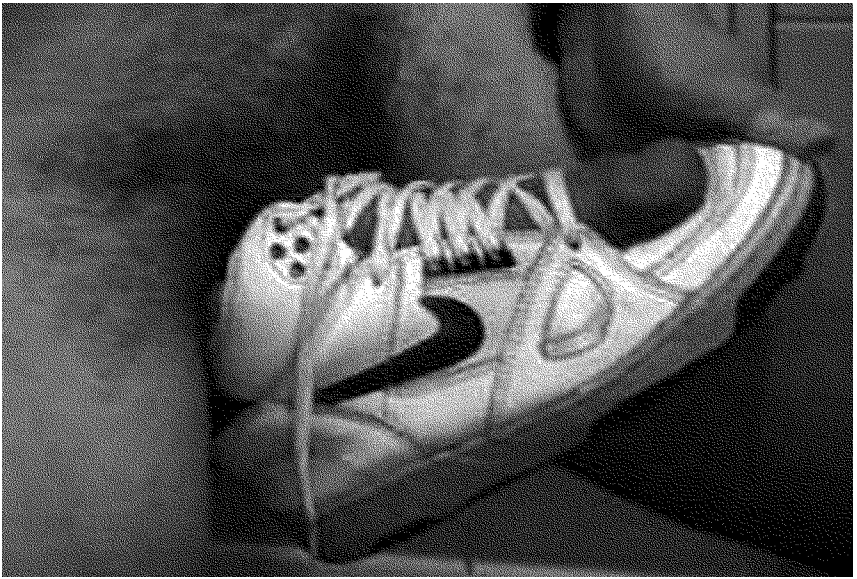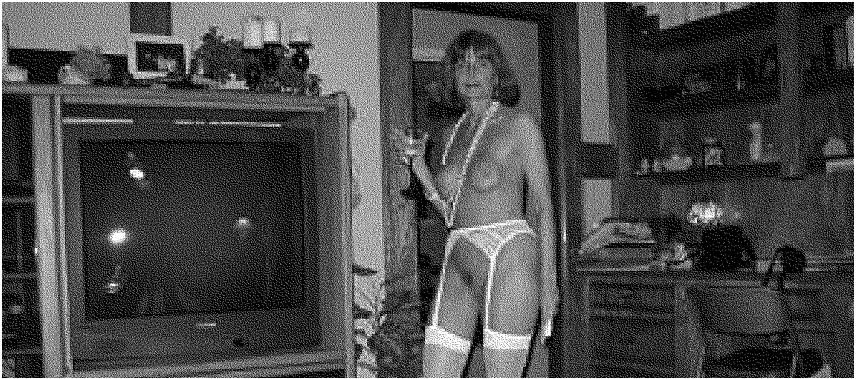
Sneaker fetishist. Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina. Used with permission; collection of Sergio Messina.

Asked about the unapologetic ugliness of some Usegroup Realcore-ers, Messina counters, "It isn't ugliness, it's normality---a shopping center stripped bare, you could say. The ultra-fat or extra-ugly are us." Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina.
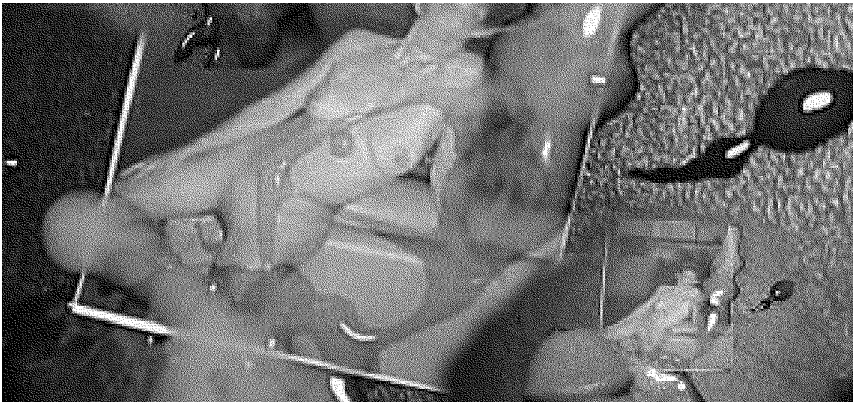*Used with permission; collection of Sergio Messina.*

If you've got it, flaunt it: according to Messina, this Realcore swinger is trolling for play-mates by baring her assets banana breasts and a jones for nicotine. Fetching.
Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina.
Used with permission: collection of Sergio Messina.

Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina.
Used with permission: collection of Sergio Messina.

"A different tribute, very evocative," notes Messina. "He is getting a hard-on over another newsgroups user, and maybe he's even online, at that very moment." Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina. Used with permission: collection of Sergio Messina.

Photoshopped tribute. Realcore image found online by Sergio Messina.
Used with permission: collection of Sergio Messina.

theme music cable news shows slap on war-porn footage of bombs bursting in air.

If this is so, then the gross-out nature of some Realcore practices, and the stunning ugliness of some Realcore practitioners, begins to make a certain sense: Realcore's gross-ness and ugliness — its irrefutable corporeality, and its frequent delight in what Bakhtin would call the pleasures of the "lower bodily stratum" — heightens its reality, making Re-alcore realer and therefore rarer in an age of simulations.

SM: That might be part of it. But think of these TV shows where you see police chas-es, car accidents, rescues, bungee-jumping gone wrong, etc. For most people, there is something very compelling in watching these shows, much more so than in watching a reenactment. Is it because the TV channels are thick with fiction? Partly. But real-ity TV fulfills other needs, touches some of the same strings that Realcore does. Jenna Jameson-type industrial porno, which is becoming a bit more extreme every year, is to Realcore what reality TV police chases are to Hollywood cop shows. It's like Indepen-dence Day compared to Robert Frank's Cocksucker Blues. In the first movie, you know where it's going and you enjoy the FX; but in the second, anything, literally anything, can happen — and does.

I agree about "the gross-out nature of some Realcore practices, and the stunning ugli-ness of some Realcore practitioners." Realcore stuff such as gloryhole pictures, amateur gangbangs, and sex in adult theaters often ends up on "tasteless" sites. Scat, for example, was extremely popular on gross-out sites like Rotten.com. That's because Realcore is shot in a way that proves the stuff is real: unedited equals immediate, actual, true — qualities treasured by gross-outers and fetishists (and millions of reality-TV fans) alike. For scat fe-tishists (and there are quite a few of them), knowing that the shit in the photos is really shit and not chocolate (that's another fetish!) is very important. This is why extreme-fetish porno tends toward Realcore. The very first people to understand this were European BDSM moviemakers in the 1980s; reality was very important for them, too.

MD: What do Realcore people themselves say about the "realness" of their auteur porn?

SM: I've tried to bring up the "reality" subject a few times, in e-mail exchanges, but it seldom bounces back, conversationally. They say that they got online, and they found these different images, and that's how they got involved in the scene. This is a common story: Realcore seems to be more satisfactory than porno because it isn't passive, it's in-teractive.

In my lecture (which isn't exactly a lecture; it's more of an edutainment show, a cross between stand-up anthropology and an X-rated Discovery Channel feature), I talk about "tributes." A woman posts her picture, some guy downloads it, prints it, cums on it, takes a photo of the results — the tribute — and posts it back into the newsgroups. She gets com-ments, requests to wear specific items — her home suddenly becomes public.

It's a whole game, involving mostly two or more people, where the first post is only the opening move. Once the tributes are made, the person portrayed in them collects

all these images and makes Photoshop collages that also end up online, on the person's website or in the newsgroups. The more tributes he or she gets, the greater the glory.

You don't do this with just any image: tributes tend to involve portraits of faces. And there are often specific requests for "tributes."

What a digital, complex, multi-stage way to please each other! Real, then virtual, then real again (and sticky), then virtual again, then sticky again…

MD: Again, very Baudrillardian: the precession of the stimulacra. Or is it sem-ula-cra? (Forgive me, J.B.) And, in its own way, Freudian: I'm reminded of that passage in Freud's essay, "The Uncanny," where he talks about the survival, in the modern psyche of the "atavistic mental activity" that he calls "the omnipotence of thoughts"—the prim-itive belief that subjective mental processes can affect external reality. The "tribute" has something of the occult about it; it's a kind of sympathetic magic—what I do to your image, I do to you.

How has being part of the Realcore scene affected the people in it?

SM: Many people have seen a change in their sexual lives, from "spiced up" to "turned upside down"—at least, that's what they say. Most of them started downloading first, and then they got cameras and started taking pictures themselves. So emulation plays a role: they like what they see and make similar stuff. Almost all the ones I've contacted were unaware of the implications—social, networking, futuristic—of what they were doing. They didn't have much to say about the images in terms of cultural-critical insights, but were happy to give juicy details on the setting in which the images were taken: many even kept online diaries (for members)—long texts, intended to accompany the images, and serve as further evidence of their reality.

MD: You mentioned setting. I was particularly taken, during your Amsterdam lecture, with your reading of the image of the woman proudly displaying her new trophy breasts. As you noted, the surgical results were underwhelming, if not grisly. But you focused (brilliantly, I thought) on the real subject of her self-portrait, namely, the sociological subtext hidden in the backdrop she had chosen. The image was really a sort of status-symbol porn. It was about the erotics of consumer desire—the tokens of the good life this woman had managed to amass, proudly and prominently on display in her petit-bourgeois livingroom. Her newly augmented breasts were just her latest acquisition.

SM: That image is very Realcore: it has no center, everything is equally relevant, from the picture on the TV to the vases on the shelf, the carpet, etc. There's an almost Re-naissance quality to the image—the new breasts proudly displayed with the other house commodities.

MD: It reminded me of a Dutch master's portrait of a self-satisfied burgher, surrounded by the creature comforts that proclaim his status.

SM: Many couples stress their respectability: "We might do gangbangs (black cocks only, inseminate my wife), but we would never cheat; we do this within the sacred institution of marriage." Interesting and exotic to me as an Italian, but probably more understandable in the US. I always love details—bookshelves, pictures, whatever.

Realcore people are seldom aware of the photographic beauty of their images; they're always surprised to hear me say that. In most cases, they don't seem very aware of anything else but the sexual side(s) of what they're doing. (Personally, I find this attitude very refreshing!)

MD: Do what extent do you—and/or they—see their autobiographical or documentary porn as a rebellion against, or a critique of, mainstream porn, whose unblemished glossiness rejects the Rabelaisian grossness and ugliness we've been talking about?

SM: They aren't aware of the changes they (along with the rest of the digital revolution) have induced in the porn industry. New mainstream porn genres have been born out of Realcore, such as point-of-view movies. I guess it's a bit like everything else digital: we just do it, and analyze it later. Yet, as in the blog phenomenon, there is an awareness, and often a pride, in differentiating what they're doing from the mainstream media—in this case the unblemished glossiness of magazines or corporate sex websites. They know they are different, because they look different, and in their images they stress this difference.

They're also aware of the different temperature of their porn: in Realcore, the camera is inside the action; most of it is shot by one of the partners, and eye and voice contact with the camera is almost a rule. So I would say this: they might not be "aware" of the rebellious quality of their stuff, but the images tell a different story.

NOTE
Sergio Messina adds: "I presented Realcore for the first time in 2000, at the Ars Electronica symposium, whose theme that year was Next Sex. As sometimes happens in digital culture, that presentation was too far ahead of the cultural curve; the phenomenon was blooming, but hadn't gotten the attention of mainstream culture yet. In the succeeding seven years, many things have happened in terms of technological change and digital culture, and most of these changes have affected Realcore in some way. Broadband, Bittorrent, Web 2.0, YouTube, camphones, videoconferencing: personal media has never been so personal. While this interview is the most comprehensive "written" text about Realcore so far, I'd like to emphasize that I prefer to present my research as a one-hour live infotainment show, which is what I do best: a peer-to-peer session, in the flesh, where my body talks about bodies to other bodies. I'd like to thank the Institute of Network Cultures, Marije Janssen, and Mark Dery for their interest in my work.
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