The ‘grotesque body’ in young women’s
self presentation on MySpace

By

Amy Shields Dobson

PhD Candidate in Sociology,
School of Political and Social Inquiry,
Monash University,

ardob1@student.monash.edu.au
0421 491 184
The ‘grotesque body’ in young women’s self presentation on MySpace


Abstract

In this paper I discuss some of the implications for contemporary feminist politics of some key findings of my doctoral research into young women’s self presentation on MySpace.

In this paper I use Mikhail Bahktin’s (1965) account of ‘grotesque bodies’ in the carnivalesque setting, and ‘classical bodies’ in Renaissance statuary to frame some of the imagery found in young women’s MySpace picture galleries, aligning this imagery with grotesque body representation, and its social and political underpinnings. I then go on to align grotesque and classical body representation with Laura Mulvey’s theory of voyeuristic and fetishistic narratives in film respectively, by connecting these narratives to female celebrity representation in the mass media. I suggest that in mass media representation, ‘grotesqueness’ may, to draw from Mulvey, be aligned with a narrative of
humiliation and degradation of the female object, producing for the viewer a sadistic kind of pleasure. However, in the self-produced self representation of girls on MySpace, the narrative of choice in one’s own ‘grotesque’, sometimes degrading, but more importantly, traditionally ‘un-feminine’ representation, perhaps disrupts or subverts both gender stereotypes and the type of sadistic pleasure Mulvey associates with voyeuristic narratives and modes of viewing.

**Word count: 3 513**

**Key words: MySpace Young women Feminism Grotesque Bahktin Mulvey**

***Please note: permission to reproduce examples of imagery from young women’s MySpace profiles for the purpose of this conference is currently being sought, therefore, images have not been included here.***

**A brief contextualisation of the research on which this paper is based**

The doctoral research project from which this paper draws examines as performance the current phenomenon of highly assertive, hetero-sexualised, individualised and often traditionally ‘unfeminine’ self representation by Australian young women on MySpace, looking at a sample of 45 MySpace pages of Australian girls aged between 18-25 which reflect the above mentioned traits. It is concerned with discovering the meanings and implications for feminist performance and representational theory, as it is applied to these
online self representations and to the current gender (cyber)-landscape more broadly. This paper explores just one of many aspects of MySpace representation that emerges as significant within the data: that of an excess of what I am here terming ‘grotesque’ bodily representation in the photo gallery sections of young women’s MySpace pages.

Social network sites (SNSs) and social network site profiles are currently emerging as exciting, controversial, timely and highly germane new topics and sites for research in fields such as media studies, sociology, computer-mediated-communication, and youth and cultural studies. Their take-up and use by young people has also sparked somewhat of a moral panic in mainstream media of late, often because of the sometimes confrontational or controversial self-representation displayed on these sites. In my thesis I approach young women’s self-presentation on these sites from a feminist performance theory angle, with the aim of suggesting this as a possible new tool-kit with which to examine this internet phenomenon of self-produced self-representation, and young women’s participation in it. One of the questions this research poses is then: In what ways can these representations be said to constitute a ‘new feminist poetics’ of female representational practice and female body performance, hinging on, as feminist theatre theorist Sue-Ellen Case (1988) might have it, a place in the representational system for identification with the female subject/female desire? Conversely, in what ways do these representations continue to circulate stereotypes of ‘masculinised’ hetero-sexual desire and construction of female bodies for a hetero-sexual ‘masculinised’ gaze (Mulvey, 1989/1975)?
Definitions

Before continuing it is necessary to briefly define two important terms used in this paper: ‘hetero-sexiness’ and ‘traditional femininity’. I use the term ‘hetero-sexy’ or ‘heterosexualised’ instead of the more general term ‘sexualised’, to draw attention to the fact that it is a specific type of sexualisation to which most people refer when they describe young feminine representation and femininity itself in contemporary culture as ‘sexualised’. It is not just that femininity is ‘sexualised’, but that it is aligned with a specific gendered and heterosexual aesthetic, derivative of both ‘traditional’ femininity (pink, delicate, cutesy, and so on) and mainstream heterosexual pornography (overly large artificial looking breasts, high heels, excessive make-up, revealing clothing or clothing which draws attention to sexual and erogenous zones). For example, the body of a Barbie Doll is not merely ‘sexualised’, it is hetero-sexy. The phenomenon of marketing padded bras to eight year old does not simply or automatically ‘sexualise’ young girls, but rather, serves to construct their bodies in a specific, hetero-sexy way.

I use the phrase ‘traditional femininity’ to describe the stereotypical and socially prescribed aspects of young feminine representation and conditioning in 20\textsuperscript{th} century Western culture, prior to the women’s liberation movement of the 1970’s (which I also refer to as second-wave feminism). This would include aesthetic traits such as ‘cuteness’, pastel colours and tones, pinkness, and delicate, decorative ‘prettiness’. It would also include traditional feminine engendered qualities— such as shyness, coyness,
submissiveness and passivity— that effect how feminine bodies were commonly represented or conditioned to present themselves— for example, with their legs crossed, mouths closed and body not taking up too much space.

**Introduction: MySpace as a site of ‘symbolic inversion’ of traditional femininity?**

The MySpace profile picture sections of the young women examined contain many examples of images of female bodies which are diametrically opposed to more ‘traditional’ twentieth-century, Western, pre-second-wave-feminism conceptions of a feminine aesthetic, and feminine ‘hetero-sexiness’. We might even go so far as to align them with Barbara Babcock’s notion of ‘symbolic inversion’ in culture and performance. Babcock defines symbolic inversion as “…any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political.” (Babcock 1978: 14). On the MySpace profiles examined, the photo sections contain numerous examples of: images in which girls are making ‘silly’ or caricatured faces; wide open mouths and protruding tongues; poses which would typically signify a ‘masculine’ body (miming rear-entry penetration, squatting, legs wide apart, limbs akimbo and occupying space); and displays of drunkenness and rowdy behaviour. By traditional standards, all of these examples would all be considered typically ‘unfeminine’— in fact, an inversion of femininity. Cultural theorist Angela
McRobbie has referred to the practices described above as surmounting to a kind of “phallic girlhood” (McRobbie 2007).

In this paper I use Mikhail Bahktin’s (1965) account of ‘grotesque bodies’ in the carnivalesque setting and ‘classical bodies’ in Renaissance statuary to frame some of the imagery found in young women’s MySpace picture galleries, aligning this imagery with grotesque body representation, and its social and political underpinnings. I then go on to align grotesque and classical body representation with Laura Mulvey’s theory of voyeuristic and fetishistic narratives in film respectively, by connecting these narratives to female celebrity representation in the mass media. I suggest that in mass media representation, ‘grotesqueness’ may, to draw from Mulvey, be aligned with a narrative of humiliation and degradation of the female object, producing for the viewer a sadistic kind of pleasure. However, in the self-produced self representation of girls on MySpace, the narrative of choice in one’s own ‘grotesque’, sometimes degrading, but more importantly, traditionally ‘un-feminine’ representation, perhaps disrupts or subverts both gender stereotypes and the type of sadistic pleasure Mulvey associates with voyeuristic narratives and modes of viewing.

**Grotesque female bodies on MySpace**

Bakhtin’s theorisations of the grotesque body provide a useful framework for analysing these images of debauchery, vulgarity, drunkenness and transgression by girls on
MySpace. According to Stallybrass and White, “Bakhtin was struck by the compelling difference between the human body as represented in popular festivity, and the body as represented in classical statuary in the Renaissance.” (Stallybrass and White 1986: 21). The classical body as represented in statues and classical iconography is, as Stallybrass and White outline it, usually elevated on a pedestal, to be viewed from below; closed, “with no openings or orifices”; distant from, and seemingly indifferent to its audience/viewer; frozen in time, and in this sense, unengaged and ‘disembodied’ (Stallybrass and White 1986: 21-22). On the classical body, according to Bakhtin, “the opaque surface and the body’s ‘valleys’ acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world” (Bakhtin 1965: 317). The grotesque body however, “is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed” (Bakhtin 1965: 317). The grotesque body “protrudes, bulges, sprouts and branches off”, whereas the classical body is a façade that cannot be penetrated (Bakhtin 1965: 320). The grotesque body is a body in processes of exchange, and sometimes, transgression of the individual self. Bakhtin posits that it represents the point at which the individual body penetrates and intersects with the outside world, and with other bodies. Open orifices, particularly mouths, are central to grotesque bodily representation, according to Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1965: 317).

Representations of young women with wide open mouths and protruding tongues are very common in the photo galleries displayed on the profiles of the young women that I have viewed. In many of the images seen on these profiles, poses and faces are purposefully comical and silly. In some of the images seen, the protruding tongue and
the licking or kissing gestures looks to be a caricature or a parody of overt or exaggerated seduction. This is another key feature of grotesque representation according to Bakhtin: it “exaggerates and caricatures the negative, the inappropriate” (Bakhtin 1965: 306). Overt, public displays of seduction, open mouths and licking are all behaviours that were once seen as inappropriate for females, especially young females. Wide open mouths are not traditionally associated with traditional feminine representation or even notions of what is hetero-sexy, appealing and seductive in a feminine body. Thus, these images might be considered a ‘symbolic inversion’ of traditional femininity, and also a caricature of the negative and inappropriate for the female gender, in line with Bakhtinian grotesque representation. The prevalence of images depicting alcohol consumption and drunkenness by girls and young women, is another example of this kind of inversion. Public displays of this kind of rowdy, active participation in what McRobbie (2004; 2007) and others (Totaro 2005) (Verghis 2003) have described as ‘laddish’ or ‘blokeish’ behaviour were once also seen as inappropriate for females.

When seen in the light of traditional notions of femininity and more traditionally ‘feminine’ representation, this phenomenon of a more open, active female body representation, one which does not close or confine itself, but rather, takes up space, consumes, protrudes into the external realm— and in this case, literally, into the world via the public cyber domain— is significant in its implications. So are the social and political underpinnings of grotesque representation as theorised by Bahktin, when applied to this phenomenon. In the mass media, we see countless representation of perfected, idealised, ‘classical’ female bodies; bodies, which, if we apply Bahktin’s logic, are also
perceived as closed, fixed and essentialised. While the profiles of the young women examined also contain many examples of cut-and-pasted images (of, for example, models and celebrities) of this kind of idealised female body representation, the dominant representation of self in young women’s picture galleries is much more open and ‘grotesque’, and with the implications of Bakhtin’s theories, perhaps more resistant to objectification, idealisation and essentialism.

**Mulverian narratives and grotesque bodies**

The grotesque body of Bakhtinian carnivalesque is open, engaged in action, exchange and pleasure. The grotesque body is thus more readily seen as a “mobile, split and multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange”, according to Stallybrass and White (Stallybrass and White 1986: 22). When contemplating this aspect of grotesque body representation in relation to feminist goals of subjectivity and agency in female representation, a mobile, multiple representation of self has often been identified by feminist theorists as a goal of feminist representation (De Lauretis 1984; 1987; Dolan 1988; Case 1988; Schneider 1997). In contrast, the closed-ness and frozen-in-time nature of the classical body make it a self that is fixed, mystified, unknowable and thus essentialised and idealised. The classical body is thus an image, an object to be admired, even worshipped. Following this definition, it can never be fully known, attained or de-mystified. Thus, we might add that the classical body and iconography of this nature is
easily ‘fetishised’ and objectified in the same way that film theorist Laura Mulvey describes, as I explain below.

If we question young women’s self representations primarily from an aesthetic, performative and representational perspective it is possible to argue for the presence of a kind of ‘feminist grotesque-ness’ within them. These images depict a transcending of what was once the societal boundaries and limits of typical feminine behaviour and an inversion of bodily poses and aesthetics associated with ‘traditional’ femininity. Further, their ‘grotesque’ openness and depiction of action, movement, mobility, engagement and liminality— as opposed to the stasis and confinement of a static, inert ‘finished’ product/object— perhaps leaves them (literally) open to the possibility of change and subjectification in the eyes of the viewer, rather than essentialism and objectification.

Mulvey has argued that in the screenic context, it is overwhelmingly female bodies which are positioned as ‘to-be-looked-at’, and these bodies are viewed from a ‘masculinised’ subject position/gaze (Mulvey 1989/1975: 19). That is, the viewer gaze has been engendered as male in the screenic context regardless of the actual biology of the viewer in question, because it is most often the male who is in the subject position, and whose desire (for the female) the audience is meant to identify with (Mulvey 1989/1981: 29). Mulvey theorises that cinematic narratives correspond mainly with one of two types of viewing pleasure or ‘scopophilia’, structured around heterosexual male desire. These are *voyeuristic* scopophilia and *fetishistic* scopophilia. This theorisation is based on Freudian psychology, and the premise that men fear women because of ‘castration anxiety’.
According to Mulvey, they react to this fear and play it out in the cinema in two main ways. Firstly, by seeking to know, debase and demystify the body of the woman by voyeuristically following and watching her, in a narrative which usually involves sin, shame and guilt on the part of the female, leading to discovery, humiliation and punishment of the female by the male. Secondly, they react by idealising, fetishising and thus distancing the body of the women, in a narrative of pure visual spectacle (Mulvey 1989/1975: 21). In other words, a de-valuation and humiliation of the female or an over-valuation, idealisation and objectification of her body are the two central ways male fear of women is played out in filmic narratives. Voyeuristic scopophilia involves “investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery” (Mulvey 1989/1975: 21). Fetishistic scopophilia involves “build[ing] up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself”, regardless of plot or story (Mulvey 1989/1975: 21). Whether psychologically accurate or not, the two types of scopophilia and the narratives associated with them as theorised by Mulvey provide a very useful model for feminist analysis of visual and screenic cultural forms. A connection can also be drawn between voyeuristic scopophilia and grotesque body representation, and fetishistic scopophilia and classical body representation, which is interesting in its implications when applied to young women’s choices and agency in their self representation on MySpace, as I explain below.

To see an example from the contemporary context of both classical and grotesque bodies and the two types of visual pleasure I am associating with them, we need only look to women’s magazines, and the aesthetic and narrative differences between high-gloss
fashion/consumption/‘lifestyle’-centred magazines such as *Vogue*, *Harpers’ Bazarre* and *Cosmopolitan*, and tabloid gossip-centred magazines such as *Who*, *Women’s Weekly* and *Famous*. The contrasting presentation of female celebrities in these different kinds of women’s magazines demonstrates the connection between classical and grotesque bodies and fetishistic and voyeuristic scopophilia. Images of celebrities in high-gloss fashion magazines are generally ‘classical’ in a fashion and aesthetic sense, and fetishistic in a narrative sense. These magazines focus on presenting an idealised, highly constructed image of the celebrity, through both text and imagery. Interviews are highly planned and highly paid in fashion magazines, and they reveal little about the private life of the celebrity in question, but rather, seek to increase the idolatry and mystery surrounding the figure. The images that accompany such articles are highly glamorised images resulting from planned photo shoots. The star is often in highly constructed ‘classical’ poses, resulting in shots that create a statuesque or ‘frozen-in-time’ image. She is often wearing long, glamorous ‘classical’ gowns, and the fashion is not of that of the lower classes or everyday life, but of an idyllically glamorous and upper-class world. The narrative is secondary to the high-gloss, fantastic visual spectacle of fashion and beauty. Their dresses, faces and hair are perfectly styled, indicating a lack of action and achieving a ‘frozen in time’ quality. The poses are non-naturalistic, but rather static, theatrical, framed, and classically feminine, so that whilst the celebrity may look at the viewer, she remains symbolically distant from the viewer, ‘out of reach’, and an object of idealisation. The image that results of the celebrity in question is a fetishised and idealised one, of mystery, glamour and unavoidable distance from the viewer.
In contrast, in ‘lower-brow’ gossip magazines, the narrative of shame, humiliation and degradation is central. It tells us the ‘real’ story behind the idealised feminine object. In Mulvey’s terms, the viewer is placed in the position of voyeur, reading not an interview which was consented to and paid for, but second-hand, ‘un-censored’ and ‘un-authorised’ accounts of a story from ‘friends’, ‘neighbours’ and other sources of ‘private’ information. Stories often involve heartbreak, humiliation, personal struggles and revelation of lies or deceit on the part of the celebrity. The pictures that accompany such articles are often secondary to the narrative—sometimes blurry, hard to see, or not very revealing. But they are often ‘grotesque’ in Bakhtin’s sense, focusing on flesh, bellies, bottoms and genitals, capturing action, mobility and sometimes moments of pleasure or exchange with other bodies. For an example, we might look to the highly publicised tabloid photos of both Britney Spears and Lindsey Lowan, in which these young women are seen emerging from vehicles to reveal their bare, hairless labias to the viewer. The viewer becomes voyeur, engaged in the act of de-mystifying, degrading and humiliating the female object of his/her gaze.

In this way, we can see clear examples of classical and grotesque bodies in contemporary mass media imagery of females, as well as the Mulverian fetishistic and voyeuristic narratives and visual pleasures that accompany them. Looked at from this perspective, and importantly, in the context of mass media representation, ‘grotesque’, voyeuristic bodily representation of females does not seem so subversive, nor feminist in its possibilities. However, in the new media context of MySpace we are not discussing mass-produced, mass media representation but rather self-produced, self representation.
It is this element of acknowledged and overt personal choice in one’s own depiction and presentation that complicates the analysis of grotesque, voyeuristic representation when we transpose the context to MySpace. Producers and publishers of the grotesque-body images of celebrities discussed above take advantage of, and profit from, the voyeuristic avenue for pleasure, which, according to Mulvey, is based on the premise of voyeurism—watching a body without the consent or knowledge of the individual.

Unlike the celebrities we see in tabloid magazines, young women on MySpace are choosing to show, ‘debase’ and de-mystify themselves, perhaps effectively limiting or even subverting the pleasure a ‘masculinised’ gaze might get from doing so. By subverting the traditional codes of feminine-gendered sexual objectification and idealisation, as well as displaying a kind of hedonistic, Dionysian behaviour that is more traditionally ‘masculine’ in its care-free and shameless pursuit of pleasure and self-abandonment, these girls do, in some ways, place themselves squarely in the subject position and ‘symbolically invert’ some feminine stereotypes. In some ways, MySpace ‘girls in grotesque’ are perhaps ‘demystifying’ and ‘de-idealising’ themselves, and the feminist potential contained in such an action must be acknowledged. Whether or not a conscious knowledge of feminism comes into play, these bodies, by putting themselves on the line for all to see in all their shame, pleasure and ‘grotesque’ authenticity, are in a sense, perhaps making themselves more known to the viewer, depicting a representation of self that values multiplicity and mobility over essentialism and idealisation.
Conclusion

The question then arises in the current context of a ‘technocratic’ explosion of female self-production and self-imaging: Does young women’s grotesque body representation necessarily disrupt, (drawing from Mulvey’s analysis) the potentially voyeuristic pleasure of the viewer because they are the ones choosing, making and producing the representation? While an important one, this question is beyond the scope this paper. I raise it in conclusion here because the purpose of this paper is not to persuade the audience one way or the other as to the political implications and meanings of female grotesque body representation on MySpace, but rather to question the possibilities of this kind of representation, and test the use of Bahktinian and Mulverian theory in relation to it. In this paper I have outlined how, from a feminist performance/representational theory perspective these representations might be seen as subversive of gender norms and possibly disruptive of voyeuristic viewing pleasure, as one way of understanding why young women might choose to represent themselves in this way. However, this is only one side of a complex story, and by no means, my ‘conclusive’ ‘feminist’ judgement. I tell it with the aim of drawing the audience’s attention to the complexity, convolution and difficulties of judging or analysing self-produced female body representation in the ‘post’ feminist social and political context.

Another possibility that I do not have the scope to elaborate on here is that this kind of ‘grotesque’, ‘phallic’ (McRobbie 2007), or even ‘blokeish’ feminine representation is merely one more in a series of masks that feminine bodies have been acculturated to wear.
in order to keep up with changing fashions of sexual objectivity and hetero-sexualised, masculinised desire. Perhaps submissive, passive femininity is no longer hetero-sexy in contemporary culture, and rather than, or more correctly, as well as, signifying a subversion of ‘traditional’ feminine traits, grotesque body representation by young women signifies a conformity with new regimes and stereotypes of femininity, as McRobbie (2007) argues. Particularly in respect to the context of new and interactive media, self-produced representation and the discourse of ‘choice’ and ‘individuality’ that surrounds it, we are treading complex terrain, and more exploration of these issues is called for.

Bibliography


