

Animation & The Queering of the Body Genre in *Big Mouth*

Introduction

Garnering both critical and popular acclaim, the Netflix Original Series *Big Mouth* personifies the trials and tribulations of puberty through figures such as Hormone Monsters, Shame Wizards, and even talking genitalia. Despite the series' crude appearance, critical and popular reviews alike note the simultaneity of disgust and sympathy, and of lewdness and heart, in the animated program (Framke). The television show frequently evokes Linda Williams' concept of the body genre through its excessive iconography as well as the codes and conventions of pornography, horror, and melodrama which serve to incite an adult audience to recall the uncharted territory and intense emotions that accompanied puberty (Williams 3). A major characteristic of the body genre is its provocation of a physical mimetic reaction on the part of the spectator which the show, interestingly, denies (Williams 4). The animated nature of the show helps to create what I shall refer to as a "safe distance" between the spectator and the screen that negates the possibility of such mimicry. It is precisely the safe distance produced by animation that queers the body genre, providing the means by which physical mimicry is negated and emotional and mental resonance is prompted for a diverse array of spectators.

Evoking the Body Genre: Elements of Pornography, Horror, and Melodrama in *Big Mouth*

Through iconographic elements and codes and conventions of pornography, horror, and melodrama, *Big Mouth* visibly evokes the body genre that Linda Williams analyzes. Perhaps the most obvious body genre that *Big Mouth* evokes is pornography. Both visual and aural references to genitalia saturate the program, which is overtly sexual in its presentation of puberty and emerging sexuality. Rather than shying away from frank depictions of sex and sexuality, the show exaggerates these depictions, featuring a talking vagina and the Hormone Monster's

several detachable penises as just a few of the show's many "guest stars". Furthermore, the show emphasizes that puberty is *scary*, and drives this point home by frequently implementing the excess of the horror body genre. Thunderclaps and bolts of lightning that accompany the dark and stormy night, along with the strategic inclusion of dramatic lighting and point-of-view shots, set up the expectation for the viewer that something terrifying awaits. Instead of being followed by a blood-curdling scream and a vicious murder, these horror film tropes are followed by the literal entrance of puberty, personified by the character of Connie, an intimidating and curvaceous Hormone Monstress. While its adult audience is far removed from puberty, the show's recurring incorporation of conventions of horror serve as dramatic and terrifying reminders of the way puberty feels for young adolescents. The earth-shattering, soul-crushing anguish of puberty is further accentuated through codes and conventions of melodrama, most notably the close-ups of the animated face and the exaggerated movements of the animated body. In many ways, the show's embrace of the body genre elicits emotional reactions amongst spectators that mimic those happening on screen.

Affect, Emotion, and the Function of the Body Genre

In the case of *Big Mouth*, evoking the aesthetics of the body genres prompts the expectation that the program will be narratively similar to other body genre media texts and thus will be repetitive, formulaic, unoriginal and circular in nature (Williams 3). Body genres in general, and *Big Mouth* in particular, incorporate and simultaneously move beyond aesthetic tendencies and visual excess. They provide a mechanism by which to "address, if never really to 'solve', basic problems related to sexual identity" (Williams 10). Clearly, *Big Mouth* addresses sexual difference and identity by placing puberty, adolescent development, and sexual difference under a microscope, enlarging and exaggerating every detail visually as well as narratively.

When the show evokes the aesthetic of pornography, horror, or melodrama, it does so to in service of its mission to address puberty and the development of sexual identity in a way that is rather progressive, sex-positive, and even *queer*. The male and female hormone monsters, the melodramatic portrayal of the discovery of masturbation by both girls and boys, and even the song and dance number “Totally Gay” exemplify ways in which the show implements body genres evenly across its portrayal of different genders’ pubescent processes. *Big Mouth* actively employs these body genres to make room for and to celebrate difference and to encourage its audience to think critically about identity and difference.

While on the surface the show may appear to cleanly and simply exemplify the body genres, its queer and feminist themes, as well as its emphasis on diverse experiences of puberty opens the show up for critical introspection on the part of the spectator. However, this represents a departure from the body genres that Williams discusses, which are affective in nature. These genres gauge their success in their ability to manipulate audiences physically, to create a “non-conscious experience of intensity” that is bodily and pre-linguistic (Shouse). While *Big Mouth* provokes intense reactions among its viewers, it is by no means non-conscious. Professional reviewers and casual viewers alike have consciously noticed and remarked about the wit and originality of the program and the impact it has on them as they retrospectively look back on their own pre-teen pubescent journey (Chaney; Framke). Reactions to the show also emphasize the mental, emotional, social, and linguistic—rather than the corporeal—experiences that arise as a result of viewership. Affordances of the animated televisual text, including its ability to blur the boundaries of physical reality and its excessive self-reflexivity, help to produce the “safe distance” by which physical mimicry is negated and emotional and mental resonance is prompted.

Animation & Safe Distance

Big Mouth obviously evokes the body genre aesthetically while simultaneously departing from the traditional notion of the body genre in its lack of “a sense of over-involvement in sensation” as the audience is not meant to physically mimic what happens on screen (Williams 5). The show is sexual but not *sexy*. As such, it is not physically arousing and does not produce the same kind of affect as pornography. The audience is not enticed to mimic the sexual metamorphosis and action happening on-screen. The point of the show and its measure of success is not in its ability to produce affect in the form of sexual arousal. The show is similarly not scary enough or sad enough to induce screams or tears, nor is the generation of screams or tears the show’s goal or function. *Big Mouth*’s wacky aesthetic and collision of genres are as haphazard, excessive, and unanticipated as the process of puberty it portrays. Thus, the show can arguably fall into a fourth category of body genre, what Anna Kérchy calls “anatomo-(in)animation” (Kérchy 179). This category considers affordances of animation, emphasizes the animated body, and infuses elements of various body genres. Like other texts that fall into the category of anatomo-(in)animation, *Big Mouth* incorporates:

Anthropomorphic incarnations of inanimate matter...all bizarre blurrings of boundaries of physicalities and ir/realities, provokes a curious spectrum of sensorial excitement, flashes of pleasure, horror, anxiety, experienced as fleeting possibilities, mixing, transforming into each other to surprise audiences and create an overall tickling effect that... offers a teasing-troubling mind game, an intellectual challenge. (Kérchy 179)

It manages to visually display the turmoil and excess that characterizes this period of adolescent life in a way that exudes camp and achieves its goal of cerebral and psychic resonance with spectators. Kerchy’s category accounts for *Big Mouth*’s animated form and the flexibility of

reality that is afforded by this form, as well as the shift away from physical mimicry and towards emotional and intellectual stimulation. This category forces the spectator to question the very existence of reality, an intellectual and emotional process that inherently destabilizes previous ideas of identity, existence, and experience as clear-cut and categorizable. Interdisciplinary scholars such as Jeffery P. Dennis take this scholarly conversation surrounding animation a step further, arguing that the way animation allows for fluidity contributes more broadly to the ways in which producers and spectators alike approach identity and desire in the animated text.

Animation's ability to blur lines of physical reality most obviously manifests in the program's personification of otherwise non-existent or non-living beings and objects, which is another means by which emotional and mental involvement between the audience and the program is prompted. Personification and whimsical fantasy do not function solely for the purposes of humor, but also as ways of rendering the "unknown" of puberty known through physical embodiments of the emotions that reign supreme during adolescence. Ironically, characters like Maury and Connie—the Hormone Monster and Monstress, respectively—help to produce the emotional resonance that viewers experience despite them being fantastical characters. Additionally, the animated form possesses a degree of potentiality that live-action does not. With animation, *mise-en-scene* is completely at the will of the animator. On the other hand, live-action involves constraints of lighting, budget, access to sets and locations, and even the capacities of the human body which delineate what can be shown on screen. The animated form can "bring to screen incomplete or infinite variations of grotesque bodily metamorphosis" (Kerchy 179). As a result of animation's considerable freedom, animated bodies can be anyone, anything—hence the entire episode of *Big Mouth* featuring talking birth control methods.

Animated texts also possess a certain degree of self-reflexivity which, when combined with the ability to blur the lines of physical reality, culminate in several moments in *Big Mouth* wherein possibilities for physical mimicry are halted. For instance, moments in the show that evoke pornographic, horror, or melodramatic elements are typically interrupted by cutaway gags, or moments wherein characters make an offhanded joke and the scene cuts to some sort of visual representation of whatever joke was just made. The *Big Mouth* episode “Everybody Bleeds” features three cutaways each involving a talking ladybug inserting humorous comments into a melodramatic scene. As the music swells and protagonists Jessi and Nick are asked to define their unclear relationship status in front of the entire school and delve into the murky waters of nonplatonic relationships, the ladybug enters, echoing what we’re all thinking: “Oh shit! What are these motherfuckers gonna do!?”. When Jessi gets her first period in the same episode, a wide-eyed Missy remarks that this is the most terrifying thing that could ever happen (another evocation of the horror body genre) before the ladybug reappears to comment on the situation, saying “That’s right! I’m back!”. The malleable reality of the animated form allows for even the most unrealistic and fantastical of cutaways to be inserted, literally interrupting any possibility of the audience experiencing physical affect.

The strategic use of the excessive self-reflexivity of the animated televisual text serves as a pertinent reminder to spectators that they are viewing a production and not a “slice of life”. With a live action, human body on screen, the spectator has ample chance to see themselves in the physical body and in the action occurring on screen. In a live-action horror movie, for instance, we can imagine ourselves in the place of the terrified protagonist at the mercy of the serial killer home invader. In the animated program, spectator identification occurs more so in terms of psychic and cerebral dimensions. We do not necessarily identify with Nick’s

exaggeratedly large mouth or Jessi's experience talking to her vagina, but with the emotional and mental themes they exaggeratedly produce. We identify with the experience of feeling like you look idiosyncratic and freakish, and with the experience of trying to navigate life through a body that feels increasingly foreign. At one point the show's protagonists self-reflexively comment about a television show wherein children masturbate, calling it child pornography. The Hormone Monster inquires about whether they can get away with it because it's animated. This illustrates the way animation is consciously and purposely employed to enable the safe distance which ultimately prevents the audience from physically mimicking the horrific, sexual, and melodramatic affect that the characters experience and instead prompts them to identify mentally and emotionally.

Queering of Body Genres

Big Mouth provides an example of how animated television programming can problematize the existing theory of the body genre. Thus, the body genre can be shifted, opened up, rethought—even *queered*. The term *queer* in this sense moves beyond the idea of making something (in this case, the body genre) different or abnormal. Instead, the term *queer* directly references queer theory, which attempts to “challenge and push further debates on gender and sexuality” and to “confuse binary essentialisms around gender and sexual identity, expose their limitations, and suggest that things are far more blurred” (Hayward 326). This term is specifically and purposely used in this context since many of the ways that *Big Mouth* departs from Williams' traditional formulation of the body genres is due to the way the show “advocates multiplicity: of voices and of sexualities”, which is a central characteristic of queer cinema (Hayward 328). *Big Mouth*'s extreme focus on the experiences of (often same-sex) desire, uncertainty, and turmoil experienced by multiple genders during a precarious stage in life not

only makes it a *queer* televisual text, but additionally renders the animated text a case study that exemplifies the ways in which the concept of the body genre can be *queered*.

It is not difficult for spectators to pick up on the queerness of *Big Mouth* as a televisual text. Queer characters and queer storylines are common throughout the show's two seasons, evidenced by episodes entitled "Am I Gay?" and storylines about same-sex desire, whether it be among best friend duo Nick and Andrew, Jessi's mother and her rabbi, or among the hyper-masculine Jay and the only out gay boy in school, Matthew. Even Jay and his male couch cushion experiment sexually, yet another testament to animation's unique ability to anthropomorphize and to create fantasy even out of everyday household objects like a couch cushion. Beyond these overt references to same-sex desire and queer identity, the especially polysemous nature of animated symbols and signs encourage active participation amongst spectators who read queerness into the televisual text even when it is not explicitly communicated (Barthes; Dennis). Despite Jay having never come out as such, online magazines have already referred to him as the "next bisexual icon" (Zane). Numerous fan fiction and fan art shipping Jay and Matthew have been created and disseminated by actively engaged spectators, and Reddit threads are buzzing with storylines and theories of Andrew's sexual fluidity as well. Engaging in what Henry Jenkins would call participatory culture, spectators have proven their active engagement with the text and that this active engagement carries with it mental and emotional, rather than purely physical, threads (Jenkins). So, the show's *queerness* also bleeds into the way in which the show *queers* the body genre as it incorporates mental and emotional resonance and active spectatorship.

While Williams classifies the body genres in terms of their respective "presumed audiences", there is more to be said about spectatorship, particularly in regard to gender and the

binary of the active/passive spectator (Williams 9). Although there has always existed a gap between presumed and actual audience, the very idea of the “presumed audience” is complicated in *Big Mouth* since both the female and male adolescent experience of puberty is highlighted in great detail. Furthermore, while Williams does not explicitly discuss this, the presumed male audience of pornography is actually a presumed *heterosexual* male audience, one that derives scopophilic pleasure from looking at the exposed woman on screen. As a genre-bending program, *Big Mouth* reinvents and widens the presumed audience to be more inclusive, calling into question and problematizing the way that other body genre texts presume idealized audiences.

Indirectly, *Big Mouth* addresses its presumed audiences through diverse characters that represent characteristics and experiences that traverse lines of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religion. Jessi and Missy narrativize female puberty and destroy the taboo of adolescent female sexuality, proving transgressive in the way their story arcs legitimize their desires and their agency as young women. Andrew’s questioning of his sexuality culminating in his queer kiss with his best friend Nick transgresses the idea of the clean division between straight and gay and between romantic and platonic love and relationships. The heterosexual imaginary is disrupted further as Jessi’s mom engages in a homosexual affair with the family’s rabbi. No longer is the white, heterosexual, male experience of adolescence (think *American Pie*, *The Graduate*, and *Superbad*) delineated as the sole narrative of the trials and tribulations of adolescence. The presumed audience of *Big Mouth* is one that has not traditionally been considered by other many other texts, especially body genre texts which too often consider males or females separately, assume them to be heterosexual, and fail to consider the possibility

of the active female spectator. Thus, the way *Big Mouth* interpellates its audience can be considered another way in which the body genre is queered.

The reality-blurring affordance of the animated medium encourages fantasy, which in turn influences the way *Big Mouth* queers the body genre. Fantasies of seduction are quite common in the show, from Missy's space-themed fantasy about her celebrity crush to Andrew's fantasies about Missy. Fantasies of sexual difference occur through the equally common emphasis on personified genitalia. The hypervisibility of these original fantasies performs the function of rendering spectatorship as "oscillation rather than identification in a univocal sense" and of the deconstruction and blurring of "boundaries of biological sex or cultural gender, as well as sexual preferences", which are often portrayed as fixed (Mayne 165). The program uses the freedom and fantasy afforded to animation to interpellate spectators of many genders, races, and sexualities, ultimately contributing to the queering of the category of the body genre. A more diverse range of spectators with varying demographic characteristics and life experiences can identify with the show—perhaps not physically, but in ways that are cerebral and deeply emotionally resonant—as a result of the animated freedom that produces characters and scenarios ranging from the ghost of Freddie Mercury to the talking vagina and even to Missy's space-themed fantasy about her celebrity crush. A heterosexual spectator need not be queer to identify with Andrew's identity crisis in the "Totally Gay" sequence. Similarly, a spectator need not be male to identify with Nick's feelings of inadequacy regarding his delayed entrance into puberty. The "safe distance" enabled by animation's many affordances renders identification emotional and mental, not physical, and as such one can engage with the emotional and mental concepts of questioning one's identity and feeling inadequate even if they are not queer and even if they do not have a penis.

Conclusion

Williams' famous theory of the body genres accounts for spectators' experiences of pornography, horror, and melodrama. Because *Big Mouth* incorporates elements of each while also experimenting with affordances of animation, it constitutes a means by which to deconstruct and problematize Williams' conceptualization of the body genres. Animation is never explicitly figured into Williams' theory, although animation impacts spectatorship greatly by providing greater possibilities of mise-en-scene and narrative while creating distance between the spectator and the physical action occurring on screen. However, it is important to clarify that the distance created by animation does not translate to a lack of engagement. It produces, instead, more mental and emotional forms of engagement which allow for diverse spectators to appreciate and identify with the emotional threads of the show. Rather than displacing the body genre, I suggest a queering of the body genre, which considers the role of interpellation and fantasy in queering common notions of spectatorship within the theory of the body genre.

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