Abstract

“The Look of Genes:
A Gene Safari at the Cyberscape of BBC or Popular Science on Display”

Cecilia Åsberg  (E-mail: cecas@tema.liu.se)

Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

What does a gene look like? The image of genetics is of a burgeoning field of science, now celebrating 50 years of DNA research, and celebrated throughout most popular science media. In recent years the visual figure of the DNA molecule as a double helix has become an important cultural icon. But images of genes still heavily rely on traditional cultural resources and our common cultural imagination when visualising that which cannot be seen by the eye – the actual genes. Scientific accounts of genes are considered in this paper as culturally mediated and conceptualised as popular genetics. Popular science is considered as the arena for public display of these, often visual, accounts that can be analysed in the form of images and stories told about genes.

These genetic images and stories are here also assumed to say something about our culture, for example about our relationship to science and to animals, but also about other power relations woven into the fabric of our “genetic imaginary”. My task in this paper, which is work in progress, is to consider what can be referred to as the spectacle of popular genetics, that is the visual practises, cultural resources and image conventions used in order to present genes and contemporary genetics as an important event in present culture. How are clones and other genetically altered human and non-human bodies imagined at the popular science web pages of Gene Stories? What kind of imaginative work do these figures do in popular science? Which imaginary bodies are displayed, and which bodies are made to disappear on the stage of popular science? Follow me on a Gene Safari, a wild border zone where human and non-human distinctions implode and science fiction and science are literally collapsed into each other.