


33. Ibid., 43.


36. Seyla Benhabib affirms this individuating function of home and privacy in her discussion of the need for feminists to retain a certain meaning to a distinction between public and private. See Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London: Sage, 1996), 213.


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**Cyberfeminism with a Difference**

Rosi Braidotti

In this chapter, I will first of all situate the question of cyberbodies in the framework of postmodernity, stressing the paradoxes of embodiment. I will subsequently play a number of variations on the theme of cyberfeminism, highlighting the issue of sexual difference throughout. Contrary to jargon-ridden usages of the term, I take "postmodernity" to signify the specific historical situation of postindustrial societies after the decline of modernist hopes and tropes. Symptomatic of these changes is urban space, especially in the inner city, which has been cleaned up and refigured through postindustrial metal and Plexiglas buildings, but it is only a veneer that covers up the putrefaction of the industrial space, marking the death of the modernist dream of urban civil society.

This is primarily, but not exclusively, a Western world problem. The distinct feature of postmodernity is in fact the transnational nature of its economy in the age of the decline of the nation-state. It is about ethnic mixture through the flow of world migration: an infinite process of hybridization at a time of increasing racism and xenophobia in the West.1 Postmodernity is also about an enormous push toward the "third-worldification" of the "first world," with continuing exploitation of the "third world." It is about the decline of what was known as the "second world," the communist bloc, and the recurrence of a process of "Balkanization" of the whole Eastern European bloc. It is also about the decline of the legal economy and the rise of crime and illegality as a factor. This is what Deleuze and Guattari call "capital as cocaine." It proves the extent to which late capital-
ism has no teleological purpose, no definite direction, nothing except the brutality of self-perpetuation.

Last, but not least, postmodernity is about a new and perversely fruitful alliance between technology and culture. Technology has evolved from the panoptical device that Foucault analyzed in terms of surveillance and control, to a far more complex apparatus, which Haraway describes in terms of “the informatics of domination.” Approaching the issue of technology in postmodernity consequently requires a shift of perspective. Far from appearing antithetical to the human organism and set of values, the technological factor must be seen as coextensive with and intermingled with the human. This mutual inbibation makes it necessary to speak of technology as a material and symbolic apparatus, that is, a semiotic and social agent among others.

This shift of perspective, which I have analyzed elsewhere as a move away from technophobia, toward a more technophilic approach, also redefines the terms of the relationships between technology and art.2 If in a conventional humanistic framework the two may appear as opposites, in postmodernity, they are much more interconnected.

In all fields, but especially in information technology, the strict separation between the technical and the creative has in fact been made redundant by digital images and the skills required by computer-aided design. The new alliance between the previously segregated domains of the technical and the artistic marks a contemporary version of the posthumanistic reconstruction of a technoculture whose aesthetics is equal to its technological sophistication.

All this to say that I wish to keep my distance from, on the one hand, the euphoria of mainstream postmodernists who seize upon advanced technology and especially cyberspace as the possibility for multiple and polymorphous reembodiments, and on the other hand, from the many prophets of doom who mourn the decline of classical humanism. I see postmodernity instead as on the threshold of new and important relocations for cultural practice. One of the most significant preconditions for these relocations is relinquishing both the phantasm of multiple reembodiments and the fatal attraction of nostalgia.3 The nostalgic longing for an allegedly better past is a hasty and unintelligent response to the challenges of our age. It is not only culturally ineffective—insofar as it relates to the conditions of its own historicity by negating them, it is also a shortcut through their complexity. I find that there is something deeply amoral and quite desperate in the way in which postindustrial societies rush headlong toward a hasty solution to their contradictions. This flight into nostalgia has the immediate effect of neglecting, by sheer denial, the transition from a humanistic to a posthuman world. That this basic self-deception be compensated by a wave of longing for saviors of all brands and formats is not surprising.

In this generalized climate of denial and neglect of the terminal crisis of classical humanism, I would like to suggest that we need to turn to literary genres such as science fiction and more specifically cyberpunk, in order to find nonnostalgic solutions to the contradictions of our times.

Whereas mainstream culture refuses to mourn the loss of humanistic certainties, “minor” cultural productions foreground the crisis and highlight the potential it offers for creative solutions. As opposed to the amorality of denial, these cultural genres cultivate an ethics of lucid self-awareness. Some of the most moral beings left in Western postmodernity are the science fiction writers who take the time to linger on the death of the humanist ideal of Man, thus inscribing this loss—and the ontological insecurity it entails—at the (dead) heart of contemporary cultural concerns. By taking the time to symbolize the crisis of humanism, these creative spirits, following Nietzsche, push the crisis to its innermost resolution. In so doing, they not only inscribe death at the top of the postmodern cultural agenda, but they also strip the veneer of nostalgia that covers up the inadequacies of the present cultural (dis)order.

In the rest of this chapter, I would like to suggest that first and foremost among these iconoclastic readers of the contemporary crisis are feminist cultural and media activists such as the riot girls and other “cyberfeminists” who are devoted to the politics of parody or parodic repetition. Some of these creative minds are prone to theory, others—feminist science fiction writers and other “fabulists” like Angela Carter—choose the fictional mode. While irony remains a major stylistic device, of great significance are also contemporary multimedia electronic artists of the nonnostalgic kind like Jenny Holzer, Laurie Anderson, and Cindy Sherman. They are the ideal travel companions in postmodernity.

It’s a good thing I was born a woman, or I’d have been a drag queen.

—Dolly Parton

The quote from that great simulator, Dolly Parton, sets the mood for the rest of this section, in which I will offer a survey of some of the sociopolitical representations of the cyberbody phenomenon from a feminist angle.

Let us imagine a postmodern triptych for a moment: Dolly Parton in all her simulated Southern Belle outlook. On her right hand, that masterpiece of silicon reconstruction that is Elizabeth Taylor, with Peter Pan lookalike Michael Jackson whimpering at her side. On Dolly’s left, hyperreal fitness fetishist Jane Fonda, well established in her post-Barbarella phase as a major dynamo in Ted Turner’s planetary catholic embrace.

There you have the Pantheon of postmodern femininity, live on CNN at
any time, any place, from Hong Kong to Sarajevo, yours at the push of a button. Interactivity is another name for shopping, as Christine Tamblyn put it, and hyperreal gender identity is what it sells.

These three icons have some features in common: first, they inhabit a post-human body—that is to say, an artificially reconstructed body. The body in question here is far from a biological essence: it is a crossroad of intensive forces; it is a surface of inscriptions of social codes. Ever since the efforts by the poststructuralist generation to rethink a nonessentialized embodied self, we should all have grown accustomed to the loss of ontological security that accompanies the decline of the naturalistic paradigm. As Francis Barker puts it, the disappearance of the body is the apex of the historical process of its denaturalization. The problem that lingers on is how to adjust our politics to this shift.

I would like to suggest as a consequence that it is more adequate to speak of our body in terms of embodiment, that is to say, of multiple bodies or sets of embodied positions. Embodiment means that we are situated subjects, capable of performing sets of (inter)actions which are discontinuous in space and time. Embodied subjectivity is thus a paradox that rests simultaneously on the historical decline of mind-body distinctions and the proliferation of discourses about the body. Foucault reformulates this in terms of the paradox of simultaneous disappearance and overexposure of the body. Though technology makes the paradox manifest and in some ways exemplifies it perfectly, it cannot be argued that it is responsible for such a shift in paradigm.

In spite of the dangers of nostalgia, mentioned above, there is still hope: we can still hang on to Nietzsche’s crazed insight that God is finally dead and the stench of his rotting corpse is filling the cosmos. The death of God has been long in coming and it has joined a domino effect, which has brought down a number of familiar notions. The security about the categorical distinction between mind and body; the safe belief in the role and function of the nation-state; the family; masculine authority; the eternal feminine and compulsory heterosexuality. These metaphysically founded certainties have foundered and made room for something more complex, more playful, and infinitely more disturbing.

Speaking as a woman—that is to say, a subject emerging from a history of oppression and exclusion—I would say that this crisis of conventional values is rather a positive thing. The metaphysical condition in fact had entailed an institutionalized vision of femininity that has burdened my gender for centuries. The crisis of modernity is, for feminists, not a melancholy plunge into loss and decline but, rather, the joyful opening up of new possibilities.

Thus, the hyperreality of the posthuman predicament so sublimely represented by Parton, Taylor, and Fonda does not wipe out politics or the need for political resistance; it just makes it more necessary than ever to work toward a radical redefinition of political action. Nothing could be further from a postmodern ethics than Dostoyevsky’s overquoted and profoundly mistaken statement that, if God is dead, anything goes. The challenge here is rather how to combine the recognition of postmodern embodiment with resistance to relativism and a free fall into cynicism.

Second, the three cyborg goddesses mentioned above are immensely rich because they are media stars. Capital in these postindustrial times is an immaterial flow of cash that travels as pure data in cyberspace till it lands in (some of) our bank accounts. Moreover, capital harps on and trades in body fluids: the cheap sweat and blood of the disposable workforce throughout the Third World; but also, the wetness of desire of First World consumers as they commodify their existence into oversaturated stupor. Hyperreality does not wipe out class relations: it just intensifies them. Postmodernity rests on the paradox of simultaneous commodification and conformism of cultures, while intensifying disparities among them, as well as structural inequalities.

An important aspect of this situation is the omnipotence of the visual media. Our era has turned visualization into the ultimate form of control, in the hands of the clarity fetishists who have turned CNN into a verb: “I’ve been CNN’d today, haven’t you?” This marks not only the final stage in the commodification of the scopic, but also the triumph of vision over all the other senses.

This is of special concern from a feminist perspective, because it tends to reinstate a hierarchy of bodily perception which overprivileges vision over other senses, especially touch and sound. The primacy of vision has been challenged by feminist theories.

In the light of the feminist work proposed by Luce Irigaray and Kaja Silverman, the idea has emerged to explore the potentiality of hearing and audio material as a way out of the tyranny of the gaze. Donna Haraway has inspiring things to say about the logocentric hold of disembodied vision, which is best exemplified by the satellite/eye in the sky. She opposes it to an embodied and therefore accountable redefinition of the act of seeing as a form of connection to the object of vision, which she defines in terms of “passionate detachment.” If you look across the board of contemporary electronic art, especially in the field of virtual reality, you will find many women artists, like Catherine Richards and Nell Tenhaaf, who apply the technology to challenge the inbuilt assumption of visual superiority which it carries.

Third, the three icons I have chosen to symbolize postmodern bodies are all white, especially and paradoxically Michael Jackson. [. . .]

On related aspect of the racialization of posthuman bodies concerns the ethnic-specific values it conveys. Many have questioned the extent to which
we are all being recontextualized by an American, and more specifically, by a California "body-beautiful" ideology. Insofar as U.S. corporations own the technology, they leave little room for any other cultural imprint upon the contemporary imagination. This leaves little room for anyone to make any sense of it. The three emblems of postmodern femininity on whose discursive bodies I am writing this could only be American.

Confronted with this situation, that is to say, with culturally enforced icons of woman, we are all being recontextualized by an American, and more specifically, by a California "body-beautiful" ideology. Insofar as U.S. corporations own the technology, they leave little room for any other cultural imprint upon the contemporary imagination. This leaves little room for anyone to make any sense of it. The three emblems of postmodern femininity on whose discursive bodies I am writing this could only be American.

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The imaginative power of virtual reality is all the more striking if you compare it to the creativity of some of the women artists I mentioned earlier. By contrast, the notoriety and novelty of these new technologies are marked by a widespread interest and a qualitative shift in the field of virtual reality. As a result, and in some cases even more so, the potential for the new technologies is far from being exhausted. The central point remains: there is a credibility gap between the promises of virtual reality and the quality of what it delivers. It is not clear whether the promise will intensify or decrease its hold on society in the short run. The new technologies, however, are not just a matter of virtual reality; they are also a matter of power and control. The most effective way to disengage our private images from the phallic and its accessory values: money, exclusion and domination, nationalism, racism, femininity, and systemic violence.

Another qualitative leap is also necessary, however, toward the affirmation of sexual difference. In the recognition of the dissonant, the difference is a space of resistance, a space of re-framing in which the masculine, the phallic, and its accessory values: money, exclusion and domination, nationalism, racism, femininity, and systemic violence are re-framed.

I would like to argue, therefore, that the central point to keep in mind in this context of discussion on cybersex is the fundamental transformation as unfolding from this process. As it pertains to the very term "transcendence," one cannot simply be reduced to the classical, essentially Cartesian, opposition of "masculine" and "feminine". In the process of exploring the dissonance, the dissimilarities between the sexes, one would emphasize very strongly the importance of the intersection of gender, sexuality, and power. The project of psychoanalytic theory, in so doing, I also mean to distance myself from the simplistic psychology and cybersex theory. In opposition to this, I would like to emphasize that Woman is not only the objectifier of patriarchy, but also the subject of her own subjectification. Women and men are in diametrically different positions: men are conflated with the universalism of gender, and women are placed at the intersection of the phallic and its accessory values: money, exclusion and domination, nationalism, racism, femininity, and systemic violence.
archy, tied to it by negation. As the basis for female identity, the signifier Woman also and simultaneously pertains to a margin of disidence and resistance to patriarchal identity.

I have argued elsewhere that the feminist project intervenes on both the level of historical agency—that is, the question of the insertion of women in patriarchal history—and that of individual identity and the politics of desire. It thus engages with both the conscious and the unconscious levels. This deconstructive approach to femininity is very strongly present in the politics of the parody that I defended above. Feminist women who go on functioning in society as female subjects in these postmetaphysical days of decline of gender dichotomies act "as if" Woman were still their location. In so doing, however, they treat femininity as an option—a set of available poses, a set of costumes rich in history and social power relations but not fixed or compulsory any longer. They simultaneously assert and deconstruct woman as a signifying practice.

My point is that the new is created by revisiting and burning up the old. Like the totemic meal recommended by Freud, you have to assimilate the dead before you can move onto a new order. The way out can be found by mimetic repetition and consumption of the old. We need rituals of burial and mourning for the dead, including and especially the ritual of burial of the Woman that was. We do need to say farewell to that second sex, that eternal feminine that stuck to our skins like toxic material, burning into our bone marrow, eating away at our substance. We need to take collectively the time for the mourning of the old sociosymbolic contract and thus mark the need for a change of intensity, a shift of tempo. Unless feminists negotiate with the historicity of this temporal change, the great advances made by feminism toward the empowerment of alternative forms of female subjectivity will not have the time to be brought to social fruition.

We rather need more complexity, multiplicity, and simultaneity, and we need to rethink gender, class, and race in the pursuit of these multiple, complex differences. I also think we need gentleness, compassion, and humor to pull through the ruptures and raptures of our times. Irony and self-humor are important elements of this project and they are necessary for its success, as feminists as diverse as Hélène Cixous and French and Saunders have pointed out. As the Manifesto of the bad girls reads: "Through laughter our anger becomes a tool of liberation." In the hope that our collectively negotiated Dionysian laughter will indeed bury it once and for all, cyberfeminism needs to cultivate a culture of joy and affirmation. Feminist women have a long history of dancing through a variety of potentially lethal minefields in their pursuit of sociosymbolic justice. Nowadays, women have to undertake the dance through cyberspace, if only to make sure that the joysticks of the
cyberspace cowboys will not reproduce univocal phallocy under the mask of multiplicity, and also to make sure that the riot girls, in their anger and their visionary passion, will not re-create law and order under the cover of a triumphant feminine.

NOTES

17. Remark at the conference "Seduced and Abandoned: The Body in the Virtual World."