

Cybernetics and Sex

Barry King

Do pubescent boys dream of electronic hookers?

There is a long history of introducing technological change through images of the feminine and this is particularly true of computer game culture. Sex sells and selling virtual encounters is a dominant marketing tool for computer gaming. Not unexpectedly, virtual babes – highly sexualised images of ‘girls’ who promise to be the willing servants of heterosexual desire – become the preferred conduit through which to build a ‘game’ of sexual and physical conquest.ⁱ Given the fusion of a version of female sexuality and electronic ‘life forms’ how better to unsettle gender stereotypes than by taking their specifications too seriously? Such is the intention of Hye Rim Lee with her creation of TOKI.

TOKI is a virtual babe with a difference, an incarnation on steroids, unlike her sister digi-bodies, Lara Croft, Anova, Syndi, Myra and, the decisively pornographic, Ultravixen. The cybernetic submissiveness of Lara Croft has always been tempered by the sexual authority of her pneumatic breasts and figure. Ultravixen, endures a range of sado-masochistic practices in order to achieve a super-orgasm that “blows the villain away”.ⁱⁱ Snatching victory through compliance is also TOKI’s way. She incarnates male desires under conditions of erasure. In part, this is because TOKI signals her belonging is as much to the realm of animals and machines as to humanity. It is also because through her fretful experiments in body modification, TOKI renders the fantasy of the perfect, compliant female as a never-ending chase for the unattainable.

Drawing on the Japanese traditions of Manga and Anime with their casts of doe-eyed females playing out sugary tales of romance, TOKI is also cute - which is to say she models a girlish style of charm that replaces sexuality with fun. Her face with its smooth, de-realised features and large staring eyes is disturbingly

childlike, even as her body and vocalisations evoke a fully matured sexual being. Part machine, part girl, part woman, part animal, TOKI is equivocation made flesh.

Body, Machine, Image

Never has the human body – above all the female body – been so massively manipulated as today... And yet the process of technologisation, instead of materially investing the body, was aimed at the construction of a separate sphere that had practically no point of contact with it: what was technologised was not the body but its image.ⁱⁱⁱ

The separation of the living body and its technologically produced image is a relationship of exploitation and domination. It is the image, when given the prestige and social penetration supplied by the media that sets the terms of reference for the look of the body, its grooming and appearance. As many studies in the USA have shown, media images influence the kind of attitude young girls and women take towards their own bodies. Television, advertising, fashion and magazine images of women, who are 13% to 19% below their expected body weight by size, tend to increase the dissatisfaction of young girls and women with a more size-consistent body weight – an effect much less likely to be found amongst men.^{iv} The power of media images has been argued to have created an epidemic of eating disorders, such as bulimia and anorexia, and more insidiously to have led to an obsession with beauty enhancement techniques, such as plastic surgery and training regimes, in order to acquire the apparent perfection of media images.

In the West the popularity of television shows such as *Extreme makeover* and the influence of Hollywood cut and patch celebrities, has encouraged increasing numbers of women to take the surgical road to the dream self. The dream self is in itself a complex construction, part mental, as a phenomenon of a wish for better self-esteem, and part an external media image that applies to every

woman and no woman in particular. In the process of accepting to go under the knife, a real self and virtual self approach one another in a fantasy of re-incarnation. This fantasy seems most intense in Asia for reasons that are complexly intertwined in historical, economic and physical realities.

Historically, females have been regarded as the property of men with traditional practices such as foot binding, breast binding and the covering of the face confining women to the domestic sphere, thereby hiding their physical attractiveness from the public gaze. From the point of view of the West, such practices seem outdated and barbaric, conflicting with the widely accepted principle that women should be permitted, within limits between the babe and the slut, to use their attractiveness to win a partner. The shift to a free choice in relationships and the perception of appearance as a marketable value is slowly developing in the East but it does so in a context in which traditional definitions of gender and double standard are still widely recognised. Not unlike Western men, many Eastern men want their wives inexperienced and exclusively attuned to their particular sexual needs and capacities. Yet outside the marital home, men want women to be available for casual sex and experienced in it. This double standard is a feature of Western culture. In Asia it is exacerbated by the high value placed on 'virginity' in the marriage market. Torn between what men expect sexually and the stigma of lost virginity young women increasingly resort to surgically reinstated virginity through 'vaginal rejuvenation' plastic surgery.

Economically, as the vast trade in global sex indicates, women are increasingly forced into prostitution as a means of supporting themselves and /or their families or to find a way out of the oppressive conditions of the sweatshop. Whatever the particularities of the case, the general rule applies: close a factory and prostitution increases. There may be 'happy hookers' out there but the smiles are generally as fixed as those that greet Western tourists and men seeking 'mail-order' brides.^v The global traffic in sex makes the 'look' a much sought-after commodity, which can lead the bearer towards a secure job, a

husband and the chance to be someone – a star in one’s own body. If in the West, the demands of the fashion industry tend to be mitigated by values of individual self-expression, in Korean society the value placed on group identity leads to a greater degree of conformism. Women on the streets in South Korea are more likely to be clones of Western fashion and, in seeking the prized ‘Eurasian’ look, they are much more likely to use cosmetic surgery. Compared to the USA in which only 3% of the public have undergone cosmetic surgery, the rate in Korea is 13%.^{vi}

Colonial Mimicry

If TOKI is familiar, she is also irreconcilably strange, a hybrid of the virgin and the hooker, both cute and unsettlingly raunchy, one who promises to satisfy male desire even as she suggests that men will be expected to be the satisfiers. Her shiftiness and eccentricity speaks to her provenance. She is a hybrid composed through the interaction between Western and Eastern notions of the feminine, and for that reason always the same and yet always slightly awry and off-centred. As the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha has argued, the colonial power requires that the colonial subject makes his or herself into a recognisable other, as “a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite”.^{vii}

Through a skilful use of visuals and sound, Hye Rim Lee advances a strategy of sly imitation – conforming to the Western ideal even as she exposes it as artificial and arbitrary.

First, there is the strategy of hyperbole, TOKI is rendered as a ‘living and breathing’ abstraction - a figure that strives to embody the Western ideal of beauty. But a figure that falls far short of the ideals of photo-realism that drive the mainstream developers of digi-bodies. TOKI’s smooth, endlessly, undulating skin shows no hair, wrinkles or realistic pigmentation of eyes and skin - the very details that mainstream animators see as crucial to an impression of ‘aliveness’. In *Lash*, TOKI’s lips suddenly explode into a rosebud, more perfect and red than

real lips could be. Her eyes are too large and too much like doll's eyes to suggest an invite.

Secondly, TOKI is a figure of puns. Firstly, TOKI is the Korean word for rabbit, which recalls the Playboy Bunny – thereby hinting at the colonisation of beauty ideals by the West. Secondly, in traditional Korean culture the rabbit is depicted inside the orb of the Moon, grinding away at a mixing bowl like an ideal housewife. By mixing the good time girl and the housewife TOKI refuses the burden of domesticity. She deflects the energy given in domestic labour onto fashioning her body as a sex object. But that fashioning is not revealed as a condition of harmony. Lee represents the perfecting of TOKI as the compulsively iterative actions of a stylus that first draws, erases and redraws TOKI's torso, breasts, lips and vagina. This intensity speaks to kind of carnal obsession and madness.

Even when TOKI seems about to incarnate the Western beauty standard, the brooding and ominous sound-scape in which she is imprisoned evokes a harsh industrial process far removed from the ideals of nature and femininity. In *Lash* a blink sounds like the crack of a whip compelling submission. In *Powder Room*, a soft pink ambience and sugary Korean pop music evoke a beauty parlour with its close emphasis on personal appearance. Yet each of the four 'mirrors' shows TOKI in a different state of transformation; a constant iteration that denies the spectator any chance of identification except with the process of change itself. Here in this private personal space says TOKI, nothing is personal since everyone is striving to look exactly like everyone else – an allusion to the desire of Korean women to become westernised. In *Super Toy* where TOKI is most intensively sexualised – the formation of her plump nipples and statuesque vagina never fully attains the fixity of real flesh, the underlying code constantly surfaces and reveals its artifice.

So TOKI in acquiescing to the hypersexualisation of her body refuses to be the cybernetic equivalent of a 'comfort woman'. Once the demands of sexual perfection are set in train they will become all encompassing, engulfing *he* who imagines women as merely the accommodating vessel of his own desire.

TOKI as Phantasm

But what kind of being is TOKI - an avatar standing for the artist herself, a digital persona which is, in some sense, alive, an animal mimicking human identity, a machine posing as human? TOKI is a phantasm rather than a figure of fantasy. As defined by the French Philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, a phantasm is an illegitimate copy, a simulation that assumes a surface resemblance to its immediate object in order to establish its own singular reality.^{viii} In mimicking so closely a thing it is not and yet signalling the presence of difference, a phantasm de-constructs resemblance itself. Are we all not quite ourselves?

TOKI presents male fantasies in a state of mimicry, assuming the image forms of the westernised regimes of colonialism and sexism in order to unravel them. A figure that warps and folds through a series of identifications never quite encompassed or fulfilled by any image and doomed to endless repetition, TOKI recalls the image of the nomad, a being always in a process of becoming something else and never at home in one place.^{ix}

As TOKI slips away from what she seems so willing to embody, might not the spectator feel a moment of disturbance, of eccentricity and of slipperiness with relation to what is collectively defined by the media as the essential sexy reference points of being?

- ⁱ Mary Flanagan "The Bride Stripped bare to her Data: Information flow and Digibodies", in Robert Mitchell and Philip Thurtle (eds) *Data Made Flesh: Embodying Information* pp 153- 180, Routledge, London, 2004
- ⁱⁱ Anne-Marie Schleiner "Does Lara Croft wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender role subversion in Computer adventure games" *Leonardo* 34, 3 March 2001, pp 221-6
- ⁱⁱⁱ Giorgio Agamben *Infancy and History: The destruction of experience* trans Liz Heron, London, Verso, pp 49-50
- ^{iv} Alexandra Hendricks, "Examining the Effects of Hegemonic Female Bodies on Television" *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Volume 19, 1, March 2002, pp 106-123
- ^v Dennis Altman *Global Sex* Allen and Unwin, 2001.
- ^{vi} Taeyon Kim, "Neo-Confucian Body techniques in Korea's Consumer society" *Body and Society* Vol 9, 2, pp 97-113
- ^{vii} *The Location of Culture* Routledge, London, 1982, pp 85-92
- ^{viii} Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and Simulacrum" *October* Vol 127. Winter, 1983, pp 45-56
- ^{ix} Gilles Deleuze *The Fold, Leibniz and the Baroque* University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Trans Tim Conley
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Dr. Barry King, 'Cybernetics and Sex', *Powder Room* catalogue, pp.23-25, 2006