Title
Bodies Into Bits: A Reparative Approach to Informationalizing the Body

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3139s579

Author
Hixon, James

Publication Date
2009-02-01

Bodies Into Bits:

A Reparative Approach to Informationalizing the Body

There is a longstanding conflict between information and matter, a tension which is highly evident within the discipline of information studies today. The proliferation of digital archives and libraries has raised challenging questions about the relationship between the informational and material qualities of objects. In a world in which everything is becoming digital, the turn to privilege the informational content of objects over their material presence raises concerns about originality and authenticity, ownership and authorship. Bodies, like archival records or books, are information objects. It is not surprising, then, in this cultural moment, that a plethora of research, dialogue, and art focuses on the changing role of the body in the information age. But though it is common to associate information and the body through contemporary digital technologies, this paper is predicated on the argument that this relationship in fact long precedes our ability to turn bodies into bits.

The excerpt that I will be presenting today is part of a larger research project in which I argue that the body, as a material object, has been informationalized, or converted to information, throughout western history in its classification into formal knowledge structures such as taxonomies. This is strikingly apparent in the early modern scientific classification of raced and sexed bodies, and marks a trend that continues today through massive digitization efforts such as the Human Genome Project and the Visible Human Project. But what I would like to suggest, and where I would like to pick up here, is that both classification and digitization of bodies depend upon merely one definition of information. Instead, I would like to rely on an alternative paradigm in order to re-theorize the merger between information and body. I end with

James Hixon
Thinking Gender: February 6, 2009

the example of the Body without Organs as an informatic body characterized by randomness, and one that, rather than replacing the corporeal body with a virtual counterpart, in fact blends the two, offering new possibilities for bodies.

I want to begin by fleshing out Eve Sedgwick's theoretical move from paranoid to reparative reading which will guide my analysis. Through this framework, Sedgwick attempts to shift from, as she says, "the rather fixated question Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? *How*, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects" (124). Thus, Sedgwick encourages us to think about knowledge as something that *does*, rather than something that *is*. Paranoid reading, which she says characterizes much of queer theory, is based on the belief that knowledge lies hidden within particular objects, cultures, or practices. Paranoia, as Sedgwick says, is "anticipatory" (131) and "places its faith in exposure" (138). As a result, paranoid methodologies attempt to offset surprise through uncovering what is believed to be that hidden truth. This exposure is then theoretically linked to the liberation of the subject.

But, as Sedgwick says, paranoid reading is only one way of reading among many, and she instead calls for reparative reading practices. Though she does not fully explicate a methodology of reparative reading, Sedgwick does offer us this passage of how it differs from the paranoid position:

> to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones… because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically

crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did (146).

Here Sedgwick unlocks the binding relationship between knowledge and paranoia and shows reparative reading as one that embraces the affective and uncertain qualities of knowledge. While this position is generally thought of as non-critical or naïve (126), Sedgwick illustrates how it can in fact propose a powerful alternative to the trend of paranoid critical practices.

While Sedgwick talks specifically about knowledge, I think we can expand her theory to apply to information as well. Insofar as classification and digitization attempt to seek out the information contained within bodies for the purposes of exposure and scientific domination, they both practice a paranoid reading of bodies. In the attempt to informationalize bodies through classification, we convert the body into a piece of information, or a sign, that stands in relation to other signs in a classificatory system. Similarly, in the digitization of bodies, we convert the body into a bit of information, in this case a code, which is said to represent the body itself. Within the paranoid framework, we can thus think of information, either the sign or the code, as a message that is transmitted through the materiality of that body—a message, of course, that is waiting to be revealed. Critical to this reading is its dependence upon a commonly understood definition of information as representational and deterministic. This follows what Ronald Day has argued is the strength of the modernist construction of information as factual and quantitative, and thereby elevated to a "privileged, even totalitarian, form of knowledge and discourse" (2). Not coincidentally, this construction directly relates to the definition of information as a thing (1), and, like Sedgwick suggests, as something that *is*.

It follows, then, that a reparative reading must call for a new definition of information. If information is not something that represents or determines the body, if it is not a message or a

privileged fact, what else might it be? To begin, let us explore Claude Shannon's redefinition of information, published in his seminal 1949 text "The Mathematical Theory of Communication". An engineer for Bell Labs and commonly known as the "Father of Information Theory," Shannon participated in the Macy Conference on Cybernetics, for which he developed a theoretical definition of information that was radically different from both common usage and other communication models. Instead of identifying information with its effect of reducing uncertainty through the meaning conveyed in a message, Shannon reversed its traditional relationship with uncertainty and in fact *associated* information with randomness rather than *opposed* to it. To support this conclusion, he argued that a more unexpected message carried a greater amount of information (Hayles, 1999, 102). This definition correlates with the contemporaneous and culturally-situated emergence of chaos theory, which, as Katherine Hayles says, "celebrates unpredictability, seeing it as a source of new information" (Hayles, 1991, 7).

Hayles has meticulously chronicled the cultural effects of this theoretical transition on the dematerialization of information, which she says results in a problematic privileging of virtuality over materiality (Hayles, 1999). However, in this change in definition, I believe we also begin to see the possibility for a reparative reading of information and the body—one that allows for surprise*,* uncertainty, and a move away from the determinism associated with previous definitions of information. In particular, applying Shannon's theory of information calls for a body that is chaotic and random instead of classified and codified, and, I would argue, where difference and contradiction exists within bodies rather than among them. I would like to suggest that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theorization of the "Body Without Organs," published in their 1980 text <u>A Thousand Plateaus</u>, offers one such example, not only because it challenges deterministic notions of information, but also because it blends virtuality and materiality rather

James Hixon
Thinking Gender: February 6, 2009

than supplants the latter. The Body Without Organs (BwO) is a virtual body not because it is digital or because it exists in the de-materialized environment of cyberspace (though I think that it certainly can), but because it is a body characterized by potentialities and affects. In short, it enacts the reparative transition from a body that *is* to one that *does*.

So, what is a Body without Organs? Exploring the concept in her work on corporeal feminism, Elizabeth Grosz writes, "the BwO invokes a conception of the body that is disinvested of fantasy, images, projections, representations, a body without a physical or secret interior, without internal cohesion and latent significance. Deleuze and Guattari speak of it as a surface of speeds and intensities before it is stratified, unified, organized, and hierarchized" (169) and later, "the BwO … is opposed to the structure or organization of bodies, the body as it is stratified, regulated, ordered, and functional, as it is subordinated to the exigencies of property and propriety" (169-70). Thus, the BwO deconstructs the solidification of the body into a unitary object, instead opening it to multiple readings and possibilities. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari write that "once it has blown apart the organism and its organization… The full body without organs is a body populated by multiplicities" (D&G, quoted in Grosz, 168).

But this does not mean that it negates the materiality of bodies, or even that is ascribes to a universalist body that denies difference. The BwO in fact actively engages with difference through the process of "becomings". Through becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-imperceptible, and others, the BwO deconstructs notions of a fixed and stable body and subject, of binaries and hierarchies. As the body goes through the process of becoming-woman, it is fragmented and rendered increasingly molecular until it is finally, what Deleuze and Guattari call "a thousand tiny sexes" (D&G, quoted in Grosz, 177). In so doing, this molecularization of the body opens up the category of sex in a way that is reminiscent of the chaos associated with

James Hixon
Thinking Gender: February 6, 2009

information theory. Sex is not something that the body has, something to be uncovered and then classified, but rather, it is an "assemblage" of factors that continually interrelate, negotiate, and contribute to its ongoing rearticulation. Through this process of becoming, we can see Sedgwick's idea of information that *does*.

Undoubtedly, the idea of information is critical to the way we theorize bodies in cultural, social, and scientific discourses. Foucault has argued that the modern subject of Man was born with the change in classificatory practices that focused on looking deep within the body and discovering its secrets (312-313). If Man is the organized organism with his body arranged, described and exposed, then the Body without Organs emerges with a change in the definition of information. From a reparative position, the Body without Organs shows us the striking limitations in the way we have typically informationalized bodies, and offers an alternative which urges us to think beyond the truth value associated with both bodies and information. Like previous pairings of information and the body, the Body without Organs turns bodies into bits; but it does so with the intention of offering newly fragmented and multivalent possibilities.

WORKS CITED

Day, Ronald. <u>The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History and Power</u>. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.

Foucault, Michel. <u>The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences</u>. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Intensities and Flows" <u>Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism</u>. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Hayles, Katherine. <u>How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics</u>. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Hayles, Katherine. <u>Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science</u>. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Sedgwick, Eve. <u>Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity</u>. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.