

Pedro,

Thank you for the invitation to share this article with ZoneZero readers about my experience getting searched by UK customs for pornography. In a recent editorial, you spoke of scars and the photographers' responsibility: at once to the individual being shot as well as to a higher calling -- the art itself. What of those invisible scars, you ask, so tough to capture in 35mm? It is a question that writers face, too. In our case, the words are the traces of experience we leave in our wake. They are less tangible than the photographers' print, yet they leave different imprints. How to capture the scar in ink? Those invisible scars that must be discovered in introspection, in the silence facing blank paper, a computer screen.

Whithin a few hours after the following was story was posted on the Internet, I received an incredible number of e-mails from people who've extended their support. It's a digital form of nature's healing, I am certain. I'm pleased that the story may now find an even greater audience with ZoneZero readers, of which I also count myself one. It is especially important for the artist, not just the politician, to think through these issues. If we are to be spared from silly governmental policies, I place my faith in the photographer -- the recorder of scars -- before today's bureaucrats.

Cheers,

Kenn

Some days its a bad hair day, other days you see the suite of Western values since the Enlightenment quashed in an instant by a single, soulless, civil servant. Here's what happened to me last Friday when I arrived in London from Paris on the channel tunnel train:

As I walked through UK immigration, two guys pulled me aside, flashed badges, and said: "UK Customs. Come with us." They walked me behind a wall where they handed me off to one of a fleet of waiting agents.

A customs officer told me to lay my computer bag on the table, and inspected my ticket and passport. After learning I was a reporter, she demanded to see my press card (issued by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and asked about where I was going in London, why, and for how long.

"Do you know there are things that are illegal to bring into the UK?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah.... There are *many* things that are illegal to bring across borders -- do you have in

mind any thing in particular?," I said.

"Illegal drugs, fire arms, bomb making materials, lewd and obscene pornographic material...."

I felt a rush of relief. I was late and now was assured I could get on with my journey.

"I am carrying none of that," I replied, staring directly at her, with a tone of earnest seriousness.

"Is that a computer in your bag?"

"Yes."

"Does it have Internet on in?"

Here, I confess, I really didn't know how to answer. What does one say to a question like that?? I was struck dumb.

"I use the computer to access the Internet, yes,"

I said, rather proud of myself for my accuracy.

"Is there any pornography on it?" she said, stoically.

Here, I figured out what's going on. But I'm mentally paralyzed from all the synapses sparkling all at once in my head: Does she not understand that Internet content is distributed around the world? That I'm just dialing a local number, be it in France or the UK, and that whether I cross a border is moot to what I'm able to access?

"There is no pornography stored on the hard drive," I stated.

"Do you mind if I check." she says rather than asks, and begins to take the computer out of the bag.

"I'm just going to hook it up over there and scan the hard drive..." she continues.

And then her face turns dour. "Oh! It's an Apple," she says, dejectedly.

"Our scanner doesn't work on Apples."

At this point, it's all a little bit too much, too fast, for me to handle. From seeing my personal privacy ripped out from under me with a computer-enema to an immediate about-face and witnessing my oppressors flounder in the paps of their own incompetence was just too much to bear.

Then, of course, I sort of relished the irony of it all. I swung into naive-mode:

"Oh. Oh well," I said and began packing up. "Why not?"

"I dunno -- it just doesn't," she said.

"Is this a common thing that you do? Scan PCs?"

"It happens quite often," she said. (Note: I wrote this entire dialogue immediately after the incident, but that particular quote I wrote the moment we parted, to have it exactly right.)

"Do you catch a lot?"

"Sometimes," she says, cautiously.

What's the fine? The penalty?" I asked.

She started to become uncomfortable and tried to move me along. "It depends. Every case is different. It depends what they have."

"What about if I had encryption -- do you check for that too?" I said, disdaining the risk that she might want to check the computer "by hand" since I'd mentioned the dreaded C-word....

"Huh?! I don't know about that...."

"You don't know what cryptography is?" I asked.

"No. Thank you, you can go now," she said.

And thus ended my experience with inspector "K. PARE_," whose name tag was partially torn at the final one or two letters of her last name.

Of course I was burning up. Lots of thoughts raced through me.

For example, would I have really let her inspect my hard drive, even knowing I was "innocent." That, of course, was entirely irrelevant to me -- it's about a principle. I thought of my editor -- or ex-editor -- if I didn't make the day-long meeting. And I immediately thought of John Gilmore, and how much I respected him when he refused to board a flight a few years ago when the airline demanded he present a form of identification.

Had I acquiesced to their mental thuggery?

As soon as I realized I was "safe" from being scanned, I was tempted to pull out my notepad, go into reporter mode, and make a small scene getting names and superiors and formal writs of whatever.... but suspected it would only get me locked in a room for a full day.

Then I thought of how, despite in their kafakain zeal to abuse my privacy, they couldn't even get that right. Not only did they not have a clue what the Internet is, they confirmed their ignorance by not even being able to digitally pat me down. Insult to injury! It brought back something John Perry Barlow once told me about why he doesn't fear US intelligence agencies. "I've seen them from the inside," he said (as I recall), "they will suffer under the weight of their own ineptitude."

What's at the heart of this is "thought crime"; and scanning one's computer is paramount to search and seizure of one's intellectual activity. What if they found subversive literature about the proper role of government authority in civil society? Would that have gotten me busted? And do they store what they scan? Are business executives with marketing plans willing to have their data inspected under the umbrella of public safety from porn?

Just the night before I read in the memoirs of William Shirer, who wrote *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, about how he was blacklisted for a decade after his name was cited in *Red Currents*, a magazine that destroyed hundreds of careers during the McCarthy era. He was powerless to defend himself.

I see parallels: We are approaching the point where we are incapable of reasonable discourse on Internet content. Refuse to boot up for inspection means you've got something to hide. Defend civil liberties of the accused means you condone guilty acts. Question the nature of the censorious policies in the first place means you are filthy, and as unhealthy as the wily-eyed porn devourer.... State the obvious: That a large part of the drive for Net content regulation is driven by hucksters seeking recognition, and that it is taken to idiotic extremes by a mass movement of simpletons ignorant of the history of hysteria in the US, and, well, you're just a typical lawless cyberlibertarian.

Finally, it dawned in me. This wasn't an aberration at all, but part of a much deeper trend. It's a British thing, really.

"As might be supposed I have not had the time, nor may I add the inclination to read through this book," wrote Sir Archibald Bodkin, the director of public prosecutions, on 29 December 1922. "I have, however, read pages 690 to 732 ... written as they are, as it composed by a more or less illiterate vulgar woman ... there is a great deal of unmitigated filth and obscenity."

And so James Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned in Britain for 15 years.

Interesting, that. The policy was made by a chap who didn't actually read the work he felt justified to prohibit others from reading. Wonder if the fellows who implemented Britain's scan-for-skin policy actually use the Net themselves...?

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Singapore, 11 August 1998
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(No, I was not stopped by customs officials here. But this e-mail was sent out via government-mandated proxy servers)

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Searched at UK Border for Net Porn on an Apple

Written by a letter by Kenneth Neil Cukier

worked at the International Herald Tribune.

<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/kcukier/searched.html>