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Techno-textuality: representations of femininity & sexuality

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Abstract

This paper takes a cyberfeminist position to explore constructs of femininity and sexuality as they are appropriated by and yet elide the discourses of masculinist techno-culture. Using the tools of feminist cultural studies, the authors explore how femininity and sexuality are being textually mediated and culturally recoded into emergent discourses about IT and cyberspace in the 'traditional' textual genre of popular magazines. The specific focus is on the discursive and semiotic representation of femininity, sexuality, and women as technology users in women's lifestyle, internet, and computing magazines. It is argued that despite the overwhelming presence of male culture and male-authored cyber-speak in popular representations on techno-culture and cyberspace, there are many affirming representations of femininity, feminine sexuality, and women in IT discourses that speak to and for a new generation of technologically competent and wired women.

Cyperpunk, cyberculture, cyberbodies, cyborg, cybersex -- everything that is 'virtual' today is in fact the 'real' thing. What is state of the art or 'cutting edge' today -- whether a concept, marketing idea, or consumer product -- is discursively connected to new worlds of cyberspace and new times of postmodernity. When old/'real' and new/'virtual' worlds collide, what kinds of cultural and narrative hybrids are produced? Here we want to take a cyberfeminist position to explore constructs of femininity and sexuality as they are appropriated by and yet elide the discourses of masculinist techno-culture. It is our contention that contemporary media culture, including the textual and virtual spaces of cyberculture, "contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire and what not to" (Kellner 1995, 2). In short, we support Kellner's point that critical analysis of media culture can help us understand how cultural artefacts such as media texts function as culture and as a form of public pedagogy (Luke C 1996a,b) in the formation of social identities, the popular cultural imaginary, and 'popular' knowledges. Analysis of how new technologies and cyberspace are being named and semiotically produced in the popular media can provide insights into what Collins (1995) calls the politics of techno-textuality: the strategies of cultural mediation of information about 'information' and 'information society', 'technology' or 'techno-culture', 'cyberspace' or 'cybernauts' (Luke C 1996c). We want to explore how femininity and sexuality are being textually mediated and culturally recoded into emergent discourses about IT and cyberspace in the 'traditional' textual genre of popular magazines.

Women plugged in

Featherstone and Burrows (1995) talk about the mythology of cyberspace and cyberpunk which, they claim, has a coherent and theoretical vision of the future which is about to collapse on the present. It is a kind of Baudrillardian backward implosion. But is the present already a fiction of the future as envisioned by the sci-fi nerds? In many ways the politics, construction and "frontier settlers" (Rheingold 1994) of cyberspace certainly confirm and, in fact, reproduce many aspects of the narratives of a patriarchal past and yet, as many feminist cybertheorists have argued (e.g., Haraway 1995; Cherney & Weise 1996), those narratives don't totally confine the feminine, nor define the present or the future. Women indeed are busy constructing their own virtual spaces, relationships, and using the diversity of cyber resources in their own interests and on their own terms (e.g., Cherny & Weise 1996; Herz 1995; Plant 1996; Sandoval 1995; Spender 1995; Squires 1996; Turkle 1996). However, that is not to deny the dominance of male presence in cyberspace which is obvious to most women who cruise and lurk on the internet. Yet for many women the virtual realities of the sites and communities we visit on the internet -- the cyberreality which takes up a good portion of our everyday analog lives -- allow us as women to define who we want to be in a keystroke, and give us the freedom to move without the traditional constraints of RL (real life). We can head 'out' any time of night or day to any place, we can bar hop, and check in on friends or any number of chat-freaks sitting around their (material) screens but in virtual (cyber) groups having virtual sex and/or conversations.

VR (virtual reality) is one space where we spend our time. But we also still spend most of our time each day in RL (real life) where we are still consumers, embodied and desiring cyborgs who eat, wait for green lights or commuter buses or trains, go to work or university, stand in line-ups, read magazines, shop, and so on. But our RL is also jacked into our electronic organisers, cellular phones, laptops, and desktops at home and work. We check our email through our cellphone while waiting in the doctor's office, and consult our electronic lists to see whether we need to get ketchup and cat food at the grocery store. Our mothers' and grandmothers' dictum may have been: "don't leave home without it" -- hairspray, that is. For us, that means don't leave home without the laptop, cellphone and digital diary. Women today are wired, technology and computer literate, and expert navigators on the IT highways. But to what extent are our experiences, identities, visions and desires reflected in the cultural mirrors of RL?

In our view, a good part of the mass media and culture industries remain stuck in outmoded and patriarchal cultural representations of masculinity or femininity (Hawthorne 1996; Luke C 1996b; Luke H 1994, 1997; O'Brien 1997). Representations of women in IT or cyberspace related texts are indeed reproductive of old and tired masculinist narratives about women and sexuality, but many also exceed that containment in highly provocative and ambiguous ways. This is what we wish to explore here: the ambiguities of representation of femininity and sexuality. Alongside traditional stereotyped representations, new advertising narratives are emerging which hook products, ideas, or services into futuristic IT discourses of new times, global culture, instant connectivity and sociality (see Prodigy's "Amber" in Figure 11). The use of women and/or feminine signifiers in the representational packages of IT marketing narratives remains a pervasive and powerful presence which has received little research attention. In some ways, then, we are charting new analytic territory here.

It's a guy thing

In Wired women (Cherny & Weise 1996), a notable exception in the flood of (mostly male authored) anthologies on IT and cyberspace -- notable because it is edited and written by women who have things to say to women about "gender and the new realities in cyberspace"-- Karen Coyle talks briefly about the gendered politics of representation in computing/cyberspace discourses such as popular consumer magazines. Coyle argues that the metaphors and imagery of computing are intrinsically linked to images and understandings of dominant masculinity because it is white, young and middle-class males who are the primary authors and consumers of new technologies, softwares, and techno-culture of the internet. In other words, for Coyle it is not surprising that cyberspace is a wall-to-wall testosterone zone in which sex and sexuality, images of women and men, are articulated from an unmistakably male point of view. In short, as Coyle puts it: "it's a guy thing". Sandy Stone makes a similar point, claiming that the masculinist culture of electronic communities (whether on IRCs, in university computer labs, or gaming zones) echoes the sentiments and analyses of most cyberfeminists:

> The programmers, who as of this writing are overwhelmingly (99%+) young adolescent or postadolescent males, tend to live their lives as they write their games - with singleminded

> determination and a very narrow set of goals. Usually they have little in the way of social lives; they don't read books, but occasionally read comics; and they tend to perpetuate extraordinarily immature ideas of personal interaction styles. One of these is the way they relate to women. Women tend to be the same kinds of objects for them in their lives as they are in their games, and this is the heart of the problem of how pernicious the loop is: They don't believe there is a problem, because it's invisible to them.

It is the invisibility of the politics of feminine representations in emergent IT and cyber-culture discourses - the ways in which women are framed in the social imaginary of mass circulation magazines - that we wish to pursue here by making them visible and open to debate. Susan Hawthorne (1996, 32) recently observed, for instance, that women tend to be represented as either clones of the net's Virtual Valerie reminiscent of 1970s Playboy Bunnies (see Figure 2), as futuristic techno-cyber-vixens with "space-age pointy breasts of the 1960s" (see Figure 1), or else as 1950s retro images of bobby-socked or full-bodied bathing suit beauties (see Figure 9). We concur with Hawthorne's lament that "these retrogressive images portray women as we were represented in the past, none of them represents us as we are in the '90sÖ. New medium, same old image" (32).

So, is cyberculture a guy thing? Is it, in Karen Coyle's words (1996, 49), exclusively "about balls. Big ballsÖthe image of maleness". Computing magazines continue to be consulted by millions (of mostly men) in the search for information on how to make smart computer purchase choices, how to solve hardware problems, how to turbo charge the old 486 and make all that paraphernalia work, to find out about new products and related consumer fantasies. And in order to 'sell' the idea of power, speed and control of information, the superhighway, or one's destiny in the new world order of pure information, sexuality and sexual innuendo still seem to be effective and appealing marketing strategies. However, we see women's relationships to and readings of these images as more complex, ambiguous, productive, and destabilising of any assumed commensurability between image/product and identity. As Mica Nava (1987, 209-10) comments, "cultural forms and meanings are not reducible....Like sexuality, it consists of a multiplicity of fragmented and contradictory discourses". And so while we maintain that public media culture does teach mass social lessons about cultural power, social relations, gender and ethnic stereotypes, and consumer desires, people nonetheless negotiate these lessons in highly differentiated ways (McRobbie, 1994).

Boys' toys & texts

Our analytic position rests on two claims. First, it is our claim that the majority of women on-line are not the duped victims of virtual cross dressing male stalkers. We are wired women, cyberwomen who dabble in cyberrealities. We use it for work, for play, for eavesdropping on bulleltin boards and intimate talk with our best friends. Women can spend all their time on the internet without 'seeing' or being bothered by guys; yet we also know to be cautious in the same way that we are cautious in RL bars or on the streets at night. We watch for discursive and textual cues that might alert us to 'stranger danger', we cruise alert to the potential for email stalkers, ripoff artists, and any identity that comes on too strong. But cruising the net is only a part of where we spend our time and most women don't care and don't have the time to slip into the boys' channels to see what they're up to. We know what they're up to and we are it.

Second, it is our claim that women of all ages, diverse class and ethnic backgrounds and income brackets, consume magazines voraciously (Carrington & Bennett 1996). But we don't just read fashion and lifestyle magazines. We also consult magazines and books about IT and cyberculture: we look for information, and we look for entertainment. And sure enough, as we will argue shortly, it is in the material textual narratives of cyberspace hardcopy that the "guy thing" also plays itself out. But, importantly, we also take serious the postmodern tenet about competing and contradictory discourses, fluid and malleable signifiers, meaning systems, and identities, and the impossibility of a unified, totalising, and seamless patriarchal narrative ex-communicating all 'others' except its own singular mirror image. Indeed, we wish to argue here that the representational logic of 'things feminine' in contemporary cyberculture is fraught with difference, with competing images and texts, and with a host of cyberfeminist voices that are cutting a powerful laser-like streak across the hodge-podge of (mostly male authored) cyberscholarship hitting bookstore shelves like a tidal wave.

The bulk of newly released internet magazines cater to 'newbies' new to the net and those who are contemplating getting connected or have only recently gone online. Most of these magazines provide definitions of techno-lingo (What is email? What is a byte? What do faq, www, html or http stand for?) which

suggests a strictly novice user audience. CD game magazines are another popular magazine genre which provide mostly CD reviews and heavy advertising of games -- many, like "Krazy Ivan", reviewed as "gorgeous looking shoot 'em up" thrillers that are "an explosion lover's wet dream" (see Figures 2, 3) (1). These magazines are marketed at a (mostly pubescent) male audience which can be spotted hovering densely around these mags at any news-stand. In fact, even a cursory look into a few newsagents where magazines are sold will find a small army of males crowded around - no, not the boating, sports, or soft porn section - but the computing section.

Grabbing a spot within the tight ranks of men and boys is robust ethnographic fieldwork. As a woman one often has to nudge to get a space in the 'frontline' to peruse the material. Once a spot is secured, one is often met with curious glances, occasionally some subtle elbow shoving and the odd hostile look: What is she looking at? What would she find interesting? What does she know? Yes, we are looking for interesting articles on cyberspace, for information on the V-chip, faster modems, new web site addresses, maybe cyber-representations for our research, but we are also battling for elbow room in the boyzone! This is male territory and a woman leafing through technical computing magazines, hyper, mondo or Wired is a bit weird - in RL it is not a guy thing. It's about as challenging and disruptive as heading into the male porn zone, leafing through a magazine and watching the men get uncomfortable by a woman's presence.

When a new edition of Wired hits the news-stands, the struggle is on to get a frontline spot to check out the latest copy. The longest running and most popular of cyberculture magazines is the US publication Wired - "the hottest, coolest, trendiest new magazine of the 1990s" (Borsook 1996, 24). Between the two of us, we have copies dating back to early 1994 which coincides with our first graphic interface enhanced access to the internet via the long-awaited installation of Netscape at our respective universities. After two years of purchasing almost every monthly copy, we gave it up. Why? Pauline Borsook, a former staff writer for Wired, explains: "It seems that women, even the techno-initiated, generally do not like Wired" because it basically has very little to offer women although 20% of its readership is comprised of women" (27). Anyone who has ever taken even a few minutes to leaf through the generally hefty volumes, will readily spot the similarity to top-selling men's lifestyle magazines such as GQ, Playboy, Penthouse, or even Sports Illustrated which is less about sports per se but, as Coyle says, more about "balls", "guy things", and affirmations of WASP American and African-American cultures and icons of masculinity.

> Wired has the same glossy pictures of certified nerd-suave things to buy - which, since it's the nineties, includes cool hand-held scanners as well as audio equipment and cars - and idolatrous profiles of (generally) male moguls and muckymucks whose hagiography is not that different from what might have appeared in Fortune. It is the wishbook of material desire for young men (Borsook 1996, 26).

Her-sytes

But it is not only in computing and internet magazines where the new cyberspeak and techno-mediated visions of social relations, identity, and brave new worlds appear. Cyber-speak and cyber images proliferate in magazines such as Time, Bulletin/Newsweek, and weekend supplement magazines in regional and national newspapers. Airlines, coffee, cellular phones, in fact almost any product, is today being marketed as either a 'traditional product' on which the consumer can rely on in the face of encroaching microchip technologisation (see Figure 4), or else marketed as being at the cutting edge of high-tech itself. Both strategies - either retrograde anti-technology or pro-technology futuristic - always address and usually represent an implied human subject who is the product user situated in the preferred lifestyle the product appeals to.

Women's magazines such as Marie-Claire, Cosmo, Elle or Australian Cleo have also gestured to cyberspace in the last few years. And what do women learn here? We get http addresses for new fashion web sites, 'hot hunk' sites (see Figure 5), make-over gurus, great recipe sources, on-line lifestyle magazines or the CNN or USA Today lifestyle pages. In magazines targeted at thirty-something women with children, there are increasing references to useful sites that deal with parenting and health issues. But for young women reading fashion/lifestyle magazines, efforts to direct female readers to the superhighway is anything but what one might consider of intellectual worth. Of course many women who read these texts may already be connected to more intellectually oriented cybersalons, sites, and relationships. Yet, in our view, for young women who first read about cyberspace, information highway, and what it all might mean for them, many of these messages tend to reflect old and tired narratives of normative gender roles and desires that connect feminine interests and desires to a one-dimensional aspect of femininity -- appearance and looks (cf. Luke H 1996;

O'Brien 1996). But, as we indicated earlier and as we will show below, cultural products, images and texts are always open to multiple readings and interpretations. What may, at first glance, seem hegemonic and repressively normative from the reading position of the cultural theorist-analyst, is in fact often a productive site of positive and transgressive identification for women (cf. McRobbie 1994; Carrington & Bennett 1996).

We chose the ads below with no particular scientific criteria of selection, representativeness, or random sampling. We looked through several recent (1996) editions of Wired, a few copies of The Australian's weekend magazine, women's magazines that we had purchased over the last few months, and an assortment of jointly collected computing and internet magazines. We looked specifically for ads that portrayed only women -- which was much like looking for a contact lens in the bathtub. Women overall appear far less frequently than men in computer-related magazine editorial and advertising texts and are most commonly shown in relation to men and boys. Boys at the keyboard showing mothers, sisters or female classmates how do something is one common theme. The other is the classic workplace scene: woman at or near the keyboard or photocopier with a male boss close by either giving directions or receiving a woman's clerical assistance. Our interest here was less in how men and male signifiers discursively mediate women's relationship with IT. Therefore we decided to focus on 'women only' ads to explore the portrayal of women as users of technology, and the narrative and semiotic construction of femininity and sexuality in relation to technology. We found few 'women only' ads and have included here almost all that we could find in some twenty women's, computing, internet, cyberculture, and weekend magazines.

The at&t woman

A recent AT&T ad, published in several 1996 editions of The Australian weekend magazine, envisions its corporate customer as a professional woman who is serious about her work (Figure 6). Too often women in ads for computing hard- and software are portrayed as adjunct secretarial bimbos to a powerful male but this ad reverses that stereotype. The overall motif of this ad is dynamic and exudes a sense of tension bound up with the cognitive energy of trying to solve a problem. The woman's hand is foregrounded in the photo as she reaches for a cup of coffee. The computer is spatially in the centre of the layout and, along with her face, they are the only two dominant images which are in focus and not blurred as in the photo's periphery. This is a woman of professional integrity. Her hair is a bit messy - she's been working hard, well into the night. Her shirt sleeves are rolled up. Her hand moves towards the reader as she reaches for the coffee cup in the centre front of the image. She pulls strands of her hair with the other hand while focussing with furrowed brows on the screen text of her laptop. In front of the laptop, we spot what looks like an expensive gold tipped pen next to what looks like her other earring. In any case, here is a woman in charge of her space, her task, and her thoughts -- there is nobody visible advising her what to do and she is not shown as a helpmate to a more senior male.

Her office is on an upper story office of an inner city highrise, and the office space appears relatively expansive which we might associate with a senior administrative or management position. She sits at what looks like a 'quality' wood grained desk filled with lots of high-tech gadgets. With the all important high status view of the skyline (which, in the public imaginary, only comes with senior positions at upper management levels), we can assume that this woman is not secretarial staff and not in lower (windowless) level management. Her ballooned thoughts: "I wish I could send it securely", "I wish I could send it in time", and "I wish I could just send it", tells us that she's more concerned with the task at hand, even at this late hour, and less concerned with what in Figure 7, Sanyo assumes women are concerned with: looks. Clearly, AT&T are using a non-traditional image of the corporate executive to appeal to women's attention and women's business.

Finally, and we have left this to the last because we actually noticed it last, the AT&T woman, like the Sanyo woman (Figure 7), strikes us as either of Asian or Eurasian descent. How does her visible ethnicity mediate a reading of this cultural production of femininity? First it depends on reading position and location: who is looking/reading and where? But we might also consider the global currency of exchange and transferability this image might have in the context of a global advertising campaign by a multi-national company such as AT&T and Sanyo. Our reading is that the ethnic signifier may not be about celebrating cultural diversity or the allure of the feminine signature "asian smile" (Ang, 1996), nor is it about using an Asian woman in a pejorative and stereotypical way to link notions of corporate elite or high-tech, high-end global capital with popular mythologies of the Asian work-ethic (she's working late!) or 'Asia' as economic superpower. The ethnic signifier here may be as simple as a pragmatic advertising decision on what the most cross-culturally

transferable image might be -- one that lends itself to AT&T advertising markets in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. This is just our guess but if that is the case, then clearly the politics here might suggest (at least) two readings. On one hand, it might just be the crass marketing of cultural difference. Yet, on the other hand, it might be indicative of increasingly visible moves in public culture to construct old peripheries as centres, identities historically marginalised as identities of desire, old strategies of orientalist othering as mainstream centring (cf. Chow, 1996).

The sanyo woman

Cut to the Sanyo woman (Figure 7) who is caught in a private moment of preening in an implied context that could be a night out: a theatre or dinner event? Here the technology is a woman's accessory but not for work and professional uses. As light as a compact, the Sanyo phone fits in with her lifestyle. "She's on the phone": the image plays on the popular imaginary and equation that connects women with chatting on the phone. Since this is "no ordinary phone", she is able to talk on the phone as well get her looks in order. The image captivates because it plays on a seductive image reminiscent of 40s glamour: the simple thus 'classy' silk shift which is low cut but not 'trashy', her languid hairstyle with a 40s rolled up fringe, the gold compact, two glass perfume and lotion bottles and one lipstick, all washed over with a colour scheme reminiscent of colourised movies.

Her look is ambiguous: she could be European or Eurasian. She clearly takes pleasure in her image as she smiles at herself in the mirror. The Tebura phone is nowhere in sight because she is "talking on the phone without being on the phone". This ad is about a woman in a moment of intimate and private self-absorption. We see this as an erotic, sexually charged moment of self-pleasure unencumbered by the gaze and desire of male signifiers. The commodity and the person she may or may not be talking to are absent. They are peripheral to a woman who uses technology as an adjunct to a life and lifestyle that can be read as self-determined, centred, and self-focussed. In some ways, as this is "no ordinary phone", this is no ordinary woman. The image is appealing -- we stop to look at it. We derive a fair bit of pleasure from looking at an attractive woman and we relate to her in that "a-ha" moment of recognition as we identify our own lives with constantly being on the phone while trying to do two or three other things, including putting on make-up.

Nokia's euro-woman

Nokia invokes the mythology of European art, class and elegance to market its monitors as a work of art signified through the grainy image of a woman (Figure 8). She sits poised, detached from engagement with the technology (there is no keyboard!), but looking into the monitor-mirror where she might see her own image reflected in the "technical perfection" and "avant-garde" of European art brought to the Nokia screen. "A Nokia monitor is more than electronics. It's an art". Instead of referencing continental tradition and European art to predictable masculinist signifiers such as Rodin's The Thinker or Michelangelo's David, Nokia has constructed a 1990s woman of style and refinement to signify "European passion for beauty". Nineties women are athletic women: the woman wears a black dress or top with an athletic, sports-bra back which exposes a well-toned back. Body presence -- the built feminine body -- is sexy and powerful unlike the absent or disappearing waif body. Her blonde hair ("the Nordic obsession"?) is styled in a short no-nonsense cut which matches the classy simplicity yet sporty look of her outfit which, together, reflect the "continental lust for life and good health". The grainy and brush-stroked edges of the photo contrast with the sharp and clean edges of the white Nokia monitor and the technical and electronic features of the editorial text and small graphic inset of the monitor's cross-section. Her jewellery is not minimalist but 'artsy' and expressive, and is offset by the simplicity of the colours and contours of the black dress, chair, and table, and the white monitor. Although the shape of the chair is unclear, the table on which the monitor sits might be antique, of dark and heavy hardwood: it is definitely not laminex office furniture.

The scene is more akin to a living room context than an office and the Nokia woman is clearly in evening rather than professional workwear garb. Nokia monitors embody the "European passion for beauty" through the visual association with heavy and dark furniture, a woman 'painted' as a work of art, and textually connected to "the continent that gave us museums and luxury automobiles". The three definitive luxury automobiles that spring to mind are BMW, Mercedes, and Audi: expensive, prestigious, powerful, and 'classy' objects of bourgeois desire. The Nokia monitor and woman are such objects of desire. Like Euro cars they exude "the sheer elegance of the tooling" -- high-tech engineered (body sculpted) avant-garde objects d'art that are the "combined spiritual equivalent" of the continent's most cherished cultural products: the museum

and luxury automobiles. This is what the Nokia woman represents. She embodies the combined "spirituality" of "technical perfection" and "European art". In fact, she is semiotically "equivalent" to the monitor: both occupy equivalent space in the layout, located at the same height, and situated in an opposing yet level facing interchange. Her pose and gaze into the screen can be read as a potentially intimate moment -- not much different from a gaze into the eyes of a dinner date. Sometimes we love our computers, sometimes we resent them but often we do look at our screens with intense interest and affection, awe and amazement.

c|net's bathing beauties

We like the ad (Figure 9) for c|net and isn - "the premier interactive entertainment network" which appeared in Wired (July 1996). "We love you for your mind", not your body which clearly these women love as well. The woman in the striped outfit in the centre of the image takes as much pleasure in her self image as the Sanyo woman smiling into her compact. Her hoop earrings match the classic 50s halter top look of her one-piece, the polka-dot scarf contrasts with the stripes but extends her presence across the page from one carefully manicured hand to the other holding what looks like a cheap plastic mirror. Here is sexuality and sexual appeal of a different kind: cellulite, rolls of excess flesh, and bulges in the bathing suit on women who are, perhaps, thirty-somethings combine with classic feminine poses and practices. We see these women as signifying both 'classy' and 'classic' femininity. Class and cheap, feminine allure and the grotesque are contrasted and balanced in the mix of poses and pleasures of self-absorption of three women. The sky and ocean function as two visually potent levellers that spatially differentiate and foreground three cameo performances of three unique women.

All three women are in 'classic' feminine and model poses: the woman on the left has her leg cocked in a traditional 50s pose of coyness while dragging on a cigarette and putting on a splash of nailpolish. Since this is all happening in the lapping waves of ocean surf, this is a decidedly camp moment of women having a good time -- a moment of masquerade, performance, and parody of retro-femininity. The woman on the right balances a beach ball (a different use of 'balls') in a playful moment of grinning at the sun, breasts jutting out, leg also playfully cocked with sexy lace-up sandals. C|net has information and entertainment on offer which is food for the mind: "we love you for your mind" and we can see you love your bodies. How do we react to this image? It strikes us as affirming, as exuding a warm and positive sense of women having a good time by and for themselves, and actually looking good -- and sexy -- despite what mass culture has taught us about feminine fat. It's time to take our yellow sand-pail and head over to www.sandbox.net to see what's new this week.

Autodesk's paula

From a masquerade of playful sexuality and feminine excess, we turn to a more conservative image of asexual femininity (Figure 10). This Autodesk ad was the only image of a woman (without men) in a 250 page recent edition of Australian PC. Paula, we are told, is the local pet expert. This image is interesting: it shows us a woman in charge of her own business, one fraught with the dangers of handling boa constrictors at her Super Snake Sale! Paula's business success is due in no small measure to the design layouts enabled by Autodesk's Instant Artist software. Paula is clearly in business and means business: her shirtsleeves are rolled up, her work apron is on which displays her store name ("Paula's Pet Cetera"), and she leans confidently on her monitor which displays her tropical fish theme for the month. The back wall is littered with posters she's made and of which she seems proud. On another reading, however, we can see Paula repositioned in a traditional domestic scene: apron, kitchen counter, wedding ring, doing the sorts of artsy 'hobby' crafts typically associated with women, and engaged in care for and work with small pets (the absent boa admittedly disrupts this vision). At first glance, the image struck us as more representative of a domestic than a workplace scene. Clearly Paula is not in the same league of women at work as the AT&T woman executive. But Paula's workplace image, while appropriate to the diversity of work women engage in today, is much more readily pulled back semiotically to traditional femininity and domesticity than the AT&T woman.

Prodigy's amber

From Paula we move on to "Amber" (Figure 11), courtesy of America's Prodigy which appeared in Wired (March 1996). Men usually aren't fictitiously personalised in the same way that women are in public discourse, and Paula and Amber illustrate the gendered politics of naming. "It all started when I typed hello". We can read this to be a take on the way we talk about the start of an intimate relationship which, taking a cue from Amber's winsome smile, might just suggest that "the online experience" really did start something

more than a chatgroup experience. The sexual innuendo here is hard to miss. We note that Amber is in quotation marks which tells us that Amber is her sigfile, her online persona. Shades of rust and amber -- again in a colourised wash -- drape the Prodigy woman in an aura of warm colours which underscores the intimacy and warmth of the alcoved corner in which she sits. Her amber eyes meet those of the reader; her look is neither a provocative come-hither appeal, nor is it particularly seductive. Amber is young, appears to wear little make-up, and is dressed in a simple but tight turtleneck which reveals none of the usual icons of feminine sexuality and allure: exposed skin and breasts.

She leans her hand into her neck which catches some hair strands pushed against her lips. Her smile betrays nothing: can we assume she's just come off-line after a particularly satisfying on-line encounter, or is she waiting to plug in to get into "whatever you're into", or is she just taking a reflective moment to ruminate over the prodigy experience? Perhaps her laptop or lover is on her lap? Sexuality is implied here on several levels: the seductive promise of the prodigy experience that can plug you into "whatever you're into", the ambiguous sexual identity and desires behind the persona "Amber", and of course the mystery behind whatever it was that "started when I typed hello". The 'RL' woman who sits on the couch denotes none of the usual object level or stock interpretive signifiers of stereotyped feminine sexuality. However, we read her as emblematic of the kind of 'white bread' middle-America sexuality of white twenty-something women whose hair is not perfectly coiffed but looks like Friends-style managed tousle, who stay up late to go on-line, who have their own computers, are computer and technology literate, and who wear daggy lycra turtlenecks at home.

We, and the women in our daily orbits -- our neighbours, relatives, and women with whom we share our work lives, personal and professional friendships -- are an amalgam of the women in these ads. We have high- and low-tech days, good and bad hair days. We are ordinary and unusual, seductive and daggy. We are frivolous consumers and environmentalists. We wield professional and corporate power and yet are subjected by it. We do the guy thing and we do the women's thing. We love doing nerdy cyber-crawls and we hate it when the technology breaks down but we know how to fix it. We are RL and VR hybrids: we are the AT&T, Sanyo and Nokia woman, Paula, Amber and c|net's bathing beauties.

Closing comments

As Sandy Stone notes, it is the general invisibility of the problem of misogynist representations in public discourse which renders it both an ongoing political and feminist issue. But as we have tried to show here, the politics of representation -- images and their variously negotiated uptakes -- are not straightforward either analytically or theoretically. It seems to us, therefore, crucial to maintain analytic vigilance over the multiple forms of representation, and diverse media and (cyber)spaces of representation, where cultural icons of femininity, constructs of 'real' and virtual women and girls, and women's sexuality are produced.

Analyses of tele-textual mass media representations of femininity have a well-established history in feminist cultural and media studies, and more recently some scholars are turning to the emergent domain that is cyberspace to continue and expand the analytic project of feminist cultural studies. Feminist scholarship over the last decade has provided a substantial body of empirical evidence to support claims of the ongoing saturation of offensive stereotyped representations of femininity and the marginal presence of affirming counter-discourses in popular culture and mass media texts. In consequence, the argument has run somewhat like this: given the power and hegemony of mass cultural texts and images, we cannot rest on assumptions that current and future generations of young women will necessarily engage with and read popular and virtual culture narratives with the kinds of critical analytic tools that would emancipate them from 'duped' readings of and engagement with popular culture. Hence, it seemed paramount to sustain the political and research agenda of ongoing analyses and teaching about the representational politics of mass media culture. While that agenda remains politically important, it is our view that it also silences women on a number of levels. It assumes that women are indeed ideologically duped readers and consumers, and that mass commodity and virtual cultures are totalising and uniform discourses hammering women into ideological submission. Such positions write women into victim narratives.

In light of Kellner's (1995) media as public pedagogy equation, we would argue that we need to pay more attention to the way women produce and read themselves into cultural texts and practices, and to pay attention to the generational differences among women so that we don't reproduce a fixed and generalised feminine other -- one who no longer matches the multiple realities of many women's lives today. Moreover,

we need to capture the Foucauldian flipside of traditional structural and Frankfurt School visions of negative and repressive power by creating analytic, theoretical, and pedagogical spaces for talking about a feminist politics of representation in RL and VR as productive, multi-layered, often ambiguous and always potentially self-affirming. Such a move must be predicated on the conceptualisation of a feminine cultural subject that is not one but multi-dimensional, morphing across fluid and changeable identities and boundaries, changing identities by a keystroke, never 'either'-'or' but always multiply generative and refracted.

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Notes:

(1) Each ad covers a huge two-page spread (47 x 30 cm) and both appeared on the opening pages 1-2 and 3-4 of hyper (March 1996). The sheer size of these double-page ads rendered them too large for photocopier reduction which meant we had to sacrifice the left-hand diapered bottom of "Krazy Ivan". Clearly the ads are hyper-camp, with all the classic phallic signifiers, bimbo sexpot shots, and mysterious double-agent cyber-vixens (ruling or being ruled by diapered men?). The cultural and gendered stereotypes (fat commie Ivans; chesty blondes soaping down pink rigs and canon) are self-evident and, in our view, don't warrant the depth of analytic treatment we wish to reserve for other ads that we judge as more provocative, complex, and ambiguous. Admittedly, we have not played either game.
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