# 3D images and sexuality

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Sexuality is a vital function in living beings. It allows them to reproduce, and leads to the survival of the species. It corresponds to a physiological need for animals, and to a source of intense pleasure for human beings. For the latter, it has become  private behaviour, a matter for intimacy,  thus usually out of sight.

Art has always offered representations : prehistoric sculptures of Venus *(Willendorf Venus* for example*)*, the erotic Pompeii frescos, Greek bowls… Subsequently, Jewish-Christian culture decreased manifestations, but Courbet, and then Picasso, produced astonishing paintings. These works reveal the secret behaviour of couples, but above  all show how sexuality is seen and interpreted by both painter and society.

This text attempts to show whether sexual representations vary with 3D creation. If so, how and why.

The process of computer creation differs from that of painting, photography or video. For the latter processes, reality — the presence of the model, or the matter put on canvas — acts on the artist's sensations and feelings, and can maintain certain states of sensitivity favourable to the act of creation. The work on a computer — and that which interests us here, 3D work — is radically different : without real model or other stimulus for the eyes, without organic matter to transform, the artist has only 'pure'  mathematics (geometry, logic…) to reach his/her goal  He/she writes formulae, digital values, or successively clicks on icons corresponding to the desired functions; and shapes, colours… appear. As a chemist, he/she synthesises. Our word 'synthesic' will qualify these images.

Such a radically abstract method must lead to changes. Formal elements must be consciously, precisely, described to the computer before appearing in the image. Spontaneity is reduced, and sensitivity, impulses can be dulled by geometry and essential quantifications. If sensitivity, and so desire/pleasure, have to be filtered through mathematics, do they still exist ? In what forms ? What about sexual representations in 3D images ? What can we deduce from the capacity to evoke reality by this technique ?

This somewhat alluring theme continues our previous PhD text[1] : What corporeity, or awareness of one's own body, or way of being in/with one's own body, does the artist possess when he/she is creating with language and numbers ? How can the immobile body influence the image ? We will concentrate on the field/bed of the sexual.

Diverse sexuality figures determine our plan, the most obvious not necessarily being the most interesting. The first refers initially to the literal representation of genital and coupling organs. Next we will study the question of sexual female characters. We will then consider justifications for these representations. Sexuality can, however, also appear in a symbolical way : eye, duct, etc. Finally, to conclude, we will show that sexuality can inhabit the very way in which forms are represented, almost independently of all figuration. Global, dispersed in the image, it corresponds to the way the artist looks at things, and expresses it, whether he/she wants this or not.

Our study is restricted to 3D works, without motion capture or cyber ware. We will not discuss the various interfaces which aim to re-animate the body. Our concern is with  the creation of forms through language.

Women artists are few, as is generally the case in scientific and technological fields. It seems too early to see clearly if these female digital artists, of whom I am one, produce different works, in particular as regards to sexuality. Let us note that a few, and some of the most famous (Amkraut, Ikam, Sommerer, and even Nahas) are accompanied by a man — for pleasure? for technical needs ? or for credibility ? (Must I myself make up my mind on this issue?)

**1) Literal representation of sexual elements**
The representation of human sexual organs  is rare in synthesic films.

The usual replacement of human characters by industrial objects (toys, knick-knacks, robots), by skeletons or insects[2] (article in Anomalie n°1), avoiding  problems of realism, partly justifies this absence : can we imagine genital organs for a bike, for a lamp ? However… In the way of some Dadaïst works, and without necessarily having sexual organs, a machine could be sexualised[3]. Snow, in *Tall Story* (1996), gives a robot, made of wire-framed parallelepipeds, a similar penis, but without humour.

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[1] « Création artistique en image de synthèse : expression de la corporéité », november 1999, Paris 8, under the direction of Edmond Couchot, 430 p.

[2] See my publication « De la représentation du corps humain en image de synthèse », in *Anomalie*, n° 1, 2000, p. 82-90.

[3] *Voila la femme*, 1915, Picabia ou *Woman*, 1920, Man Ray, *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires même*, 1915-23, Duchamp. *Féminimasculin, Le sexe de l'art*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996, p. 190-195.

When there are integral nudes — which is very, very, very rare — sexual details of their body remain discreet, almost invisible. No 'irregularity' in the crotch. A nappy hides the sexual identity of the baby in *Tin Toy* (1988), by John Lasseter. The women of Michel Bret (see later), if they are completely naked, their breasts pointed and with carefully delineated areolas, have neither pubis nor sex (*Suzanne* (1999) seems to differ slightly). Nor do the dancers, with bodies of shiny and transparent matter, in *Luxor Excerpts*, by Kleiser and Walczak, present a noticeable difference at the base of the stomach. In *Migrations* (1997), Chamski, the statue of the winged man has a slight genital fatness, melted in matter. Other bodies are simply discontinuous. The articulations of the masked dancers in *Eurythmy* (1989), by Amkraut and Girard, are empty : the bottom of torso is thus constituted by a triangle, without buttocks or sex, whereas the pectoral muscles are carefully made. Justified in its time by the constraints of realism (refusal of animated volume interpenetration), this absence happily shrugs off sexuality.

A few exceptions exist : *Wrong Brothers* (1995), Weston, once they have become white angels, by virtue of vain flights, allow us see their pretty round bottoms and their 'willies' — which are very youthful. The character in *La quête du très saint râââle*, (*The search for the very sacred grooaan*) (Imagina 98), by Jeannel, has indeed an erection, but he hides it at once, and disappears after he has sawed the female and provocative element. We reserve for the « coupling » section *Les Xons* by Cécile Babiole. Lastly, *Joram* (Imagina 1994), by Rosen and Broersma, shows a superb character, a masculine sex, separated from its body, and personified, standing, walking, and making its hood dance, in a wood of open hands. From this film emanates the joy of evolving, of moving freely, in a carefree way.

Sex is rare, and if it exists, has to be treated lightly.


As with representations of sexual organs, representations of copulation are rare, and often hide the corresponding organs.

One of the episodes of the *Quarxs* series (1991), by Benayoun, Schuiten, and Peeters, shows geometric male and female couplings as a discreet fitting together, almost static. *Lawnmawer man* (1992), by Brett Leonard, offers a union-fusion between the man and the woman, in a spiral liquefaction, which is almost monstrous. *The End.* (1995), by Landreth, also opts for union as energetic spiral : some thick and opaque pink drops end by — discreetly ? — obstructing  the screen and hiding the scene. Have spiral and liquid replaced the 'coming and going' rhythm of the cinema? Have we moved from mechanistic  behaviour to the expression of intimacy ?

*Dirty Power* (1989), Lurye, is a strange example. Two electric wires, initially plugged one beneath the other, unplug themselves. Hanging in space, they watch each other and move like snakes. They then plug themselves back alternately into their respective sockets ; light, radio and sighs following their rhythm, faster and faster, relate to the act of sex between two men.

The *Xons* series (1991-1992), Cécile Babiole, shows both organs and the rhythm of copulation, playing with them humorously. On a ring planet, yellow skeletons go about their business. Their morphology offers certain freedoms : apart from their 'hanging' ribs, men possess a penis, women, a vertical ring, at the base of the stomach, for the vagina. In *Crac Crac*, a couple of the same species, is making love, standing, in public : the erect penis penetrates the woman's ring. After withdrawing, this latter enlarges jerkily, then disappears into the cosmos, identical to the planet carrying the characters (film projection). The producers did not wish to continue the series.

Let us note that in these representations of naked bodies, body hair is absent, whereas elsewhere hair (as sometimes fur) may be brought into prominence (but as a display of technical prowess). With control over the hair which is displayed, and without sweat, the synthesic body is smooth, hygienic. Does  the 3D image reek of cleanliness ?


The case of women is special. Genital organs, as such, are as rare as breasts are : visible under (clinging) garments, generous despite a thin body, and unfailingly firm. Examples abound : Lara Croft, *Tomb Raider* (1997) by Eidos, *Mystère et boule de gomme* (1998), and *Cahin Caha* (1996), by Michel Bret, etc[4]. One important exception, *La grosse Lulu retourne à Venise (Fat Lulu goes back to Venise)* (1991) by Mario Martin Buendia, F, shows a woman who is rather stout and noticeably less young. As a result she has more presence.

 The situation of these women deserves attention. Firstly, they are very often alone. Of course, this reduction in the number of characters cuts calculation time. The woman thus takes the leading role (but not in Lasseter's films). But is  this solitude not a response to a desire of the creators ? Is synthetisic woman still an idealisation : untouchable, unreachable beauty ? Her body would say 'touch me', whereas her isolation and her words (cf. spoken words in *Don't touch me*) will say 'no' ? Secondly, and similarly,  their behaviour forbids us to touch them. Often active, maybe super-active, athletic, strong-willed, they do not adopt the role of seductress, making play with their eyes  — or the role of seduced, offered woman, open to be looked at (none looks voluntarily at the camera). They do not have time for that — they are

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[4] As diverse characters in *Cloison* (1997), by Bériou, *Xanadu City* (1992), by Estienne and Duval, *Eccentric Dance* (1992), by Takaoki, Jap, the singer in *Don't touch me* (1989), by Kleiser and Walczak, USA, the barbie in *KnickKnack* (1989), by Lasseter, and not to forget *Sexy Robot* (1984) by Abel…

very contemporary. (Slowness, or worse, lasciviousness are absent from 3D images). Is it because they are alone that they are busy, or is it the opposite ?

Synthesic woman is thus an object of looks, an object of desire, but neither a subject of desire — she is not aware of her sexuality — nor a partner in shared desire. Her sexuality is not totally denied (athletic, she is aware of her body), but it is represented chastely, in the torso, without sex, without hair or slit between her legs. It is not thematised. Could *Diable est-il courbe ? (Is Evil curved)* (1995) by Benayoun be an attempt at this ?

Note too that there is no parallel situation for men, as happens, one might add, in the other types of representation When it deals with sexuality or sexualisation of one isolated character, the protagonist is a woman.


**2 ) How to explain the lack of sexual representations ?**

Lack of sexual organs in 3D is thus widespread. Il is not easy to find reasons why this should be. Some films may be unknown to us.

Of course, the signification of the representation of sexual organs has changed. In our affluent society, fertility is no longer a value. The pill has separated sexuality from impregnation, while science and technology have given us the means of aiding reproduction ; sex seems to have been made banal, the sacred aura surrounded it appears to have been destroyed. For all that, it has not been swept aside : other arts or media (television among them) provide us with constant examples of this. Almost an overdose.

Is this lack of sex in computer images related to the difficulty of modelling ? If a simple tube, possibly equipped with small balls, may become a masculine sex, a darker slit or a simple triangle may be suitable for the discretion of the female sex. Or the faithful vine leaf. Difficulty is not a valid reason. But is it too easy to represent sexes ?

Has technical thought totally replaced symbolic thought ? Technical difficulty often motivates researchers. Skeletons and muscles are modelled before the skin and the body movement, creatures are given intelligence (see research into artificial life). These are interesting themes ! Synthesic animation is now so close to the appearance of reality, as much as in regards its volume as its mechanism, that the symbolic value of the 'natural' qualities of the body is cast aside. No more need to be sexed to be human, to look 'alive'.

What role do the technological tool, and the manner of working, play in these representations ? Is teamwork an obstacle or is it the serious nature of the technology which might lead artists to repress their sexuality ? How can one think of pleasure while counting and measuring ? Has the initial boldness in confronting art with calculation dulled with time ? Is a

computer chosen for convenience… and no longer out of passion ? This perhaps would explain the timidity and refusal to depart from accepted ideas. Or is it because pleasure is unquantifiable that it is not represented ? Here is an interesting difficulty, to quantify the unquantifiable.

Finally, does  the type of forms, these smooth and ideal geometric models carried by light, bring another element to the sexual, organic character of the body ? Formal irregularities, which would exist 'by default' in reality, have to be made deliberately  to appear in 3D ; but are they ? Visual irregularity has become imperfection, impurity, impropriety, and acquires a negative signification. Similarly, few situations highlight the organic nature of bodies : how many show characters who are old or sick ? And how many have food as a theme ? Oral pleasure ends up with that of the body (similarly, what place for laughter, or for the uncontrollable ?). Elsewhere (Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, « Next Sex »), reproduction deals with cloning, strictly genetic, without sexuality. Even representations of dance have been toned down, so they are no longer erotic. Synthesic immateriality strives to refer to an ideal purity, sexless, with neither secretions nor emotions. Is this due to  the influence of American Puritanism ? With no sexuality, what image of the world are we going to produce ?

Let us hope this lack is only temporary, and that, overcoming technical challenges, some authors will produce personal films, rich in their reality and in the emotions connected to sexuality. This text aims to encourage them to do so.

### 3) Sexual unconscious figures

Some symbolic forms indicate that sexuality is fortunately more widespread.

The eye is a frequent form in 3D realisations. Of course it represents an exacerbation of the desire to see, but also represents all desire (psychoanalysis). On faces, it is often enlarged. Sometimes completely separated from the body, it then moves independently : *Imagina* logos, from *Oeil du cyclone (Cyclone Eye, TV series)*, *Automappe* (1988), by Bret, or *Limbes* (1995), by Bériou. Many works, in literature as well as painting, associate the eye with the sex : feminine or masculine[5] (see *Tableau d'amour, Love Painting* (1993), Bériou)

The  'tube' — obliged form — is also employed. Infinite corridors along which the camera flies at top speed, called *rides* or *fly through*, proliferate in themes parks and in dynamic movies. These tubular spaces, often dark, are a metaphor for the vagina. *Limbes* shows this directly, when, at the end, the eye — or its transformation ? — arrives in the arms of an

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[5] Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil* ; Bellmer, *Unica, L'œil sexe*, 1961 ; Brauner, *Le monde paisible*, 1927 ; Louise Bourgeois, *Le regard, 1966 ;* Annette Messager, *Chimère*, 1982, etc. *Féminimasculin*, *op. cit.*, p. 167-169.

obstetrician. These tubes then represent  the desire to return to the mother's belly, in levitation, without material heaviness[6] (cf. *supra*, immateriality).

But the movements in these corridors are fast, appear hurried — almost in a hurry to finish. And yet, they do not finish. Strange, this unacknowledged desire which, when it is realised, does not seem to be agreeable.

Ironically, we could also evoke explosions, rockets and similar flying objects which express an energy which is probably more …masculine ?

These symbolical manifestations, the eye or the tube, demonstrate that, if the literal representation of sex is rare, it is however relatively present, in an indirect, almost anxious way.

I would now like now to stress the quantity of soft forms, more or less flabby, supple or energetic, in synthesic animations : *Limbes* (already quoted), *Displaced Dice* (Imagina 1995), by Zancker, *Betezeparticules* (1994), by Bret…[7], and in many Japanese examples. In this context, let us welcome the sensuality emanating from *Indo Dondaine* (1993), by Huitric, Nahas, Tramus, and Saintourens.

Following the title *Organ House* (1992) by Masa Yoshi Obata, can we imagine that these flabby forms are internal organs, even sexual organs, soft but capable of changing their aspect… (cf. balls and tentacles by Kawaguchi) and  thus masculine ?

If these soft forms display the capacity for transformation of digital images, in doing so they correspond to a game with the 'matter'. A force is acting on the shape, which has become matter again, and refers to the symbolic action the artist is having upon them : 'in kneading, no more geometry, no more ridges, no more cuts[8]'. These curves and these movements express a desire for contact, for links, adhesion[9]. The 3D image thus brings an unexpected expression. The image's immateriality — so widely criticised — is belied : the contact between artist and the work's matter occurs symbolically, in  a imagined and profound way, because it is unconscious.

To question the sensuality of the makers of 3D images, we should therefore not so much look at visible forms as at the manner in which they appear and move. The unconscious is working on them, obstacles to its expression are only greater.

However, the unconscious is not taken into account, nor even less thematised.  Too often, creators stay on the surface of these empty forms. They do not question themselves about  the

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[6] M. Dery, *Vitesse virtuelle. La cyberculture aujourd'hui*, Abbeville, Paris, 1997, p. 168.

[7] *In search of muscular axis* (1990) by Kawahara Toshifumi, *Organ House* (1992) by Masa Yoshi Obata, *The page master* (Imagina 1995) by Hunt and Stoen, *Le ressac* (1992) by Le Peillet and Kermel, *Lux* (1992) by Guilminot and all films by Kawaguchi, etc.

[8] G. Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves, Essai sur l'imagination de la matière,* José Corti, Paris, 1942, p. 146.

[9] G. Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Dunod, Paris, 1992, p. 308-312.

interiority of the character, or about their own interiority, or that of the spectator. But why represent sexual elements, if it is not in order to touch the spectator, to affect him/her, to make him/her feel like a living body ? But how to touch him/her ? We must now  consider the global erotic dimension of the image..

Sexuality remains fascinating because the complexity of its mystery cannot be formulated. To show a sexual organ is not enough to come to terms with it. Should we not rather avoid showing it, or show this avoidance ? Faced with this difficulty, all  techniques of creation experience problems (Dwoskin films tackle this issue, *Take me*, 1968, *Trixi*, 1969-70). Can computer realisations, while using language as material for creation, show this inexpressible quality ?

To conclude hopefully, I will finish with two works which are very rich visually. Both work with darkness, transience, and undetermined matter. Both condense a presence to the work, thanks to the demanding and necessary work of the gaze on the plastic image — an unquantifiable quality. Eroticism develops here through figuration and abstraction.

Projection of *Trilogie*, by Miguel Almiron, Argentine, 1998 and then some extracts from my own research : *Un peu de peau s'étale encore* (*Aforme*, 1990), *Horgest* (1991-1993), *Etres-en-tr…* (1994).