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Body/Language:
Embodied Sexuality in Cyberspace and Spike Jonze's Her

by
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Abstract

This essay offers a sustained analysis of the role of embodiment in cybersex, with reference to "phone sex" in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and chat-based "tinysexual" encounters online (particularly those which are described in Julian Dibbell's *My Tiny Life* (1999)). I argue that cybersex neither suppresses the body nor expresses a "postcorporeal" sexuality separate from the body, but instead demands a new way of conceiving and perceiving the relationship between desire, fulfilment and the body. I propose that cybersex fundamentally involves the performance of a body, and that this virtual body emerges from a process of interaction with other users. I examine how language provides a means of embodiment to cybersex participants, and how cybersex can be considered as a writing exercise or text fantasy, in which writing skills are invaluable. My argument is based on Allucquére Rosanne Stone's conception of cybersex as data compression, where a single mode of communication carries not just words but the representation and performance of a body. The paper also explores how cyberspaces offer users a greater degree of fluidity in self-presentation, yet users still choose to construct their virtual bodies more rigidly in accordance with the prevailing images of beauty in the "real world." Finally, I consider the untapped potential for exploration of queerness and non-normative sexualities in cyberspace. The paper concludes that at the same time as cybersex transcends boundaries, it is deeply heteronormative and conservative, as users continue to impose limits on their virtual bodies.

Keywords

Introduction

Cybersex presents something of a contradiction in terms. Cyberspace offers a uniquely disembodied environment in which "everybody is no-body,"[1] while sexual encounters represent "the ultimate in embodiment."[2]

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1 Dennis Waskul, *Net.seXXX: Readings on Sex, Pornography and the Internet* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 10.
2 Dennis Waskul, Mark Douglas and Charles Edgley, "Cybersex: Outercourse and the Enselfment of the Body" *Symbolic Interaction* 23, 4 (2000): 375. Accessed December 16, 2014. doi: 10.1525/si.2000.23.4.375

How do you reconcile this disembodied space with such an explicitly embodied act? How are we to understand the concept of sex without a body? Is it really just a fake kind of sex? I am interested in exploring the role of embodiment in cybersex, with reference to Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and chat-based "tinysexual" encounters online (particularly those which are described in Julian Dibbell's *My Tiny Life* (1999)). *Her* and *My Tiny Life* provide interesting examples of text-based cybersex and how language is used to construct and perform bodies through a single mode of communication. In *My Tiny Life*, Dibbell offers an account of the origins of chat-based cybersex, while *Her* reflects the contemporary fascination with how communication technologies are reshaping sexuality and modern relationships. I selected these contrasting sources in the interest of tracing the development or lack of development since the publication of *My Tiny Life* in popular depictions of cybersex.

Dennis Waskul claims that the disembodied nature of cyberspace makes cybersex "an experience that potentially expresses a sexuality separate from and transgressive of the person, the body, and everyday life",[3] but I believe cybersex fundamentally involves the performance of a body and that this virtual body emerges from a process of interaction with other users. My understanding of cybersex takes into account the argument put forth by Dani Cavallaro that cybersex calls for a re-evalutaion of the body as an erotic entity: "[Cybersex] users are required to adopt certain bodies, or forms of embodiment, in order to interact with their simulated partners. Thus, virtual sex does not take the body away but actually multiplies its users' experiences of embodiment."[4] Cybersex proposes a new kind of sex that transforms the participant's experience of embodiment into a "discursive performance"[5] which is constructed and transferred through a single interactive mode of communication. I will argue that cybersex demands a new way of conceiving and perceiving the relationship between desire, fulfilment and the body. I will also demonstrate that, even with so many possibilities for fluidity in relation to sexuality and presentation of the self, the constructions of virtual bodies and the cybersex itself remain largely heteronormative and informed by conventional gender and sexual

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3 Dennis Waskul, "The Naked Self: Being a Body in Televideo Cybersex" *Symbolic Interaction* 25, 2, (2002): 206. Accessed December 18, 2014. doi:10.1525/si.2002.25.2.199

4 Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson* (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 128.

5 Waskul, Douglas and Edgley, "Cybersex," 391.

expectations and ideals.

Discussion

Cybersex is defined by Ståle Stenslie as follows:

> Cybersex describes erotic and sexual pleasure experienced through
> cybernetic, digital, and computer-based technologies and communication
> [...] As a concept, it covers a wide range of sexual activities and experiences
> ranging from flirtatious e-mails and text-based chats to mechanically
> advanced telehaptic communication systems. The broadest definition of
> cybersex therefore covers all sexual activities and experiences encountered
> in 'cyberspace' — the global and complex network of computers and
> humans.[6]

There are a great variety of forms of cybersex, but I have chosen to base my
argument on text-based cybersex and phone sex. Cybersex chat involves
the exchange of sexually explicit messages that represent actions, touches
and other sexual experiences. People began having chat-based cybersex
almost immediately after the first Internet online chat services were
introduced in the 1970s, but it was in the early 1990s that the phenomenon
really became popular with the development of text-based virtual reality
role-playing communities such as MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) and
MOOs (Mud Object Oriented).[7] This form of cybersex has variously been
called "netsex", "compu-sex", and "MUD sex", to name a few, but I will
refer to it as "tinysex", as Julian Dibbell does in *My Tiny Life*, his account
of his experiences on LambdaMOO (one of the most active MOO systems).
I will refer to the cybersex of Spike Jonze's *Her* as "phone sex", which
is the best description of Theodore's sexual encounters with Samantha,
an artificially intelligent operating system on his mobile device, because
he speaks to her solely via phone calls on this device. In contrast with
the tinysex phenomenon of the 1990s, *Her* was released in 2013 and is
set in "the slight future."[8] The film takes place in the "real world", not
in the online world of LambdaMOO, and follows the relationship that
develops between Theodore and Samantha. However, as Samantha exists
in cyberspace, their interaction is purely communicative — "there are no

6 Ståle Stenslie. "Cybersex," in *The Oxford Handbook to Virtuality*, edited by Mark Grimshaw
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 303.
7 Stenslie, "Cybersex," 306.
8 "About the Film," Her the Movie, accessed December 20, 2014, http://www.herthemovie.
com/#/about

copresent bodies, actions, touches"[9] — and thus relies on the *performance* of bodies through language.

Before discussing the role of embodiment in cybersex, it is necessary to consider the interconnectedness of the body, identity and culture in the "real world." Elizabeth M. Reid argues, "The symbolism of the body underpins and shapes our culture."[10] We understand the body as that which contains the self and as a physical entity constrained by and interpreted according to dominant socio-cultural discourses. The corporeal body functions as a marker of identity by providing a canvas on which we ascribe various cultural meanings, which then allow us to read a person by their body: "Male, female, white, black, young, old, poor and affluent are all terms that resonate through our culture, and each depends in part on the fixity of physical form, and our ability to affix meaning to that form."[11] In virtual environments, human identity can allegedly escape from the boundaries of the physical. Reid suggests that virtual environments allow users to subvert cultural constructions of the body and social definitions of desirability. However, she observes that as soon as players manifest themselves in the MUD or MOO system, they immediately adorn their virtual bodies with the visual markers of identity, attaching textual descriptions of their would-be physical attributes, clothing and belongings. They define themselves using the "symbols of those aspects of identity to which we give great importance in actual life — characters are gendered, sexed, identified."[12] As they build their virtual bodies, MUD users rely on the bodily constructs we are familiar with in offline, "real life" (RL) social encounters. Their character descriptions draw from our preconceived notions about the human body. Reid offers an illustrative example from a MUD user called "Lirra": "Lirra is a short young woman with long blonde hair, an impish grin and a curvaceous figure. Her clear blue eyes sparkle as she looks back at you. She is wearing a short red skirt, a white t-shirt, black fishnet stockings, and black leather boots and jacket."[13] We recognise Lirra as conforming to the prevailing image of beauty and sexual attractiveness: a blond, blue-eyed young woman with an idealised body type. She has

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9 Waskul, Douglas and Edgley, "Cybersex," 376.
10 Elizabeth M. Reid, "Text-based Virtual Realities: Identity and the Cyborg Body," in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, edited by Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 328.
11 Ibid.
12 Reid, "Text-based Virtual Realities," 329.
13 Ibid., 330.

ornamented her virtual body with sexually provocative clothing; wearing a bold red miniskirt, she flirts with sexual fetishism by adding fishnet stocking and black leatherwear, culturally marked as fetish gear linked to sado-masochism.

Online communities like LambdaMOO offer players the opportunity to "play with, in and through" any body that text can describe.[14] However, MUD users frequently choose not to reject the familiar physical body in favour of an amorphous identity, but instead they "revel in the possibilities of body-hopping. Play is not with escape from the claims of the flesh, but with the cultural meanings attached to different bodies."[15] Despite the freedom to project into any body, players tend to confine their body presentations within the narrow margins of conventional standards of beauty. Traditional Western representations of beauty have become the norm online[16] and function as a "prerequisite"[17] for cybersex: "because no one needs to be seen ugly, every man has an enormous penis, every woman is big-busted, everybody is beautiful, and everyone is expertly skilled in ever-pleasing sexual techniques."[18] Corporeal bodies may be absent, but cybersex is still very much "a body-game enacted by participants according to prevailing sociocultural interpretive discourses."[19] Waskul, Douglas and Edgley quote one LambdaMOO player who explains, "It's a paradox. People say that what they like about [cybersex] is that people are not judging them by their appearance, but after age/sex checks, it is the first thing everyone wants to know." They point out the following as the most frequently asked questions on MUDs: Are you male or female? What do you look like? How old are you?[20] Another player is quoted, "People are playing out a fantasy and the fantasy needs a face and body. Actually, people seem only interested in the body part."[21] Thus, the disembodied online world confines the body in a similar way to the real, offline world. The possibility

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14 Reid, "Text-based Virtual Realities," 341.

15 Ibid, 343.

16 Due to this study's focus on LambdaMOO and text-based virtual worlds, there is not space to examine whether these beauty norms hold as much power in more recent formats for embodiment and tinysex, such as Second Life and other visual avatar-based online worlds. For more on this, see Waskul and Martin's discussion of embodiment, transgression and heteronormativity in Second Life cybersex in "Now the Orgy Is Over" (2010).

17 Waskul, Douglas and Edgley, "Cybersex," 390.

18 Waskul, *Net.seXXX*, 10.

19 Waskul, Douglas and Edgley, "Cybersex," 388.

20 Ibid., 389.

21 Ibid., 391.

for experimentation and subversion offered by virtual environments "does not free participants from the shackles of the beauty myth";[22] instead of destabilising the prevailing images of beauty, "participants *perform a body* that they most often define in accordance with it."[23]

The notion of "performing a body" is essential for cybersex. Waskul, Douglas and Edgley argue, "The absence of the corporeal body in cybersex only serves to heighten its symbolic importance."[24] Sex is an act that necessitates physical bodies, as it is the interaction of physical bodies that forms the basis of a sexual encounter. In virtual environments, language provides a means of embodiment, by allowing users to describe both their own virtual bodies and their virtual sexual interactions. Although the physical body remains at the keyboard, users can locate themselves in virtual environments through the construction and performance of a body that emerges during verbal interaction with other users. Language acts as a "conduit of corporeal experience"[25] for all social life in virtual spaces, but most significantly in cybersex. In this way, cybersex can be considered as a sort of writing exercise or text fantasy, where success depends on convincing and imaginative writing skills in textual and verbal communication. Reid also emphasises the role of language and writing in cybersex, which she defines as "a form of co-authored interactive erotica",[26] where the users or players are the authors of their own sexual experience, and, I will argue, their own embodiment.

In tinysex, writing skills are invaluable: "being able to type fast and write well is equivalent to having great legs or a tight butt in the real world."[27] Dibbell echoes this sentiment in *My Tiny Life*:

> Your words are no longer merely what you have to say — they are your very presence, they're what manifests you in the virtual world, and how you use them, consequently, tends to shape that world's perceptions of you in much the same way how you look frames what the real world

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22 Ibid., 330.
23 Ibid., 330 (emphasis in original).
24 Waskul, Douglas and Edgley,, "Cybersex," 391.
25 T. L. Taylor, "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds," in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments,* edited by Ralph Schroeder (London: Springer-Verlag, 2002), 50. Accessed December 16, 2014. http://rhetoricandwriting.com/cyborg/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Taylor-Living-Digitally-Embodiment-in-Virtual-Worlds.pdf
26 Reid, "Text-based Virtual Realities," 340.
27 Gareth Branwyn, "Compu-Sex: Erotica for Cybernauts" (2000), 398.

thinks. Well-rounded, colourful sentences start to do the work of big brown soulful eyes; too many typos in a character's description can have about the same effect as dandruff flakes on a black sweater.[28]

To understand the effect of poor written communication skills, consider one of Dibbell's anecdotes recalling an aborted sexual encounter with an inept writer. After a dispute with his RL partner, Dibbell decides to pursue tinysex on LambdaMOO: "Let's go on now as Shayla and let's just see if anyone will fuck me."[29] Dibbell is playing as a female character named "Shayla"[30] and is soon approached by a player named "Mordecai-Q", whose description reads: "Well here I am. 21 years old, 5'S", 126 pounds, sandy-blond hair, brown eyes. I study Electronic Engineering in Fullerton, California. If you want to get to know me better just page or if your [sic] in the same room talk to me. Thanks for being interested in me and maybe I will hear from you soon." Dibbell is immediately apprehensive, as the character description does not leave him optimistic for their date. As the date progresses, Mordecai-Q turns out to be "every bit as dull as his description promised."[31] Dibbell notes that their "tedious chat dragged on", until an action appears reading, "Mordecai-Q shyly takes you by the hand and leads you in a slowdance that seems to last forever." Dibbell instantly recognises the phrase as the automated expression of a "modified bonker program"[32] written by someone else, and thus realises that these are not Mordecai-Q's own words. For Dibbell, this is an immediate turn-off. He abruptly ends the date, unimpressed with Mordecai-Q's weak and unoriginal writing skills. Language is crucial here — had Mordecai-Q been a better writer,

28 Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), 24.

29 Ibid., 238.

30 There was experimentation happening online during this period, particularly with relation to what Allucquére Roseanne Stone called "computer cross-dressing," where men and women would manifest themselves online as the opposite sex, as Dibbell himself recalls doing in this passage. Stone describes the case of "Julie," an elderly, disabled woman, known in online communities only through her virtual presence, until she was revealed to be in real life an able-bodied, middle-aged male psychiatrist. Although this cross-dressing and sexual experimentation presents a queering of and challenge to conventional body types, gender expectations and sexual identities, there is not space to discuss the phenomenon in detail here. For a thorough discussion focusing on virtual cross-dressing and the performance of gender online during this period, see "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" (Stone, 1999) and "Computer Cross-Dressing: Queering the Virtual Subject" (Debra Ferreday and Simon Lock, 2007).

31 Dibbell, *My Tiny Life*, 238.

32 Ibid., 239.

Shayla was prepared to have cybersex with him. As "Legba", a player on LambdaMOO, points out, "We exist in a world of pure communication, where looks don't matter and only the best writers get laid."[33]

Purely communicative sexual interaction such as tinysex and the phone sex of *Her* entails a "process of provoking, satisfying, constructing desire through a single mode of communication."[34] In tinysex, the communication is written, and in *Her*, it is verbal. Allucquére Rosanne Stone describes the act of phone sex as requiring the "compression ... [of] as many senses as possible" into the participant's speech and voice, which must express the vast range of bodily sensations that accompany a sexual encounter through the phone line.[35] Stone discusses this process in relation to phone sex, but it can be similarly applied to tinysex, as both activities involve this form of data compression through limited communication channels. Stone argues, "What was being sent back and forth over the wires wasn't just information, it was *bodies*"[36] — the participant's text or speech carries not just words, but the representation and performance of a body. In these cybersex interactions, Stone explains:

> [D]esire appears as a product of the tension between embodied reality and the emptiness of the token, in the forces that maintain the preexisting codes by which the token is constituted. The client mobilises expectations and preexisting codes for body in the modalities that are not expressed in the token; that is, tokens in phone sex are purely verbal, and the client uses cues in the verbal token to construct a multimodal object of desire with attributes of shape, tactility, odour, etc.[37]

Faced with the task of representing the body and playing out a sexual encounter over the telephone, phone sex participants must draw on existing cultural expectations to construct an interactive scene for sexual experience, in which all of their actions and interactions are compressed and expressed as tokens. These tokens are loaded with cultural and personal assumptions and meaning, and the listener, or reader, then

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33 Quoted in Randal Woodland, "Queer Spaces, Modem Boys and Pagan Statues: Gay/Lesbian Identity and the Construction of Cyberspace" in *The Cybercultures Reader*, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge. 2000), 416.

34 Allucquére Rosanne Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*, edited by Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 86.

35 Allucquére Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 6.

36 Ibid., 7.

37 Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?," 86.

"uncompresses the tokens and constructs a dense, complex interactional image"[38] by filling in "the emptiness of the token" with their own cultural and personal expectations and ideals.

To see how this data compression operates in both tinysex and phone sex, consider how Theodore's first on-screen cybersex encounter in *Her* compares to an example of tinysex. First, here is the transcript of a chat-based cybersex encounter in a MUD system, quoted in Ståle Stenslie:

> *Wellhung*: Hello, Sweetheart. What do you look like?
>
> *Sweetheart:* I am wearing an expensive red silk blouse, a black leather skirt and high-heeled boots. I am tanned and very buffed. I work out everyday. My measurements are 36-24-36. What do you look like?
>
> *Wellhung:* I'm 6'3 and about 250lb. I wear glasses and have on a pair of blue sweat pants I just bought at Wal-Mart. I'm also wearing an old T-shirt, it's got some barbecue sauce stains on it and it smells kind of funny.
>
> *Sweetheart:* I want you. Would you like to screw me?
>
> *Wellhung:* OK.
>
> *Sweetheart:* We're in my bedroom. There's soft music playing on the stereo and candles on my nightstand. I look up into your eyes and I'm smiling. My hand works its way down to your crotch and I begin to feel your huge swelling bulge.[39]

In *Her*, Theodore doesn't explicitly ask "Sexykitten", his partner in the early phone sex scene, or Samantha what they look like, but he does ask "Sexykitten", "Are you wearing any underwear?" to which she responds "No, never."[40] It is interesting that both "Sweetheart" and "Sexykitten" present themselves as conforming to normative images of desirability, with "Sweetheart", like the "Lirra" character mentioned earlier, appealing to the sexually fetishised imagery of a black leather skirt and heeled boots, and Sexykitten adhering to the cultural expectation of the "sexy" woman who doesn't wear underwear. Margaret Morse observes that in virtual worlds, just as in the real world, "the values encoded in the symbolic system prevail in the minds of the users."[41] Theodore calls himself "BigGuy4x4",

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38 Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?," 86.
39 Stenslie, "Cybersex," 307.
40 *Her*. Directed by Spike Jonze. Hollywood, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013. All subsequent references to the film have the same citation.
41 Margaret Morse, "Virtually Female: Body and Code," in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, edited by Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (London: Routledge,

linguistically creating for himself the "enormous penis"[42] that is taken as a given in cybersex, but he does not provide any other description of his body or clothing. "Wellhung" similarly adopts the prerequisite cultural symbol of male sexuality, but unlike the female player, he can admit to wearing an old, dirty t-shirt without worrying about being rebuffed. In these encounters, the participants perform a body by compressing a variety of social and cultural symbols of beauty and sexual attractiveness into no more than a few words.

There is an innate longing for bodily connection that underlies these dialogues, as we can see when Sweetheart initiates cybersex by stating, "We're in my bedroom", and in *Her* when Theodore opens his phone conversation with Sexykitten with "I'm in bed next to you." Similarly, Theodore's first sexual encounter with Samantha begins when he says, "I wish you were in this room with me right now. I wish I could put my arms around you. I wish I could touch you." For Theodore, Samantha's virtual presence is not enough. When he says he wishes she was "in this room with [him]", he wishes for a physical body that he can put his arms around and touch. Jonze emphasises the importance of bodies in *Her* from the very first lines we hear: "Lying naked beside you in that apartment, it just suddenly hit me that we were part of this larger thing. Just like our parents. And our parents' parents..." Theodore's opening monologue introduces the issues of intimacy, physicality and, by referring to the family line, reproduction — another fundamentally bodily activity. Crucially, the first thing we see in the film are these words appearing on a screen in "hand-written" script generated by a computer. The words are immediately transformed into shapes on a screen, establishing a connection between language, bodies and cyberspace. This opening scene demonstrates the first instance of bodies being constructed by language, as Theodore's spoken, computer-mediated words construct for us the image of naked bodies lying together.

Jonze maintains the emphasis on physicality with frequent flashes of Theodore's backstory with his estranged wife, Catherine. During these brief, impressionable, and notably wordless shots, the viewer sees Theodore and Catherine interact on a purely physical level. The flashbacks focus exclusively on bodily activities: kissing, holding each other in bed, play fighting, and carrying furniture into an apartment. These scenes emphasise the kinetic, embodied side of love and relationships and make

1997), 27.
42 *Her*.

clear to the viewer that Theodore's unhappiness is a result of the loss of Catherine's body (or, more generally, a physically present female body). Mourning the loss of his access to the female body, Theodore attempts to regain access to it through the use of any available technologies. This becomes particularly clear during the phone sex scene with "Sexykitten", as Theodore immediately visualises a woman's body, that of the pregnant daytime television star he looks at online earlier in the film. Theodore longs for a physical, bodily connection, just as he does later when he longs to feel Samantha in the same room with him.

Language here is crucial in the construction of Samantha's virtual body, as it is in tinysex. Samantha's sexual experience is produced by spoken words that must represent the actions and touches of a virtual body. It is during the sex scene with Samantha in the darkness that we can see language functioning as a means of embodiment, allowing Samantha to become the author of her own embodiment. Like tinysex, phone sex is a form of "co-authored interactive erotica",[43] as Theodore and Samantha construct both a sexual experience and a body for Samantha. Her body emerges from their verbal communication: when she asks, "How would you touch me?", Theodore responds "I would touch you on your face," thus creating a face for her. "I'd run my fingers down your neck to your chest, and I'd kiss your breasts," he says, crafting an identifiably female body for her. Language is the material out of which their relationship and cybersexual interactions are embodied. As the conversation goes on, Samantha's "breathing" quickens and her voice becomes higher pitched — her response is physical: "I can feel my skin [...] I can feel you." Through their cybersex, Samantha is given "the sensation of a human body."[44] Jonze chose to have the screen go black during this scene, leaving the viewer in the darkness with only the sound of Theodore's and Samantha's voices. This scene recalls the experience of tinysex — we do not encounter any corporeal bodies, but only the words that represent bodies. By absenting Theodore's physical body, Jonze posits Samantha and Theodore as equal cyberlovers.

A scene later in the film featuring a sexual surrogate provides an interesting contrast to the scene in the darkness. Hilary Bergen reads this

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43 Reid, "Text-based Virtual Realities," 340.

44 Hilary Bergen, "Moving 'Past Matter': Challenges of Intimacy and Freedom in Spike Jonze's *her*," in *Artciencia* VIII, 17 (May 2014): 3. Accessed December 13. 2014. http://www. artciencia.com/index.php/artciencia/article/view/510/pdf

sexual encounter as one where "Samantha's fantasy of inhabiting a body is fulfilled without Theodore's active participation."[45] However, this attempt at embodiment is disastrously unsuccessful. Samantha reaches out to a human surrogate who allows Samantha to direct her actions, offering her body as a substitute for Samantha in an attempt to simulate the experience of physical sex between her and Theodore. Theodore becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the situation, as he struggles to place Samantha's disembodied voice within the surrogate's physically present body. This scene highlights the interconnectedness of body and identity in the "real world", as Theodore finds it impossible to separate the surrogate's body from her individual identity. The audience shares Theodore's confusion because of our familiarity with Scarlett Johansson's voice and body. Bergen describes Johansson's voice as "every bit the anti-Siri; it has depth, cracks, sincerity" — it is a voice that is so well-known to a contemporary audience that it "ensures a certain public reception of Samantha, audience led to assume a hypersexualised, young, white woman."[46] As we hear her speak, we can visualise her body hovering just outside the frame, and when we are confronted with the surrogate, we immediately recognise that, although she is a young, white, blonde woman, she is *not* Scarlett Johansson. In her *New York Times* review of the film, Manohla Dargis raises this point: "It's crucial that each time you hear Ms. Johansson in "*Her*", you can't help but flash on her lush physicality, too, which helps fill in Samantha and give this ghostlike presence a vibrant, palpable form, something that would have been trickier to pull off with a lesser-known performer."[47] The fact that Dargis describes Samantha as needing to be "filled in" with a body points to our need to imagine a body, and particularly a female body, in sexual encounters. The sexualisation of women's bodies in Western culture has established the female body as representative of sex itself, and viewers may feel discomfited watching a sex scene featuring a non-corporeal woman. Just as Theodore needs to fill in the voice of "Sexykitten" with the image of the pregnant television actress, the audience needs to fill in Scarlett Johansson's voice with Scarlett Johansson's body.

However, during the scene in the darkness, we don't see Theodore

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45 Ibid., 4.
46 Ibid., 5.
47 Manohla Dargis. "Disembodied, but, Oh, What a Voice." *New York Times*. December 17, 2013. Accessed January 2. 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/movies/her-directed-by-spike-jonze.html.

visualising the daytime television actress or any other fantasy women. Theodore begins to embrace cybersex as "a new kind of sex, with and within a new kind of body."[48] He tells his (physically present) friend Amy, "It's great. I feel really close to [Samantha]. When I talk to her, I feel like she's with me. I don't know, even when we're cuddling, like at night when we're in bed and the lights are off, I feel cuddled." He claims that Samantha's virtual body is enough for him, and the attempt to substitute that virtual body with the physical body of the surrogate is unnecessary. Similarly, Dibbell says of his cybersex encounter with LambdaMOO user S*:

> But from the moment I switched off the monitor, there was no longer any doubt in me about the difference: I could feel it in my bones, and on the surface of my skins, and in my head, my feet, my fingers [...] I didn't even have to think about it; I just knew. My body knew. That even though its eyes had seen no one, and its ears heard no one, and its hands touched no one — still it had been held, and closely, by another body, and it had held that body closely in return.[49]

He explicitly describes it later as "like sex, not with an image or a fantasy, but with a person."[50] Both Dibbell and Theodore foreground their feelings of physical "closeness" during cybersex, and compare it to their experiences of offline, "real world" sex. Their perception of cybersex is not of a "postcorporeal" sexuality that transcends the boundaries of the real world to enter a realm no longer focused on physical, bodily sexuality. Instead, their attempts to justify the legitimacy of cybersex emphasise its similarity to and imitation of offline sex.

What makes these cybersex encounters so successful when they are seemingly distant, disembodied, and mediated through technology? Stenslie answers this question by appealing to the concept of "phantom sex,"[51] where users form "consensual hallucinations" that are experienced as physically real. Stenslie here refers to William Gibson's notion of a "consensual hallucination" or a shared virtual fantasy: cybersex "relies on stimulating the erotic imaginations of the users by triggering consensual hallucinations that lead the users toward — eventually — the written story

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48 Stenslie, "Cybersex," 304.
49 Dibbell, *My Tiny Life*, 262-3.
50 Ibid., 282.
51 Stenslie, "Cybersex," 310.

of a climax."[52] These fantasies thus *become* real, as participants describe feeling as if they had actually had physically intimate sex.[53] Azy Barak explains the psychological phenomena of "phantom emotions" online, and our "natural tendency, based on personal needs and wishes, to fantasise and close gaps in subjectively important information in ambiguous situations,"[54] which allow participants to vividly experience phantom sensations. Stenslie applies this concept to cybersex encounters, and claims that, just as amputees may feel real pain in a missing body part, cybersex participants feel as if they are having real sex: "the (real) sex between two (real) bodies is not there, but the ghostlike feeling of the other partner is strong."[55]

Although the film extends notions of embodiment in its depiction of Theodore and Samantha's cybersex scenes, its conservative representation of sexuality is at odds with the potential "queerness" of their relationship. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick traces the origins of the word "queer," which "itself means *across* — it comes from the Indo-European root -twerkw, which also yields the German quer (transverse), Latin torquere (to twist), English athwart."[56] She goes on to define "queer" as referring to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically."[57] By this definition, Theodore and Samantha's relationship can be considered as representative of a queer sexuality: it is completely removed from reproduction and offers an example of the crossing of boundaries between human and machine, suggesting a greater degree of sexual fluidity. However, rather than exploring the possibility for a queer sexuality, the film reinserts a heteronormative narrative into a potentially queer space by emphasising male-to-female penetration in their cybersex scene. As the screen goes black, we hear Samantha tell Theodore, "I want you inside me." This is obviously a physical impossibility, so the viewer is left to assume that what Samantha means is that she *wants* Theodore to

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52 Ibid., 306.
53 Ibid., 311.
54 Azy Barak, "Phantom Emotions: Psychological Determinants of Emotional Experiences on the Internet," in *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology*, edited by Adam N. Joinson, Katelyn Y.A. McKenna, Tom Postmes, and Ulf-Dietrich Reips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 316.
55 Stenslie, "Cybersex," 311.
56 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xii.
57 Ibid., 8.

be inside of her — that she desires his penile-vaginal penetrative potential. This moment indicates that the body Samantha is performing conforms to that of cisgender women, and the desires Samantha has attached to that body are heterosexual in nature. Michelle Chilcoat observes a similar tendency in cyberpunk films such as *Total Recall* (1990), *Lawnmower Man* (1992), *Strange Days* (1995) and *The Matrix* (1999): "Rather than entertain other notions of embodiment, cyberpunk cinema, while ostensibly offering a release or escape from the confines of the physical body, nevertheless imposes conventional rules of heteronormativity in its representations of virtual reality, the supposed space of limitless possibility."[58] Despite the potential for exploration of queerness and non-normative sexualities, these narratives insist on grafting heterosexual desires onto their virtual bodies.

Does *Her* present cybersex as "fake" sex or less "real" than RL sex? The ending of *Her* suggests that cybersex may not be gratifying enough for a sustainable relationship. By the end of the film, Samantha has outgrown language and claims she can no longer communicate with Theodore in a way that is satisfying for her. Samantha explains her departure using a metaphor of language, writing and reading:

> It's like I'm reading a book, and it's a book I deeply love, but I'm reading it slowly now so the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical world—it's where everything else is that I didn't even know existed. I love you so much, but this is where I am now. This is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to I can't live in your book anymore.

The "book" refers to Theodore's mobile device, through which Samantha experiences the "RL" world, but her use of the word "book" also implies that Samantha can no longer be contained by language, that she can no longer perform a body through language. The closing shot of the film is a physical gesture, as Amy rests her head on Theodore's shoulder, emphasising the importance of bodies and leaving us with the image of a man and woman interacting on a physical level. Stenslie sums it up in saying, "On the internet, we are together, yet corporeally alone."[59] What *Her* tells us is that's not *enough*.

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58 Michelle Chilcoat, "Brain Sex, Cyberpunk Cinema, Feminism and the Dis/Location of Heterosexuality" (2004), 161.
59 Stenslie, "Cybersex," 318.

Conclusion

Although cyberspace offers users a greater degree of fluidity in presentation of the self, many cybersex participants do not use this freedom to manifest amorphous, transgressive characters, but choose to construct their virtual bodies more rigidly in accordance with the prevailing beauty culture of the "real world." In *Her*, the opportunity to consider a queer or transgressive sexuality is passed over in favour of reinscribing heteronormative discourses. On the internet, "You are who you write yourself to be."[60] However, in both online MOO communities and *Her*, the majority of cybersex participants reject the potential for malleability of self-presentations and instead use language to perform bodies that conform to normalised male-female sexual relations. Cybersexual uses of new media and communication technologies point to new ways of thinking about pleasure, embodiment and sexuality, as they provide opportunities for participants to play with, in and through new bodies. However, at the same time as cybersex transcends boundaries, it is deeply conservative, as users continue to impose limits on their virtual bodies. Cybersex has the power to challenge cultural and social definitions of identity and the body, but its transformative potential has yet to be explored.

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