

PATERSON Simone
A Data Body Discourse in Image and Text

Abstract

The Internet or cyberspace is a space supposedly not restricted by the codes of the physical, off-line world. Cyberspace is thought to be free from the encumbering demands of physicality; it is a new realm that has the potential for total equality of race, religion, sexuality and gender.

Is cyberspace really an environment in which the rules of the dominant Western paradigm do not apply? No, unfortunately cyberspace has fallen short of these utopian ideals and has instead become the new frontier for the Western white world (“www”) driven by mass media consumption. Nowhere is this more evident than in the representation of women in cyberspace.

In cyberspace, data bodies represent physical bodies and these avatars are mostly female. They are constructed as young, white, and as if surgically enhanced. This unmarked (American, white female) body is seen as normative. The “Barbie” ideal of youth and perfection imposed on the female body in our off-line contemporary culture is alive and well in the on-line world of cyberspace.

This discourse, in image and text, traces the development and programming of an avatar, the Bimbo Borg. The Bimbo Borg inverts the normative data body from a silent object of desire to a “butt kicking” girl hero. Her electronic attributes expose the cultural construction of femininity and discredits the myth that cyberspace is free from the off-line, real world restraints of the dominant Western paradigm. The Bimbo Borg’s purpose is to encourage women to become more visible as speaking subjects in cyberspace and to create more authentic female representations.

Biography

Simone Paterson is a multimedia artist who is currently a PhD candidate at The University of Newcastle, and Teacher of Multimedia at The Hunter Institute of Technology, Newcastle, Australia. In 1995 Simone was awarded a Master of Visual Arts from the University of Sydney, Sydney College of the Arts and was the winner of The NSW Travelling Art Scholarship. Since that time Paterson has exhibited widely in Australia and overseas including in Italy and the USA.

In 2003 as visiting artist at Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA, Paterson presented her *Data Body Series* at Georgetown’s 101 Gallery. In 2002 her avatar, the Bimbo Borg, featured in multimedia installation works which were exhibited as part of the *Fear/Fun* multimedia festival at Western Michigan University, and in *(sic) but true* a multimedia exhibition at The University of Sydney, Sydney College of The Arts. The Bimbo Borg was also included in the conference *Consciousness Reframed 2002*, organised by CAiiA (Center for Advanced Inquiry into the Interactive Arts, UK), as part of The Biennale of Electronic Arts, Perth, WA, Australia.

A Data Body Discourse in Image and Text

Discourse

[I]n every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures...¹

Foucault 1972

The intention of this discourse is to mesh together existing strands of theories that are relevant to the digital domain of cyberspace and attach these debates to the electronic flesh of my avatar, the Bimbo Borg. Through both image and text I discuss the reason for the Bimbo Borg’s appearance and the purpose of her development. The “production” of this discourse is “controlled” through the programming of the Bimbo Borg, who was created in my personal computer. The images and text are “selected” by immersion into popular culture, by cyber-surfing, watching television, and going to the cinema. This discourse is “organised” according to the codes of my multimedia art practice and “redistributed” by means of “grrl” talk, which is a no-nonsense, in your face, ready to change the world way of talking. Through humour,

irony and entertainment I turn mainstream, digital culture against itself, in the hope of encouraging more women to participate in the disembodied world of cyberspace.

Perhaps unlike more traditional discourses, this data body discourse does not keep to a rigid precept of logic; rather, it is banter at a given point in time. The voice participating in this banter does not articulate a unified sense of identity, or solidarity with others, but pronounces a process of becoming, implying a multiplicity rather than a reduction to one “truth”. The voice within this data body discourse functions via a currency of symbols rather than words, it is a visual voice of sound. It is my disembodied, electronic voice and it is carried on invisible waves and infiltrates the hallowed grounds of the academy, a discourse by/with/through a data body. What does this voice say? “More variation please.”

The Data Body/ Cyborg

The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code. ²

Haraway 1991

Haraway’s cyborg manifesto has converted the classic, science-fiction cyborg from a male monstrosity found in popular culture, such as the Terminator, Robocop or Davros (the creator of the Daleks from the British TV show *Dr Who* c. 1975), into a feminist icon. In claiming the cyborg as a feminist icon, contemporary culture – including cyberspace, one of its most compelling realms – becomes a vehicle by which women can fully participate in and manipulate. The concept of the cyborg has also expanded to include digital entities such as data bodies. The data body is a new paradigm, an emerging being within cultural discourse. We see data bodies everywhere. They appear on the domestic screen of our televisions and computers, on the large cinema screen of the movies, on public projections in our shopping malls and electronic billboards. So what exactly is a data body?

A real, off-line body is flesh and blood, “mere meat”. ³ A data body is not a real body; it is made from computer information. A data body is a binary code of 0s and 1s. ⁴ It is colour pixels arranged for the benefit of the screen, a cyborg that is reliant on computer technology. Data bodies in cyberspace are digital, virtual bodies, many of which operate as avatars.

An avatar represents an off-line body in the on-line world of cyberspace. Many appear on-screen as big-busted beauties, available 24/7, easy to use, and ready to download to the laptop of the Internet user. Their appearance seems to be dictated by the commercial interests of mass media culture.

Cyberspace exists behind the screen of a computer and can be seen as a creative space that is culturally produced and considered a new Eden for the technical production of digital, artificial life. Cyberspace has become “a mass delusion”, colonised and controlled by the dominant paradigm of American mono, McDonald's, amazon.com culture, another trap, considered unmarked or neutral but is in actuality a projection of the Western, white world, the “www”.

Does gender matter in cyberspace? Given its virtual, non-physical or disembodied nature, the Internet, cyberspace, has been hailed as a great equaliser, where anyone can construct any identity, and gender is not experienced as an inhibitor: “transboys, transgirls, androgynes, bitykes and all the possible in-betweens”. ⁵ Does this act of “passing off” as another identity signify the arrival of gender-neutrality in cyberspace? In many cases it is more revealing of the construction of gender than impartiality or neutrality.

Presently, in cyberspace, data bodies are more likely to be representations of feminine perfection rather than feminist icons. They tell us how we should want to appear. Like magic mirrors, data bodies can tell us, “We are the fairest of them all”. They are faultless reflections of ourselves, but whose ideal of perfection are they?

One can argue that all data bodies are defined and created from the point of view of the dominant paradigm, creating an imbalance of vocal power within cyber discourse. The “www” heterosexual voice dominates in what appears at surface value to be a gender-neutral cyberspace. The “www” dominant paradigm exists as a collection of practices with a propensity for espousing theories of universal truths and

essentialist views. These theories permeate the culture, yet seem “spoken from nowhere and as if by no one in particular. No one voices the assumptions and problems of these theories; no one’s voice is heard in the exemplary knowledge claims around which they are built, and no one is answerable for their effects in peoples’ lives.”⁶

Data bodies appear as willing participants in ubiquitous porn sites. One can argue that pornography on-line, the majority of which serves the “www” viewpoint, has been the greatest contributor to the speed, growth of and increasing ease of accessibility to the Internet. Pornographers want their product downloaded fast, they want their product to be very easily found and they want your e-mail address and credit card details to provide you with a range of services you never really requested. In cyberspace, the “www” sex tourist can post his experience worldwide and give recommendations of best practices, an example of how the engendered world of cyberspace has implications in the real world.

Yes, gender does matter in cyberspace. Far from being a genderless, bodiless arena of neutrality, cyberspace discourse is dominated by male voices creating a populace of data bodies devised to suit a tits-and-arse aesthetic. The Bimbo Borg has been developed to expose this aesthetic; she has excessive breasts and an ultra-thin waist. The extreme characteristics of the Bimbo Borg are a way of revealing the absurd demands of a feminine ideal placed upon women in the real world and seemingly perpetuated by the information revolution.

Disembodied / Post human

It is this notion of detaching oneself from one’s embodiment that has identified as one of the prime means through which women have been excluded from the Cartesian ideal of reason.⁷

Gatens 1998

There is a long history of characterising the “mere meat” body, especially that of women, as playing no part in serious discourse. Knowledge is disembodied. The seventeenth century rationalist philosopher René Descartes privileged the mind over the body, implying that the body had nothing of value to add to knowledge. Rational thought, pure reason, truth, can only be obtained if one is to overcome bodily needs and passions.

In the dualist constructs of mind/ body, reason/ irrationality, women are aligned with the body and the irrational. Abstract thought, reason and rationality are the domain of the Western, white male. Some feminist thinkers have thus concluded that the act of disembodiment is a masculine pursuit, a male fantasy.⁸

The notion of disembodied knowledge has preoccupied Second-Wave Feminist scholars, such as Butler (1990-93), Gallop (1988) and Grosz (1994-95). They have been concerned with the visceral female body in an effort to embody knowledge. The real body, in the real world must be the central core of all Feminist concerns because it is the quality of women’s lives that is the motivating factor behind Feminism. If one were to pursue such a line of thought to the extreme, then possibly it would reinforce Cartesian dualities of women being grounded in the real world, leaving only men to explore the new abstract disembodied frontier of cyberspace, to conquer, colonise and make subservient what grows and blossoms there.

As a result some contemporary Feminisms⁹ explore the potentials of operating via a data body in cyberspace. Included in the category of Third-Wave Feminism are Cyberfeminists who engage with the wired world of cyberspace; they do not dismiss the computer as a boys’ toy. Their activity is often placed outside of the real world of flesh and blood; their voices are enunciated in cyberspace. This activity is not a vindication of the Cartesian glorification of male disembodiment. Rather, an acknowledgement that cyberspace is now a part of our lived experience and that this abstract arena must be encoded with Feminist values to enhance a woman’s quality of life.

There is a multiplicity of approaches to Cyberfeminist discourse, a large, shifting array of views proclaiming different, individuated truths rather than one universal truth as the Hundred Anti-Theses of Cyberfeminism makes clear. “#42 CyberFeminism is not an avatar”.¹⁰ Nor is it one language or science fiction. It is not stable and not complete but while refusing to be pinned down to a singular definition,

Cyberfeminisms incorporate the concerns of women on-line. One concern of both Cyberfeminists and other Third-Wavers is: "Fighting unrealistic standards of beauty set by the mass media.... Third-Wavers are fed up with the pressure to look perfect and wear a size six."¹¹

The Bimbo Borg is aware that she was developed with an unrealistic standard of beauty, but she is not real, she is only an electronic manifestation of the desires of mainstream Internet users and program designers. It is this awareness, the awareness that she exists only in relation to the male gaze and is thought to be just an object, an inferior being, a delinquency, but still she has courage enough to speak, to declare herself as sometime more than just tits-and-arse; this is what makes her a Third-Wave Cyberfeminist.

Declarations

The drawback to any attempt to remain un-gendered is the inability to declare oneself¹²
McAdams 1996

To affect change in on-line and off-line worlds, it is necessary for women to announce that they are, in fact there, rather than silent, invisible, deodorised technophobes. There are a number of Cyberfeminists who have declared themselves in cyberspace. Their data bodies have infiltrated "big daddy mainframe" (VNX Matrix 1998), to disrupt and infect the code of so-called pure, sterile and neutered, cyberspace. Electronic blood and guts have been reinserted into the neat string of visual code of the perfect data body.

A case in point is Australian artist Linda Dement, who has declared herself through girl monsters. *In My Gash* 1999, takes you into the flesh of a depressed and dangerous girl, drug-fucked and damaged.¹³

Tina La Porta, who lives and works in New York City, in her on-line artwork, *Future Body*¹⁴ reduces the female figure to a wire frame model hinting at the unlimited potential of the form. La Porta, exposes the code behind the model; this disclosure articulates the construction of femininity in cyberspace. The act of code disclosure and the looping of sound and animations reveal a female speaking subject.

Nancy Paterson, a Canadian artist and no relation to me, is known on-line as, vacuumwoman.com (represented as a 1950s housewife). Her multimedia work *Stock Market Skirt*¹⁵ is both an installation in a gallery and available on-line. It consists of a skirt where the hemline is controlled by the rise and fall of the stock market. The skirt is connected to a computer, which relays the stock market data and the skirt rises and falls respectively.

In the CD Rom, The Bimbo Borg does 'c' Space, we also penetrate electronic flesh, as in the work of Dement. We strip open the external covering of the cyborg to see her insides, in so doing questioning her status as human. The Bimbo Borg was constructed using the same modelling program as La Porta's female figure but rather than being a wire frame model the Bimbo Borg is covered in a green-coloured reflection map and she is continually updated and will be until she reaches her full potential. The Bimbo Borg also exists in gallery spaces, like the work of "vacuumwoman", the Bimbo Borg incorporates digital components and installed sculptural elements thus making a direct connection between virtual and real worlds.

The politicised, post-classic cyborg of Haraway does now participate as a needed voice within cyber discourse. More women must choose data bodies of their own making and enter the disembodied digital arena. Real embodied women must use data bodies to infect, circumvent, transform, and transgress the "www" form of female (mis)representation. They must add their voices in great numbers to permeate the current masculine-oriented discourse in cyberspace.

bimboborg.org

Having your own home page is having your own space in a global network it may empower its author's lived experience¹⁶

Chandler 1998

The development and control of the Bimbo Borg has been an act of signification, that is, a way of making sense of the world in which I live. My oh-so-sexy *sigh-borg* has starred in most of my practice-based

research (which includes interactive multimedia, web publishing and sculptural installation work) over the past three years of doctoral research.

My Bimbo Borg appears much like many avatars who, according to Melinda Rackham in an interview with Eugene Thacker for 'C' Theory (2002), "are tall and surgically enhanced" with one exception: she is green rather than white. The sexy, sassy appearance of the Bimbo Borg is an advantage in the wired world. Her electronic assets allow her to infiltrate, then to insert a political agenda despite her colour.

Why is the Bimbo Borg green? It's a reference to *Lost in Space*, the 1965 futuristic TV series created and produced by Irwin Allen, who was also responsible for other TV classics such as *The Time Tunnel* and *The Land of the Giants*. *Lost In Space* provided many children of the '60s with their first small-screen encounter with a cyborg or, as they were known as at that time, android. The *Lost in Space* creature who most influenced the Bimbo Borg was the Girl from the Green Dimension, sometimes known as the Girl from the Green Mist.

Wearing sparkling green lurex and a salad bowl as a space helmet, the Girl from the Green Dimension confessed her love for Dr. Smith, the show's villain. Her high-pitched, extremely seductive catchphrase, "Pretty handsome, Doctor Smith", was unforgettable to any impressionable pre-pubescent girl child. This sexualised being was powerful as only a woman can be. The Bimbo Borg utilises the same power base, but she also has the potential to kick butt, just like the girl hero, TV data body, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.¹⁷

Faith Wilding in her essay *Where Is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?*¹⁸, has been critical of Cyberfeminists' reference or use of 1960s space babes and of 1950s housewives. In cyberspace we can write the stories, and the data bodies that we use are no longer just passive objects of desire. They can save the world or leap tall buildings in a single bound and eat as much exclusive, hand-made chocolate as they bloody-well like. The meta-narrative of the male hero is ruptured, and the girl hero provides an alternative role model for lived experience.

The film *simone* (simulation one, sim-one) presents to us a very compliant female data body, which never complains about working 24/7. She fulfils the creative desires of a failed and aging male director. She mirrors his voice. She has the figure that is most desirable in our Western global economy. Men want *simone* and women want to be *simone*. I control my own simulation one, my own data body, my Bimbo Borg.

The Bimbo Borg is a post-human who has overcome the inbuilt obsolescence of the human form. She will never grow old, she will never get fat and she does not have to maintain a regime of personal hygiene. She has the potential to be anything. Her electronic body is malleable and nimble in the realm of cyberspace.

I remake the Bimbo Borg continually; she can be anything I want her to be. I can update my data body without my real body undergoing a physical reconstruction by the surgeon's knife, perhaps relieving the pressure on my real body to conform to a Western feminine ideal. Maybe by updating our data bodies, the way we update our computers and software, we can leave the meat to age gracefully and intact.

Tomorrow People

Objective research requires that women tell their stories. These stories will reveal the hidden cultural influences that will be evidence for knowledge claims relating to gender differences in the use of computer based technologies.¹⁹

Morritt 1997

Women's stories are different from men's stories. So too are the stories from diverse races, religions and ages. If these distinctive voices are taken into account in the quest for knowledge, then options for an equal and just world begin to emerge. This is the underpinning principle of what is known as Feminist Standpoint Theory, where marginal lives are taken as a starting point of research.

In the future, will data bodies become the marginal lives of tomorrow? Will my Bimbo Borg become a new sub-class of human? Will she become a fully individuated entity with her own agenda? Will other data

bodies want to tell their own stories, different from that of their developers? Will we always regard data bodies as lesser beings or will we grant them full citizenship? Will we dismiss their attempts to participate fully in society as a threat to our dominant human position?

Such questions might appear only important in the realm of science-fiction, but it must be remembered that not too long ago it was thought that women were not capable of reason, scientific inquiry or abstract thought and that we had little to add to the quest for knowledge for we were dumbed down by our physicality.

As women of today we must cease the opportunity to participate in cyberspace and produce our own data bodies. These data bodies might be big-breasted, flat-chested, outrageously thin, unbelievably huge, pink, green, or not even a female figure at all. This is our choice, we must exercise this choice and create a varied representation of women on-line and not succumb to the normalising dictates of “www” mainstream culture.

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- ¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, translated. A. M. Sheridan-Smith, Pantheon, New York. 1972. Page 216.
 - ² Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women; The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York. 1991. Page 163.
 - ³ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Ace Books, New York. c1984.
 - ⁴ The use of the term 0s and 1s is directly from Sadie Plant’s inspiring book (1998) of the same name, although, the term is not applied directly to data bodies. Laurie Anderson’s use of the term in *Home of the Brave* (video documentation of her performance art, c1985) is also acknowledged.
 - ⁵ Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen; Politics in the Posthuman Age*, Routledge, New York. 2000. Figure 9 notes, page 112.
 - ⁶ Lorraine Code, ‘Voice and Voicelessness; A Modest Proposal?’: *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice, Critiques and Reconstructions*, Janet A. Kourany, editor, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. c1998. Page 204.
 - ⁷ Moira Gatens, ‘Modern Rationalism’: *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young, editors, Blackwell Publishers Inc. Massachusetts. 1998. Page 22.
 - ⁸ Marj Kibby, ‘Babes on the Web; Sex Identity and the Home Page’. *Media International Australia No 84* May, 1997. <http://www.kibby.org/internet/babes.html> (Accessed June 2003).
 - ⁹ The use of the plural is deliberately used to acknowledge the many different and varied interpretations of feminism.
 - ¹⁰ <http://www.obn.org/cfundef/100antitheses.html> (Accessed June 2003).
 - ¹¹ Sarah Rasmusson, ‘Third Wave Feminism; History of a Social Movement’: *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements*, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., Armonk, NY. August 2003.
 - ¹² Mindy McAdams states this in ‘Why Bring Gender Online?’ Lisa Schmesier, *Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) Magazine*, March 1, 1996. <http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1996/mar/ed.html> (Accessed June 2003).
 - ¹³ <http://www.casulapowerhouse.com/cybercultures/InfectiousAgents/dement.html> (Accessed May 2001)
 - ¹⁴ <http://eies.njit.edu/~kimmelma/laporta.html> (Accessed May 2003)
 - ¹⁵ <http://www.vacuumwoman.com/MediaWorks/Stock/stock.html> (Accessed May 2003)
 - ¹⁶ Daniel Chandler, ‘Personal Home Pages and the Construction of Identities on the Web’. 1998. <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/webident.html> (Accessed June 2003).
 - ¹⁷ For a detailed discussion on the virtues of Buffy see Susan Hopkins, *Girl Heroes: The New Force in Popular Culture*, Pluto Press, Annandale. 2002. Page 111-118.
 - ¹⁸ http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html (Accessed June 2003)
 - ¹⁹ Hope Morritt, *Women and Computer Technologies. A Feminist Perspective*, University Press of America, Inc., Lanham. 1997. Page 7.