

Introduction: Gender and Sexuality in Science-fiction and the Fantastic

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One of the fundamental contributions of feminist scholarship has been the recognition that gender roles and definitions of sexuality are, to borrow a phrase from Gayle Rubin, an “imposition of social ends on the natural world” (Rubin, 38). Like science fiction and the fantastic, feminism has made it possible to imagine other modes of being not limited to the familiar, culturally determined binary of male/female. It is hardly surprising, then, that in imagining new worlds and alternate realities, science fiction and fantasy-based literature and television programs have also explored a vast array of possibilities in the realm of human sexuality.

From Victorian literature to contemporary explorations of virtual reality, this special issue of *Phoebe* examines how the fantastic imaginary has probed the parameters of sexuality and provoked a revisioning of sexual identity and expression. Technology – and its potential to transform human life itself – has been a persistent theme in the literature of the fantastic since the appearance of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The possibility that technology could be used to make the gendered body invisible, and thus liberate individuals from cultural constraints on sexuality, or that a technical creation such as a robot could be appropriated by women to challenge how their identity is perceived by others, is explored by several contributing authors in this volume. Others interrogate the normative systems that legitimate certain sexualities while defining others as ‘deviant’ or ‘unnatural’, and then illustrate how these norms can be unraveled in fantastic alternate realities where a single, prescribed sexuality is not a given.

A central question runs as a unifying theme throughout each of the essays, and that is: where does sexuality lie, in the gendered body itself or in the matrix of social and cultural expectations imposed on that body? With the full range of bodies that science fiction offers – robots and cyborgs, vampires, those genetically engineered and surgically altered, even invisible, disembodied bodies – the contributors to this volume highlight the fluid, dynamic boundaries of the self, and the coercive power that is harnessed to render certain sexualities “unthinkable”.

Works Cited

Gayle Rubin, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex’ in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, Linda Nicholson, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 27-62.